

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

PETER KOVACH

*Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy
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Q: Today is the 18th of April, 2012. Do you know 'Twas the 18th of April in '75'?

KOVACH: Hardly a man is now alive that remembers that famous day and year. I grew up in Lexington, Massachusetts.

Q: We are talking about the ride of Paul Revere.

KOVACH: I am a son of Massachusetts but the first born child of either side of my family born in the United States; and a son of Massachusetts.

Q: Today again is 18 April, 2012. This is an interview with Peter Kovach. This is being done on behalf of the Association for Diplomatic Studies and I am Charles Stuart Kennedy.

You go by Peter?

KOVACH: Peter is fine.

Q: Let's start at the beginning. When and where were you born?

KOVACH: I was born in Worcester, Massachusetts three days after World War II ended, August the 18th, 1945.

Q: Let's talk about on your father's side first. What do you know about the Kovaches?

KOVACH: The Kovaches are a typically mixed Hapsburg family; some from Slovakia, some from Hungary, some from Austria, some from Northern Germany and probably some from what is now western Romania. Predominantly Jewish in background though not practice with some Catholic intermarriage and Muslim conversion.

Q: Let's take grandfather on the Kovach side. Where did he come from?

KOVACH: He was born I think in 1873 or so. I believe he was born in Vienna and he migrated to join relatives in Timisvar, the Hungarian pronunciation of Timisoara in Romania; a place often dubbed little Vienna. Many of my Dad's relatives were based there from earlier in the 19th century. My Dad's uncle Jenő, I've recently learned was

perhaps one of the wealthiest men in the city. They survived the Nazis and the Iron Guard but ironically ran afoul of the communists in the late 60s and scattered. My Dad was not one for whom money meant a lot, nor did he discuss wealth very often. I had the impression my Timisvar relatives were lower middle class with not much education. I learned of their wealth filling in as cultural attaché in Bucharest as a retiree in the summer of 2011. I bothered to 'interview' my Timisvar cousins, an Austrian businessman and a Hollywood director prior to going out to Bucharest.

Q: Who was the first person on that side to come to the United States?

KOVACH: My Dad's younger half brother, Curtis Shell came over as a teen in the mid-30s and lived as kind of a street urchin in lower Manhattan. I have recently learned that it was an established NYC couple, business associates of my rich Timisvar great uncle Jenő Dornhelm, who sponsored my uncle's immigration and later my parents visa in 1939. With Curt, it was almost like the Daniel Patrick Moynihan myth. He was selling papers in Hell's Kitchen and the like. Curt's Dad (not a blood relative) had abandoned my grandmother in Vienna. While my parents came over with advanced degrees in 1939 and needed no help economically, Curt had at best a high school education and arrived mid-Depression. I'm not sure why his initial circumstances were so difficult.

Q: So he came over in the 30s?

KOVACH: He came over in the 30s, a young man in his mid-teens.

Q: When did your grandfather come over?

KOVACH: My grandfather never came. My father was the second one over.

Q: He was from Vienna.

KOVACH: He was also from Vienna, my grandfather also. My father came over in '39 and came over for three reasons; one was he was a polymer chemist and for work in the plastics industry, the United States was the place to be.

The second is my parents were both dogged social democrats and Europe from the mid-20s on was not very friendly to that kind of political center. It was going communist or fascist pretty fast.

The third is being part Jewish he saw the writing on the wall even though I don't think he ever entered a synagogue until he was an adult.

Q: What did he do?

KOVACH: He was a plastics engineer and an executive. He first went to work in New York City briefly and then they moved up to Massachusetts.

Their first apartment was on W. 57th street, near Carnegie Hall. My parents told this great story; they went to the 39 world s fair right after they came and there was a robot at one of the exhibits. The robot, on some kind of electronic prompt said, Ma-Sa-Choo Settes. In retrospect, my parents viewed this as an oracular moment. They soon moved up to Leominster, Massachusetts where my Dad worked for Foster Grant, the sunglass maker. He was their chief chemist for a while and then like engineers, at least in my parent's American generation, typically moved around a lot.

Q: He must have gotten involved in World War II.

KOVACH: He tried. He was very motivated to enlist but they wouldn't let him because he was a polymer chemist and they said you are more valuable on the home front than you are as a grunt, even a German native speaking grunt.

Q: Did they do Ray Ban glasses?

KOVACH: I don't remember. I remember they did Davy Crockett sunglasses. That was right about the time, 55 of my tenth birthday so I was the king of Davy Crockett swag on my block.

Q: What about your mother s side? What do you know about her?

KOVACH: Her side was interesting. She was born in Budapest. Her father was a self-made man from a Jewish shtetl in Eastern Hungary who married a woman of considerable refinement (my grandmother) who I think was three quarters gentile, including a parent or grandparent who was a Turk, a Muslim Turk. My grandfather rose to the top of the judicial profession. I think he was something like the head of the appeals court system more recent documentation my brother has obtained mentions him as a respected attorney and very left wing. He apparently had a role in the short lived quasi-communist Béla Kun government in Budapest that lasted for two years after WW I. We still need to do more research. Despite ethnically being less Jewish; they were far more Jewish in practice, my father s family not practicing the religion. The girls were very well-educated; I think typically of a certain social class. I have never been quite sure what that meant. I am quoting my mother. She learned German before she learned Hungarian. German and German literature and German culture are very much a cultural anchor on both sides of the family.

Q: Did they ever talk about, I won't say the good old days but did they ever talk about for example in Hungary you had a fascist. Did they talk about that?

KOVACH: The answer to how the Admiral Horthy (fascist) government treated my grandfather is mixed. Documentation we have recently unearthed shows that my grandfather in what would have been his first decade out of law school had some affiliation with the left-wing government in Hungary for two years right after WW I and the collapse of the Hapsburg Empire. That said, it was clear that by WWII, my

grandfather was protected from the Nazis by that fascist Horthy government you are eluding to.

My mother, the youngest of three sisters was the first to come to the U.S., right after marriage to my Dad in her mid-twenties. They were sponsored for visas by the NYC couple, associates of my Dad's wealthy Timisvar uncle, who had earlier sponsored Dad's youngest half brother. The eldest, a wonderful woman who was to have a big influence on my life and values, married a German colonel and actually survived the war in Germany as a military wife. The War emotionally destroyed her husband who was not a Nazi sympathizer and he died in 1947 or so. That sister a staunch Catholic and the only religious person under our roof, came over to Cambridge, MA in the early 50s. She managed a well-known restaurant in Cambridge housed in the house of Dexter Pratt, the proverbial Village Blacksmith of Longfellow poetic fame. As such, she was my boss for three summers as a waiter and very positively influenced my style as a manager with her sense of justice and even-handedness. The middle sister became a world famous photographer. She ran away from home at 19. My grandfather, their father the jurist, was a total education daddy and very big on women's advancement. Ironically, the runaway became the most outwardly successful of the three sisters. She cut her teeth as a photographer in the late 20s in Berlin which was not only the cultural capital of Europe but was the Mecca for aspiring photojournalists of the day.

So she was of that generation. When it was pretty clear the Nazis were coming to power she hightailed it to Holland where she lived the last 70 years of her life.

Q: Did she ever run across Leni Riefenstahl?

KOVACH: No, no but she was the first one to put a camera in the legendary photographer, Robert Capa's hands. He was actually Hungarian and lived in the same building as my family. At age ten my aunt (Eva Besnyö) had something like a Brownie, a box-like, single shot camera which she lent to him to take pictures and the rest is history so she was very close to both Robert and Cornell Capa and Moholy-Nagy and a lot of those great first generation photographers.

Q: Your aunt made it through. She was in Holland?

KOVACH: She was in the underground during the War, running a forged paper ring in the Dutch countryside. I think the war was very traumatic for her. First of all, losing her idyllic life in Weimar Berlin which represented a cultural golden age and to lose that so wrenchingly and suddenly and then by being by blood part Jewish. She didn't have a religious bone in her body, to her it was an inconvenience and then having to hightail it and going underground, it definitely put a cloud over her outlook. She by the way more than the other two sisters inherited her father's left-wing tendencies.

I just helped my cousin open up a retrospective of her Mom's photography in a major Berlin museum. It was painfully clear that her photography was never quite the same after the war. She had pictures in the iconic Family of Man a late 50s photo exhibit that

grabbed international attention, but it wasn't the same. Her great pictures were taken in the 20s.

Q: One always thinks particularly of Berlin. I just finished re-seeing the movie, Cabaret. One thinks about that period.

KOVACH: I saw that with my aunt in fact at an Amsterdam cinema when it first came out and her comment to me was, look it is fanciful but it captures the spirit. That was her reaction.

Q: You grew up in what, New York?

KOVACH: No, no. I grew up in Massachusetts for a while, born in Worcester because my father was in Leominster which was the plastics capital of the Northeast at the time but there were no nurses in the Leominster hospital due to the war so I had to go south to Worcester to be born.

Lived in Leominster for maybe a year and a half and then my father got a job in New Jersey. They lived in the Hungarian ghetto in New Brunswick, New Jersey. They hated it, they felt so claustrophobic. Then he didn't like the job so then they moved to Cranston, Rhode Island and in fact, in Cranston is where I did nursery school and kindergarten and began first grade.

Q: As a kid did you sort of grow up as an immigrant kid? Was that around you or not?

KOVACH: Oh, it was. That sense was very much around me in some ways and not in others.

The ways it was around me, okay. The whole war was very traumatic and my parents didn't talk about it and were always ones to see this particular genocide as a manifestation of a universal human problem, not as a uniquely Jewish problem.

But it was traumatic for them with pain and guilt at having escaped that they only shared with my brother and me if we pushed. My mother's father, the judge/lawyer who was sort of Pater familias, he was the big guy, he was the only one we lost to the Nazis on my Mom's side. It was an interesting story. This fascist government, and they like many Hungarian governments were never that friendly to Jews, but Admiral Horthy's attitude as described to me by several people was 'these are our Jews' and we are going to protect them. And my grandfather was evidently highly respected.

In 1944, around April the Nazis pushed Admiral Horthy's government aside and took over. The SS and the Gestapo came in in a quasi-colonial administration that included in effect the last gasp of the final solution bureaucracy even as the German general command was increasingly focused on the deteriorating military situation. It was the quickest and most thorough round up in the whole Holocaust.

My grandfather was protected. Living in under his roof were my father's mother, as well as his wife, my refined grandmother Helen Besnyö. My father's mother was running a hot paper ring out of the apartment. She was forging documents so Jews could get out. The Gestapo came to the door one day investigating the forged document source. My grandfather at my current age of 66 literally threw the guy out of the house. The next day they came and they took only him. That was the end of the story. There were no trains to Auschwitz-Birkenau at that moment. He was diabetic. He was not in good physical shape for his age, so he probably died or was shot on the road. It is unlikely he ever got very far toward Auschwitz. Remarkable in terms of Hungarian Holocaust reading I've done is that the grandmothers were allowed to remain in the family apartment in a tony Budapest district and not deported to the countryside or to labor camp as other mixed race or upper class folk were. (My Dad's family lost two members from a suburb of Budapest in the same period they were the ones who gave him his first job as a factory manager after his graduation from the Technische Hochschule. I suspect that the infamous papers documenting Aryan or at least non-Jewish origins might have played a role in the protection of those under my maternal grandfather's roof but not my paternal side, more 'ethnically' Jewish relatives on my Dad's side in the suburbs of Budapest.)

The other thing is look, my parents were both educated. My mother had a PhD, my father had a terminal engineering degree between an MA and a PhD from the renowned Technische Hochschule in Austria. But they had heavy accents and even though my father was a great fit in American business, with his sort of easy going Viennese personality, my mother was maladjusted from the get go. You asked if I felt social difference. The answer is an emphatic yes. My parents with their accents and personalities were distinctly foreign. Not having a religious affiliation in small town New England or suburban Cincinnati always puzzled my friends parents. My mother I would say to her dying day had a pretty strong sociopathic streak. and that tendency had an interesting origin one her older sisters confirmed for me as a young adult. Mom was kept home from school during the Spanish pandemic in 1918 and onwards so the first six years of schooling at home with tutors.

Q: This was flu.

KOVACH: Yes, a flu pandemic. They hired a tutor for her so she never got to school until she was 12. And she didn't have the organized social schedule that home schooled kids enjoy in the U.S. today. Grade school, is all about socializing. She never got socialized and had a very strong personality reinforced by a culture, Hungarian culture, that I've noticed tends to nurture expressive personalities. As for me, I was a pretty curious kid, outgoing and once I got to nursery school I remember thinking to myself, Oh, my God. Everyone is so different. I am never going to learn anything about being in America from these loving but crazy foreigners. My two aunts separately confided in me well into my adult years their admiration for how well turned out my brother and I were (relative to their kids, my cousins) with their maladjusted sister as my mother. My reaction to these conversations was that it would have been nice for my brother and I to have had that conversation with our much respected aunts during our difficult teen years.

So I was fiercely independent, really as a kid onwards. Knowing I was different, knowing that when I brought friends home they saw these weird parents with those heavy accents. I felt like I was always in a cross cultural situation. Even in Cranston where we lived in a white middle class neighborhood and there were Italians and Irish and Portuguese and some Jewish people, I felt like I had to get in other people's heads and kind of figure out where they were coming from in order to not be bullied. Maybe the launch of any diplomatic skills or aptitudes I might have!

Q: What you are describing in a way is one of the great personal tragedies of becoming an American and that is often the first generation born in the States become separated from his or her parents because of the language. It is a whole different world and the parents don't adjust and the kids make it and the parents are kind of left behind.

KOVACH: My parents in their own way adjusted. They both spoke and wrote excellent English. Their spoken English was heavily accented. My Dad's writing was flawless. Later in my youth he would teach weekend seminars at MIT and constantly grouse to me about how American engineers can't write in their own language. My Mom's written English was strong enough but the few articles she cranked out as an academic needed a lot of editing. The two grandmothers from Hungary made it over in '47 and lived under our roof for years so that was very much a part of my scene too. All these women

Q: What about the cooking?

KOVACH: The cooking was good central European cooking. Remarkable because all the women learned to cook hands on only after immigrating. They might have supervised maid-cooks in the old country so they knew their stuff. We wouldn't call it health food today by any stretch of the imagination; goulash, knockerln, potatoes, light on vegetables.

I was a light eater so much so that it worried my mother a great deal. I liked lamb and rice so my mother presciently would call me her little Arab (It was in the Arab world where my graduate thesis and the first half of my career was focused.)

The other thing that needs to be noted about that generation of immigrants is they thought we're in America. You've gotta Americanize so they did not go out of their way to speak German with me and my father spoke Hungarian but he disdained it. He disdained Hungary, disdained the language and disdained everything to do with it. Strange because at the end of his life, ill and partly disoriented, he reverted to Hungarian with our predominantly Hungarophone European relatives on his last trip or two back there, according to my brother who was there with them.

My younger brother is fluent in German and is a German professor as my mother was. My mother became a German professor when I was about ten years old.

Q: Where was she a professor?

KOVACH: She started at Tufts, didn't get tenure, and had a lot of students demonstrating for her before that was fashionable. Her difficult but extroverted personality translated into a very popular, charismatic teaching style. Then she went to BU and Regis, Boston University and Regis College, and ended up very happily teaching at Massachusetts Bay Community College until she was into her 80s.

Q: The immigrant population, it is really a miracle of how we essentially with all sorts of problems, but how people who came to the United States were absorbed. My family on my mother's side was German and they spoke German at home and all. I didn't learn it. My first post was Frankfurt.

KOVACH: It is interesting. I picked up some because my parents talked German. The women in the family, the two mothers, the grandmothers spoke Hungarian and to this day if I hear a male speak Hungarian I jump. It sounds so alien.

I was on TDY as a WAE, I did WAE work in Romania and I went to Pentecost mass in Cluj, the Hungarophone Roman Catholic cathedral and I mean hearing that priest in a sonorous voice saying the mass in Hungarian was surreal. I am the only one in the family not fluent in German. My brother got fluent and became a professor. I just wasn't around enough and really wasn't that interested until high school. My brother was sickly and so more of a stay at home type who absorbed that much more of the culture from the old country.

Q: Let's take kindergarten and elementary. Your memories would start pretty much in Rhode Island, wouldn't they?

KOVACH: Yes.

Q: Where did you live in Rhode Island?

KOVACH: Cranston.

Q: What was Cranston like for a kid?

KOVACH: My neighborhood was lower middle class white ethnic, I would say with a couple of fancier houses and educated families around too. There was a richer family that actually sort of adopted us, the Bruces. They were Episcopalian and from an old Anglo family and they had the biggest house in a several block radius of our house. I remember it was on a triangle shaped lot. It was an old Victorian but the rest of us all lived in sort of 30s and 40s houses, little monopoly houses I call them. The Bruces invited us to their place in Boothbay Harbor Maine, my first introduction to Northern New England, a region I love deeply.

I remember Johnie White who was Portuguese. They anglicized the name and Carol Capatosto. These were my kindergarten friends, you know, very ethnic and I remember a guy named Jimmy Press who was Jewish and he lived on the next block and that was

kind of it. There were some Irish kids too. That is what it was like. I wasn't the only first generation kid which made it even more interesting.

Q: As a young kid I assume it was still the era where they turned you loose after school and you are told to be back at a certain time and after that it was up to you, wasn't it?

KOVACH: Yes. There were two episodes in Cranston. We didn't have a TV. We are talking probably 1948 to 1951 in Cranston. But I went next door. There was a kindly old lady named Mrs. Hall and I watched Beany and Howdy Doody there religiously. It was like someone who went to mass every day. That was one thing.

Before Beany, the sequence would always would start out with Kate Smith's show signing off with her singing When the Moon Comes Over the Mountain.

The other thing I remember is my father worked for a plastics company and they made pea shooters and my father, I loved my father but he could be so naive. He gave me a bundle of about 15 pea shooters and of course, I had those out among the neighborhood kids in no time. One of us almost put Carol Capatosto's eye out so her mother went screaming to my mother and you know, pretty soon all the pea shooters were confiscated. I remember that as sort of an incident.

Q: At a fairly early age, were you much of a reader?

KOVACH: Moderate in my case, I would say. More of a doer than a reader which is interesting because I didn't walk until I was 19 months. They thought I was retarded. I was just so doted upon by these three women-the two grandmothers and my Mom. I was happy. I was a fat little baby. Why should I walk? Why should I move or do anything when I was being waited on hand and foot. and then I made up for it. I was hyperactive. I wouldn't take naps.

I remember reading. The things that captivated me as a kid reading were politics and sports. Maybe that's a little later but you know, it is still pretty much my daily bread in terms of reading.

Q: With the family, I take it they weren't very religious.

KOVACH: My parents were absolutely non religious, probably more agnostic than atheist. They did not see the existence or non-existence of God as a major life question. They thought that organized religion was the root of much social evil in the world. In America in their eyes it seemed particularly pernicious because people weren't sincere. They saw Americans as going to church to reinforce social identity. They thought that this was outrageous and that it undermined their vision of the American ideal. They were very ethical people with a very strong sense of justice, that they imparted in me. Their mixed Hapsburg identity both in terms of nationality and religious origins of ancestors and in-laws I think made rallying around Jesus, Adonai, Allah for a social identity an exercise in absurdity in their eyes.

Q: I don't know if it has changed much but I suspect it has quite a bit but there was sort of a social ring to different religions and everybody fit into little boxes.

KOVACH: Exactly. In New England? You better believe it. Even in Cranston, even in white ethnic Cranston but when we, you know, we went away to Cincinnati for 2 years and then came back for good to Massachusetts in third grade, in that town the church/synagogue you belonged to projected a virtual social caste system.

Q: What about politics?

KOVACH: They were lefty democrats.

Q: This is socialist.

KOVACH: Yes. I remember literally, and they were activists. They really thought that participatory democracy was a privilege and I remember licking envelopes for Adlai Stevenson in 1952 at age six.

Q: How did you find early schooling?

KOVACH: I was a dreamer. They wanted to keep me back in first grade.

One of the trends in my education, only interrupted for a year and a half when we moved to Cincinnati before returning to New England, was the parade of female Catholic spinsters I had as teachers. Later in the 50s I had practicing Catholic relatives who emigrated from Germany who lived under our roof. In addition to sort of white ethnic middle class New England neighborhoods we lived in, I had a rich dose of Irish Catholic culture. I have to say, you asked me what my American root culture is, it is a combination New England upper crust Anglo and Irish Catholic, both in very positive senses.

My kindergarten teacher and my first grade teacher were both Irish Catholics and they both taught a very, I would say, panentheistic (what theologians would term a creationist view of the world in which God is everywhere, God is in the world but not exhausted by it. So God is within you. That was really a strong sense I had. God is watching you but he is a benign force and a loving force and he is everywhere.)

To personalize this dimension of my life, I had visions from as far back in my early infancy as I remember. White light experiences. I am a deeply spiritual and at times religious person, maybe the archetypal religious kid of atheist parents. We moved to Cincinnati in the middle of first grade. What a wrenching experience that was for everyone. There they wanted to keep me back in school because of my day dreaming. My parents said 'no' recognizing that grade school is mainly about socialization and they wanted to keep me with my age group and I thank God for them taking that decision.

Q: When you moved to Cincinnati did you feel you were, New England has its, maybe the Deep South and New England are two real distinct cultures. When you went to Cincinnati did you feel you were in a different world?

KOVACH: Yes. I went to a school that was 60% African American.

In Cincinnati there were three groups in those days; African Americans, Germans and German Jews and that was it. We didn't fit into any of those categories so boy, my parents felt isolated. I had a very formative experience that first grade year. A bit of context: the city was semi segregated in 1951. The schools, however, were integrated and I immediately bonded with a couple of black kids who became my buddies, my after school best friends. We all had those big clunky metal pump scooters. Our parents set very definitive geographic limits of where we could go on our pump scooters, about one block, not crossing any streets. But of course rules were made to be broken.

One day not too long after I fell in with these guys I said, let's go to the zoo. The Cincinnati zoo is one of the noted urban zoos in the United States sometimes mentioned even along with San Diego and the Bronx zoos. We lived right by the Zoo. So stretching the boundaries of parental permission, we did those few extra blocks. We knew we were all going to get our butts kicked if we got caught. We got to the zoo and they wouldn't let my black friends in because it was segregated. That was a moment that embedded itself deeply in my psyche; a life changing moment for me.

I remember screaming epithets at the guard (culled from my parents verbalized discomfort at the semi-segregated environment we found ourselves in) and returning home in tears.

Q: I would think so.

KOVACH: I was so freaked out it took my parents a week to talk me through that. That incident on top of my parents good values, made me a fighter for justice my whole life.

Q: How did your parents deal with segregation coming from Massachusetts?

KOVACH: They had absolutely no patience for it. Because we didn't belong to a church and we weren't either German, German Jewish or African American there was something actually called the Community Chest (a la Monopoly) and we joined the Community Chest. It was the only interracial group in the city. We would go on picnics with them. I remember kiddy carnivals. That was how they raised me. That incident just changed my life.

Q: Did your parents teach racial tolerance?

KOVACH: They taught me justice and they taught me that humanity is a universal state and that there are all kinds of people, cultures, colors and religions that are part of it and that human identity is what we must affirm. Even in speaking of the Holocaust which had

upended their lives, cost the lives of three dear relatives, their view was not particularistic. They viewed it as another sad human chapter of genocide. My father in particular would say that our human duty is to anticipate and staunch the next genocide, not obsess on the last one.

Q: Was the Holocaust presented to you because in many ways the Holocaust almost faded from view in greater America and came up later on.

KOVACH: I don't remember them fudging about their history and what happened and why. I don't remember that. They gave it to me in well measured spoonfuls. They didn't overwhelm me with the narrative but I always had a sense of it as a near shadow on our family history; a world lost. But a new world gained because they idealized America and their sense that all people are equal citizens and that justice is a paramount value. As far back as I can remember I can remember that coming from them so they taught me good values.

Q: How long were you in Cincinnati?

KOVACH: We were in that first neighborhood just for eight or nine months, through the summer and then we moved to a place called North Avondale which was pretty much German and German Jewish, no African Americans. There I felt even more of a misfit. This despite the German music and culture I was raised on and a sense of pride in our Central European roots. I never bonded with anyone. It was my second grade in school. I began to wake up from my academic torpor and my performance in school from flunking almost everything the year before, I got to be a C, to B minus student.

I had a good teacher, a real strict lady of German origin and name. She was very strict but nice, a really good teacher. She was pretty and I think, I have to tell you. I remember having an eye for girls and women from nursery school on. It's always been a part of my life.

Q: What about this area? What sort of playing did you do?

KOVACH: I remember that summer when I had no friends in the new neighborhood; we had moved from the mixed race area in July, I became for the only time in my life a Cincinnati Red Legs fan. Could never forgive them for beating my beloved Red Sox in the 1975 World Series. To me that is an unforgivable sin because the Red Sox should have won that series. I remember sitting watching TV that summer (yes, we had finally gotten one in 1952 after most families of our means had long had one) and watching the Cincinnati games and having my baseball cards lined up on two arms of a chair and being really depressed and down.

My parents finally sent me to a Jewish day camp and boy I did I feel like an outsider there in a way I had never felt before. I don't think it was the Jewishness of the camp. It was more being an outsider and for the first time really in a homogeneous environment; all Jewish kids of German origin and raised in the religion.

Q: Were the Jewish kids you ran across raised in a different way or something?

KOVACH: Yes. They were raised with Jewish narratives and they were also frankly what Eastern European Jewish friends of yours might refer to as yekkes. They were not as German Jews. They looked at me as this outsider because Hapsburg Jews in this country are sort of an outside category. You are either from the Polish pale or you are German and it is a false dichotomy but that's the way the prejudice forms and I was viewed as different, as an Eastern European. And being unschooled in the tradition I'd never entered a synagogue in my life until age 12 made me even more of an outsider. I felt like I was looked down at.

Q: The German Jews that were here would talk about the Polish Jews as being kikes. That's where the term came because it was very derogatory.

KOVACH: Ridiculous. The prejudices of Jews who suffered from so much prejudice directed at them from the outside.

I remember the one part about that camp I did like, it did bring me out of my doldrums. I think my mother sensed that I was in kind of a depression.

I am sociable. I have always been extroverted. I had my friends in camps. We did a lot with butterfly catching and I found that I loved catching and collecting butterflies. We sang songs and I liked that. So that got me through that summer.

I have one awful memory of that second grade school year. In the spring of the second grade one of my friends drowned in a swimming pool. That was the first death of a contemporary I had ever experienced. A first intimation of mortality, if you will.

Q: One doesn't forget that.

KOVACH: None of the elders in my family had died in front of me or in my life to that date. I knew my grandfather in Timisoara, Romania had died during that Cincinnati period but I never knew him so what did that matter? (At the other end of this life, I was on TDY in Bucharest in 2011 and visited his grave while on business in Timisoara; a grave site visit that raised more questions than it answered; the main one being that his stone commemorates him as 'DR.' Oden Kovacs. My parents who weren't above a bit of intellectual snobbery at times would surely have told me, had he been either an academic PhD or a medical doctor, I thought to myself. (The spelling of the name is the genuine Hungarian version, no mystery there. My Dad changed the spelling at Ellis Island, knowing with his excellent English that Americans would never pronounce it properly with the Hungarian spelling.)

Q: As school developed, were there courses or subjects you liked and subjects you didn't like?

KOVACH: Oh, yes. I was always Mr. Social Studies. I always liked geography, I always liked history, even when I didn't do well in them I just always liked them. I liked to read, I liked English well enough. I actually liked school. I didn't like math too much even though my aptitude is way above my verbal aptitude, at least if measures like the SATs and GREs are to be believed. I have never liked math much and can say that the last useful math course I ever took was in 8th grade with interest problems, complex division etc.

Q: It is interesting how so many, myself included, really had to struggle with math.

KOVACH: Beyond eighth grade where probably if you were like me you did interest problems and calculated commissions, I didn't see anything useful about it from them. Geometry was vaguely useful but I never studied physics which I regret even in high school where geometry and physics would be a complement.

I viewed math and all that abstract thinking as superfluous to my development; you can develop that part of your brain in 20 other ways.

Q: I was born in 1928 so I am a generation before you and was a kid during World War II and I devoured the newspapers and all which was the greatest geography lesson one can have because you were following village by village in Russia or in Africa and islands in the Pacific. Did you get much geography?

KOVACH: Yes. I remember a lot of history and geography and they seemed to give the two subjects to us in alternative years even with all my school jumping. I liked them both.

That second grade year kind of slipped by.

My brother and I we would sit out. We had a beautiful backyard. We lived in a very beautiful neighborhood in North Avondale. We would pretend we were in a spaceship sitting in a large backyard fruit tree.

Then, thank God, my brother was allergic. He didn't do well in the humid Ohio Valley climate. My parents felt like fish out of water socially and I was kind of afloat. Foster Grant in Leominster, Massachusetts hired Dad back much to all our relief. We moved back to Massachusetts, in my parents' case, for the rest of their relative long lives.

Q: Back to?

KOVACH: So it was back to the Boston area, to Belmont. My parents felt like they had been delivered. They loved Massachusetts.

Q: What was there about Massachusetts?

KOVACH: They liked its European-ness; they liked its sort of old school values. My Dad was very much respected in his profession and somehow that recognition came in waves

once we returned. Dad was designated one of the 50 plastics pioneers who are considered the forefathers of the industry in the United States and eventually was elected President of the Society of Plastics Industry. He liked the Anglo values but he also identified and could deal with white ethnics being one himself and being pretty down to earth. So in a way we bridged sort of that caste system that I referred to earlier as a family in a very nice way.

Q: Massachusetts has got, either you are sort of an Episcopalian or an Irish Catholic and sometimes the twain didn't meet too well.

KOVACH: Religiously both the New England neighborhoods I grew up in through 8th grade had no Episcopalians that I remember except for the Bruces in Cranston. There were a lot of Irish Catholics and Italian Catholics. We had Catholics, under the roof, at that point too. My mother's older sister, the one that was married to the German colonel, she came over in '53 right when we moved back to Boston. Her daughter had been living with us for two years. Her son had come over in '49 and had gone to Saint Anselm College in central New Hampshire. He was an avowed atheist despite being brought up in the Church. This might have been a reaction to growing up in the Nazi youth, getting drafted into the military of the Third Reich and going AWOL and hiding in the mountains until war's end. So we had two practicing Catholics living under our roof and the Catholic neighborhood so I felt like I had kind of the aura of being Catholic without it ever having been shoved down my throat.

I felt like I had a very privileged quasi-Catholic upbringing. Religiously I would say that was definitely the case. I'd tag along to church with my aunt from time to time, began to appreciate and enjoy Easter in particular. Yet most Sundays I was doing outdoor things with my parents and brother a kind of church of nature in which to this day I feel I commune with the ineffable far more readily than in a house of worship.

Q: Did that cause problems on Sundays when the kids went to school?

KOVACH: No. I may be depicting myself here as a wayward kid and very independent and I was but Sundays were generally devoted to family. What we would do is my parents were great outdoors people. My father, was a great lover of the Alps and so forth. We went skiing in the winter. We went skating. We went hiking. From about the time we moved back to New England we bought an old 7 1/2 horse power outboard motor that we would carry around in the trunk of the car and then just rent a rowboat and plop the engine on the transom of the rowboat. So we were always into that kind of stuff. I just loved the outdoors and I have my terrific family to thank for that.

That was sort of our religion. I recall from my study of world religion that the Prophet Mohammad is described in the literature as having this great reverence for nature from his early days as a shepherd. Among the prophets of divinity I know, I always recall that Mohammad's reverence for life was similarly grounded in nature and identify with that. But to date, no sacred messages have been issued, using me as a vehicle that I know of.

Q: Did you move up to Lexington at that point?

KOVACH: No. My father worked in Leominster but my parents definitely liked the Boston area so we lived in Belmont. He had about a 45 minute commute each way which he claimed to like. He would listen to classical music in the car and put space between work and home. That let him get back into his pleasant Viennese head from the tensions of the corporate work day.

Q: How was Boston for you? Was this a place to go to?

KOVACH: Yes in keeping with the spirit of the zoo adventure in Cincinnati, my friends and I, you know breaking every rule and restriction on us; you could ride on the legendary MTA (Boston's Metropolitan Transit Authority) for five cents if you were under 12. You could go from Belmont Center which was less than a mile away from where we lived by bus to Harvard Square. Then you could go all the way to the end of Boston's red line in Dorchester, sneak through without paying a fare again, go all the way back and get a free transfer to the bus to Belmont so for five cents I could ride virtually the whole MTA system. We got into that, I got into that in third grade. I never stopped. We had the MTA thing.

Two particular adventures that would require a stop and an additional nickel to get back on the train I should mention for dramatic effect, and my readers' amusement. One is we'd go into the seedy old sailors neighborhood in Scollay Square and on Lower Washington Street and sneak into the peep shows. There for a penny, you could view a primitive movie of naked women cavorting. For my more innocent eight and nine year old friends, these adventures were a revelation. I enjoyed them, no doubt.

Later when we got older and nastier we would take our friends who were from far more protected families and we would take them into town and then ditch them. That was a big game. That was around sixth grade.

The other ritual event from fourth grade on was skipping school during the first April home stand of the Boston Red Sox and attending a game. You could sit in the right field grandstand for 75 cents if you were under 12, half the fixed price of the famous Fenway Bleachers and better seats. I don't think I missed a year from 4th to 7th grade.

Q: The museums, you didn't pay to get into the museums or not?

KOVACH: I will tell you something. For someone that just thrives on having the Mall and going to art museums here in Washington DC. My parents loved going to the Museum of Fine Art in Boston and the Gardner museum. I hated going to art museums at that stage of life. I remember when I was about nine in fourth grade their saying you are going. I remember sitting in the car parked right outside the Museum of Fine Arts, hands clutching the steering wheel of the parked car and refusing to get out with my parents. I would not let go. I wanted the key left in the car so I could listen to the Red Sox game on the radio and my parents finally said no key but you are just going to sit in the car and do

nothing. And I did. I just stewed and was pissed off for two hours while they saw whatever they wanted to.

The first exhibit I deigned to go to was when the Family of Man came to town; an exhibit in which my aunt, the noted photographer Eva Besnyö, had a couple of pictures.

Q: These are wonderful pictures of people from all over the world.

KOVACH: When they said your aunt whom I didn't know at the time had pictures in the museum, I guess I was narcissistic enough to get out of the car and go in.

I don't remember if it was free or not to answer your question.

Q: How about movies? Were you much of a movie buff?

KOVACH: The first movie I ever saw was Danny Kay's On the Riviera. My parents loved Danny Kay. Then the second was the Wizard of Oz. They liked the movies; they definitely were caught up in Hollywood. I went to the movies a lot.

That is a habit that kind of got knocked off its pedestal when I joined the Foreign Service where you could never keep up so you kind of give up. Ironic perhaps since as a public diplomacy coned officer, you are representing the culture as well as policy. And Hollywood sure is a major element that defines our American culture.

Q: I attend at least saw two movies a week if not more, a lot double features.

KOVACH: We kids later used to go to the matinees.

I guess I didn't have to sneak out at this point in life but I had some friends that had to sneak out to go to the Saturday matinees for a quarter. You'd get in and see a double feature plus cartoons plus the news which of course I loved. I was already a news junkie.

Q: Did any country sort of grab you as far as while you were growing up, interest in other foreign countries?

KOVACH: I would say Germany. It was natural in our family to listen to German music. My mother sang Schubert songs. German poetry was all around. It was a very German, Germanophile household. So I would say Germany.

I was very interested in religion, in part because it wasn't forced down my throat. We had friends from almost every major religious group and I remember at one point about fourth grade having a golden Bible, a book about the prophet Muhammad for children, a Bhagavad Gita and a Passover Haggadah for kids on my shelf so I don't know. We had Iranian friends that fascinated me so I would say Iran was on my radar screen. Then my mother worked for Dr. Amiya Chakravarty for a while who had been Rabindranath

Tagore's personal secretary so India got on my screen. I would say in sum Iran, India and Germany.

Q: Then you had quite an exposure.

KOVACH: Yes. And my parents moved in very international circles in Boston. Even in our neighborhood the first girl I ever kissed was Armenian. Belmont was another white ethnic experience. My two best friends were Irish-French and French-Canadian/Anglo.

Q: From this mix at school there must have been a lot of really bright kids, didn't you?

KOVACH: I wasn't one of them, no. I remember from about fifth and sixth grade, fourth grade was where I bloomed academically. I went from being a C student to being an A student, except for penmanship where I was always a D student. People think I am a doctor on looking at my scrawl to this day.

I think from about fifth or sixth grade on, even at that stage of life when women, the girls develop a lot faster than the guys for a couple of years, you know, they get tall, they get breasts, they get figures and they get mature brains a lot earlier, I got marginally interested in them.

I always divided high achieving kids into grinds and bright people. I remember that taxonomy in my head from the fourth or fifth grade on. I have to say there is a slight sexist tinge because all the grinds with one or two exceptions were girls. Years later in Lexington my high school class had a particularly undistinguished group of women. Usually we would send 10, 12, 15 women to the Seven Sisters or the Ivies; in my class, it was one. We have multi-class reunions up there in Lexington. People from the other classes at these reunions are always commenting on how mediocre the women in my class were, academically speaking.

But the women in my family were a good antidote to solidifying a sexist attitude identifying grinds with women. My mother and her two older sisters were originals; all highly accomplished, out of the box women of depth, intellect and substance. I can honestly say that my mother's older sisters, Eva Besnyö the renowned photographer and Panna Kirchner, one of the most deeply thoughtful people I've ever known were both as influential in my development as was my Dad.

Q: When you got to high school, where did you go?

KOVACH: I have two friends from grade school in Belmont that I still see. I was just out in California with one of them. His mother was my den mother as a cub scout yet she never became an American citizen. I didn't know that until much later. She is French. She was in the French resistance and married a GI who was a brilliant Irish American biochemist or something, a professor. They were friends of my parents in a circle that included the parents of the infamous Daniel Pipes a well-known Zionist Islamophobe polemicist. The young Pipes was my brother's age and classmate. Alex, the French/Irish

son and I met playing together on a cub scout baseball team and remain friends to this day.

The other Belmont grade school friend, Alan Lord, I just reconnected with using social media after 44 years. Alex, the son of the French den mother I had always kind of kept up with. I knew them in California during my grad school years at Berkeley and my parents and brother kept up with other siblings and the parents. The elder Durbins were probably the only contemporaries of my parents who were independently my friends too, probably due to the separation of a continent and the Berkeley connection.

Alan and Alex and I went on all kinds of adventures. Alan's father had a yacht in Watertown up the Charles River, near the dam. I remember one time we rode our bikes to the Watertown Yacht Club and he knew the combination for the lock on the dinghy and we took his father's dinghy out on the river. We rode all the way to the locks by the Science Museum at the basin where MIT is. We had our little Tom Sawyer, Huck Finn adventure on the Charles.

You asked me about countries; I would say there is a geographical feature that somehow I have always been attuned to and that would be rivers. I love rivers.

Q: Did you ever run across a wonderful series that came out during the 30s, Rivers of America? I got through about 50. I didn't do them all.

KOVACH: I am still an avid kayaker and have a place on the lower Potomac. I wrote a 100 page undergraduate thesis on the Ganges and Hindu cosmology and the water cycle as an archetype. I have taken this obsession with rivers to the bank.

Q: In high school

KOVACH: So I got to Belmont Junior High School and in my class already at this point I am turning into sort of a little bit of an Elvis. I've got the greased back hair and the red paisley shirts and the black pegged pants. Remember snap jacks? You were a little too old for snap jacks.

It was kind of a black shoe with a tongue on a metal slide instead of laces; and you snapped it shut. They were the real cool thing. Elvis's popularity, what was his first? Heartbreak Hotel or Hound Dog? That was about the year you got in the Foreign Service when I was ten.

Q: This is past me. I can recall being in the Trucial States and sitting down with a sheik and I was in Dhahran and we had represented the Trucial States. They spread a carpet on the desert and on his record player was playing Elvis songs. I thought oh, my God. Now I appreciate it much more than in those days.

KOVACH: I think it was great to grow up when rhythm and blues went both black and white. It was a wonderful age. It was so musically rich and seminal in respect to later trends in the 60 s and beyond.

I entered Belmont Junior High with a kind of Elvis look but then I got in with a crowd that I would say were proto beatniks. We kind of got into it. We even started reading Alan Ginsburg. We started hanging out in Harvard Square. I have such memories.

I had a girl I was totally smitten with in my home room who turned into a drug addict later. So sad and so beautiful and then we had in our class the sister of Joan Baez, the folk singer. Joan was about four years ahead of us and a senior about that time. Her sister, my classmate, Mimi Farina who had a brief flash of fame with her husband, Richard Farina. Sadly, he died in a motorcycle accident right after cutting his first successful album with Mimi. Mimi was on the margins of my crowd (or maybe I was on the margins of hers). We just hung out in Harvard Square a lot. I began to dress more preppy but sporting black turtlenecks and abandoned the snap jacks and greased hair.

Our crowd had a funny overlap with sort of the some of the white ethnic juvenile delinquent types so some of the folks we d hang with still wore the red shirts, black pants and snap jacks.

I remember there was a girl who was really well developed who had a bit of a reputation. I came to know in the way middle school kids do that she had a crush on me. I was scared of her. I knew at 13 she would go all the way as we used to say. I wasn't ready for that emotionally and I knew that. Then a year later she got pregnant and she had to drop out of school. I was glad to have steered clear of that temptation.

That seventh grade year I had some great teachers. I had an old witch of an English teacher who really taught us grammar and I so appreciated her. I even liked her. Everyone loved to hate her. She looked like a witch, talked like a witch but boy, did she know grammar. Ironically, one of my protégés whom I mentored through applying and gaining entry into the Foreign Service just got married. Her father, aunt and uncle all went to the same middle school and at least in retrospect, had the same view of that English teacher.

Then I had a social studies teacher. She taught a combination of civics and American history with a view to making us think critically about public issues. She was a terrifically gifted teacher, had an MA from Harvard Education School. Oh, my god. Was she great.

Q: During this high school period this was from when to when?

KOVACH: We are talking 1957 entering middle school. I did three years in middle school, seventh through ninth grade. The seventh grade, I was popular. I grew very early so from being kind of a guy who had to use his wits and cross cultural skills to avoid being bullied on the playground, I suddenly became the biggest kid on the block who

people feared. That was quite an interesting change to cope with. I didn't abuse it; I was never a bully but I think having a strong sense of justice helped me resist that temptation. I kind of enjoyed it. I was popular.

Q: You got to be the smallest kid on the block and the biggest kid on the block.

KOVACH: Exactly. That was a great year, a lot of Harvard Square time, good grades.

Q: The Harvard Square thing; did Harvard interest you at all?

KOVACH: As a school?

Q: Yes.

KOVACH: I got admitted without applying. I got pre admitted but frankly, Harvard loved my high school. It was a good enough public school, one of the highest rated in the country by some measures like National Merit Exam scores. I got pre admitted to both Harvard and Yale and I turned my back on both of them.

My uncle, the one that came over before my father, I don't think he even had a high school education coming into the war and then at the end of the war he was in his 20s, he got drafted and he got an officer's commission because he was a German native speaker. He played an important role in de-Nazification for the first two years after the war. Then he came back and he went to Grinnell in Iowa on the GI Bill. I guess he had some courses under his belt on second thought because he only did two years there and he got a BA. Then he got a PhD in art history at Harvard and became a protégée of Bernard Berenson the great patron of the history of Italian Renaissance art. My father would give engineering lectures occasionally, more at MIT, but also in connection with the chemistry department. We had Harvard ties. We lived in the white ethnic world but we had this whole sort of Cambridge life too. A lot of the professors and George Kepes, he had been one of the great photographers in Weimar Berlin who knew my aunt and was good friends with my parents too. There was a little bit of an ethnic tinge there but we were on the margins at least of Hungarians and Austrians with PhDs that were doing well at Harvard and MIT in Cambridge. We grew up in the entrails of Harvard. I saw all its weaknesses in high school.

Q: You were still too young in a way to hit the have the full impact of the drug culture.

KOVACH: Oh, no. I later did learn that some of my high school classmates were smoking weed, however, as early as 10th grade.

What my crowd both in Belmont and in Lexington did was we hung out in Cambridge coffee shops. Two of my best high school friends (not the grade school friends I've mentioned) both of whom I am still in touch with and quite close with, the older brother of one was at Harvard so we'd go in and crash at Adams house on weekends. Did you

know the original Club 47 behind the current Harvard Lampoon building on the well known triangular block that houses the Harvard Lampoon Society?

Q: Vaguely.

KOVACH: There is a triangular block behind Adam's house and there was in the late 50s and early 60s this little cafe, Club 47, that was maybe three times the size of this office, maybe 500 square feet. There one high school or middle school Saturday night in 1958 or so we heard Bob Dylan with about 15 people in the audience. He had just come east from Minnesota. He hadn't gotten noticed. That was really amazing. I remember distinctly the guy couldn't sing worth shit, as I remember but there was something about him. There was energy there. I was sort of whoa, interesting. I sort of associated him with the beat poets in my mind.

Q: Did the federal government or the Foreign Service cross your radar at all?

KOVACH: Then? Junior high, high school? Public service, this was the Irish side. Public service was a huge ideal and my parents as you know were proud Americans. I am not sure how much we discussed it but I always felt that they would be proud if I entered public service of some kind. They didn't encourage it but I certainly make noises about it they said, Yeah, this is a great country. They were very patriotic in their own way.

Q: So you didn't fall into that trap that young kids get of venerating everything, public service and all?

KOVACH: The opposite, the opposite. I am from Massachusetts. We had Irish values but also critical values. I think that my parents were part of the anti nuke movement and I think they were a little distressed that the main public service I saw for myself was wanting to go in the military. I wanted to do it for several reasons, partly because I felt like I missed that kind of structure in my upbringing and that going to a stricter environment, a more structured environment that was distinctly American would be good for me. And, yes, I wanted to learn to fly. I was obsessed with flying. That was in my mind probably from junior high on.

There was that great seventh grade year and then eighth grade the only memory I have I started dating and my first girl friend. That was very nice, very intense.

Q: What was the dating pattern then? I grew up in a time when guys really didn't, guys and girls didn't particularly pair off but they kind of went in groups. And they are doing that more. We would pair off and maybe neck a little but basically, we would all kind of go together.

KOVACH: In Belmont it was more of a coupling thing. It was a very different kind of town than Lexington. She and I kind of paired off. Her father was head shrink at McClain Hospital with this huge campus in Belmont so we had the whole McClain campus and

these underground tunnels that she knew like the back of her hand. So we had all these wonderful little necking spots.

To drop the big name again, her older sister and Joan Baez were good friends. So I remember a couple of Saturday mornings pretending to watch cartoons but necking heavily with Joan Baez and the sister teasing the hell out of us. Not giving us a minute of peace.

Then we moved to Lexington halfway through the year. That was halfway through eighth grade. I would have been 58, December.

Q: Were you hit I imagine in Lexington with Revolutionary history and all that?

KOVACH: Yes, a lot of it. The American Revolution it was a little like studying the Civil War in this Mid-Atlantic region. It is just a really rich place to study the Revolution. I never visited Paul Revere's house or the ship, the U.S. Constitution until I was in college and bringing friends from not only out of town but out of country to see them. We had Patriots Day, it was a holiday and the parade and the minuteman statue were a ritual celebration of that great day in 1775 when Lexington's forefathers, warned by Paul Revere, stumbled out of the tavern just off the Green to confront the advancing redcoats. We had our fill of the history, even if one only read the historical markers, you could not avoid the iconic moments in our national history around the Boston area. Buckman Tavern. We had a lot of it, the Old North Bridge.

It was part of that New England heritage. My parents were incredibly proud New Englanders, very proud Americans. In Lexington much more so, because Belmont was marginal to the history of the early Revolution. Paul Revere didn't ride through Belmont but Lexington.

So I moved to Lexington and this was a pretty good stage of my life. I was doing well on the grades, I was motivated, I am loving social studies and English and I am still the biggest guy on the block and good looking. I moved from Belmont to Lexington and suddenly from being in sort of a weird beatnik crowd in Belmont I become almost instantly the most popular guy in my class. The football coach took a look at me and wanted to put me on the line. Thank God I said no to that.

In Lexington I had this wonderful teacher, Mr. Malloy who was kind of a Fred Astaire look alike, a real charmer, probably gay as a blade but he was just the most inspired teacher in geography in eighth grade. I remember we did the rivers of the world and you remember film strips, of course you do. We had these film strips. He had a film strip on every major river system of the world; the Nile, the Mississippi, the Irrawaddy, the Mekong, the Amazon and the Danube. We basically did what would be called in Europe political economy where based on geography, we studied how people lived. I just loved that.

I had a very good English teacher, and became the editor of the school paper immediately. I was suddenly very popular, went out with a popular and very bright young woman, this was more like the gang thing where we partied together and we'd play spin the bottle a lot. Part of the party sequence was you'd couple up and neck for a bit and then you'd come together again. This poor Priscilla she was so bright. She was the brightest woman in the class and a thinker not a grind. She was a direct descendant of William Dawes who was the other Paul Revere as you may recall from your American history. She went to Mt. Holyoke and she was at the top of her class there. Then in her senior year she totally fell apart and never pulled it together again, a very sad story.

I had a friend in college that kind of flipped out like that too.

Q: How about languages? Were you involved in languages?

KOVACH: I tended to get my way with my parents. The way I dealt with my mother's sort of craziness was I just bullied her. She tried to push me and I'd leave her in tears. This is a sad relationship. I can say I loved my mother but I never liked her much.

She wasn't the worst; it was her older sister whom I loved and adored and was really an example for me in the way fathers usually are, she insisted I do Latin. They were throwing the old mind muscle theory extant since the 1920s at me. Remember that from psychology? The idea that somehow studying an ancient language developed your mind in a way that was totally different from studying a modern language. It was a patently absurd proposition and my father bought into it but my aunt was just adamant. I liked going to mass from time to time and in the mass in pre Vatican two days was in Latin. Frankly, that's what pushed me over. I think I told that to them and my parents were sort of well, the less you go to mass, the better with us, you know. That's what pushed me over so I did Latin. I enjoyed it, was initially a B student, and had very good teachers.

Q: If you are going to take Latin, Massachusetts is the place to do it, particularly in that era.

KOVACH: Miss Allen was a Radcliff graduate. She was so smart and we got the Roman history. I loved that, I loved it. Once I decided to take the plunge, I was an A student. I regretted that only because I wanted to take Spanish and I would now know Spanish which is the second language of this great country.

Q: At any time did your family travel abroad at all?

KOVACH: My father had trips to Europe. My mother went over when I was 3 ½ before she had my brother. My father would go over every few years. In Germany in particular he had a lot of business contacts and Foster Grant and Farber which is a huge textile company in Germany I think eventually bought Foster Grant. He was one of the architects of that sale, I think. (Note: Farber I believe was deeply complicit in the military-industrial machine of the Third Reich)

I never traveled overseas until my 21st birthday except to Canada where I once drove through in just four hours. I didn't travel much. In high school I took German.

Q: Did you have when you were in high school summer jobs?

KOVACH: because I was independent and my parents, I mean I had a meager allowance, but my parents were definitely not spoiling me. They weren't fabulously rich either. My father didn't own Foster Grant. He may have been the chief chemist but he was on salary. My mother was teaching and not making a ton. They had nothing from Europe.

I worked. In Lexington we were more outer suburban. We moved from this white ethnic neighborhood in Belmont to a very strange experimental communal style neighborhood. The whole neighborhood consisted of about 60 modern houses, Bauhaus style. Most of the houses including ours were designed by the great Walter Gropius. It was a planned community that he designed after he immigrated so a lot of the people were what I'd call Cambridge types like doctors and shrinks and professors. My father was one of only four or five businessmen in the neighborhood and was looked down on. It was a highly educated lot, sociologically more Jewish, WASP and sprinkling of other exotic ethnics like Chinese, Japanese and Dutch. We had a world famous Japanese architect with a house in the neighborhood so it was a very different sort of social milieu.

Lexington wasn't that different from Belmont. Lexington had a few millionaires, had people in duplexes, union card holding types on the other end. Belmont was more white ethnic. There were no synagogues in Lexington when we moved there. I don't think there was an orthodox church. Now there are three synagogues and two orthodox churches. It has changed a lot. It was kind of WASPy. Now it's over 20% Asian, generally highly educated Asians.

Q: Asking about working, did you do much?

KOVACH: Oh, yes. In the outer suburbs there were a lot of fields and my brother being allergic, there was a lot of ragweed to be mowed so I actually did a lot of field mowing and pool cleaning, sort of rich suburban work. And snow shoveling; oh my God. The snow was like money raining on your head so I did a lot of that. I always worked menial jobs. I never did anything that took a brain. Maybe babysitting took an ounce of intelligence-certainly good judgment and discretion. As one of the 7 or 8 oldest kids in the neighborhood, babysitting was another source of income.

Then in 1962 my father quit Foster Grant and started his own company and I'd work for him occasionally.

Q: Did you graduate from Lexington High?

KOVACH: Yes. It was in some ways a great school. It was very much the child of Harvard's School of Education so we got very good people; teachers and principals. It was a very blue town, lefty, democrat, had its own civil rights committee and I got

involved again working in Roxbury and became aware of the situation in the South. There was that element.

What I didn't like about Lexington High was this I was very a very good European kid in a way. I wanted information and ideas and Lexington High was very good at teaching process and that was very much in. so we learned how to do a term paper with card notes that were coded to the bibliographic source and all that. I could do that in my sleep and we learned how to outline and organize a speech but we didn't learn much. I mean we didn't learn what you might term the classical canon. Some of the kids, some who were brilliant and scholarly and some who were discipline problems were farmed out to a really good Jesuit school in Concord, the next town out. In the tenth grade I had just had enough. I told my father I want to go to, I don't recall the name, St. Joseph s perhaps. I wanted to go there.

My parents both went to very good gymnasiums in Budapest and Vienna and my father totally got what I was missing out on at Lexington High School, but my mother believing in public education and then her histrionics about my son in a private school and a Catholic one at that killed the idea. I realized too it would be more demanding on me and I was frankly getting a bit tired of school, which I'd been doing non-stop since age 3.

Q: This is reflecting a social democrat outlook.

KOVACH: She didn't buy it due to political and cultural bias. My aunt, her older sister, was very supportive of my desire because she was Catholic and understood the quality of a Jesuit education. It was a good Jesuit school. Kids out of that school went to the top schools in the Ivies and went to the best Catholic schools. That was an argument my mother won in the end. They wouldn't let me go. My mother was very, my social success was something that meant a lot to my mother because in a way she was living vicariously through me. How could you give this up? You are president of your class. Stuff that meant nothing to me, frankly. And my grades began to founder at the end of my sophomore year.

It was a real fight and it was one of these things; you know eldest sidings to an extent run interference for their younger siblings and my brother got to go to private school. He says he didn't fight that much to do it but he didn't fit in that well socially and that seemed to be the clincher with my mother.

Q: Private school in New England had quite a different cast than I think they did in other parts of the country because maybe there was a social element but they are also expected to really teach as opposed to being a place where you could send a problem kid.

KOVACH: Yes. Well, this Jesuit school was just topnotch. There were a couple of kids that went over there in ninth grade. I marvel. We talk a lot about the education we got. They said they are so grateful. Some are not intellectuals but a couple of them are professors. It really hurt me. That said, I had good teachers in high school in English and social studies, wonderful, just wonderful.

I had a Miss Murray in my junior year who taught that history is not objective. Now how many high school kids get that rammed down their throat? She had these two lessons. The one I remember was about the American Revolution, what drove the American Revolution. She had us read a book that had just been published that said that the location of George Washington's mistresses were what drove him to decide where he would take the British on. He was a womanizer; there is no doubt about it. We know that but this was probably a bit farfetched. But it did make the point.

Economic history, she was the one frankly, who in her teaching flew in the face of the PC wisdom regarding the driving cause of the Civil War. This, probably beginning in my generation, it was politically correct to think that slavery was the major issue of the Civil War. She adamantly believed an alternative theory and she was very good on race issues so it wasn't, you know, a racist bias she was teaching from. She d adamantly believed that the causes of the War were a broad range of economic differences between the regions and that slavery was part of that economic structure that separated the two parts of the country; one granted that had an ethical edge and a lot of advocates for abolition in the North.

Q: Were you in high school in 1960?

KOVACH: Yes, I would have been a sophomore. I was respected and a student council leader, eventually becoming President my senior year. I was a civil rights activist working with Lexington's own 'civil rights committee' or the like to staff the almost daily picket of Woolworths in downtown Lexington in order to persuade the national chain to desegregate their lunch counters in the South. This would have been around 1961 or 1962 of course.

Q: I was wondering if the Kennedy Nixon election affected you.

KOVACH: Oh, yes it did; the campaign and the election both. I became the, I wasn't old enough to even be in the Youth for Kennedy and but I found myself in the role of youth coordinator for a chunk of outer suburban Boston. I was very involved in the Kennedy campaign. It to me, that combination of sort of patrician Irish that the Kennedys represented in a way brought both parts of my outer environment together in one.

With my parents grouching about Eisenhower and grouching about the nukes and you know, grouching about civil rights, it suddenly seemed to bring it all together. It was really a hope.

So yes, that was a huge thing. I remember the night before the election, that final rally in Boston Garden. It was snowing like hell and my girlfriend and I slogged in. I think we had to walk a good distance once we got downtown, maybe the subway that serviced the garden was closed or the like. I believe it was elevated so a heavy snow episode would have affected service. A million and a half people lined the streets from the airport to the

tunnel and then from the tunnel to the Garden. Kennedy was there and it was the only time I ever saw him in person. An amazing night, I will never forget it.

Q: Did the Ask not what you can do for your country, did that plant a seed in you?

KOVACH: It sure did and to leapfrog to years later, toward the end of my Foreign Service career, someone whom I hardly knew but absolutely idolized is Maura Harty who was then assistant secretary for CA. I was serving as diplomat in residence at UCLA. Back in DC for the annual conference of that cadre, the Department hosted a career day and I was back from UCLA where I was teaching. She was the keynote speaker and she talked about those Irish values and growing up and the Kennedy campaign. I was in tears. It was a real strong part of my upbringing.

Q: There will be things of this era that you and I are somewhat removed from. Somebody else will be talking about this another time about when they grew up.

KOVACH: I suppose. I don't consider myself an old fogey or anything but I guess I have to think about the first Apple computer.

But Maura Hardy just captured it beautifully. What an articulate woman. What a leader.

Q: You are getting close to graduating from high school. Whither?

KOVACH: In high school my grades started going down in my sophomore year. I did well in English and social studies but I started not writing papers and started getting more, I was doing work in Roxbury in the black neighborhoods and my civil rights activism was there and then my social life; I always liked the ladies. I was also active in the anti nuclear movement.

Answering that inner voice of justice that first manifest in the first grade incident at the Cincinnati Zoo, I became the high school coordinator for the Lexington Civil Rights Committee's daily picket of the Woolworth's in Lexington Center to protest lunch counter segregation in the South. The Greensboro sit in occurred I believe, my junior year. I even had a veiled threat directed against me in our supposedly enlightened town—an alleged bastion of liberal values.

One really instrumental thing that happened in tenth grade, the first year in high school for me, the high school teacher that taught high school history had gone to BU over the summer and she had studied Asian dynastic history. We had the option of doing that instead of whatever the standard tenth grade course was. I opted for that.

Q: This was the history of what?

KOVACH: China and Japan. Huge, huge moment for me. I got so much from it. I was president of council my third year. Great teachers, great grounding in literature.

One interesting anecdote regarding the pervasive Anglophilia in my New England small town upbringing. As I've described, I grew up in an environment that was very centered around German music, literature and culture. My mother was a German professor, a German literature professor at Tufts.

I am thinking, damn. I look at British culture and literature as sort of a secondary European culture. I am of the German Hapsburg pale. I would like to be reading German literature. I decided to organize a kind of protest. There weren't many central Europeans in the school but a number of us, kind of brainier ilk got together. We decided we were going to approach the head of the English department. We didn't have a petition. We just asked for an after school meeting. There were about six of us.

Mr. Cheevers invited us in and asked what he could do for us. I was the spokesman.

I explained that we all are of central European heritage and we are proud of our heritage and a lot of us come from German speaking homes and we feel that German literature in many ways is the great European literature. In my case I said I would like to study a little Hungarian literature in translation. The American literature, we accept. This is our country. This is our intellectual history but the English literature is just not up to snuff. I said that includes Shakespeare. I have never liked Shakespeare that much.

He parried our representation perfectly. He just judo pulled us. He said, looking around us, "When is the last time you had an assigned book to do for a book report?"

We kind of looked at each other because it was a very liberal school. We never had assigned topics. We chose what to read for reports ourselves. He said, "Okay." Then he looked at me mischievously, and said, "You want to read the Magic Mountain for your next book report." I knew it was 1,000 page book. He said, "You are very free to."

A bit crestfallen, and a bit embarrassed and ashamed we traipsed out. But I had the last laugh, personally speaking. For my next book report, I read Hermann Hesse's Siddhartha, a novella based on the Buddha's life for my next report. A hundred pages was a lot better than 1,000 and I was interested in eastern religions a bit already. That was an interesting moment.

I was elected to head of student council my senior year and we had another civil rights moment. I attended the state council where for a day we pretended to be senior State officials with the governor actually sent a decree saying in effect that we were rotating in and out of a ceremonial chair, governor for a few moments. I think I got elected something like head of the senate so for the three hours I was officially the head of the Massachusetts senate. There was a guy from Wellesley, the town where the college is. It was the rare Republican town where many of Boston's senior bankers lived. I was from a predominantly Democratic leaning town and he and I kind of bonded. He was an Italian ethnic guy, like me, first generation.

About two months later the Daughters of the American Revolution held their annual essay contest they ran in Massachusetts for female high school juniors to anonymously write a paper on some patriotic topic, assigned topic. The woman that won in the blind judging was African American from a nearby town. They would not give her the award. I predictably went through the ceiling.

I pulsed the council in the lunchroom. We didn't have a formal meeting. I got a majority of council people to support me in forwarding a resolution that the school will not participate in this contest again and will be vocal about our non participation until the DAR finds justice in their heart.

I went to the principal, another terrific guy. I had a good relationship with him. I said to him, Mr. Johnson, you don't have a choice here. I've got the council behind me. We are going to call for a boycott of this contest.

He said, I am with you. And what s more I am going to call the head of the school board (by coincidence meeting that night) and get you on the agenda for five minutes and see if we can do it as a town.

So I got up there, we got the town behind us. The next day I called my friend that headed up the Wellesley High council and I challenged him, Hey, are you in with me?

He had just heard about the DAR s refusal too and he had the same reaction as I predicted. We went to the Boston Globe and said declared our boycott of the contest. In my case, I represented the town. I think my buddy just represented his student council.

Q: This is the Boston Globe paper.

KOVACH: Yes and then the next day the DAR relented. So that was good.

Q: Very good. Good for you.

KOVACH: So that was important. That was another one of those moments.

Q: You wonder how an organization could be so obtuse.

KOVACH: And as if African Americans didn't fight in the Revolution. I mean, give me a break. Proudly and not as slaves.

The other moment in high school that shaped my life and my career was an essay contest all juniors in the honor class had to compete in. Dubbed the UN essay contest, it was the only time at Lexington High School where you had write on an assigned topic. It was particular assigned topic for everyone in your year. The topic that came up my year was the Palestinian refugee problem.

My parents were not Zionists, as you can probably guess. They weren't anti-Zionists. They said well, there are complex issues at play. Would you want to be in an ethnic ghetto? They always teased me about how lucky I was that we got out of New Brunswick, New Jersey which is actually a Hungarian ethnic ghetto. They just didn't think it was cool to be in a homogenous environment, they didn't like homogeneity. They really were Hapsburg in that way. It had nothing to do with the poles of their own identity. They really liked variety.

That said, with Jewish heritage on both sides and leaving Europe in the short run to escape the Nazi threat, they had a certain abstract appreciation for a Jewish State on the one hand (as long as they didn't have to live there) but not one founded on an injustice to another people, the Palestinians. This latter view was my Dad's. My mother was quite indifferent.

We did the research and we usually wrote 20-30 page papers at Lexington High School. Now at UCLA I asked my graduate students to do a 30 page paper, they just about died in their tracks. What a change. A month of research on the problem and suddenly Exodus and Sal Mineo and Eva Marie Saint if you remember that Hollywood 1950's extravaganza which shaped many folks view of Israel were all thrown in the proverbial trash heap of history. Israel had been built on a foundation, not entirely on its own fault, of injustice to another people. That never left me. I had an interest in the Arab world all of a sudden.

Q: One has the greatest admiration for what Israel has accomplished but at the same time it is somewhat a mirror image of South Africa, white South Africa.

KOVACH: You won't get any argument from me on that proposition.

By the way, I was a note taker during my time in Jordan in a meeting where Warren Christopher, King Hussein and Yitzhak Rabin were meeting together. I was the number three in the embassy in Jordan when Israel and Jordan made peace, acting DCM for a good part of that year too. Rabin said it approximately in those words. In my earshot he said, when there is a big bully of a cousin who has been a bully for three generations (meaning Israel), even when there may be a lot of commonality; you need a divorce before you can think of marriage. We don't want the '67 borders. We want a straight line. I think if he'd lived there would be peace now. He and Arafat, I have seen them together. They were tight. They joked together. There was a comfort level that in Arab culture in particular is vital. Ehud Barak? What a clown he is. He was the prime minister in 2000 when Arafat walked away from the Taba negotiation in December, the last three weeks of the Clinton administration. There was no trust there.

I totally agree with you. We will get into that later. Much of my career was involved with the Middle East.

Q: So you are graduating what year?

KOVACH: Graduated in 63.

Q: How about the Cuban missile crisis?

KOVACH: I was a senior that year. The fears of Cold War getting hot, of nuclear brinksmanship a part of living in that era, came home to roost in our hormonally driven adolescent minds. There was a party and I recall a consensus that well, you know, at a certain point in this crisis if things get really bad we want to lose our virginity if there is a chance we're going to die. We sort of paired off and decided who was going to couple with whom, you know. I was not dating anyone special that year. I had a girl I never dated but whom I liked. She was in this doomsday cabal. I like bright women, by the way. She was a very bright woman who wasn't very attractive but I just thought she'd be kind of neat to make love to, I feel so close to her as a friend and this is an adventure that neither of us is ready for but if the world is going to end, I'd like to do the deed once.

That was October, 62, right?

Q: Yes.

KOVACH: So it was my senior year.

Q: So how stood you? What were you going to do?

KOVACH: The college thing seemed unreal to me. Even though my grades really began to sink my junior year, I had probably a C average but I was in honors classes. I was not doing the work. But I was still interested in the reading. My teachers still saw a lot of intellectual promise and all that. I was doing civil rights work. I looked good on paper. Harvard, Yale and Williams all recruited very heavily at my high school. Harvard and Yale in those days had a system where they more or less invited you to apply. And they'd say if your record stays pretty much the way it is, we are likely to admit you. It was called an A rating. So I got an A rating. You didn't have to apply. They looked at your record. They came and talked to you for 15 minutes. And Williams too. My high school had sent a number of people to Williams in recent years whose profile was a lot like mine.

First of all, in Harvard; I had seen the emperor's new clothes. I am not a big Harvard fan. A lot of braggadocio but my friends who had gone there were put off by the number of teaching assistants they had as course instructors and the general inattention paid undergraduates. With Yale I was smitten. I liked the system of residential colleges, sort of like Oxford. One side of me thought, This is the place but the side of me that was beginning to go on academic strike, the inner voice that said enough school for now, you are 17 and you've been doing this school business since age 3, said no, I am not ready for this. I am hardly writing my papers in high school.

I wanted to go to Antioch. Probably since the great fights with my parents over Latin and the Jesuit school, this was the third major fight. My parents in their naive European way

were desolate over my interest in Antioch. They just said, No, no. You haven't come this far and achieved everything you have socially and intellectually to go to Antioch.

I said, I like the work study model. I have been in school since I was three years old. I am sick of it. I remember saying that. I am just sick of it. I need to breathe.

We went back and forth. Meanwhile my uncle was a professor, he was the head of the art history department at Wellesley. This was the uncle who was in Hell's Kitchen in the late 30s and early 40s and the de-Nazifier. They consulted him. Help, help. What do we do with this rebellious kid? My parents were both educated in Europe. They didn't really know the scene. My father knew the engineering schools but not the liberal arts scene which clearly was the direction I was leaning.

My uncle said, he knew my grades had gone down so he suggested Union or Hamilton in New York State. But he said you can try maybe a stretch to get in Wesleyan. My high school was a feeder school for Williams. A couple of guys usually went to Amherst every year. I had never heard of a third school in the so called 'little three' nor had I heard the term 'little three' up to that point.

There was a home room classmate that I always liked. We were adjacent in the alphabet. He was Don Kovitz, I was Kovach so the first day of each year in home room, at least, we were seated next to each other. He had his driver license which I was just too pre-occupied to bother with. Being popular usually guaranteed me a ride any place I wanted to go. And to supplement this mooching of rides, I was a bike rider, always have been and still am.

So he said to me, I am going to have a look at Wesleyan this weekend. Want to tag along and share gas? He was from a fairly poor family too.

I said, Sure. My uncle was just telling me about it. Yeah.

I got within two blocks of campus and I knew that I had arrived in every sense of the word. It is emotional to recall this epiphany; a kind of white light moment. I knew I was home. It is moving because of the power of that moment: a totally irrational moment of revelation because I hadn't seen a thing on campus yet and we were in a rather glum working class Middletown neighborhood, not a place of any visual splendor. Recalling that moment is emotional too because Wesleyan I think was probably the single best decision I ever made in my life. The Foreign Service probably being number two; my two marriages way down that list. Wesleyan was just perfect. I just intuitively knew it. Have you been on campus?

Q: I have been there. I fenced there once.

KOVACH: Oh, you went to Williams. It is so funny. Williams is in the weave of my stories too. Williams was the one I kind of had a hard time letting go of. Two guys that

had been president of the council before me had gone to Williams. One of them had been sort of a social rabble rouser like me and they were happy there.

In your day Williams may have been stronger. In the early 60s it went through a relatively weak phase and my uncle was sort of all over me about that. He said these little schools go up and down like roller coasters including Wellesley depending on their presidents. Williams had a president that wasn't that good. Now Williams is the number one liberal arts school in the country.

I was just with a Wesleyan friend I hadn't been with in years and he told me that all three of his kids went to Williams. He said I never had a second thought about it.

Q: When I went there it had a very strong president. I think something like 70% of my class, the class of 46, were vets. This meant the maturity level, not just age but also World War II had made a difference.

KOVACH: I applied to Wesleyan early and got in and never looked back.

Q: We will pick this up in 1963? You're going to Wesleyan and we haven't talked about it. We will start there.

KOVACH: Okay, great.

Q: Today is the 11th of May, 2012 with Peter Kovach.

You left something out. What do you want to say?

KOVACH: I want to talk about music because it certainly extended into my career as my role as cultural attaché.

I grew up in a very musical family. My parents, Central European. I grew up on classical music and have such warm associations especially with Mozart, Beethoven and Schubert music right through my childhood. I remember going up to Boston from Providence, Rhode Island with my grandmothers when I was about three and a half with my father, because my two grandmothers were going on vacation in North Conway. I think my parents were very glad to see them go for a week because we lived as an extended family. On the way we heard Beethoven's violin concerto on the radio. To this day I hear that piece and I think of that day. I have associations like that.

My mother was very musical and my brother is very musical and they used to play and sing Schubert lieder together so I had that.

My parents also liked jazz so I had that too. As a child of the 50s I grew up with rhythm and blues crossed over to Elvis and the white world and the black world crossed over with it. I grew into adolescence with rock and roll and pop culture in the 60s.

A very eclectic taste. When I got to Wesleyan which had the famous ethnomusicology department, I got into Indian raga the first month I was there.

Q: New England really is a musical place. It does have a strong musical heritage emanating from Boston but also from the universities, the main line universities.

KOVACH: There is a lot of room for eclecticism because there is no real native music in New England. Whereas I rode over here from Main State on the shuttle with a driver I had never seen before; seemed like an aging white redneck and he was listening to some of the best blue grass the likes of which I hadn't heard since I was in high school when it was briefly popular. It was wonderful and I can't get the song out of my head now. This Mid-Atlantic region has a music which is blue grass Appalachian, a product of a rich Scottish-Irish legacy.

Music was an influence and later when we talk about the career, an important one.

Q: You are getting ready to graduate from high school. Have we covered why you went to Wesleyan? Let's do it.

KOVACH: I was a toughie. I began to sort of check out my junior year in high school. I was getting Ds in math and science. I was president of everything and praised for my intellectual promise and social activism and working the slums in Boston and doing all that justice stuff. I was beginning to screw up in school and I was beginning to think, damn, I am 17 years old and I have been in school since I was three. This is getting boring. I want to get out.

What school was I attracted to? Antioch and my parents both came over with classical educations just could not understand the attraction at all.

Q: Antioch which has folded. Would you explain why?

KOVACH: Work study program, progressive school with work study. I liked that idea of a few months in, a few months out, traveling around, doing different jobs. It just appealed to me a lot. And they were just appalled that their older son who seemed to be doing everything well and representing an American success story, president of student council would not want to translate that success into going to a top school. So they appealed to my uncle who was a Wellesley professor. My father lectured at MIT because he was an engineer but I clearly wasn't an engineer. My uncle advised to maybe think of these small liberal arts schools and he knew that Williams was interested in me and actually came after me. They recruited very heavily in my high school as did Yale but he was talking about Hamilton and Union and Wesleyan. So he came over for dinner and he dropped that word. I had never heard of Wesleyan.

A guy in my homeroom who had his driver's license said I am going down to this place Wesleyan this weekend. Will you come? He wanted me to share gas. I said yeah, sure. My uncle has told me about it.

I got down there. It is very unimposing as compared to Williams and the others. I was a block from campus; I hadn't even seen it yet but I knew. It was like an epiphany and that was the best, probably the single best decision I made in my life, even though I fought Wesleyan tooth and nail too in the process of getting through.

Wesleyan seemed to be as far fringe as you could get and get, a little bit Ivy education but with liberal rules that allowed mixing majors (far less common in that day than now). They had the College of Social Studies and the College of Science and College of Literature and I liked that. I just liked everything about it. I liked the strength in Asian studies. I was getting very interested in Asia already in high school. It was the right place for me.

Q: What years were you there?

Let's talk about the summers.

KOVACH: So I graduate. I made a lot of money summers in high school doing lawns and sweeping pools. I had a friend who had a hand tractor and we used to do ragweed fields because we lived in the outer suburbs and a lot of asthmatic kids like my brother could not endure life around ragweed and goldenrod so we made a lot of money cutting ragweed.

With this money so I decided to go out West over the summer of 1963, after graduating from Lexington High. I headed out West with my high school best friend, borrowing an old second car from my parents. My friend and I enjoyed the drive which included an amazing tour of the 27 acre Kelsey Hayes wheel factory in Detroit where his uncle worked and where most of the car wheels in the U.S. were made. An amazing stop. I didn't have enough money to just travel, even with the loan of the car and gas at a quarter a gallon.

I dumped the friend in Denver after three weeks to fly home. I then drove up to Jackson Hole and got a job there at a dude ranch since I was already low on funds. I don't recall how I heard about it but I got a job washing dishes. This dude ranch was owned by a close follower, a Phoenix businessman, of Barry Goldwater. All the kids who worked there were babes in the woods from the Midwest who typically had been at the most a hundred miles from their home in their life, probably to see a high school basketball game. And then there was one other oddball like me; a guy named Harry Boyte. Harry's history fighting for racial justice dwarfed any of my history.

His name seemed familiar to me on meeting. Turns out that he had his far more spectacular 15 minutes of fame in the Boston Globe too and achieved that as a southern kid. He had been the best one mile runner in North Carolina (the best white one miler that is). He refused to run in the state meet unless it was integrated. He declared, his words repeated in papers throughout the country, 'I am not going to take the championship if I

don't run against the best runners black and white', and they refused to integrate the meet and he protested. He made the headlines of the Boston Globe sports section.

So I knew about this guy in the abstract. Who would have known that at this redneck dude ranch just between Teton and Yellowstone parks two kindred spirits would meet up. He was there doing the same thing I was. He and I bonded instantly. We had campfires every night with the other help staff. We were clearly corrupting these kids from the point of view of the owner. We were putting big and radical ideas in their heads. Furthermore I was and remain a lousy dishwasher, truth be told, so I got fired first and then with the boss being in the firing mode, he said to Harry, You get out too because you are a bad influence.

So Harry and I went to Teton Park and arrived at a famous campground there; famous among folksingers and itinerants of the Beat Generation called Climbers Campground. You had to prove you had hiking boots to get in. The rangers let you in, it was free. It was a real stop on sort of the 50s folk music scene. Pete Seeger had camped there.

Q: What summer was this?

KOVACH: 63. We hung out in Climbers' Campground. After a few days we actually did a week long trek around the whole Teton Range, went into Idaho and back into Wyoming. Then a few more nights (and days) around Climbers' Campground. At that point, a pretty amazing sequence of events and coincidences (is there really such a thing as a coincidence?) unfolded over the next weeks that in retrospect, take the breath away. We decided to head to San Francisco. Calling ahead to friends, we each heard from our left wing activist contacts that the nuclear test ban treaty had been signed between the U.S. and the Soviet Union while we were on the hike. Harry was a peace activist in addition to his civil rights background. We heard that the peace movement had a 40 foot catamaran that they used to sail to into test zones to stop the tests off places like the Marshall Islands. Post treaty signing, the movement was selling the boat and they wanted two people to sort of varnish it and get it into sellable condition. We got that gig so we got to live on the boat in Sausalito and got to take care of it.

Q: And San Francisco was the height of the folk music thing.

KOVACH: It may have been a little beyond that by then but before Ashbury and acid rock and the free speech movement at my future grad school, UC Berkeley, by one year. It was neat to be out there. It was just so exciting.

I fell in love in those weeks and had my first consummated love affair. I just weeks ago spent a morning with that lady. I hadn't seen her in 45 years. While I value the human connection to past loves, first reunions like this are a strange combination of dredged up memory, catching up and trying to be in the present moment. Reflecting back on the affair, It was just wonderful back then, young, in love, had this great gig on the boat that paid almost nothing but gave me a free place to live in San Francisco. But fate had other

big things in store for me before summer's end. And Paula was a thoughtful, bright and kind individual, a prize in many dimensions.

Then Harry and I got a message to call from his father, Harry's father. Harry's from an old White southern family and his father had at one point been so popular he probably could have been,,,he was briefly I think head of the Southern Red Cross and they were talking about him for mayor of Atlanta. His father had had in the 1950's an epiphany where he saw the evil in segregation and racial hate and he went to work for Martin Luther King. He was a tough negotiator. He was negotiating all the integration issues with large segregated workplaces like Coca-Cola.

He phoned us around the end of July and said there is going to be a huge march in Washington that Dr. King is organizing. He knows he is in way above his head. We need all the help they can get. Could you and your friend come to Atlanta right away? I didn't think two seconds about leaving despite the girlfriend.

We got in my old car and in three and a half days drove across country in that old Nash Rambler with no AC. I damaged my tear ducts on that drive. I never totally recovered.

Q: In the Nash did you have those fold back seats? Did you sleep in the car?

KOVACH: We had the reclining seats. Yes, we could.

Q: A Nash was renowned for a make out car.

KOVACH: I know. We had the seats but we stopped one night, we camped on the North Rim of the Grand Canyon and allowed ourselves two hours of daylight sight-seeing before we hit the road again. Then one slept and one drove the rest of the way. Next to being with my father when he died years later I saw the only other dead body I have ever really seen close up. Someone had gotten hit on the road in New Mexico. I remember.

In Abilene we were just destroyed with fatigue. We pulled over to sleep and the police tried to arrest us for vagrancy. We talked our way out of that by agreeing to move on immediately. It was not without adventures.

We got to Atlanta and right away we went to work at SCLC (the Southern Leadership Conference) with Dr. King. It was good that we were there. At times he needed us a lot, at times we got to look around Atlanta where I had never been.

Then a few weeks later, we went up to the march. Like the fool I was, I had a banner 'We shall overcome' on the side of my car driving in the Deep South. Nothing happened; no one took any shots at us even though I had effectively painted a target on the side of my car.

I think we were in the Mayflower hotel. My memory is that we all stayed there. I realize the Willard Hotel near Freedom Plaza claims they hosted us. I have a good visual

memory. Recently, I walked out of the side door of the Mayflower on L Street and had a flashback to the way the street looked that morning with the stream of cars and pick-ups that had come up from Atlanta, festooned with posters. I'll have to research and confirm that point. My role was basically what we in Washington would call a staff aide to Dr. King. I was with him through the night before the March. I had the night shift. I was answering the phone while he was writing the speech about ten feet away. I actually have a draft of that speech with his annotations on it. That was very exciting. I went to sleep for a few hours and then went out to the march, just amazing stuff for a young idealist.

Later that day I said bye to Harry. He was going off to Duke and I was going off to Wesleyan. I came up to New York and actually stayed with my cousin who lived in the Village or lower Chelsea.

I went up to my hometown and guess what? The head of the Chamber of Commerce who was a real estate agent in Lexington Massachusetts, the so-called birthplace of American liberty had just refused to rent a house to a black, MIT educated physicist who was a colonel in the air force and a researcher out at nearby Hanscom Field, a research base, by and large.

So I got together with some of my gang from the civil rights committee in town. A Boston civil rights organization sent a shill, far less financially qualified or presentable to try to rent the place, which he easily did proving clearly that the Black Colonel had been discriminated against. We organized a picket around the famous Minuteman statue on the Lexington Green and basically disgraced this guy. He was a fledgling politician with definite political ambitions. We destroyed his career. The black found a better place, the black air force researcher.

This verified my instincts that the North had problems too, somewhat more hypocritical, more under the surface. His daughter married a classmate of mine and has never spoken to me at a reunion since. I am sure that I am a devil in his family's eyes and probably destroyed his career.

Q: Obviously, Boston has always had a problem with difference; ethnic and class separation being a very pronounced pattern in my youth. I would say in Boston is probably more tribal than split along racial lines.

KOVACH: It is.

Q: The Boston Irish, they are a tribe.

KOVACH: They are and the racial edge came up again years and years later. I don't know if you are a hockey fan but I am. The Bruins and the Capitals played in the first round of the hockey play offs and the Caps won in seven games in overtime. The guy who scored the winning overtime goal for the Caps was black and you should have seen those boys in Boston. It was like pre-busing. It is like none of those decades of healing and reconciliation had ever happened. Bruins fans were spewing racist messages all over

the Internet, it was awful. It made me realize why I am kind of happy that I don't live in New England.

Q: It is played out in Ireland, itself.

KOVACH: Sure. It is not only the Irish. I am sure there were some Italians and Poles and Eastern Europeans. Let's not jump on the Irish too badly.

Q: When you got to Wesleyan

KOVACH: I didn't want to go. I told my parents that I wanted to go back down south and register voters and I said I need time. I said I've been doing this school thing for 12 plus three, 15 years. I am 18 years old. I need to come up for air. They got hysterical and then invoked the draft and I said, Well, OK because I knew I was against the war. So I went.

It was a wonderful year but it was, my performance was awful.

Q: How did it strike you; the teachers, the student body, the first year experience there? Did you feel you belonged, a fish out of water, what you liked, what you didn't like? What happened?

KOVACH: As much as I had mouthed my high school when I was talking about going to parochial school, I felt I was better educated than even some of the kids from prep schools so I began to appreciate my high school education in retrospect and the broad cultural exposure my family represented, my upbringing. I was cultured. I just felt that way. I had blown off taking the AP exams in high school, another stupid immature thing. So guess what? I had to take all the 100 courses. I think I would have made advanced placement in a few of the liberal arts and social science areas. I blew the intro courses off and I just refused to attend those classes. That's not why I am at Wesleyan, I thought to myself.

We had Richard Wilbur, the poet laureate of the United States and the noted literary critic Ihab Hassan on faculty too. We had great national figures teaching there so I attended their classes as a non registered fly on the wall. Both of them took to me but they couldn't help me. They couldn't give me credit for a class I wasn't taking so I flunked half my courses and was shown the door. We had parietal hours. We weren't supposed to have women in our rooms overnight and I liberally broke that rule. I think I had been brought up for reprimand twice on that count too.

Q: Where did one go for women there?

KOVACH: After my love from California came East and then she went to the Middle East. My next girlfriend was from Sarah Lawrence. After that the first girl I ever dated in Belmont in junior high (of harassment by Joan Baez fame) had moved to Lexington. She appeared at this all college sort of party at Christmas time, you know when all the kids

who are freshmen get together after their initial semester and tell war stories. We fell into each other's arms and we had an ongoing affair for two, three years. She went to Pembroke. It was pretty much she and I who got into a lot of trouble for breaking what were called 'parietal hours'; we were in trouble at Pembroke too.

Q: How did you survive if you weren't playing the game?

KOVACH: I didn't. I got kicked out mainly for academics. I flunked half my courses. I remember the first day I got called into the dean was the day Kennedy was assassinated. I will never forget that. He said, "We took you for your intellectual promise and you are basically blowing half your education off. You've got to come around."

I replied, I didn't want to come here without some time off. I love Wesleyan. I am so grateful I got in here but I don't think I am ready and I will tell you honestly I don't know what I am going to do. I will try to pull my courses out. I have tried but I am not sure I have it in me.

So he said, "Well, try your best."

At the end of the year they threw me out. It was mostly on the basis of academic performance but they noted that I had a couple of disciplinary issues.

I wanted to go down to work on the Mississippi summer project; the same movement that summer of 1964 where three civil rights workers that ended up getting killed (as depicted in Mississippi Burning) participated in. I wanted to go down with that group. Several of my friends from Wesleyan were going down and Harry Boyte was part of it too.

My parents said, "We always told you we will support you through your undergrad years but you've got to be in school. You have to support yourself now that you are out."

So I bit the bullet and got a job in Cambridge, waiting at this wonderful Viennese restaurant called the Window Shop which was owned by a nonprofit. My aunt was one of the managers; that again, my mother's eldest sister who, part Jewish, had survived the war married to a colonel in the German army in Munich. That aunt, a principled, deeply religious woman taught me more about management than my father ever did. I took a course at Harvard summer school on top of the full time work. The restaurant was in the old Village Blacksmith's house; the village blacksmith immortalized in Longfellow's famous poem.

Q: This first year at Wesleyan, where were students coming from? What was the student body like?

KOVACH: It was interesting. It was probably about a third preppy but what was different from Williams and Amherst, for instance, was Wesleyan always reached out more to get students that were kind of edgy or cutting edge and frankly, my freshman class was the last class where cutting edge was sort of white, catholic working class or Italian working

class and a lot of Jewish kids. So there were a lot of people from sort of lower middle class working class backgrounds, really bright.

The biggest worldly success in my class may well have been the one from the most modest circumstances of about 250 of us who entered together; two illiterate parents from Sicily. At the height of his career, he was the head of Creative Artists, the biggest talent agency in the world and a major Hollywood mogul. He is the biggest name among us.

A year later they got a new admissions director at a time that the ivies started going after minorities, racial minorities. Where Wesleyan really broke out of the pack is that they spent a lot of money and energy to go to the ghettos and go to the small southern towns and find the best in the most down and out circumstances whereas frankly most of the other Ivies just got upper middle class blacks and Hispanics on scholarships.

Q: Were there fraternities and all?

KOVACH: Wesleyan was about 92% pledged. I joined a fraternity. I think there were about 10 or 11 fraternities and a lot had broken away from nationals because Wesleyan was iconoclastic and the nationals were still by and large racist. I joined the counter-culture fringe fraternity which was called 'Esse quam videri' (EQV) which in Latin means 'to be rather than to seem'. EQV was an important part of my life. My closest friends from Wesleyan are still among my brothers. The funny thing was I thought being in a fraternity was so provincial even though I did pledge. I was a waiter at two other fraternities. I didn't want to wait on my own fraternity brothers. I thought that would be demeaning. It was on and off an important part of my life but it is interesting that my best friends from that era were all EQVs. I made close friends from other fraternities whom I met in different scenes overseas later in life.

Q: Where did the students you were around fall politically?

KOVACH: Wesleyan was and remains a real progressive bastion. Remember this awful film PCU, Politically Correct University? That was made by Wesleyan graduates and it was a parody of Wesleyan. And Animal House too was made by Wesleyan grads. The latter was based on the kind of wild partying that went on as I am sure it did at Williams. Animal House was filmed at the University of Oregon but was also written and produced by Wesleyan grads.

In my fraternity everyone leaned left politically but we had three brothers that were what we'd term today the libertarian right which was kind of cool and neat, out of the box.

I actually believe even though I worked for Kennedy in that 1960 election just outside of Boston, I supported Goldwater in 64, not very actively but I liked him, I felt that was this finger on the nuclear trigger thing was being really exaggerated even though I grew up in a very anti war family. You could already tell this guy was a libertarian, that he was for civil rights. He had some good sentiments. I hated LBJ. I thought this guy was the worst kind of machine politician and big government addict. I thought the worst part about him

he just saw government and big government as the solution to every sort of social problem. What he would do is shovel money at bureaucracies that ate up about 85 cents to the dollar of the money spent to solve the problem. I just don't believe in that kind of political philosophy, I am very progressive on social issues but I believe in community empowerment. That's where Robert Kennedy's epiphany when he ran for Senate was so key to me because he had been a similar sort big government guy. I think his break from that way of thinking came when he got around Bedford Stuyvesant in Brooklyn and saw what you could do by empowering communities and being a partner. That became my paradigm and it pretty much is and that's why I hate being in Montgomery County. It's like a mini-Great Society.

Q: You got the summer of 64.

KOVACH: Yeah, I was in Cambridge and then I decided to move to New York. Since I had to work I wanted an adventure and new horizons so I moved down to the city and got a job as an office boy at Owing Corning Fiber Glass. It was a very right wing company, in a wonderful office tower right south of the Plaza Hotel, Fifth Avenue near Central Park, great place to be at lunch and walk around.

At nights I went to the New School and took a course on existentialist literature. I took it in their oldest building on 7th Street. Far more memorable than the course, taught by a pathetic little man with delusions of grandeur, it was a building where the Mexican Trotskyite painter Orozco painted an incredible mural holed up and hiding in that room after the KGB came over to North America to kill the Trotskyites. He hid in that attic and he painted one of his incredible murals.

If you have been to the Dartmouth library it is like a miniature of the mural that he painted at the Dartmouth library. I had this boring, petty bourgeois professor droning on and on about how he didn't buy life insurance because that was existentially invalid and droning on with his boring personal theories.

Q: The New School is what?

KOVACH: It is called the New School for Social Research. Bob Kerry, the senator became the president after he left the Senate.

It was just a neat place to hang out and pick up a couple of credits. I wanted to go back to Wesleyan and I knew I had pretty much had to do some course work to get by the readmission council. The dean when I left said you might take a course or two and do relatively well (wink, wink, wink). So I took him to heart and took a course each semester at night and got A's.

Q: So what happened?

KOVACH: My high school music teacher was one of the greatest teachers I ever had, was 75 years old when I had her. Her first year of teaching she had been a teacher in

Arlington, the next town over from Lexington. There she most amazingly taught Alan Hovhaness who is my, bar none, favorite 20th century composer. My year in New York, he was on sabbatical from somewhere in Washington state in New York so I sort of became a Hovhaness groupie and heard him play and actually got to meet him and talk to him like an adoring fan. So that was a big highlight in addition to going to a lot of concerts that were free and just enjoying New York. Lived in a fifth floor walk up near Riverside Drive and 92nd street, was near Columbia. Had high school friends at Columbia and got to hang out there a bit.

Q: I have never lived in New York. I used to visit it a lot on my way up to Williams and before that prep school. It was very easy to visit in those days.

KOVACH: It was a wonderful year. I had the girlfriend, this is the same girlfriend that from Pembroke, she came down a lot and we enjoyed. I cannot find her now and it really bothers me because we were really very close friends and had known each other since eighth grade. And like many of my lady friends and loves, she was nothing short of brilliant. I like intelligent women.

Q: You spent basically a year before going back to Wesleyan.

KOVACH: Yeah.

Q: Was there any problem getting back in?

KOVACH: I had to write a mea culpa kind of essay, talking about how I had grown up. I prattled on for about 16 pages describing what I had done during my year off as a dirty drop out and told them I felt I was ready to cope and so forth and cited my two A's in night school. I also had to come up for an interview. It was with the same two deans and they were convinced I was ready, probably more convinced than I was, so they let me back in.

Sophomore year was awful because then I really had to take all the 100 courses and I just bit the bullet and did them.

Q: 100 courses being introductory courses.

KOVACH: Intro economics, intro to literature, intro to intro. The good news was that I found that the religious/spiritual streak animating my inner life as a child translated beautifully into one of the strongest majors and departments in the university, the religion department. The department pioneered pretty much among those elite schools in that it was one of the first to have non Western, non Judeo - Christian religious studies. I was attracted, to a young professor, just out of grad school, an expert on the Upanishads, the apex of Hindu mystical literature and also taught a Buddhism course. I just fell under his sway. He started talking to me in November. He had ambitions to start his own abroad program in India and he wanted to send a couple of his minions out to India to do junior years. He glommed onto me because I had the experience in New York and he figured if I

could survive New York I could, extrapolating, survive India. I was still pretty immature in my own eyes. He just started telling me that I could and should major in religion and go to India my junior year.

I told him that he was nuts. I was taking German. German was one of the courses I passed, had it in high school, both my parents were native speakers, got right back into it when I got back to Wesleyan. I was thinking of the Brothers Karamazov and the downfall of Europe about this insidious earthbound eastern culture, subverting the more apollonian, you know, rational ideals of European culture. His challenge to me kicked my inner hornet's nest about going to India; it just really provoked conflict in me on a lot of levels. My mother is a German professor, my parents came from this high European culture. Then one day I literally woke up in a sweat at 6 in the morning and I knew I was going to India, just like that. No thought, no rationality. I just knew it. My professor's wife had thrown him out of the house so he was sleeping in his office in those days so I banged on his door and said, Hey, you! Ready for breakfast?

He said, Yeah, I'll meet you at the coffee shop in 15 minutes.

I told him, I am going.

He got me Wesleyan money to go to Penn that summer and take intensive Hindi and Indian studies.

It was the summer of 66; the summer was so hot many roads buckled between Washington and Boston, right before July 4th. I was luckily was put in Saarinen Hall, named after the architect who designed it, the Finnish architect and it was the only air conditioned place on campus. I remember coming back from the un-air-conditioned libraries at 10 or 11 with 50 people sitting in a circle giving each other back rubs. It was a good summer. We had a good gang.

Then I went home to pack, came back to Boston. My mother had a very, very hard time letting go. This idea of me going to India was just beyond the pale for her and she got a little hysterical but wouldn't admit what it was about. My father was really great, wrote her out of the play.

So off to India I went, took the SS Hanseatic from New York to Liverpool. I have a history by the way of being on flights and boats that sink or crash the next trip. The Hanseatic on the return trip from Liverpool got to the dock in New York, burnt and was scrapped; one of the grand old liners made in Germany in the 30s.

It was a great trip, very Germanic. I speak German so I had Anglo friends and German friends and drinking beer just constantly and playing drinking games.

Q: This is during the great times of the wanderyear of so many students, wasn't it?

KOVACH: Yes, but I flew from London to Amsterdam because the closest relatives I had never met were my mother's older sister Eva Besnyö, the famous photographer and her kids, my cousins about my age and three years younger and I spent three or four days with them. That was wonderful. They've become fixtures in my life.

I remember deciding just on a poetic whim that I wanted to stop in Istanbul and Beirut, on the way out. To just slowly get into Asia. In Istanbul the fantasy was to sit in a cafe by the Bosphorus, drinking arak and looking at Asia. I got there and stayed in a pension right below the Sultanahmet (Blue) Mosque, the big one and also near the Sokollu Mehmet Pasha Mosque another wonderful mosque designed by the great architect Sinan. I was right on the block there in a little walk up for about two dollars a night and just did exactly that, went down to the Bosphorus, drank ouzo, fell in love with Istanbul. It is a love affair that continues to this day.

Q: OK, you'd only had basically technically one year at Wesleyan.

KOVACH: One year and a half plus the two courses at the New School, one at Harvard summer school and two at Penn so I just two courses short by the end of my year in India.

Q: I would have thought they would have been reluctant to let you go. To go off, you were a half baked Wesleyan-ite.

KOVACH: Wesleyan respected experience and they really, one of the things they don't do well on these rating indexes is they have never graduated people much on time and to me, that's a positive. I am an adamant believer in gap years and the like. That was seen as a negative even when they were in the top ten according to US News; that was always one of the stats that hurt them.

Q: We're talking about the ratings particularly in U.S. News.

KOVACH: and Forbes.

Q: Ratings at all the schools which are based on certain calculations; faculty to student body, graduation rates.

KOVACH: That's a good one, student-faculty ratio that is. That's one I believe in. Wesleyan was the best in the country when I was there.

Q: The figures can be cooked. I served in Vietnam and talk about cooking figures.

KOVACH: I understand that. It is an awful system but there is some truth there and perception, I'm a PD guy. Perceptions count and the way Wesleyan education is valued is just not the same it was ten or 15 years ago. The class size has really fallen. Williams and Amherst are way ahead of us on that score now. The criteria of not graduating on time I think is a badge of honor is still there, even though we graduate about the same percentage of people entering as the other schools.

Q: But you were still a member of the school.

KOVACH: In good standing.

I spent a day in Beirut. It was 66, a day of innocence. It was just very intense walking along the cafes near the Corniche and then getting on the plane and leaving. Lebanon didn't make quite the impression that Turkey did, though half my career was in the Arab world.

Q: Istanbul is the major city and with very distinct overtones of the former empire whereas Beirut is just another one of the

KOVACH: I flew from Amsterdam to Istanbul on a really clear day and I remember when we flew over Hungary and Romania I felt a real pull. A kind of mystical, cathartic, draw to the soil of my predominant ancestry. I really belong here. When I did my stint last year in Romania for three months, I felt so connected. I have never felt so connected personally in any place in my life. And I feel a bit of that connection in Istanbul with a blood ancestor and a history of drawing family into its embrace.

Q: You are on your way to India. What was your outlook towards India? Before you got there? Were you wide eyed and be overwhelmed mystically or what?

KOVACH: I am a mystic but when I got there my real rationalist hat came on. There is a lot here, an overwhelming amount and I've got to be critical and pick and choose, I felt. I spent two days in Delhi which was smart. I had an Indian friend, a fraternity brother, an EQV fraternity brother and he welcomed me and took me around. He was from a very distinguished Muslim literary families, his family ran one of the great Urdu literary journals. It was very interesting. I had never thought too much about Islam. We always had Muslim family friends up in Boston but it was interesting. I was there to study Hindu culture and Buddhism and there were suddenly a proliferation of Muslim friends in my life.

And then I get to Banaras, the holy city on the Ganges and that's where I went to school. I enrolled at Banaras Hindu University to study Hindi and Indian philosophy and I had a Sanskrit tutor although I never took that very far. I was expected, I had agreed with my professor I was going to write an undergraduate thesis and it was going to be based on field research. I decided in pretty short order to look at Ganges veneration as an example of the universal archetype of water cosmology and corresponding ritual. I was so overwhelmed by being on the Ganges with all this pilgrimage activity and the rituals by the water every morning and at sunset.

I got into reading the myths, not the philosophy. I was reading Hindu myths on my own. This idea of the water cycle of this kind of water coming down from God's head on the Himalayas, renewing the earth almost like the Holy Spirit, it was almost like a baptism image to me and then getting fouled by human sin and corruption and just churning into

the sea, kind of primordial sea, evaporating, ascending into nothingness shedding the earth's dirt and squalor and then coming back down as a kind of primordial pure rain, renewing life on earth. To me it was like, especially to me as I was very seriously Catholic at the time. It was almost like baptism and renewal and the descent of the Holy Spirit and also humiliation in the pollution and corruption of waters. I have always seen the Jesus paradigm as one of elevation but also of humiliation. Someone who had that spark of divinity, leaving aside whether he is the son of God, whether you believe that or not because I have gone back and forth on that. I tend to believe it but I tend to believe we all are the sons and daughters of God too.

This prophet Jesus abased himself. He allowed himself to be beaten, abused, treated like a piece of meat in humiliation and that was kind of an emptying out and then he ascended to heaven and then the Holy Spirit descended fifty days later, Pentecost. So to me the Christ parabola is one of humiliation it is going down it is not going up. It always has been and to me the Ganges sort of symbolizes that in the form of the water cycle.

So I wrote my paper on the water cycle and I went up the river to the holy places, Rishikesh and Haridwar and Varanasi (Sanskrit name for Banaras) and interviewed pilgrims. Had language, could do it and actually went to the famous ghats or steps leading down to the river in Banaras and befriended a couple of the priests that did the ceremony for pilgrims by the water. With some prodding they took apart the ritual gesture by gesture and explained what each gesture and sequence stood for. I did an analysis of that and then I looked at the water cycle as omnipresent in human myth. So I did literature, I did pilgrim's intentionality, I did the symbolism of the ritual and it came into a real complete whole. It was about a 200 page paper. It was very ambitious.

Q: Here you are a Westerner talking to priests. How do you think you fit?

KOVACH: It was ambiguous. Since I had black hair and dark eyes and a Mediterranean complexion, I passed. They called me 'the Kashmiri' because I looked like a Kashmiri. Now less so with the white hair, but I passed. I was interested, I was trying. I was from Boston which has a reputation. It was good. I played my cards right.

I just didn't like living on campus much but I will tell you I have had two Al Gore moments in my life where I believe I have invented things. I invented Ultimate Frisbee three years before the website claims it was invented. They claim 1969. In 66 I invented a game that was darn close to the game that was to emerge in the U.S. three years hence.

More to the point, I had a Frisbee with me and I took that Frisbee when I traveled doing this pilgrimage research. I dubbed the Frisbee Mr. Ambassador. I'd get out and start tossing with the local people and I made friends so fast so I called it Mr. Ambassador. So Mr. Ambassador and I invented the game on campus and we played almost the same rules. You take one step or whatever after catching it to pass it and same thing, same rules.

Q: How long were you doing this?

KOVACH: A few months and then I moved into town because the university was really getting on my nerves. Then the university went on strike and that was very fortunate because right before Christmas going to mass at a Syrian catholic church, very interesting sect that had taken on a lot of elements of Hindu ritual. The same ritual I was studying to a degree and incorporated it into the mass.

Q: This was Syrian Catholic?

KOVACH: Yeah. I met Father Raymond Panikkar who was one of Pope John, XXIII, the great Pope of my life, one of his Rasputins, one of his policy advisers from Pondicherry, a French Catholic colonial enclave in South India. He was there at that mass. He and I hit it off. He liked me.

The second night, I went to mass during Advent again. There was a man in the orange robes of a Hindu renunciate, a holy man in orange robes. Father Panikkar introduced me to this man, Swami Abhishiktananda who turned out to be a French Benedictine who was living as a Hindu holy man; a man representing the absolute outer fringe of the Church in Asia.

Fr. Panikkar spoke to Pope John XXIII about Abhishiktananda. Abhishiktananda left France after the War, never went back, lived in India the last 30 years of his life and lived as a Hindu holy man. He was a spiritual acolyte of the great 20th Century mystic, Ramana Maharishi. (not Maharishi Mahesh Yogi of the TM Movement) He had complexes about following a path informed by Hindu meditative practice and philosophy while sustaining his vow to the Church. Pope John XXIII and after his death, Pope Paul VI gave Abhishiktananda a unique mandate: to bringing the Indian converts to Catholicism who were largely untouchables and were shedding the whole Hindu cultural baggage while embracing the Church back to the meditative practices of Hinduism which Rome recognized were more sophisticated than anything in the Church repertoire.

Abhishiktananda over the next half a year became like a guru to me. That for me is a very hard relationship in general, being a strong iconoclast. And with all my spiritual adventures as a seeker in this life, the only time I totally put my being and consciousness into a mentor's hands. We had long walks along the Ganges, and I remember some poignant conversations in particular by Banaras' famous cremation ghats. Then when the university went on strike a month later, I just said, screw this. I wrote him. We had no way to communicate except by internal airgram. I said, can I come up to the Himalayas and stay with you?

He said, Yes, let's walk to the source of the Ganges together because he knew I was doing that research on pilgrimage, ritual worship of the river Abhishiktananda was living in a 'kuti' which is a monk's thatched hut shack in the foothills of the Himalayas. We spent about a week together and we started walking. The first day on the trail, I got arrested for being American.

Q: Were you supposed to have a pass to get up there?

KOVACH: Yes, I guessed as much after the fact. In addition, it was a year after the 1965 India China war and the Indians were paranoid and thought I could be a spy. So I got turned back and he came back with me. He was very kind. We spent more time together. We went to Rishikesh together.

I got back to Bananas several weeks later: the strike had ended. Abhishiktananda then when school was over invited me to come down to the monastery in South India. This is where these priests and nuns of Indian origin were supposed to be spending time with him and learning Hindu austerities. We got down there and there was no one there except him and me. We agreed to keep silence except for 20 minutes a day at evening meal. I was meditating. He taught me mediation. He had earlier right after we first met in Bananas told me to go and learn vipassana (mindfulness) meditation from the Anglophone Burmese Buddhists monks at Sarnath village, the village where legend has it the Buddha first turned the wheel of the law; in simple language where he began to teach. Sarnath was about a 45 minute bike ride on the other side of Bananas from the university.

Q: With these periods of silence and all, what were you picking up about India?

KOVACH: The Indians would tell you oh, we are so spiritual. We are so spiritual and you Westerners are so materialistic. I saw it exactly the opposite way by year's end, especially coming from New England. I thought we are fairly puritanical and with a heritage of spiritualism and that the material world makes us a little nervous. Indians are such a sensual culture. It's all about smells and tastes and touches. Some of my classmates were going to dancing girls who doubled as prostitutes and getting laid. Others including me, went because they did classical dance but were wise enough not to stay on. A couple of my indulgent friends got bad venereal disease which cut into their year abroad experience badly.

It was a rich life. I was getting very enthusiastic having grown up around the Irish and Catholicism and then having the Catholics in my family living under our roof in Boston, I was very attracted. I felt that was the path for me.

But Abhishiktananda admonished me, "Don't go near it," he the Benedictine monk said. It's a trap. I am married to the church. I took a vow, I will not break that vow as long as I live but there are some days I wake up and just think it is the biggest curse.

Q: What was his problem?

KOVACH: His problem was he was a mystic. Catholicism is a highly doctrinaire, ecclesiastical, ritualistic religion and he was, felt that he was beyond that in his practice, that he was beyond names and forms and accessing a field of pure consciousness beyond ego. He told me not to fall into the 'God trap.' Those were his words. Don't fall into the God trap. You've already seen enough to know reality is beyond God as a concept. And that theism, myth and ritual are just rungs on the ladder, and that the seeker must realize

when to push all those structure away, when consciousness transcends all name and form and ego. And that state is what meditation, belief, ritual, prayer ultimately is aimed at.

Q: How about your own humanity civil rights whatever you want to call it reflexes of trying to help people of the lower depths of Boston and all of a sudden in the biggest cesspool known to man?

KOVACH: I kind of kept away from a lot of that. In the dorms there was some bullying and I'd stand up against that right away and some of it was caste based. I despised the caste system.

It is an irony with Hinduism. I mean Hinduism has the most sophisticated psychological framework of any religion I have ever been near. It says that there are different strokes for different folks, different spiritual aptitudes and different needs and spiritual drives at different moments in life. Unfortunately, caste geneticizes that argument and you get something as nasty and pernicious as caste. But the psychological realities of different spiritual capacities and different experiences at different moments in life are both I think very profound and fairly unique statements, you know, as out there, out front statements. Most religions posit an eternal and invariable truth. Hinduism in that way is so much more subtle.

I have a lot of respect for that framework and for their kind of glibness on going from different gods and myths that sort of blend into one another. I like that. They are monotheists but of a different kind than that practiced by the three Abrahamic faiths. They see god, I think the relativism of god and a particular ritual path. In fact by jumping from mythic path to mythic path, I think a Hindu opens the heart for what is beyond god as celebrated or experienced in any myth or concept. And that experience articulated more frequently by Hindus than other traditions in my experience is the goal of most mystics practicing in any system world wide. To reach a state of pure awareness beyond ego, beyond an 'I' being aware of a 'thou' or in other words, attaining a larger field of consciousness.

But in Banaras much of the skilled working and artisan classes were largely Muslim. What a pattern in my life. I start with seeing my Muslim fraternity brother in Delhi and especially in music circles having developed a great affinity for raga at Wesleyan, Many of Banaras' finest classical musicians and poets were Muslims. I made friends among the weavers, the famous Banaras weavers are mostly Muslims I really felt an affinity there on a social level there that I never felt in Hindu India.

So I am having these Muslim friends, I am studying Hindu philosophy, I am interviewing these priests and pilgrims and reading the Hindu literature and starting vipassana mediation which has become my core meditation practice, taught by Burmese monks in Sarnath which, as said, is a village north of Banaras which is where the Buddha first taught. He attained enlightenment and wondered what to do. His followers said now you should teach.

Q: Where were you catholic wise?

KOVACH: I would still go to mass but with a much lighter heart. My turning against the Church terminally I think has pretty much happened in the last years. I have just had it with 20 years of conservative popes and this dogmatism.

When I was growing up, we were underdogs. There was discrimination and I sort of lived as an honorary WASP, maybe because my parents were educated middle class people with that European touch. A lot of my WASP friends seemed impressed. My father had some prejudices too against Catholics despite his in-laws living and practicing under our roof. He's say, "You see those Ford station wagons with the third bench? You know what religion they are because they have all those kids and need the extra seats." That was my father's slightly veiled bigotry.

Q: We are talking about birth control information and the fact that everyone is supposed to make it available.

KOVACH: I am on the Interfaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington board as a Buddhist. The last board meeting we were arguing about a statement on HHS mandate. I happen to be sympathetic: I think that the church has the right to refuse to support a mandate (contraception) that is an anathema to the faith. The primary and prevailing religious freedom issue, however, is the individual female's right to choose whether to use contraception or not and have the option through the Affordable Care Act to access that service, though not paid for by the Church in the case of the hundreds of thousands of women employed by the Church.

Q: The religious issue is one thing but looking at India as a political entity, here you are, you are going to be a Foreign Service officer

KOVACH: I didn't know at the time. There were premonitions.

Q: You are beginning to learn, we all do, you judge countries. India is a country with multifaceted and unique. How would you say you were coming out?

KOVACH: In the end I loved India. India woke me up. But on another very significant level, I never liked India. There is a difference between love and like.

One of the other metaphors of this large paper I wrote was the idea of pilgrimage which is going out of your familiar zone, culturally, sensually and into a new zone. Pilgrimage in the religious sense would be a new zone where you touched the holy in some way, inspirationally.

I actually saw it more in the sensuality. I saw the sensuality of the music, the food, the smells, the feel of India and in a way the complexity and chaos of it as great teachers. I don't like India; I have never liked India but I love India. That's how I come down and in the end I owe this incredible debt to mother India because I don't think I would have ever

gone on this life path without India, both in terms of my spiritual life and in terms of my life as an FSO.

Q: I assume you didn't have any particular contact with the American embassy, consulate?

KOVACH: One time in Delhi I was craving a hamburger. I wasn't on an official U.S. government program. Somebody got me in to the Embassy and I got a hamburger in the embassy cafeteria. That was half an hour.

There was a woman I met at Wesleyan, a student at Connecticut College, an Indian who kind of fell in with my crowd and she had just graduated. She was a year older than me and her father was the education secretary. They kind of adopted me that year for the odd night or two passing through Delhi, I could always stay with them so when I needed a clean home and good food I'd spend a night or two with them. I didn't spend much time in Delhi or with them.

With Abhishiktananda in South India I was there for weeks. A lot came up from within me. It was invaluable.

Then I toured Madras, and Madurai, where I happened on a huge festival with millions crowding the streets. I was fortunate to be able to pass for a Hindu and got into the sanctuary of the particular version of the Mother Goddess worshiped there; a privilege only accorded to high caste Hindus; again undoubtedly with my relatively light complexion as a ticket. Then I went over to Kerala and took the inland waterway between Trivandrum and Alleppey which is one of the most phenomenal trips. You are on a little canal boat, people are coming on there with roosters and goats and agriculture. There is a strip of palms seaward and then the ocean. The Indian Ocean is on the other side. You are on a canal. It is a day trip; 12 hours. One of the great days of my life.

Q: Did you have a goal?

KOVACH: Expansion and growth. I think I was the second to best Hindi student. Philosophy I loved so I got A's in that and I eventually finished my thesis almost a year later. I got straight A's. I got six course credits for that work.

Q: When you got back to Wesleyan, did you go back for your junior and senior years?

KOVACH: I was called a senior but I was a senior short a couple of credits. I went back there. It was interesting. I left India. I wanted to go overland to Europe and I couldn't because the clouds of the Six Day War were a'building in May of 1967. I wanted to do the hippie thing. I couldn't as much of the Muslim world either closed off or became dangerous to traverse as an American, or so I was told. I got on a Japan Airlines plane in Delhi. I remembered having a premonition, just had the feeling Japan was to be my next foreign adventure and so it was. We flew from Delhi to Cairo via Tehran. It was June 4th. We flew over the Sinai at sunrise. You could literally see the armies lined up. It was a

day or two before the fighting started. Then we landed in Cairo. They wouldn't let us take off until the plane was full so we were on the ground for hours. The airport was blacked out. Everyone knew it was coming.

Then I got to Italy which is where I was going and my uncle, the art historian who first mentioned Wesleyan, he was Bernard Berenson's, the great patron of Florentine arts protégé. My uncle ran Villa I Tatti which was Berenson's villa in the Florentine hills that I think he donated to Harvard. The Arno River had flooded the year before in '66, the river going through Florence. My uncle was put in charge of the restoration so I went and hung out with him in this 300 year old mansion with walls six feet thick, up in the Tuscan hills for about two weeks and really chilled out. Then I went up to northern Europe to meet my parents and my brother and we traveled for a while. But the family began getting on my nerves and me on theirs so we split up. Then my girlfriend from India landed up in Italy so I hitched back down from France to meet her. We traveled together for about ten days and then we got on each other's nerves. Then I just decided to go home. I had an open ticket. I just went home.

Q: When you were with your uncle when the Arno flooded. There was a tremendous volunteer effort.

KOVACH: The summer of 1967 was at the end of the crisis. I didn't get involved in it.

He was very frustrated and bored with the Italian art history but he had made his career on it. Uncle Curt wanted to escape and he kept talking about getting into Persian and Indian miniatures. He never did. He was frustrated. He was kind of a strange character.

Q: Did you pick up any feel for any of the European countries as you went through?

KOVACH: I liked Rome, I liked Paris. I have always liked Paris but Paris is like a museum to what it really must have been like in the 20s and 30s when it was hot.

I never liked London. I love Berlin and Bucharest. Hungary has never done it for me. I have been to Budapest maybe twice, once for three weeks with my mother which was great because we went back and saw her family members and saw some of her college friends. She was very privileged. I didn't take to it much. Hungarians have a kind of a chauvinism that doesn't appeal to me much. It doesn't grab me, whereas Romania is poly-ethnic and one of the components is Hungarian. The fact that my father's family, a good branch of them were camped out in Romania for well over a hundred years. Three cousins of my generation grew up in Romania. Romania is my place, I think.

Q: So you come on back?

KOVACH: I came on back. My professor was very happy with me. He said, "You did so well. I never had any doubt of your ability to maneuver but I was impressed with the fact you did so well academically. After your initial performance, I was holding my breath."

He then said in one of our initial conversations after my return, you are a born cultural attaché. You really need to think about USIA as a career.

I reminded him that the Vietnam War was in full swing; that I had started with a few friends a national anti draft movement.

Q. Did he have any contact with USIA?

KOVACH: I think he had a Fulbright in his graduate school days. He knew what it was. He was sophisticated. He'd studied in India.

I looked him in the eye and I said, "You aren't even paying your telephone tax to protest this war. You may go to jail and you are telling me to take the Foreign Service exam? You gotta be nuts. As long as this war is on and it is an illegitimate war, I am not going to have anything to do with the U.S. government. Public service was instilled in me and my duty now is to protest this war."

That's how I felt and that's what I did. I had a good senior year, had good courses. I began to understand that somehow my destiny lay further east in Asia and started doing Japanese and Chinese Buddhist history academically and then I wrote the thesis which was good for two credits. Had a great suite, one of these suite dorms, where four of us each had our own room and a large common room and kitchenette.

One of the roommates was Mike Wolf who is the producer of the series of PBS Islamic-themed documentaries. Mike converted to Islam about ten years out of Wesleyan. A number of us in one way or another have converted to Islam and he has produced all these PBS specials on Islam; Mohammed Legacy of a Prophet, Cities of Light, Prince among Slaves. I don't know if you have seen any of these. He is a poet. It is interesting that the two most prominent converts are Mike and Kabir Helminski, both recruited to study with Richard Wilbur, who had been the poet laureate. Both had some kind of award or recognition of poetic skills in high school.

Q: You re preaching to the wrong guy. I just don't buy religion.

KOVACH: I am not sure I'm big on organized religion myself. But by the end of my Wesleyan years and especially after India, looking back on it, the building blocks of a rich spiritual life with philosophical underpinnings were in place. In a certain sense, I've been living out that intellectual and experiential heritage in the 45 years since.

To summarize: my philosophical anchors were set my Sophomore year. Carl Jung whom I studied in a Psychology course and the great German theologian, Rudolf Otto posited a dimension of human capacity to experience the ineffable, that beyond description that transcends culture, language, history, any one mythic path or god and the rituals celebrating it/them. The great Romanian comparative religionist Mircea Eliade took Jung's theory of archetypes and looked at repetitive patterns of human myth transcending specific culture. My treatment of Ganges worship I framed as a cultural manifestation of

a universal pattern throughout human history: myths celebrating life giving waters of the world's great rivers in their cycles of descent, fertilizing, cleansing the earth, merging into the sea, evaporating and then descending again.

The phenomenologists: Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger left me doubting objectivity in human narrative; but rather putting forward a kind of radical subjectivity that only allows communication when people, cultures, civilizations perceive an overlap of narrative views.

And then Abhishiktananda, speaking in the tradition of the Catholic Meister Eckhart, the Hindu philosopher Ramanuja, spoke of the specific ritual paths and named gods as relative, as rungs on a ladder that ultimately dissolves in the experience of the unified divine/human moment of pure egoless consciousness.

Getting back to my friendship with Mike, Mike Wolf and I have had some edgy moments, we have known each other since we were 17 and there was some edginess in our relationship because as freshmen, the freshmen were all isolated in one part of campus. My freshmen floor was an outrageous agglomeration of trouble makers. We were discipline problems. We were just doing outrageous stuff.

The most outrageous incident I was involved in was this: We had a dress code for dinner. You had to wear a tie, that's the way the rules were written. So one night three of us decided to show up for dinner wearing just a tie, buck naked. That ended it. The dean who was a bit of a gorilla theater fan just loved that. He decided that wearing ties to dinner was really a dated regulation and ended it the next day.

Compulsory chapel had just been eliminated the year before.

Q: Oh, yeah. Compulsory chapel; you could go anywhere you wanted but you had a card you handed in.

KOVACH: Right. So anyway, that ended that but Mike still turned us in to the Student Judiciary Committee. He was a bit self righteous, you know. He is so bright; I am in awe of his intelligence. Just wrote a book based on ancient Greek gravestone inscriptions which are very poetic b he is a classicist and a poet. He writes poetry in rhyme like Richard Wilbur's. Old fashioned poetry that's coherent and beautiful so he is quite a piece of work.

I think in retrospect that he had a point. While Wesleyan was all male, most of the hired staff in the cafeteria style dining hall were local women. By showing up essentially nude, we were making them invisible: something I feel bad about in retrospect. And Mike made that point.

Anyway, as roommates three and a half years later. He was fascinated by my fascination with pilgrimage. He loved this metaphor about getting outside yourself and not necessarily going up to the numinous, the holy, but just getting into an alternative space

physically and culturally, rationally and the way life is framed and the perceptions of life as being totally different. We talked endlessly about that.

Other than the film making, guess what his big thing as a Muslim writer has been? He writes books about the Hajj. He converted and immediately went on the Hajj within months of conversion. He has written a really readable book called *The Hadj, An American's Pilgrimage to Mecca*. It is a page turner. It is so journalistic. It is a wonderful book.

And then he has written an anthology called *The Hajj, A Thousand Years of Pilgrimage to Mecca* which is an important compilation of historical writing about the Hajj.

I still tease him, I just saw him last week. You know, remember those conversations about pilgrimage. I think those conversations did shape his thinking.

Q: Senior year, in the first place you got the Vietnam War was going hot and the draft so what was happening draft-wise?

KOVACH: It wasn't quite in the height of the conscription but I had duly registered at age 18. I didn't refuse to register but I was thinking, even my senior year going in, I wanted to be in the military. That's the sad irony about this. Public service, permissive, European family where the parents don't quite get life in America and wouldn't know how to be strict even if they did. They wouldn't know where to be strict even if they had the inclination to be. I felt I needed rigid parameters. I didn't want to be an officer. I wanted to be a grunt. I flirted with it at times and just couldn't do it. But I wasn't one of these Ho, ho, ho, Ho chi min is going to win types. I was pretty anti communist.

I abhorred the lie the Kennedy and Johnson people were telling us, the domino theory and you know, that China, China is behind this. China would hardly have been an ally of Vietnam after a thousand years of mutual enmity. Vietnam was a Russian satellite, so no proximate 'domino' to fall there. Furthermore, Russian and China were at complete loggerheads in the 60's.

I decided to focus on the draft. The first thing that bugged me and again this is a question of justice and fairness; I asked who gets draft counseling? It is a bunch of people who attend the elitist schools like Wesleyan and Quakers. I said this is crazy. Every young man in America is up against this thing. We need to do something about it. So our small group of friends got some funding around midwinter that senior year, 67, 68 from people like Reinhold Niebuhr down at Yale and from other Divinity School contributors and we started writing a draft counseling manual that we were going to distribute nationally. It was not pretentious. You have the choice but you deserve to know what your choices are and what the consequences are for the choices. I refused to go to marches, I refused this bearing witness thing, I just thought this is a hippie parade. I led a hippie lifestyle. Selectively progressive politics, smoked dope. That was my active political contribution, one I kept separate from my counter-cultural adventures.

Then on March 31, 1968 my not favorite president LBJ, got on the tube and said he was not running for reelection. All the money reverted and we just distributed the book as best we could and that project fell apart. Why? because everyone thought the war was going to shortly end with LBJ's political exit. So that was a fatal blow to the project going really viral.

I looked at my options at that point. I did a short application and received a scholarship to go out to UC Berkeley that summer to start grad school. It was for summer only, they had my transcripts showing that I was two courses short of graduating. There was much ambiguity in the correspondence. They offered the scholarship to study for the summer but their unspoken assumption turned out to be that I would come out and launch my summer as a university graduate. I got a drive away car, you know where you drive for someone moving West. I picked up my girlfriend at Antioch, my girlfriend whom I met in India. We had a great drive going through the Rockies and so forth. I love driving across country and as of this narrative, I've done so nineteen times. I arrived there and UC told me, we can't admit you. We admitted you as a grad student and you are still an undergrad. I said. "Look, that's your problem. You had my transcript. You admitted me, I have the letters here. You never said you were admitting me as a grad student. So you are either going to have to pay me damages for my time and my trip and all that or I will take you to court." I am not that litigious. I am type A. I said your choice. Either we get contentious about this or you let me in and just look the other way. I assure you I owe only the two credits. Look at my transcript. I will be a Wesleyan graduate with the completion of the UC Berkeley summer work.

They folded. They gave me about three thousand dollars on top of tuition, a lot of money and a free ride on tuition as an out-of-stater. I had wonderful teachers. I got into Urdu.

Q: You were taking what?

KOVACH: I took Urdu literature, both in translation and in original. The Urdu course was the only one that left a memory. I loved Berkeley. I bought myself a motorcycle the first week.

Q: How stood Berkeley at that particular time?

KOVACH: It was probably the best university in the world.

Q: I was wondering about sort of social upheaval and all that?

KOVACH: It was between the free speech movement from about 1966 and before People's Park in 1969 and the strike, the Kent State Cambodia strike in Spring, 1970. There was a lot of pro-civil rights organizing, there was a lot of standing up for justice but overall, the situation, it was percolating, not exploding.

Every day at noon in Sproul Plaza, the main plaza of the campus, someone would be gassing off about something but it could be as far afield as an evangelical preacher. It was really the public square, maybe a bit like Hyde Park in London.

I got through and then literally the day I finished my exams and my undergraduate career, driving my cycle on a road just a block from my apartment I had a head-on collision with another motorcycle and ended up in the campus hospital in the orthopedics ward with roommates from the football team (it was late summer after all). I spent a month there. I had internal bleeding, it was never critical but it took a long time to heal. That was kind of an interesting period. It was nice, actually. I got to cool my jets. I got out of the hospital and bought a new motorcycle that very day.

How did I afford that? I was broke. I had no money. The guy I hit was a drug dealer and the cop on the case was a law student and the Berkeley police is a terrific police force. He said to me as I lay in the ambulance, I am going to come and see you. I know you are in pain. I am going to come to see you in a couple of days and advise you informally on what to do. So he came, as promised, and told me that the guy who hit me was a known drug dealer. He reported that the Berkeley Police had been watching him for months. He knows it. We are about to close in on him. He is probably going to try to flee. He knows this accident was totally his fault. He was stoned out of his mind. It was a two lane road and swerved to the left without signaling or anything. It was clearly his fault. He told us that he is probably going to come in and see you. Go for immediate money. He has the cash. He has tens of thousands of dollars. Go for a cash payment because this guy is going to disappear I guarantee you if we don't arrest him first. Then we will confiscate his funds and they won't be his.

It was great advice. The guy came, very sweet guy and I said frankly just between friends let's just settle for cash. He said how much? I said, eight thousand dollars.

He said, I can probably manage five to six.

I said, Six. He gave it to me the next day, the proverbial brown envelope, six thousand dollars in cash.

Then I went up to the Napa Valley on my new motorcycle. My Wesleyan roommate and best friend had come out West, and he was living out on Mondavi estate and so I went up and picked grapes with him for a couple of weeks. Did that for a couple of weeks, then went back to Berkeley and then just decided to head East and headed East and came back home to Boston and my mother said, Oh, it is funny you'd come home today, look what came in the mail. She held up an envelope and guess what was in it? My Wesleyan diploma.

She said, Congratulations, you are a graduate. I headed down to Wesleyan right after Thanksgiving. I got hired immediately for three jobs. I got hired to be the deputy director for a town-gown summer enrichment program that they were planning. I got hired by a newly arrived eastern religions professor to be his TA and I got hired by the ground crew

to lay flagstone patios. So it was great. I spent a half year at Wesleyan doing all that. And living out on an idyllic pond in the countryside about eight miles off campus.

And, I applied to Berkeley to complete an MA in South Asian studies, and for a National Defense Language Fellowship to support myself. My professors loved me from the previous summer, I was an enthusiastic straight A student. They urged me informally to come back as a grad student so I applied and got a full free ride. I headed out to arrive in the middle of the People's Park crisis after another wonderful drive cross country, different mountain roads, and different parts of the Rockies. The town was in total upheaval, couldn't go places, police were barricading roads.

Q: Could you get educated?

KOVACH: Yeah, sure you could. It was a great university.

Q: I was wondering if classes were going on.

KOVACH: Yeah. But I should add that I despite arriving in June, my classes did not start until September.

Q: You might explain People's Park was.

KOVACH: People's Park; I remember the issue from the year before when I was there for the summer. Saturdays and Sundays these up and coming bands would play for free there. Santana was a fixture there before he caught on. I think I heard Quick Silver Messenger Service; these both caught on and became hugely popular the next year. Santana is still iconic. We would go for concerts. I believe the university owned the plot of land. They decided to build something on it, they closed it, and they walled it off and that precipitated the People's Park crisis.

Q: A parking lot or something.

KOVACH: Yes, something pretty inconsequential, at least inconsequential in our radical young eyes. They closed it off and at least a week of sometimes violent protests, a lot of arrests ensued. I think the oldest brother of a guy I knew at Wesleyan was involved, the Segal brothers. I think Bob was a classmate of mine or a year behind and Dan I think was the Berkeley rabble-rouser. He was one of the ringleaders. I got out to CAL right at the end of it and things were still a mess.

That summer I went up to Napa Valley. I wasn't in school; I was entering in the fall so I went out to Napa Valley and lived on a ranch up above the Mondavi Brothers winery that the woman that sold the vineyards and the winery to Mondavi still owned, a hill ranch. We had no electricity. We were basically subsistence farming and were making candles on an open fire and then we'd go down to the weekend flea markets and crafts fairs in the Bay area and sell the candles. That's how I made a living as a candle maker that summer.

Some of the Mexican pickers that were permanent in the Valley, we used to hang out with them and drink beer with them. It was a neat social experience and little world.

At the end of the summer I moved down to Berkeley and started my real graduate career. My year at Berkeley, I did five quarters all together; one was the previous summer when I was really an undergraduate. My three quarters in a row were pretty tumultuous. Eldridge Cleaver, the Black Panther leader, I believe, he led some kind of a protest in November and there was a lot of turmoil and some violence and a lot of screaming in Sproul Plaza. That wasn't too disruptive. I got through fall quarter and I met my first wife so it was an interesting quarter. I liked studying. I had to do language for my scholarship. I did more Urdu for language which I think confounded them because I think they gave me the scholarship as a prospective Hindi expert but they can't discriminate once they gave me the scholarship as long as I am taking language, that was the only provision, so I took Urdu and I became newly interested in Islam in a way. I took anthropology and that quarter I made a film with a classmate of mine who had also been in India with me my junior year. Have you ever been to a raga concert?

You sit on the floor and Indians tend to move a lot while listening and instead of a jazz concert where your head is going up and down, they move their heads from side to side. There are some other characteristic gestures so what we did is this: we used film to study contagion of movement in a fairly ritualized setting. One of my professors was a singer and he agreed to sing three concerts for us free, all of the same kind of music, all the same length, an hour of concert.

For the first concert we had an all Indian audience which we filmed, doing their thing. The second concert all Americans who never had been to a raga concert before and the third a mixture of the two. The project focussed on using film to study kinesthetics or whatever they call it, motion and you know, it was colorful. We edited it down. We threw away about nine feet for every one we used in the final version and the idea was to show that you could use film for research and to present a conclusions.

We worked with Dr. Karl Heider who would had done one of the iconic anthropology films in his younger years, a film called *Dead Birds*, about ritual warfare in Papua New Guinea.

Then I wrote a monograph about it which got published somewhere. I can't find it. All the copies, a lot of my stuff disappeared with my first wife.

Meanwhile I was courting my first wife. It was lovely.

Q: What was her background?

KOVACH: Her background was this, she was a 'townie' from Williamstown, MA. Williams College has a kind of land grant. It is not a full land grant college like Dartmouth where Dartmouth has to take anyone who is at least 1/64th American Indian. After graduating from the Putney School in Vermont where she distinguished herself

both as an actress and short story writer, she entered Williams College at a time it was all male on the basis of a provision in the original land grant giving townspeople the right to study there. It was a little ambiguous whether they would give her a degree at the end of the line. In the end there was a lawsuit. I think it went up to the appellate court level. Williams got away without giving her a degree, they gave her the credits but not the degree because as said, it was all male at the time. And so she went up to Alaska for a couple of years and became a grant writer and had that adventure and then she went down to Berkeley to finish. So she was in the English department. We took an anthropology course together a huge lecture course. We met one day when we sat two seats apart with a blind student sitting between us. We both were just being very solicitous to help that person and kind of flirting with each other across her lap and that's how we got going; similar backgrounds. She heritage was completely Jewish, not a Hapsburg mutt like me; and from Western Massachusetts. Her father had been the running back for Fordham University and they recruited him knowing he was Jewish but they made him keep it secret back in the late 20s. He was an older guy. He was a rascal. He was a rural lawyer, I think the district attorney for one of the western counties for a while. It was interesting.

She looked like she could be my father's younger sister. She really looked like my father's side of the family, which ironically at an older age I look more like whereas when I was younger I looked more like my mother. We courted for three months and then I proposed foolishly. It was a big mistake. She said yes and she was four years older than me but none the wiser. She should have known better.

So I finished making my little anthropology film, I wrote the monograph and this is all great. The second semester, back to the political thing, we had anti-draft, anti-ROTC riots on campus. Interestingly enough, it was the high school kids, very progressive Berkeley High School that would come up and trash the lower end of campus almost on a daily basis. During study period at progressive Berkeley High you could just go anywhere and so they'd come up and start trashing. They'd start throwing rocks and pelting and firebombing ROTC vehicles and so every day we had the Berkeley police in full riot gear hiding in the bushes and every day it was like ritual warfare.

I remember one day coming out of the Dole library, the main library there and a tear gas canister missed my head by about a foot. It bounced off the wall and hit the ground. I jumped right back into the building. It was pretty awful. It wasn't easy to study that semester.

But things were good. I loved my courses. I went back to Hindi and I did a course on the great devotional poetry in the medieval precursor dialects of Hindi, the so-called 'Prakrits' between Sanskrit and Hindi. I loved doing that. It is such beautiful devotional poetry and I just loved it.

And did a course on Buddhist history with a brilliant Buddhist historian, Lewis Lancaster who was a real character. Kind of got into Buddhism through a side door, was an ordained Episcopal priest in the early 50s. He fell in right before he got his first parish with the first Zen master that came over from Japan after the war and just followed him

on foot around Southern California and just literally walked into Buddhism. He was a great teacher.

So I was taking that course, taking the devotional poetry and something that made no impact on memory, possibly Hindu linguistic philosophy. I was just having a great time. Being on campus was kind of unpleasant so I really stayed off except to go to class.

Q: This was all after my time but I would have thought looking at some of these campuses and so engaged and Berkeley was the number one but probably Columbia number two and all but there must have been an awful lot of, OK, but these are kids, some of the leaders you had the feeling they were trying, were trying to earn their spurs and all and yet as soon as the Vietnam War was over, they headed off to the corporate world or something. It was the damndest thing. It was a bit indulgent.

KOVACH: Yeah, because it was conflated with countercultural expression it certainly seemed that way to a lot of people on the outside or even close in.

So that was that semester.

The first quarter I took a history course because history and religion was my thing at Wesleyan. I thought if I go for a PhD at Cal, it would ultimately be in history and so I took a graduate history course. I had a total falling out with the professor. I was for the big ideas and creative framing of problems and he, in contrast, was on the page of history is bibliographical. A third of every paper has to be a review of the literature on the topic followed by a statement on how your paper will add to it. I said no. That's not what history is to me and he retorted, Look, Berkeley and Harvard are the two highest rated history departments in the country. That's the way graduate history is. I allow my undergraduates to wallow in the great ideas and I love teaching undergraduates because I can teach the great ideas but you are a graduate student and you will write a graduate paper and I said no, I won't.

Again, a credit short, what else is new? Dropped out of that one. He and I became very friendly. We played squash together, we became squash partners. He was very friendly too about 20 years later when I came back to CAL for a visit.

One of the things I decided in India when I went as an undergraduate religion major was that I would not study theology. I would not study the stuff that is closest to me and my own spirituality. I got very interested in the study of ritual and that's why the film, even though it was in a musical setting it appealed to me. Meanwhile I was talking to the great comparative religion program at UC Santa Barbara who were interested in my transferring down there and continuing for a PhD. I needed funding because I, my parents had always made it clear, if you go to grad school rather than professional school you aren't getting a dime from us, not that we don't approve, but you gotta be good enough to get a scholarship.

I proposed that I would do a thesis eventually on a major ritual cycle in a major religion, don't know what, and that I would film it. As part of my time at Santa Barbara I also proposed that I would go down to UCLA, they had a one year MA in documentary film making, pick up the second MA and I would do a film and a hundred page monograph instead of a thesis and they loved that idea and while I might study some philosophy of religion and some theology as some course work I wouldn't really focus my original study on that.

And then came the spring quarter. If that winter was bad, spring was worse for student politics.

Q: 1960?

KOVACH: 1970, Cambodia and Kent State shooting.

Q: Guess where I was at that time?

KOVACH: Vietnam.

Q: Saigon.

KOVACH: I was one of the more militant students in Asian studies. Asian studies at Berkeley was divided in three parts: South, Southeast and East. I was the most radical in South Asian studies. Interestingly enough, the other South Asian grad student active in the strike ended up in USIA as a colleague years later, Ms. Kiki Munshi Skagen. With me and maybe two others representing all of Asian studies on the central strike committee, we decided we were going to shut down campus down. We basically shut the university down for that Spring quarter of 1970; all classes ended. I was taking a tutorial at that point so I could continue with my class work. I was scheduled to take my comprehensives even though I was a credit short. So study for my comprehensives, an impending marriage and coordinating the strike became my improbably lot those weeks. What the strike tried to do is get the student body, especially the people who had never been involved in political activism, that weren't in this countercultural miasma but who were against the war had never been political, to go back to their communities, cut their hair, sew in their bellbottoms, take their beads off, put their dope aside, start smoking Camels again and talk about the war to their neighbors and friends. We felt our duty was to pump them an unending supply of materials which we did. It was a crazy quarter.

Times were edgy to say the least. Dr. S.N. Srinivasan, a great Indian sociologist, had moved from Berkeley to Stanford. He had his office blown up at Stanford. Stanford was not radical; Stanford was very corporate as it is today, but creative.

It was just crazy. I was coordinating the strike. I got married May 16th and then I had to sit for my comps in the 20's of May. The night before my comps, the South Asian Studies Program had an off campus building a block off campus, someone blew it up. We were scheduled to sit for the written comps in the library. They had no other place for us.

The campus was closed, was dysfunctional so about five of us taking comps for the year literally had to sit in this library with no wall, looking out on the street, beautiful day, very much like today and write my comps for six hours.

Did you ever see the film *Getting Straight* with Eliot Gould and Candice Bergman? That was me. It was the getting married, it was the radical politics and yet the main Elliot Gould character was getting his MA. It was absolutely my biography that quarter.

Then that summer we went and lived at Stinson Beach in Marin County. So I have lived at Stinson Beach three times in my life. This was the first time.

Q: Were you at all attracted to, I am not quite sure of the name but there's sort of a lot of meditation. There was one particular outfit, sort of

KOVACH: Transcendental meditation, you mean? The Maharishi?

Q: A lot of that kind of stuff.

KOVACH: I went to get a mantra in Berkeley that first summer. The Transcendental Meditation headquarters were right across the side street I lived on. A friend paid for that for me and I did that for a bit. With Swami Abhishiktananda (Dom Henri Le Saux), my guru, he started with mantra yoga and I told him I want something that's more focussed on self-awareness, centeredness in the moment observing myself and the scene around me and interaction. He sent me to do vipassana -- a Theravada Buddhist meditation neither Hindu or Catholic: his two traditions. I did that.

I had a pretty solid practice. In Japan, a year later I'd go to a neighborhood Zen center because Zen meditation is different. It is just more enmeshed in Japanese ritualism. I was meditating but it was not the center of my life.

At CAL the whole academic year I spent there, we went from Eldridge Cleaver to the high school kids trashing ROTC to the Cambodia strike and shutting down the university. 18,000 of 26,000 students participated in the strike. A remarkable fact, a majority of students. How many people it persuaded, I don't know, but that strike was really a turning point, I felt.

After that crazy month of May 1970: with the strike, with my comprehensives in that bombed out library and my wedding, a spectacular outdoor wedding, the proverbial hippie wedding in the hills above Napa, I was overwhelmed and exhausted. I just needed to get out of Berkeley. We had a close friend at Stinson Beach who was going back to Illinois and owned a nice house and we house sat for the summer. I don't know what I was doing at the time. Other than long walks and body surfing on the beach, I have no recollections. My wife was quite accomplished. At Williams she had been an absolute star of the theater. She was a star of the English department at Cal. She was the undergrad student of the year. She had gotten awards for short stories she had written and she had starred in a feature film. That film was called *Riverrun* taking up on the Joyce theme. It

was by a film maker named John Korty who was in the 70s very hot and then he just sort of disappeared. I tried to Google him to find out if he is dead or what. He won the Emmy award for the best TV mini series for his rendition of The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman. That was his.

He did Riverrun with Louise (Ober) and John McLiam, a noted Canadian actor and it wasn't a great success. That movie opened and we toured it, that's part of what we were doing. Eventually we bought an old station wagon and headed back East going to openings of the movie and then got back to Williamstown and Boston and then we went up to Canada. There was a film festival and the organizers were both interested in my film and monograph and using film to both experiment and as a medium of an experiment and present the results and they were interested in her film so we got invited together. Humorous note -- the Canadians have never liked me. My two worst border crossings in my life have been into Canada. I had had my car taken apart when a girlfriend and I attempted to visit Vancouver just before I started the year at CAL (months before I met Louise). They just don't like me. In that case, they insisted on screening all the film we were carrying.

Q: You have somehow gotten on their list.

KOVACH: I don't think so. The first time the car was registered in Berkeley. It was a fancy car because I was with a girlfriend who had money. It was a new Saab and I had a beard and long hair and they are sort of thinking what is this hippie doing in a car this fancy? He's a drug dealer. I asked if they were searching us because we fit a profile -- they very honestly admitted it. If I had gotten a haircut would you have taken the car apart? They said we would have thought about it more carefully. I had a very good rapport with these guys. Canadians are very cordial. The police types aren't as authoritarian as American cops who tend to get on their high horse more.

We went up there, went to the film festival. It was nice. It was in the hometown of Gordon Lightfoot, Orillia, Ontario. His genre was folk rock, more toward folk. He was really hot for a couple of albums right then back in the late 60s. The Boston Bruin hockey icon Bobby Orr was from that town too.

Q: Did you start getting attracted towards cultural attaché?

KOVACH: I thought of the Santa Barbara offer but at the same time, friends began to talk to us about opportunities teaching in Japan and thinking that with Louise's background, feature film under her belt plus all the stage acting in Cape Cod summer theater and this and that that we might be able to land a TV gig. We decided to go to Japan. We had several hundred dollars to our name after buying our tickets. We arrived in Japan with some guarantee of English teaching. We were put up by a sister of a Massachusetts friend of mine who was married into a rich Japanese family. We started teaching. We had an introduction to NHK, the Japan Broadcasting Company and we went and auditioned. They were looking for two new 'terebi gaijin' foreign TV stars, for a new

series to teach English using an American youth culture theme. From Berkeley? They worship Berkeley.

So we got the job as the stars of this show and it got us our visa. We were going to string out tourist visas as most of the virtual army of young foreign English teachers did. For two years I couldn't walk anywhere on the street without getting stopped. The show was on countrywide, three times a week, three times a day.

It was called 'shokyu eigo kaiwa', beginning English, a very un-poetic title with a very popular television professor. We lived right near a Zendo (a Zen Buddhist temple) and I would go and sit many mornings at 6 o'clock. It was an uninstructed sitting which was fine with me. The Japanese cultural trappings even though I had studied a lot of Japanese history by that time were alien to me. I felt this is their baggage. I loved Japan. I am so type A and India was so flamboyant it brought out my flamboyance. I felt like I needed to burnish myself and Japan was exactly the right medicine. I would never fit in. I never tried to fit in. My Japanese was pretty good and I appreciated the culture deeply but I never pretended to be one of these foreigners that really try to be Japanese; I never did that. I think Japanese were more comfortable around me for my seeming comfort in my own skin.

I learned a lot from that restrained culture, I learned enryo, the word is restraint. I think Japan really nurtured and matured me.

Q: How long did you do this?

KOVACH: Over two years. We had summers, the first summer we had to leave because we had just caught on with the TV show and they decided that they liked us and our reviews were good and they wanted to keep us so we had to switch visas and we had to leave to switch visas. Louise being the writer, I am not a bad writer and I am a good photographer so we got these gigs writing articles for these fancy travel magazines, English language magazines based in Tokyo. We went to Thailand of all places and to Chiang Mai and did a couple of articles on Chiang Mai and through my background in Buddha and Buddhist history I was able to read enough Thai history to kind of catch up and write some fairly erudite pieces.

I had a real adventure that summer. I wanted to go to Laos. It was the middle of the Vietnam War, unfortunately. Even in Northern Thailand the American CG (consul General) in Chiang Mai heard about this sort of educated American couple that was writing and photographing around town. He wanted to check out us out: see whom we might be working for on the edge of the SE Asian war zone. There were very few innocents up there in those days. So we got invited to dinner at the CG's residence, a delightful dinner, a delightful guy. His name was Robert Montgomery. He basically I think accepted my story which had the advantage of being a true one. He invited me a couple more times during that time. We were six weeks in Chiang Mai. (In early 2012, on mission in Thailand for a humanitarian charity whose board I sit on, we were again invited by the consul general for a meal in that same compound: this time the consul

general was a protégé of mine who had worked for me for a couple of years in EAP about 9 years earlier.)

Louise was not one for high risk adventure so with two French acquaintances, I went into Laos. That was an adventure. The bus going from Chiang Mai to Chiang Rai, which was a small regional capital. Before sunrise the next morning, the bus drove near a fire fight between Thai soldiers and insurgents. We had to get on the floor and the driver in turn just floored it and got us into town. We got to the Mekong and crossed by hollowed out canoe. On top of that, the Mekong was flooding and about to crest its banks. Want to go?, we were asked. The river is flooding. Not going to get back, we were warned.

So we crossed precariously and we get to Ban Hui Sai on the other side and there Royal Laos Air was in the oddest airport I've ever seen: in the form of a DC-3 with cloth wings. Literally the airport terminal shack sat on top of a hill. I have never been in an airport that is not basically level. The plane was loaded with peasants with chickens and goats which you expect on a rural bus but here they were on a DC-3. Lumbering down the runway towards the valley, we took off and very quickly we arrived in Luang Prabang which was the royal capital, a city, despite the flooding, in the throes of its biggest festival featuring canoes and boat races. The whole diplomatic corps was up there. The next day the royal air force evacuated all the diplomats because they didn't want people to have to go downriver and see the insurgency and see how not in control they are.

My two French companions got us a villa in the French colonial garrison. We were basically stuck in Luang Prabang and couldn't leave. All fights ceased with the Vientiane Airport under water and the police stopping foreigners from going down stream by boat. And for the first days we didn't want to, Luang Prabang being a short step on this side of paradise, I am going out and hanging out with the monks on the mountain in the center of town during the day and then at night smoking weed, drinking red wine and listening to a local band playing on American donated instruments in the utility room below our apartment.

From a later friendship, I surmised that possibly agency people had left a set of drums, guitars and amplifiers there and there was this local rock band that came to practice almost nightly. They wanted to learn the current pop songs and pronunciation so I am there helping them with their English and going up and visiting the monks during the day and then drinking red wine, they had wonderful red wine, French.

After maybe ten days we tried to get down the river and the police would not let us go.

Finally after about three weeks the police had gotten to know us. They said there is going to be an evacuation flight because there were about 25 of us that were stranded upcountry in the entrails of the festival. They promised that the flight would take us to Vientiane. So we got on a Royal Lao Air Force DC-3 this time. We took off but the officers told us once we were airborne, oh, we aren't going to be able to go to Vientiane because the airport is now under four feet of water. The Mekong had flooded. We are taking you to a town called, it was a town right on the edge of the Plain of Jars which was the fault line

between the Royal Laos forces and the Pathet Lao. We landed there and bussed into town, the 25 or so of us on the plane scratched our heads and wondered how the hell are we going to get to Vientiane a good 50 miles or so away?

We are sitting in a café at sunset. Suddenly we hear shelling and guess what? The plane we had flown in on was blown up by the Pathet Lao. A repetition of that life pattern of me being on the last journey of a public transport vehicle. Basically all these people were hustling us. Even with a few Thais in our group who linguistically are mutually intelligible with Laotians, we were conned to get on a flatbed truck and pay up with the promise that we were going to Vientiane. They knew of course that the roads were flooded out just maybe 10-15 miles out of town.

At one point that night, we had to ford a flood plane. We held our backpacks above our heads. To make things even more surreal, we heard a distant fire fight as we forded a chest deep flowing flood water. The next day, another scam just like the first one. 'We will take you to Vientiane' knowing full well that that would be impossible. We got a little further and that night we arrived at a village with no place to stay.

Then someone in the next village put us up and the next day we did get to Vientiane but Vientiane was under water. My French companions inveigled an invitation to stay in a half empty French non commissioned officers' barrack; we are staying with this Corsican sergeant a man that even looked like Napoleon. The barrack was a villa on stilts by the river under five feet of water. It was just unreal. The quarters were on stilts and we had to get in and out to the dry land about a football field's length away.

After the second night there, we went to a nightclub on dry land. There was a Pilipino band playing Rolling Stones songs, really good. These Pilipino bands in Southeast Asia back in the day could really imitate the music. In the middle of the set, the group took a break. These American guys not in uniform, probably working for AID or the Agency got up to play. One was a good drummer. While he was playing and in the middle of his riff a Laotian guy got really angry at him, took a wine bottle, broke it on the edge of the table, went up to the stage and just killed him on the spot. Slashed him in the throat with the jagged edge of the bottle. It was over a girl as it turned out.

We went back to our quarters. I tell you that one night. I was so upset. I went down to the river and smoked opium with some obliging boatmen. It was the only time I have ever taken anything stronger than pot or hash in my life. I just needed to be sedated. It was awful.

The next day I said I don't care how, I want to get out of here. I don't care how many miles I have to go on water in Thailand, I want to go back to Thailand and my wife is probably worried sick about me anyway.

Again my French friends and I engaged a hollow canoe with a long tail engine, we got across. At the normal edge of the river on the Thai side but well under water when we arrived, there was a Thai police office on stilts. Inside, we found a Thai officer sitting

immaculately dressed in uniform as if the whole country wasn't flooded 30 miles behind him and very bureaucratically and officiously processed our papers and begrudgingly let us back in. Thailand is another place I am pretty ambivalent about.

We again just hired a hollowed out log of a canoe with a long tail engine. We said take us to a bus stop and this guy was honest. It was quite a ways in. The whole landscape looked that like that WPA film made in the Depression about the Mississippi floods. It was like going through a tropical version of that.

We got to the bus and got to Bangkok about 8 hours later.

In Bangkok, my advisor, my major tutor from Berkeley was there about to go India on a Fulbright. The Bangladesh war was about to break out and India had shut down all visas for Americans because we were perceived as leaning toward Pakistan. So I kind of commiserated with him for a day and then I headed up to Chiang Mai to rejoin my wife. It turned out to be the last time I would ever see this poet and scholar. He got depressed and killed himself. One amazing guy, born to a missionary family, born and raised in India. Spoke Hindi before he spoke English, wrote original poetry in Hindi, was published, loved by Hindus and Muslims alike, would read at poetry festivals. He just got depressed.

So then my wife and I went back to Japan.

Q: We will pick this up, still in 1970?

KOVACH: Back to Japan. We are looking at early autumn of 71.

Q: 71 in Tokyo.

Today is the 14th of May, 2012 with Peter Kovach.

Peter, before we move on to anything we are two different generations. You were born what year?

KOVACH: 1945

Q: OK, more than that. I was born in 28. You mentioned bands and groups and all. To show a generational difference we didn't have them things. We listened to the radio, we had records, and we saw movies which had to be the great band era. Glenn Miller and Benny Goodman and the Dorsey Brothers.

I would like you for a minutes since you are a cultural attaché and we try to pick up something for the next generation as they read it, what was it about these bands, these ones you were talking about. What was it about them and how did you listen to them and what turned you all on?

KOVACH: I look at Elvis. Elvis was the iconic guy. It was a way of dressing; it was a way of doing your hair. It was wearing a kind of shoe called snap jacks. Anyone researching this can look up snap jacks and see a picture, maybe.

It wasn't political for me at that point. Those of us who were kind of political and I was more beatnik and beat poetry and kind of realizing there were these people like Ferlinghetti and Jack Kerouac out there somewhere. It was the rhythm, the sensually undulating body language it was sort of liberation. It was just I think a little bit more wild gyrations and dancing than the jazz generation, your generation probably. And for a Northerner, I probably didn't appreciate that Elvis in some ways was the channel through which Black rhythm and blues mainstreamed into White society.

Q: You got together in groups, didn't you?

KOVACH: We had dances.

Q: Our dances were rather sedate, except the jitterbug wasn't.

KOVACH: We were doing the jitterbug, nothing in a way changed until around 1960 it became more freeform and I would say narcissistic in that you were sort of dancing with yourself but with a partner. I think that was a real line that was crossed when I was about a sophomore in high school.

Q: What about the music itself? To someone like myself I listen to it and I think it is practically, it is this loud music and the singing is usually something being unhappy with the world.

KOVACH: There were more love songs that were simple: either upbeat or lonely complaints in the 50s. It changed in the 60s very fundamentally. In the 60s it was loud. Amplified, hard rock evolved from rhythm and blues. The dance styles were pronounced. Maybe it was just jitterbug but we did it a lot and then the dressing style, the pegged black pants, the red shirts, the greased back hair.

Q: The duck tail.

KOVACH: Exactly and snap jacks. That was part of the uniform. I had gone to a predominantly African American grade school which I mentioned I think. A lot of the stars we liked, not the major ones like Elvis who had that sort of image appeal but people like Little Richard and Anthony and the Imperials. Popularity among White middle class kids gave rhythm and blues, African American rhythm and blues artists a chance to mainstream too. None of them were mega stars; Little Richard probably closest to anyone.

Q: When did you leave Japan?

KOVACH: I left Japan after two years of being a star on this English show with an American theme and teaching at their foreign ministry institute: their equivalent of FSI. I think I was just getting into that.

I got the institute work through my work at NHK, Japan Broadcasting: obviously seen as very prestigious. One of the professors who subbed for the guy I was working with when he went on vacation liked me. We were much more on the same wavelength than the Japanese TV professor I worked with primarily. He told me that he taught at the Foreign Ministry Institute, and explained that a current need was a course to take first tour diplomats about to go to Canada and the U.S. with good English out of their cultural skins, so to speak. They had impeccable English. You won't find anything wrong with their English, he explained, but it's the way we use language here in Japan that is so different from the way North Americans do. Can you design a course that will kind of get them over that hump?

I said, I'll try, but cautioned that it would involve playing interactive games. It would be exercises with some reflective discussion after the fact. I am not going to lecture on this. Maybe an aside or maybe after we do an exercise and we do a Socratic critique where I draw them out and see if they can articulate the differences themselves and then anything that is left out at the end of the discussion I will dutifully in one minute articulate.

I created my socio-linguistic games and I taught there at least the last year of my tenure in Japan and that was very satisfying.

Q: Do you want to talk about the differences in the use of English language?

KOVACH: Japanese is a very reticent culture. People don't wear their feelings on their sleeves and people don't even wear their arguments on their sleeves if it is a discursive situation or a negotiation. They tend to be silent where we talk. The silence makes us nervous so chatter makes them nervous or they find it curious. Neither culture talks much about religion and politics except when they do; with Japanese that's kind of first culture to them because they are homogenous and they have a narrative homogeneity. They are far less homogenous than they think they are. It is very hard to talk about culture because they aren't reflective. They just take their culture for granted, even educated people that graduated from Tokyo University, as many of these students of mine had and are about to be career diplomats.

That sort of outlines it but just very, very different language use. How to get them comfortable with negotiating situations, how to get them comfortable with getting to know someone they are going to have a serious discourse with rather than just exchanging the time of day but also discussions, how to make small talk, which is again very different.

And introductions, that's another thing. They are very reticent about introductions in Japan and we are hey, I'm Peter Kovach and that sort of thing. Those are several areas in which I designed my little ploys.

Q: Did you get any feel for the embryonic Japanese foreign service officer?

KOVACH: Yes, remarkably good English for a country where the overall level of English despite prodigious efforts to learn is terrible. I think the fear was, I think that all of them realize there is a danger that they are going to become bicultural and the more bicultural they become they become they are going to be labeled as 'hena Nihonjin', strange Japanese. I think there is a consciousness they have sort of crossed a Rubicon and that it might be impossible for them to reenter society in any other way. That's the thing I would say might be most notable. In many cases, there might have been a class arrogance that would offset that eccentricity.

Q: At this point did you, your wife, think about the American foreign service?

KOVACH: No, we are still in the Vietnam War years and remember I was still on the 'hell no, I won't go message. I won't go went for any government work.

My first wife who died just a few years later in 1978, was a very talented woman, starred in a feature film, and was writing award winning short stories, amazingly talented human being. We didn't have much of a vision of where we wanted to take life, including our marriage, when we got back. As time went on our marriage sort of wore down. It was a mistake. I think we were meant to be very close friends and not married. I think that we still had a 60s style take it as it comes mentality albeit in 1972.

Q: You came back when?

KOVACH: We left Japan November 22, 1972, the anniversary of the Kennedy assassination. I remember the scene at the Tokyo airport. By utter coincidence, I ran into a college near classmate with whom I was close friends and who had also gone to India my junior year. I hadn't seen him in years. He was just coming out of India. We were just going to India via Thailand to relax for a couple of weeks. We stayed in India nine months.

Q: What did you do?

KOVACH: During the summer of 1971 where I changed my visa I had a couple of journalistic gigs lined up. We were writing for slick, Tokyo based, English travel magazines and taking pictures. I had a couple of more commitments to do articles. We made good money. I had money I made good money on TV, I mean for me. I had never made any serious money before.

Louise, the first wife had never been to India. I wanted to go back and explore because it was such a profoundly influential year in my upbringing. The bad news was my guru figure, the Benedictine monk whom I had so looked forward to seeing again suddenly had a heart attack and died about two months before I made it back to India so one of my initial goals in saying OK, next is India was to get back with him. That was impossible.

We went to Thailand. I have no memory of two weeks there. I don't know why we stopped; was it just because we'd written a couple of articles a year and a half before when we were there. I think it must have been Louise's wish, in retrospect. We went on to India. I think the stop in Bangkok was just to decompress from Japan because India is so intense and I remembered that too well. Thailand at least on the surface is laid back. So we went to India -- we flew to Bombay and in Bombay we had some friends, Indian friends from the Tokyo era, a very famous photographer and a professional classical dancer.

We stayed in Bombay for a bit but the idea was to go back to Banaras where I'd lived for that magical junior year and camp out there. One of the articles I was commissioned to do was on Banaras. We got right to it. It was winter, a very pleasant season weather wise. Went to Banaras and basically, I knew the city like the back of my hand. Some of the merchants remembered me after 5 years' absence, because I more than a lot of the other students hung out in town and eventually moved off campus and lived downtown. They used to call me 'Banarsi babu' a compliment. They felt among foreigners I had become at least a relative aficionado of the great holy city and pilgrimage center.

One goal in returning to India was to expand the Buddhist meditation part of my spiritual life that I had picked up at the instigation of the Benedictine six years earlier. In Japan I'd sat at local zendos (meditation halls in Zen temples) but not really taken instruction. I would just go to the sitting as I intuitively feel that sitting in a group was beneficial. We went and we took a ten day retreat in Bodh Gaya, which is the village in Bihar near Patna where the Buddha attained enlightenment. So there are a lot of temples, very rural. In the middle of winter the weather is just glorious.

We stopped on the way. I wanted to go to the town in Bihar in a very uncivilized part of the state that's controlled by 'gundas' or bandits where General Cornwallis of Revolutionary War fame had died and was buried. As an American I find Cornwallis a fascinatingly complex figure. As someone who is a student of India, he is a doubly compelling figure and I wrote a piece on him. I went to the town. I thought the grave would be in some kind of antiquated Muslim graveyard. I had this romance of Cornwallis's grave in a sort of forgotten, overgrown Muslim cemetery. But he was Governor General of India and his tomb was in sort of a pillared plinth in the middle of a field with manicured gardens around it.

I wrote an article, a short piece on Cornwallis. I tried to publish it with American Heritage and to this day I don't remember if it ever got published. My copy was probably lost with other personal papers after my first wife's death.

Then we went to Bodh Gaya for the ten day silent retreat. The teacher was named S.N. Goenka who is now about 90 and still teaches and still comes to the States once a year. He didn't in those days. What an interesting and complex man. He was a Bengali Brahmin; his family had gone with the British into Burma to be glorified clerks or scribes. He had grown up in Burma. As a kind of a hyper sensitive kid he had migraines.

His family parlayed their status as privileged colonials into big business. The Indian Express, a major Indian newspaper is owned by his family. He had headaches, migraines, hypersensitive. He fell in with a Burmese independence pioneer named U Ba Khin who was the first finance minister of Burma. U Ba Khin, in the 20s when he was a young man had basically taken what had been a monastic technique for 2,500 years of Theravada Buddhism, the older southern Buddhism and outed it for laymen. For those of us who practice in that tradition but have not had the luck that I did to go to the source, that this technique had only been available to laypersons for 50 of 2500 years probably would be an astounding fact. The Burmese had really been the pioneers of that outing of the technique and Goenka had studied with U Ba Khin and became a meditation teacher.

It was a wonderful idyllic ten days of silence and instruction. He was and is a very strict teacher; it's either his way or the highway. He had a style I liked personally. These American kind of crossover Buddhist meditation teachers are so gentle and adopt a lot of cultural affectations, frankly.

He would sarcastically tease this largely Western group of meditation students chiding that there are all these Tibetan monks here. Aren't they colorful and boy, wouldn't you rather than be hanging out with them than sitting here following your breath for ten hours a day? But they do mantras and you don't want to get near mantras. I don't want you near those Tibetans.

And then he'd say, Oh isn't this wonderful? Here you are, it is winter in India. The weather is in the 70s, basically and this is the village where the Buddha attained enlightenment. Here you are taking a meditation course. Boy, haven't you arrived? Don't you feel great? What an ego trip this is.

I loved that sarcastic edge to his teaching. What a character!, and he is still doing it. He is one of these guys that prematurely grayed and I think he looked frankly to me in my mid 20s, he looked to me like he was 60 then but he couldn't have been because he is still alive and is no more than 90.

That was a great experience. Then he threw down the gauntlet and said, 'I challenge you. I am giving a course in Bombay in an un-air-conditioned high school gym right before the monsoon hits. That will test you. It won't be romantic and it will not be physically comfortable. I guarantee you your mediation will be a lot deeper.' I went; he was right.

So then after Bodh Gaya we went to Rajasthan, the desert state that is west of New Delhi and we did an article on Rajasthan. I think Louise wrote that article. I took pictures and I think she got it published somewhere. I wasn't paying attention to publications.

What I am very proud of and I also have lost my copies of the piece; I actually wrote a piece in Hindi for the Indian equivalent of Life or Look magazine back in the day. It was about Banaras but not touristic. It was looking at the schools of poetry writing and classical music and trying to evaluate how the mass media had affected the tradition. I really sensed it had.

I was doing these interviews with artists I had largely befriended in my student days, and finished the article. I can't believe my Hindi was good enough. My old Hindi teacher from those days agreed to edit it for me and I took the pictures and it actually got published. It was quite a spread and read all over North India. I have blown off a lot of those early publications. I lost copies of them because it of a snit towards me on the part of my in laws when my wife died. That was a shame but that particular piece is something I felt very proud of.

After Rajasthan we got back to Bombay and hung out there for a while with our friends Ashwin and Flora -- the photographer/dancer duo and then we went up to Nepal. We went trekking. I had a commission to do an article on the trek. We chose not to do the Everest trek. From a cultural point of view far more interesting was a course called the Jomsom trail. Off that trail is a loop up the slope of Annapurna, one of the handful of highest peaks on earth. There is a lot of interest culturally speaking, going on there, with Nepali, sub-Tibetan and Tibetan populations intermixed. So we went on and we trekked for about 45 days.

Q: When you say you trekked, what does that mean?

KOVACH: It means we put our backpacks on our backs and basically walked from village to village. It wasn't a huge scene like it has become but there were a few trekkers and there was always a place to put up in the village. Some of them would give you at least the floor with a mat for a few rupees.

Q: Were you doing more than sightseeing?

KOVACH: The trek was ambitious. The elevation change was probably from about 4,000 to 13,000 feet so there was a lot of up and down. That was rough. I was fairly fit and Louise was too. She wasn't a fat lady. We were both by the end of it physically exhausted and pretty sick. It was expeditionary 'sightseeing' for sure.

We get back down to Pokhara Lake. Pokhara is delightful regional capital just between the Himalayan foothills and the real mountains. In Pokhara there was a very disturbing incident that I was at the center of. I need to qualify that I didn't dress like a hippie even though my lifestyle was essentially like a glorified backpacker. I had a goatee and hair that was full and black and one day I was just walking around the lake in the decompression period after the hike, just down the road to town and suddenly there I was confronted by an angry mob, a guy with a lathe (the long staff that Indian policemen carry). They seemed to be mad at me. What s this, I thought in my initial hostile bemusement? The guy got right up in my face and was screaming at me. I could smell that he was pretty drunk. I could smell the alcohol. These people are very slight. Not that I am a fighter; I have only been in two real fights in my life, both with close friends, my college roommate freshman year and my oldest friend from second grade.

I decked the guy. Not smart. Things were getting more and more hostile and I figured there is a mistake here so I decked him and then the crowd got really mad and someone who I think knew me from my little hotel where I was staying screamed 'Run.' I had been in South Asia enough to know mobs there are irrational and violent so I ran.

I think the other guy ran ahead of me and told my hotelkeeper I was coming and a mob was following me and he came out with a gun and threatened to blow them away if they took a step on his property. I think he was serious and I got in safely, probably thanks to him. That was the end of it but I did go to the police.

The government of Nepal was flying me from Katmandu to Pokhara because I was going to do these articles. I went to the police. I said I am a guest of your government and was attacked by an unruly mob led by a drunk for some reason.

The next day, I got an explanation. The crowd claimed that a hippie had killed one of the royal geese at the former King's palace on Lake Pokhara. They claimed that the alleged hippie had killed and eaten a royal goose and somehow they thought the goose eating hippie was me. I was wearing pressed slacks and wearing a Nehru jacket. I was not looking like a hippie. I wanted the ringleader prosecuted. I told the officer that his government has invested in flying me around. I am writing for tourist magazines. If this happens to me. I don't look terribly exotic, I don't look terribly foreign. At that age I really looked pretty South Asian. I could pass. I am not sure I can in good conscience write articles recommending trekking vacations or Pokhara vacations even to Nepalese, let alone to foreigners. He filed a report.

The next day I came back because I wasn't going to let this go. Ok, who was the guy and he said, "We apologize." The guy was one of the guards at the palace and was drunk and lost his mind. He was pretty level with me. He apologized and a couple of days later we flew back to Katmandu. I talked to the tourist ministry about what happened. I'd like to know that the perpetrator would do a little time for this. We can't do that, was the reply. I retorted that look, if a government official could instigate a mob on a tourist. I dress clean. I take showers every morning. I am not sure I can recommend Nepal or Pokhara or trekking to anyone.

I had a good time in Katmandu. The Katmandu scene was like the classic 1944 film, *Les Enfants du Paradis*. Do you remember that old movie? It had a little bit of element of theater amidst chaos. There was a real hippie scene and people dressing colorfully and walking from cafe to cafe eating sweets laced with hashish and then going up and meditating at Swyambhu, the great stupa above the city.

Q: Did you get a feel for the American European drug culture? Had it hit the place yet?

KOVACH: Oh, yeah.

There was a street called by the hippies 'pie' street. I think the Nepali name was Maruhiti Tola. That was because there were all these cafes that basically catered to the hash

smoking and eating crowd. When you smoke, if there is a sweet pie on the table, that's the thing you are going to go for. Sugar was what you were looking for. It was fun but frankly, with my interest in the culture I didn't spend much time there.

Q: I would think it would be a boring turnoff. There was no intellectual involvement.

KOVACH: There was some. It was a real mix. Again I don't know whether he smoked or not but Ryan Crocker did the backpack from Europe to Katmandu and back. He told me he did. There were some very bright and introspective people. There some spiritual seekers. There were some intellectuals, there were some writers, and there were some people I think were blown out from the political battles in the 60s both in Europe and in the States. They were interesting people.

I went up to Swyambhu and I'd sit and meditate up on the hill there. There was one big monastery across the river up the hill. You walked down Pie Street down to the river and up the hill. There is another one, maybe called Boudhanath, it was a big, much larger based stupa that had a lot of Tibetan culture in the form of a refugees' market surrounding the stupa and Tibetan monks offering instruction inside the compound.

It is interesting because I have studied meditation with a teacher ordained by the Dali Lama. His Holiness as we refer to him, presides over the most rationalist and newest sect of Tibetan Buddhism. They are wonderful techniques they teach. I used to say it is like putting a jet pack on the basic Theravada mediation I had learned earlier, wonderful stuff with visualizations of and devotions to various Buddhas who are ultimately illusory: stepping stones to unleashing your inner consciousness. Rebellious kind of semi catholic in me, I have an inbred caution around ecclesiastic establishments like Tibet's. Tibetan Buddhism is hierarchical. There are lamas and I am thinking oh, my god. I never got it. I always kept a bit of distance from Tibetan scenes for that reason. Much as I appreciate the Dali Lama as a figure, a public figure, as much as I appreciate these techniques I learned from his acolyte, I have this instinctive iconoclasm. I guess at my advanced age I've learned to accept it.

So then went back to India to Banaras and by then it was getting pretty hot. We had a favorite south Indian hotel right near the Dashashwamedh Ghat, the terraced slope down to the Ganges named after a god associated with ten horses god where one of the gods sacrificed ten horses to a bigger god. It was a wonderful south Indian place run by fine people and they had a little restaurant. You never got sick. Their food was clean. We stayed there.

Then we went to Delhi and booked a flight to Amsterdam where I have family. We were both worn down physically. I remember arriving in Amsterdam and my aunt taking a look at us and trundled us both the Tropische Institut, a German name and we got physicals and I think I had amoeba and Louise had another problem. We hung out with my aunt and cousins in Holland and then flew back to the States at the end of the summer.

I got home and I immediately registered at Cal because I owed them that one seminar that I hadn't finished and I wanted the MA. And at that point I think Louise and I on some level felt we needed a break from one another.

I went out to Berkeley and had another great quarter there. I lived at Stinson Beach, commuted to Cal and took classes two days a week.

When I originally went to grad school there, there were a whole bunch of my fraternity brothers and several different crowds I hung with in college that went to either Cal or Stanford. It was like a mass migration to grad school. The Stanford people were so bored in Palo Alto that they said 'we beg you.' Just let us come up any weekend, any weekend. One of them said we will sleep standing up in a closet. They were just desperate to get out and here, years later, I was living at Stinson Beach and commuting to Berkeley. I threw a mattress on the floor of a walk in closet at a friend's apartment. One of my brother's best friends in grade school was in grad school at Cal by that time. He was my 'closet' host.

But five days a week, I had the natural treasure of Stinson Beach State Park and Mount Tamalpais as a temple for my inner reflections in the joy I have always derived from nature.

Q: What was going on on the campus during this period?

KOVACH: 73? Oh, my god. Contraction is the word I'd use. The 'movement' in all it's aspects had disappeared and fee hikes under Governor Reagan were the only 'hot' issue. Subjectively, CAL already felt to me like a return to a grade school that I was visiting after years away. Everything that had seemed so awesome and big seemed small and so 'yesterday'. The movement I was involved with or walked by every day, there wasn't much going on, politically. And the whole thing seemed diminished.

Q: Was Ronald Reagan?

KOVACH: was I think he was governor. I think he was.

Q: Had you picked up any feelings about Ronald Reagan?

KOVACH: The main thing about Ronald Reagan was raising tuition. He was clearly not pro university or pro mass education and you know, maybe you have to cut back for budget. I got a lot more conservative later and I would say in fact he was the great president that I served under. I wasn't a fan. But I didn't see him as the devil incarnate.

So I did my little quarter.

I did a very interesting thing. I needed a graduate seminar so I took it with one of my favorite anthropology professors. I took it with Gerry Berreman who is one of the great thinkers when it comes to the caste system. He has probably written the best stuff on the

caste system in the last 2,000 years, critical, obviously. He had gotten out in 68 on a kind of sabbatical fellowship to India and he discovered when he arrived that the fellowship granting NGO was actually a front for DIA and that it was DOD money. He renounced the fellowship very publicly in New Delhi. The Indians loved that and so that's when he wrote his great book on castes in part based on privileged access possible only because of his public push back of the USG funding.

I enrolled at the Ali Akbar Khan School of Music half way between Berkeley and Stinson. I told Professor Berreman I wanted to do a study of the school and the interaction between Indians and Americans, kind of continuing that trend, that film I did. So I went there and took singing lessons. I did my lessons twice a week and wrote a nice monograph on the school and aculturalization of Americans to the Indian scene (sort of) and the Indian musicians acculturation to America (sort of.)

And then I took a great political science course.

Q: Did you get a feel for the Indian community in California because it has become a political entity among many other ethnic ones but what about at this time?

KOVACH: I will tell you the one group we were very aware of, going back to 69, 70 my three quarters in a row there. There were several Sikhs who were in the program who were from Yuba city. The Sikhs were known as the best fruit growers in the United States. That was sort of the center of Sikh life so yeah, I was very aware of them. I wouldn't say that I was aware of a wider Indian community at that point.

Q: The Sikhs in Canada had some real problems.

KOVACH: They were proud of their heritage but they were assimilated. There is no sense of foreignness really. This is our heritage. This is our religion. This is our culture. Despite the men's exotic habit.

Q: It s interesting. I was a consular officer and became very much aware of different ethnic groups that settled in the United States such as the Koreans, the Vietnamese beginning to have some influence.

You got a degree. What did you get your master s in?

KOVACH: The master s was in South Asian studies.

Q: What was Peter going to do?

KOVACH: What was Peter going to do?

Q: Had you and your wife separated by then?

KOVACH: No. I found a ride across country, from a ride board; sold my old junky convertible; another recurring theme in my life; driving junky convertibles. I went back across country and there at Christmas in Boston, what a strange Christmas that was because several of our Japanese friends came and one of our female Japanese friends had fallen in love with an FSO and they got married and Louise and I just decided we would have an amicable breakup.

I decided to stay in Boston, my home town until I found my muse in life, so to speak. I got two jobs almost instantly. One with my father who was a plastics executive and owned his own company. They were suddenly hit by the oil crisis of 1973. We are talking late 73, 74 and he knew I knew his business because I'd worked for him Christmases in high school and all. I went in there and did a material flow study for him for a few months figuring out where they could economize. And then I got a job teaching in the Study of Religion program at University of Massachusetts (UMass), Boston.

I got the UMass job through a circuitous connection. I had been a TA at Wesleyan, the year after I came back and belatedly graduated. The professor I had TA'd with recommended me to this friend of his at UMass. I beat out seven or eight scholars for that job including Diana Eck who is one of the India scholars whose work I most admire. I am humbled. I am really humbled to think that I beat Diana out for that job. I think it was because I could bring direct experience of both monastic and street spirituality to the table and I think that was what they wanted. This was largely a working class school and kids were not from privileged family backgrounds. I mean richness of both money and culture here.

Q: How long were you doing this?

KOVACH: At UMass, Boston I basically taught one or two courses a semester or summer term right through when I entered the Fletcher School which was in the Fall of 1976, so two years and then the summer between my two years at Fletcher I taught again at UMass again.

Q: Let's talk about the student body and how they reacted.

KOVACH: I taught two courses. One was called the varieties of religious experience after William James and that was an introduction to the study of religion and basically to make it interesting for myself I taught it differently each time. My consistent formula was we are going to have three religious traditions that we study and we are going to have three methods of studying religion, meaning theology, anthropology, sociology, archeology or the like for each course.

Because of the disparity in ability among these kids, I had kids that wrote on a seventh grade level. They really were handicapped and then had reading handicaps on top of that and I had kids that if they hadn't been from working class financial status they would be at Harvard they were so bright. Then I had kids coming back from the Vietnam War and I had women that had gotten knocked up in high school and had two kids who in their late

20s were pulling their lives together. I loved teaching in that environment. I loved the variety.

What I had to do for the requirements, I had to have some hard assed academic requirements like quizzes, exam and paper but I also had them journal and the journal was a great leveler. It enabled me to give people that in a more objective environment might have been getting failing grades Cs. It was wonderful. I loved teaching at UMass.

I would take them to Pentecostal churches and we'd do meditation and I really tried to get them to get in other halls of worship.

Q: Did you have trouble with the Massachusetts university authorities?

KOVACH: No I didn't. I think participant observation in the soft social sciences had become so prevalent at that point that no one ever gave me any guff for that at all. As a matter of fact I got a lot of praise and encouragement.

Q: Were you looking at anything else beyond this?

KOVACH: I was sort of looking for the next impulse to move forward career-wise.

Q: How about a PhD?

KOVACH: My problem was when I married Louise and I went off to Japan I turned my back on that PhD in religion. I had it all set up. I thought of going back to that but at that point I guess I had already decided that studying theology or spiritual values was too personal and I knew I was on a lifelong study path and that studying ritual behavior which is what I had thought to do wasn't grabbing me either. So caught in that contradiction, I walked away from religious studies.

How did the Fletcher experience come about? That was a strange thing. I was a caretaker on Boston's only working farm right under the old National Academy of Science mansion. That was great because I lived for free and the tasks I did in turn were fun and I lived on a farm in the city. There was a little pond right by the house I lived in. There was a hillside just smothered with daffodils so the two springs I lived there I would cut daffodils, bunch them up and I'd go downtown Boston without a peddler's license and sell them in front of the Museum of Fine Arts and just had a great time. I liked street selling, great interaction. I like that kind of thing. Harkened back to my days selling the candles I made at SF Bay Area flea markets.

I was teaching. I was an interesting 20 minute drive through Daahchester (Dorchester) to UMass Boston and it was a good life.

Q: We are saying in our colloquial language Dorchester.

KOVACH: If I hadn't come home from school to two parents with heavy European accents, my Boston accent would have been much thicker. I had it when I left high school.

My first boss in the Foreign Service had a Boston accent you could cut with a knife. The authority figure. By the end of the year I would open my mouth and people would say "you're from Boston."

Back to life on Allendale Farm, I had a mindfulness sitting group and led meditation once a week. I don't remember how it started out. There was a meditation group and I was the instructor. I didn't publicize it. It just caught on by word of mouth.

There was a guy in the group whom I later discovered was a career counselor at Harvard Business School. This guy made me very nervous: let me explain why. I have been teaching meditation for 40 years on and off. He was of the rare ilk in my experience, the type that tried to sort of venerate me and make me into some kind of guru. My informal manner usually discourages that. I don't kindly put up with that at all. He made me very nervous. I had to talk to him, so I pulled him aside. I said, Look, I am very uncomfortable with your manner. I am just living my life one breath at a time just like I am trying to get you to do so too. I am not 'the venerable'. I am not in any hierarchy. Just let me be Peter and just be relaxed.

About a month later he approached me again; he suddenly put his counseling hat on. He said in a fairly arch manner, "You seem a little bit adrift."

I said, that's probably a fair description.

I was about to turn 30 and still had not figured out that next step in life. He kindly offered to give me the whole battery of tests that they give incoming first year students at the business school; free.

He gave me an envelope full of all these tests, the whole thing. On my 30th birthday in Proctor, Vermont where there is a large quarry and I was skinny dipping with two of my two best friends I took the tests. While the friends continued frolicking and jumping off the rocks I got in the shade. Taking them out right out there in the open I filled all of them in. I did all of them, three hours worth. Got back to Cambridge, rode them over to the business school and he said, OK, give me about two weeks.

By now it's funny because from the earlier deferential behavior, he was all attitude now. He put on his other hat.

He prefaced the session by saying, "Since I am doing this as an act of friendship I am going to be directive. With counseling you've got to do it Socratically and all that." He revived the war cry of my major professor at Wesleyan all those years ago. He said you were born to be in USIA or in international TV or movie production. Those are the two things I see. I'm getting very concrete with you.

Boy, that is concrete.

He further reported that he was friends with the dean of students at the Fletcher School. I knew what Fletcher was because my mother taught German literature at Tufts for years when I was a kid. If I do an introduction, will you go over and talk to her, he asked?

I said, I'll go over and talk to them. I've got time. I'm kind of a part time professor and part time greenhouse farmer. I'll do it.

He continued explaining, "The admissions committee at Fletcher had decided to look for much older students for the next class and you fit their profile exactly. You've lived abroad on your own, you've done a little grad school already, you've seen the world, and you're independent. You are exactly what they are looking for so go over and see Dean Mary Harris."

He was pretty accurate. She said we are looking for people like you and if you applied and get in I can guarantee you a free ride but you re gonna have to get through the admissions committee.

"What the hell, free school?", I thought. I did the application, put it in. Literally got it in five minutes before deadline. Weeks later a letter fell out of the mailbox saying that I was admitted and on a full scholarship. I take a deep breath. Boy, is this really what I want? But it s free and with breaks, I do like to study.

Q: Had you had a chance to explore USIA or foreign TV?

KOVACH: No, not really. I knew what they did. I wasn't unsophisticated. It sounded good to me and the Vietnam War was over so government service sounded very good to me.

So I entered Fletcher. I ran up a little debt for housing. I had to borrow money from my parents and I couldn't teach and go to Fletcher. It was hard at first getting back on the other side of the podium after my couple years plus at UMass, Boston. Fletcher demanded an awful lot of sheer reading; I say this from the later perspective of having taught graduate courses at UCLA and George Mason University in the last decade.

As for rooming, I had just returned from a late summer California sojourn. I had no real vision except wanting to live near Tufts campus. At a picnic during orientation week, the same dean who a year back had persuaded me to apply introduced me to my eventual roommate, Kishore Mandhyan from India and suggested we room together undoubtedly with my two years living in India in her mental playbook.

Why don't you guys talk about rooming together? I said, Mary, all Indians aren't alike, all people who have been to India aren't all alike but Kishore and I liked each other so we went out to dinner a couple of nights. We searched together for an apartment. We got a

duplex in Somerville. It was right in the Winter Hill neighborhood where Mystic River, the book was based on the so called Winter Hill Gang. Dennis Lehane based his novel in our neighborhood. What they did in the movie they flipped everything. Like what happened in the book and based on real life in Somerville was flipped to Charlestown and then the murder at the end where they bump a key character off was in Somerville. They just flipped it.

It was a mafia neighborhood. The next door neighbor was Albanian family. The father and I worked to dig out the block from some extraordinary snow. After that he spent the whole year trying to marry me off to his daughter who was not very pretty. Kishore and I got along swimmingly. We really became good friends.

We had a big blizzard. We were snowed in. There were beatings and whippings on the street. I would call the police. Everyone said ignore it. Pretend it s not happening. I'd always call the police who would never come. We had a good first year and after mid terms first semester I kind of got over being a student again and it was alright. I had a great group of friends and that's what made Fletcher for me. The faculty was mediocre, a lot of wannabes, Washington wannabes, not in Washington but high and dry in Boston. I was very big on the students, the friendships I made.

Flash forward, Kishore was until last year pretty much the equivalent of the American National Security Advisor at the UN and was functionally in that role Ban Ki-moon's senior political adviser so he has done very well. He's now back in India getting involved with the reformist party. Another close friend became the CEO of Kookmin Bank in Seoul, Korea's largest private bank. For a recovering pot head who got thrown out of the Korean army, that's pretty good. But a brilliant guy obviously and well connected.

The summer between the two Fletcher years I went back to UMass and really enjoyed getting back into teaching.

That same summer between the two years at Fletcher my wife, my separated wife came back from Asia and Alaska. We had sort of lost contact. She d need money and we d write maybe every five or six months and she ended up back in Alaska where she had been a grant writer when she dropped out of Williams because of their refusal to give her a degree. She was based north of the Arctic Circle working for the Bureau of Indian Affairs and got R&R every few months. Louise and her colleagues got flown to Guatemala or some Central American destination of their choice. Louise called me from the New Orleans airport stopover and said, Peter, I am so sick I've got to come home.

I said, "What s wrong?"

She said, "I don't know. I have lost all this weight." She was a very small woman to begin with. "I am 83 pounds," she reported.

So I got her at the airport and I drove her home to her mother's in Williamstown, MA and it was very clear she was extremely sick. She had stage 3 colon cancer. She lasted a year and then died.

The second year at Fletcher to avoid running up any more debt to my parents, I became a dorm headmaster, another adventure which paid for my room and board.

Q: What did this involve?

KOVACH: I was the headmaster of a large undergraduate dormitory. It was a good experience. Tufts is very liberal, sort of soft lefty institution. I told the dean, as an ex marijuana smoker, that I am going to be hard on drug users. I am going to be hard on anything other than marijuana that I smell and any dealing. I am not going to be loco parentis. I will warn you. I will go to the police if there is major dealing going on or if there is evidence of hard drugs and they swallowed hard because they had already hired me.

He said, At least let me know. I said, "That's a promise."

At the first student orientation meeting I told them that I would not tolerate dealing of any kind and let me tell you, I am a child of the 60s, went to grad school at Berkeley and they all, mantra-like uttered 'oh. Cool.' I know the signs of dope dealing and I also know the signs of people snorting cocaine although I have never done it. Rudolph, the red nosed reindeer? I just don't want to see any of that here and if any of you are immersed in that culture and you feel you can't let go of it, please look for a change of dormitory. A whole suite moved out the next day.

It was a good year. We had a cataclysmic blizzard in 1978 and it shut everything down for a week and then there was a lot of drinking and dope smoking and I frankly I had a couple of kids I was keeping a close eye on whom I thought might be suicidal and that one of them might be tempted to jump. She was from a major political family too to add to the complications. Nothing happened.

The week of no classes and stir-crazy kids was hard and it was getting on my nerves. I had a buddy who was off about two miles in a beautiful house on a reservoir and I remember cross country skiing over to his house. I needed some time as did my assistants. I had four assistants. So we rotated absences, one at a time.

I can't say I have kept any friendships with those kids. There were some very nice associations. I had an affair or two that year but I was absolutely into the incest taboo that year. The girls in that dorm were my daughters. A couple of them threw themselves at me.

The other thing was a lot of them came to me with academic advising questions which strictly speaking I wasn't supposed to do but some of them were getting plumb bad

advice. I recalled my complete missing of minds with my academic advisor my freshman year at Wesleyan.

So that was a good experience and it kept me from getting further into debt.

Getting near the end of my second year of Fletcher. John Roche who was an adviser to LBJ was quite prominent for a while; I think he may have been White House chief of staff. He was a pretty major figure. I'd taken a course or two with him and he liked me. One day, he asked, What's going on?

I got myself into writing a major paper on the Palestinians. He told me that the school had some travel money for MA research but the deadline to apply was that afternoon. So I tore down to a desk buried in the stacks of the library and in long hand with my atrocious penmanship on a yellow legal pad gave them a research proposal that involved a trip to Israel/Palestine. The next day, I was told I had a \$4000 travel grant.

A little background: In high school every year juniors were wrote something called the UN essay contest. A local foundation subsidized a free trip to the UN with the old witch of a social studies teacher for the two winners, the male and the female winner whom teachers judged had written the best essays.

Assigned topics were almost non-existent at my liberal high school. But in my year to compete in the contest, the assigned topic was the Palestinian refugee problem. I had grown up on Exodus and Sal Mineo and Eva Marie Saint, idyllic images of Israel even though my parents in their cultural Jewish identity were not raving pro Zionists, to put it mildly. My mother's side was more mixed with a Turkish Muslim grandfather and a lacing of Catholics. My father's family, and my father in particular, almost totally secular. I remember my Dad saying in the course of this eye-opening research, 'You can't find justice for one people on top of an injustice to another.' The research for this essay totally changed my life. I thought this creation of Israel without support for the parallel Palestinian state really is an injustice (one I do not entirely lay at Israel's doorstep) at least not before 1967. I am not of the religion but I am certainly of the people on both sides of my family to some extent. And justice is a paramount value I've been raised on as documented earlier.

A lot stemmed from that paper: it influenced everything. It influenced my eventual decision to go and learn Arabic and go to the Arab world and it influenced what I wrote my Master's paper on at Fletcher.

Once in Israel, I started with two papers and one was going to be on the so-called second Israel, about the Jews of middle eastern origin and their assimilation or poor assimilation in Israel and the other was going to be on the Palestinian citizens of Israel land expropriation and the resultant social change, not the refugee problem. I was going to look at land loss, water rights and living under Israeli bureaucratic legal system and what kind of social changes would be predictable.

I got out to Israel. I had no language, no Hebrew, no Arabic and pretty much found that when Jewish Israelis saw I had no language skills whatsoever they stiffed me so I dropped the second Israel paper. Palestinians, on the other hand, as an oppressed minority were quite eager to tell their story so I got very taken with that. My feeling welled up again that there is a horrible injustice this country is built on. At the same time I certainly have respect for what I saw, what Israel had become. I realized my parents escaped by the skin of their teeth and was glad there was a Jewish homeland. I am not a one state supporter. You would think with some of my values I would be a one state guy. I still think two states would be the best solution given the tribal organization of Semitic society, the Ottoman heritage recognizing all the separate millets and separate communities.

That experience again to an extent I hadn't experienced since my first sojourns in India found me ensconced with the full range of both Israeli and Palestinian societies: established leaders to hot headed radicals, leftists, Zionists, devout Muslims and to a lesser extent their Jewish counterparts.

On my way home, I stopped in Amsterdam with my favorite relatives and was thunderstruck by the news that my wife had died. My parents had no way to reach me but sending airmails to American Express and I had kind of blown off going to American Express the last two weeks in Israel. And so my cousin casually mentioned that my wife had died, obviously thinking I knew, so it was very grim three days. Her brother had died of cancer in May and I was stopping off in part to condole them and probably to establish a surrogate son/brother relationship to the extent they wanted. My aunt Eva Besnyö, the famous photographer and I already were pretty tight, there were ironic comments about how I was her secret son. Iara, the daughter and I have had a decent relationship including some real brotherly/sisterly spats over politics and values.

My wife's parents were very pissed off with me after Louise returned home ill. Specifically they were angry that when I got to Fletcher I registered as a single student, which means my health insurance did not cover my wife because apparently they ran up massive debts. I had all sorts of stuff up in their attic including all my early writings on India and Thailand and other publications. They had a big, big house in Williamstown, a beautiful house and I just, never wanted to force it and they never offered to let me go up there and clean through the attic so I lost a lot of stuff. These early articles I wrote and just some beautiful stuff. There was a hanging from Northern Thailand, a tribal wall hanging and they don't make them like that anymore. I let it go.

(Since these interviews, I by chance discovered that in fact they were not focused on me so much but on Louise's college boyfriend who became obsessed with her death and was an annoying, hovering presence in her last days. He acted so unstably that they feared him and sadly enough, for he was a mutual friend, he returned to Alaska and weeks later walked off into the wilderness never to return or be found.)

On return, both mourning Louise and digesting a rich summer's work in Israel, I was done with class and not doing anything. I moved out to my parents' summer cottage and

worked on my Palestinian paper in a kind of melancholy solitude. As it was unheated, I lasted until about Veteran's day and then moved in with my parents for a few weeks. Finally, a Fletcher classmate who had a single extra upstairs bedroom rented me the space -- one block from campus. The social life was a healing balm.

As to the Foreign Service, the prospect that lured me to Fletcher, I grew a bit more ambivalent about USIA with all that political science and theory under my belt.

I took the Foreign Service exam every year at Fletcher. The first year I took the USIA exam. (You had to choose USIA or State back in those days.) I chose USIA and my written score was astronomic. They hadn't seen a score like that in years or so the agency told me but I decided to blow off taking the oral because I had just entered Fletcher and I felt committed to that path. I was naive about how long it would take to get an offer.

The next year I took the State exam and had a much lower end pass and took the one hour oral. Remember the star chamber?

Q: I used to give it.

KOVACH: The only thing that varied I remember is that in the interview there was a variation from year to year or blocks of years. Some years, the interviewers knew your biography and you had to sort of ferret out theirs a bit or the opposite.

I went in there and they knew mine.

Q: This was when?

KOVACH: The summer of 78. I remember my brother got married down here about 6 miles from where I live now up River Road in Potomac Maryland. I took the orals and I passed. In those days, they decided your cone based on an hour and ten minutes of structured chit chat. I guess like every other fool in the world I wanted to be a political officer. They had a Japan hand on the panel. I gave a political answer but I am a fairly discursive talker. I am not one of these State Department one point, one point, point two, point four types but the examiner loved my answer. It was not delivered in the standard State style but he went out of his way to give me positive feedback.

Remember Weaver Gin? He was the head of BEX for a while. He was one of my three examiners. He did a role play with me and it was a GSO role play, right? Here was the scenario: The prime minister's niece was on the GSO staff and whiskey was disappearing from the commissary in a country where there was a really high mark up for liquor. You had evidence that she was stealing it. You had to confront her and that was the role play. They loved the way I did that. They just loved it. So guess what cone I got? Consular. You can say 'no,' you can ask tough questions all with a smile, how cool. So I get consular cone.

I was actually very happy with that. The more I saw at Fletcher which is a real incubator for political officers, the less I thought political was important. I have a very nasty attitude toward the political cone to this day. When I was recruiting, oh, my God, I had to do a lot of tongue biting.

I was a consular cone guy. I passed.

The next year I took the USIA exam again, passed. So each year at Fletcher my score on the written exam was going down, not a great recommendation for the Fletcher school. I took the oral and this was the first year of the all day oral. I passed. On the oral I had a very, very high score so I became a candidate in two cones which is a little interesting. But no offers were forthcoming. These were the Carter years and frankly speaking, the cards were somewhat stacked against white males. Offers were not forthcoming; my parents are beginning to wonder. We've got this kid who is coming on to his 35th birthday and other than his years in Japan he's never made a cent worth looking at in his life and they were getting a little neuro and wondering if I wasn't delusional.

Meanwhile I am writing this 350 page MA thesis on the Palestinians which I had finally finished and got straight A's on. I took my PhD orals. Finally March 10th, 1980 I got a letter inviting me to join the June class of USIA. I was really happy.

Then seven days later I get a consular cone offer from State and within two days after that I got an offer to be a pioneering member of the Foreign Commercial Service because I had applied for a Department of Commerce internship the summer before. I turned it down because it didn't pay but I surmised they just liked my application. They asked me to be a charter member of their service. That gave me pause because I liked the idea of pioneering in this new branch of the Foreign Service. Way cool.

Earlier I had audited the public diplomacy classes at Fletcher. I pretty much decided to go with my several 'oracular' moments. I did what my professor back in the 60s had told me I should do, what the mediation student of mine, the Harvard business school counselor said what I should do. And that was join USIA. I know it was right for me so I launched my career on June 16th, 1980.

Q: What was your class like?

KOVACH: It was the biggest class since the height of the Vietnam War for USIA. It had 27 people. For USIA that was huge. I had a couple of mid level transfers from civil service, Mustangs, both African American. It was the oldest class I think in foreign service history to that moment. The average age was almost 32. I was two months short of my 35th birthday at that point.

It was a good class. It was big enough so it got very cliquey. The young marrieds, the marrieds and then kind of the crazy single crowd and I that included me; a wonderful crowd. We had a lot of fun together.

Lea Perez who just retired, the last one to retire and she's very type A, very serious except when she's relaxed she's got a great sense of humor.

Q: Where is she located, do you know?

KOVACH: She is working as a contractor for 'Ripper' (R/RPPR) that looks at public diplomacy resources so

Q: Here in Washington?

KOVACH: She's here. My closest friend was Salamai Hernandez who is a Chicano from the barrio in San Diego, from Logan Hill, the worst neighborhood in San Diego. She is a full blooded Apache from Zacatecas, Mexico. She immigrated as a baby, got a PhD in sociology from the University of New Mexico.

Q: Is she around?

KOVACH: She's living in Shanghai. They have a house in San Diego, her wonderful Peruvian husband, also a full blooded Indian who is an IT guy lives more in San Diego than in Shanghai. Her brilliant son lives with her in Shanghai. He really doesn't like the United States. He is dark, looks like a cigar store Indian. He felt in San Diego all he ever did was get profiled and harassed by police. I don't think he even has a high school degree but the guy is so fluent in Chinese, he is writing Mandarin software. I think he and mother are living in Shanghai pretty much.

They recently tried to hire her for the emergency response corps or whatever. She flew back, they gave her the training and then decided they weren't going to give her a security clearance because she owns property in the PRC. She owns an apartment in Shanghai. She has too many business interests there.

She just likes being in China. She custom designs, supervises the manufacture of bowling team jackets that has your club logo on it; she does that stuff and she also was kind of looking for English teachers for some rural universities where they give a great package. It's \$10,000 annually, furnished apartment with appliances including washer and dryer and you taught Chinese three quarters time and you enrolled in an intensive Chinese course one quarter time. The Chinese are smart; what a deal. And she was doing that and actually recruited a couple of people for it.

She and I were very close friends. We even we sort of flirted with getting involved and then decided that was a bad idea. Part of the reason was our JOT class mentor in USIA was in a USIA tandem and she was telling us what a hard time they would have finding assignments and moving their careers ahead because they were tied to each other.

Q: Who was the first lady you mentioned?

KOVACH: Lea Perez, very smart.

Q: And she's in DC?

KOVACH: DC and she is on the global address list if you are.

Then another guy is deceased, Sam Westgate who was an older guy and who had worked in Saudi Arabia before joining. He became a quintessential Thai hand and married this woman who had been a mistress of a well known general. My wife is Thai so I know all this gossip, my new wife. So that was Sam but he's gone.

Dan Sreebny is around, is a contractor in CSCC and lives in Herndon.

Q: Where did he serve?

KOVACH: He was Middle East, in China. He's done Turkey and Iraq too.

Q: What's his name?

KOVACH: Dan Sreebny and he is in CSCC over in Main State. He's a contractor.

Who else that is around and is interesting?

Amelia Broderick, is around. She lives right on the, if you go up New Hampshire Avenue on Holy Row with all the exotic churches and mosques, she lives right beyond that, I think right over the Howard County line. She does WAE work like me. I don't remember her current last name. Broderick is one last name and Fitzjohn is another last name. I don't remember which is her maiden and which is her family name.

She is an interesting lady. She was the daughter of a Sierra Leone diplomat and I think the mother was an African Methodist AME church minister. It is an African American branch of Methodism, a very interesting lady. Her career was low key and she never made the senior service. Neither did Salome. Dan and Lea and I were all MCs so we did well.

I will tell you someone who would be interesting. She hasn't done an oral history; Greta Morris. She's the only one of us that got an embassy. She's a WAE too. She started out doing OIG work and had the reaction to it I always predicted I would have which is negative. And she is doing editing human rights reports, which she finds very satisfying. She was married and so wasn't in our crowd. She is sort of straight-laced, frankly.

Our clique, we partied, we were dancers. We were wild parties and dancers. We'd go to restaurants and dance the night away.

The A-100 course, which we joined for about a month, oh my God. I remember two things from the A-100 course; one is learning how to set a table. They taught us how to set a table which surprised me because I was a waiter in a very fancy European

restaurant. We didn't set the damned table that way at the Window Shop and as I might have reported, I waited on a string of luminaries including Secretary Kissinger, Henry Cabot Lodge, myriad Kennedy's.

The second thing was our retreat. Did you have a retreat in A-100?

Q: I came in in 55 and we were the first chorus after a long hiatus after Senator McCarthy. There were about 25 of us, no women.

KOVACH: Let me tell you about the retreat.

We went out to Harper s Ferry because the Department was feeling too poor. They used to do the A-100 retreats at Berkeley Springs which is fancier. We went to Harper s Ferry to this dump of a hotel on top of a hill. Our State equivalents, what a bunch of madmen. Several of them are very, very lovely people let me add. One or two are still in I think but I remember two things; one is a colleague named Peter Kaestner. I think he retired. He was one of the ten most accomplished bird watchers in the world entering the Foreign Service. He planned his whole career around bird watching and did well. I think he may have been an ambassador somewhere in southern Africa, been DCM a couple of times, sort of straight political cone kind of guy, very low key. He was an interesting character.

Our chaperones were two retired ambassadors. There was a party the last night and right away the State people are all vying to be super straight. These ambassadors, we've gotta make a good impression, an attitude especially true of the political cone people. Our crowd, our whole class by that time was in such a party mode. There was a lot of liquor. We didn't have to go out and look for it, it was there along with music. We were doing the bunny hop. We were doing 50s dancing. We got back to the era, to the oldies and a few of the State people kind of loosened up and joined us but then what developed was one of the two chaperones got just shit faced and he started screaming. He started screaming at the State people about how uptight they were and then he got into a fight. Someone tried to mediate, there was a mounting altercation between my USIA crowd and some of the straight State types that were just wagging their fingers at us and saying you shouldn't behave like this. This is unbecoming a Foreign Service officer. The Ambassador who leaned toward partying got in the middle of things and got into fisticuffs with the straight guy. It was really a mess, it was a brawl. I hadn't been involved even in my most bohemian circles with anything like the State Department retreat in my A-100 course. I felt that had to be told.

Steve Blake, I think was in that class, he s still around. I see him in the halls.

Q: You can imagine. I am 84.

KOVACH: The JOT class was really a very strange summer.

Q: Had you pointed towards something?

KOVACH: I can be very compulsive. I had in mind a country I wanted to go to, I had a language I most wanted to learn and I had a certain characteristic of the country I most wanted, that I liked and I favored. The country I most wanted to go to was Indonesia. I never managed in a 30 year career to get there other than on TDY two times. It wasn't on the list. It wasn't like there were 27 posts for 27 people as I think they do nowadays. We had about 40. I remember July 4th weekend. We received our choices right before July 4th weekend. Immediately we procured the post reports. I had this old Chevy Nova with bench seats so literally six of us piled in my car and went up to New England for the weekend. People in the back had a flashlight and they were reading these juicy excerpts from the post reports

I remember Salome wanted to go to Latin America. I said, Salome, for God s sake. That' s what they do with you brown skinned folk. I was really laying it on. They will send you to your place of origin, they will play to their ethnic stereotypes. They would love you to go to Honduras. Confound them. Go somewhere else. Take your career in hand. Become a generalist and then when you know something about the work go back to the part of the world where you really do know a lot. If you go to Central America as a first tour, you will know more than your bosses and that is not a recipe for success in a hierarchical service, I predicted.

Back to the July 4 drive North, there was a paragraph in the post report for Honduras that talked about the electric water heaters they had and the shower heads; it seemed that you could get like electric shocks from taking a shower. We were just roaring with laughter. I could barely keep the car on the road.

So what was on the list? The language I most wanted to learn was Arabic. What I wanted was a third world country that had never been colonized and guess what was on the list? Yemen. Right away when I saw that list I knew that I was going to go for Yemen and Algeria was the second country that caught my eye. Algeria was on the list.

What happened was we had a whole bunch of people that had Arabic already. I think on offer for our class were Yemen, Egypt and Algeria in the Arab world and there were about seven of us that wanted to go to Arab world so it was a rough competition.

I did what State Department has always done and I politicked for the job, wrote to the ambassador, wrote to the PAO, talked to the trainers about why I wanted to go. I had a very close Yemeni friend in grad school who is from a very elite family. I basically talked my way into it. I believe my classmates were slightly miffed at the system, and jealous of me in the end. Yeah, I'd done this thesis on the Palestinians which I researched without a word of Arabic. So I got Yemen.

Q: What was the job?

KOVACH: They called it PAT in USIA, public affairs trainee. That was the job. It was essentially a one officer USIS post so I was the APAO in modern parlance; assistant public affairs officer.

Then I went into Arabic training.

Q: How did you find it? You started here, I take it?

KOVACH: It was awful. It was in Rosslyn, before this campus existed. The program was really in bad shape. It really was in a bad period. The linguist was this nut cake of a Georgetown professor, a socio linguist and the senior teacher was just totally off the wall; a Lebanese Christian grandmother, who kind of looked down her nose at everyone and everything.

As to the faculty, I think there were two Muslims among 7 teachers. That was not great for cultural acclimation. One Moroccan eventually got fired because he was hitting on women. It was really a miserable program.

After eight months I tested at 2/2. I wrote to Jim Callahan, my first boss and said, I'd like to come out early. He was enthusiastic at the prospect, I'm sure wanting the extra hand.

I said, "If you can get me three hours of instruction a week, I can get out early." So I got out the first of May instead of mid July or August. I just couldn't take FSI anymore.

The area studies course was bad comedy too. A guy named John Duke Anthony ran the Arabian Peninsula course. He had been reputed to be on contract with the royal family in Abu Dhabi for years. So he wasn't showing up for class and it was really getting bad so we defaulted to Ambassador Tom Pickering. A nomination for another embassy had just derailed for him for some political reason (no agreement, if I remember correctly) so he had three months on his dance card. He volunteered to teach the Gulf area course. What an incredible teacher, an incredible human being.

A positive word needs to be said amidst all this negativity about FSO for the overall Arab world course, Dr. Peter Bechtold. I owe him a great deal. He illustrates the truth to the maxim that religious people teach other religions with greater depth and empathy: a principle I have worked with in trying to inculcate a religion based approach to diplomacy in my near in retirement. Peter was a devout Catholic attending mass daily when his horrendous commute from Laurel, MD to Arlington allowed. And he taught us well about Islam and the attendant cultural practices.

Q: I've done 48 hours with Tom.

KOVACH: So that was a privilege. I hated to leave that course early but the language instruction was giving me the screaming meanies.

The best student except for his horrible pronunciation was John Reed. He was just a little older than me but he got in to USIA right after college. John did well in Arabic. He is very good at learning languages.

There was a guy named Walter White who was the opposite, an older guy. He had a drinking problem; he was just terrible.

Jim Lewis who died in the 83 bombing in Beirut was in the class, was an agency guy, very sad, a very nice guy.

It was just not fun.

Q: In Yemen at that time, we had what? One post?

KOVACH: We had no consulates. We had had one in Taiz at one point but after the 67 War the Yemeni government seized our property in that Southern city of Northern Yemen; except for one house they let us keep as a guest house. It was sort of one of these 60s contemporary type house that totally didn't fit and I guess it was a USAID house associated with development so that was good in Yemeni eyes and we were allowed to retain it as a Taiz outpost.

One of my most bizarre adventures in my career culminated in that house later in the year.

I arrived Yemen and it was like dreamland.

Q: You were in Yemen from when to when?

KOVACH: From May of 81 to July of 82.

Q: What was the situation in Yemen? What were American relations at the time?

KOVACH: So-so. We had a major development mission, had a huge Peace Corps. The Peace Corps was much less risk adverse back then than now.

Yemenis were very pro Palestinian and so there was a real, especially in the educated classes a kind of anti Americanism that was sort of ritualized, I would say.

There was an important rural urban difference worth mentioning too. Sananis speak beautiful classical Arabic and in the countryside the dialect is so strong. It wasn't as bad as Moroccan Arabic to my modern standard but it was pretty big linguistic gap.

There was a spate of assassinations of presidents and prime ministers in the late 70s and then this non-threatening man from a small tribe near Sanaa and not affiliated with the major tribal configurations, Ali Abdullah Saleh, with a ninth or tenth grade education got in and he got in because he was from a small tribe that wasn't in either of the two major tribal federations. He was a compromise candidate. Let this guy take power, the more powerful tribal federations thought. He has never going to go anywhere. Let him be in there. He is too little a fish to even bother assassinating him. That was the joke.

And guess what? He's been among the longest ruling leaders in the world until he finally stepped down this year. So Ali Abdullah was there.

It was fairly stable but there is a lot of tribal fighting. I literally remember, we'd take these glorious drives in the countryside. I remember right after I got there being very high up in a mountainscape that reminded you of one of those Flemish renaissance paintings with these huge craggy mountains receding range by range in the distance and we were up at about 7 or 8,000 feet. At about 4,000 feet, about halfway down the mountain two tribes were fighting a war with howitzers. We were just sitting there eating our picnic lunch watching the war. Two to three guns for every human being in the country, real warrior culture and these were, you know, some people will disparage the Arab's fighting ability but generalizing about the Arabs is really dumb. Yemenis are good fighters.

Wonderful traditions., unspoiled by colonialism. The closest they came to getting colonized was by the Turks who built fortresses on top of the hills but had enough sense not to go messing around with the tribes.

Wonderful music scene, wonderful poetry scene in Sanaa, the capital. Some of the best classical 'oud,' some of the best improvised poetry. Just coming out of language school and having the local instruction and getting out and speaking on the street. I was a single guy. It was like a dream, like a fairy tale; old city with the gingerbread-like houses, chewing khat which is now but was not then a DEA listed drug. It took the DEA 30 years of study to finally list it. But to do business in Yemen you had to chew so apparently there is some kind of waiver now that an officer has to sign that you are chewing in the interest of God and country. It is one of the most dumb, comical things. In my day, you pretty much had to chew to do business but 'Uncle' was not breathing down your neck about it.

Q: Was it the nature that the city gates were shut at a certain time?

KOVACH: No we'd go in the old city. I'd go to chews and stay up half the night. I lived in the new city, in a new house, not quite suburban, maybe about two miles outside the gates of the old city.

Q: Who was the ambassador?

KOVACH: The first ambassador was George Lane who was one of the really iconic Arabists.

Q: How did you find him?

KOVACH: Very avuncular, pleasant, mellow, admirable in his feel for society, chewed khat with the prime minister once a week. The residence was a gingerbread castle and he'd chew with the prime minister on the top floor of the building in the 'mufraj', the sitting room, a view of the whole city, just wonderful.

The first DCM was Skip Gnehm, future Ambassador multiple times and Director General of the Foreign Service. About two weeks into my tour I really ran afoul of Skip. He kind of negatively labeled me for years but we've since made up and are quite cordial when we meet around town. He had a little bit of that tendency. Here is how that labeling happened.

Jim Callahan, my boss, was a great entertainer. Somehow we had a source of 16 millimeter films that we would sometimes take out with a projector and a generator to remote areas. Jim had a copy of Hitchcock's classic, Rebecca. I was going over to watch Rebecca and I was wearing a PLO tee shirt with the Arabic slogan, 'thowra hata nasr' which translates revolution until victory. Skip flipped out when he saw me. He said, "What are you doing? We don't support this group." I remonstrated that the movie evening was an in-house, mission event. He countered, "And what if you had a flat on the way over? What if you had been out on the street?" I retorted lamely, "well maybe I would have made a friend or two for America." He really lit into me. He made me on the spot turn it inside out and promise him I would never again wear it in Yemen.

Q: I have to say I don't feel I am overly conventional but I would think this would be a no-no. An automatic no-no.

KOVACH: I think this is what got me into his doghouse for years. I said, I might win a friend or two wearing a PLO tee shirt. I realized wearing it was on the edge and I would never have worn it to a representational event or on the street but his thing was if you had a flat on the way over.

So anyway, that was my PLO tee shirt adventure.

It was such a rich year and a few months. Skip, who is an accomplished Arabist and Ambassador George Lane and Jim Callahan, my boss, would entertain a lot. Jim just entertained and entertained. It always seemed to me like it was the same 35 Yemenis who had MAs or PhDs from the West that would be invited, a very elite group that would show up; people that understood us, people that were the beneficiaries of our programs. I was not comfortable with their approach. I was thinking we are charged with conducting public diplomacy. This is about engaging people who don't know us well or have a distorted view of us to some degree but who are social, political or economic players.

I became determined to push the margins and I did in a couple of significant ways, programmatically. The main one was I decided to call on the Muslim Brotherhoods; you know in Yemen, North Yemen at the time was almost equally divided between Sunnis and Shias. There were a few Ismailis too (a minority Shia sect).

So there were respectively two Muslim Brotherhoods and I told Jim Callahan that I want to go talk to the brothers. He said no reason why not to if you'd like. I discovered they both had newsletters and we were in the business of Wireless File placement and we were getting Arabic language materials five days a week from Washington through the file.

So I went and I called on the leaders of the two 'ikhwan' and their newsletter editors. One told me that a diplomat has never called on us, let alone an American diplomat. They were really taken with me and I got into the rush of this adventure among those less well-disposed and understanding of our American world-view. They were generally anti khat (viewed it as an intoxicant and contrary to strict Islamic observance) so there it was much more a tea and coffee kind of encounter. They agreed after a couple of visits to start to take the Arabic wireless file.

In my day the technology for downloading a file was pre World War II. A USIS operation had two RCA radios and it was a little like in the Wizard of Oz where they pulled the curtain back and the wizard so-called was behind a curtain, you know, running some radios. It looked like that. It was in a little room, it had a curtain and you had to get the two radios in total sync to get clear print in either English or Arabic. One of the things that plagued us the year that I was in Yemen, it was one of the active years for sun storms and sun storms interfere with radio waves so reception was spotty. I am far from being a 'techie' but because I had a vested interest in placing this material with the two 'ikhwans' I was there every morning with the FSN looking over his shoulder and just making sure he tried everything in our combined power to get those machines in synch and download the file. Even if part of it came through well and then it blurred, I would get what I could and send our delivery man out on his moped to deliver the files to the 'ikhwans'.

So we I started placing this material, right? These are very nice, well written articles by very literate Egyptian, Palestinian, Lebanese Americans typically about interesting aspects of American life. Some thought we should just place the soft stuff about gardens that reflected an Arab influence or Arab American cultural relations. Let s give them some political stuff too, said I. Let s challenge them and they started placing even the political materials we sent.

Then one day the minister of information, Hassan Al Louzi, phoned me. Yemen was a less hierarchical tribal society so a junior squirt like me had relations with ministers. I got a call from him one day and he said, Peter, what is this I am hearing about these great articles in Arabic that you are giving to the Ikhwan newsletters?

I said, yes, how did you notice. I explained that I had gone to call on the two 'ikhwan' and established a relationship.

He requested similar materials for radio and television.

I said, Excellency, you know that your people radio and TV won't let me in the door. I can get them materials like this from VOA. I can get them written materials that they can read on air. They won't let me in the door because as you know, we are seen as the supporters of Israel. I liked the Minister and felt I could be forthright with him in this way. I felt I could poke at him a bit.

He said, "That's going to change."

So I got in there to finally see the radio and TV folks. I got Jim to give me several thousand dollars to procure material from Washington to place. He recognized that this placement on electronic media would be a huge multiplier. I started placing the stuff and it got on the radio so it was a real revolution in our media profile just because I, headstrong and edgy junior officer, I decided to push the margins as far I reasonably could.

Q: How did that play within the embassy?

KOVACH: Oh, very positively.

Q: Because sometimes a junior officer can get off

KOVACH: The only time I got off the reservation in that sense. I will admit it, it was poor. There you have it.

Q: No, no. All of us have done things and then later think, oh, God.

KOVACH: There was another little incident there in Yemen. There were adventures. There were amazing adventures.

One stemmed from our social life in Sanaa. I began to meet people of my generation in Sanaa from big tribal families and they 'd say we d love you to come to the village. I had an old car I bought from another agency but it didn't have four wheel drive. Jim approved of me going in to the countryside and having that kind of social contact. There were a couple of times I'd go in 20 miles on a paved road, 30 miles on a dirt road and then 15 kilometers up a dry river wadi by office jeep. I would be treated like the king of Sheba. The hospitality was of potlatch proportions with much chewing khat and huge meals and I'd have a little Delhi belly at the end to show for it but cumulatively, it was a fantasy out of A thousand and One Arabian Nights. It was just so beautiful visually, culturally and humanely.

Q: Did you find when you got into the tribal bases that they had much of an idea of what the United States was?

KOVACH: No, they really didn't and they also didn't have quite the chip on their shoulder about Israel Palestine. I was their guest. A sense of hospitality transformed these occasions.

Q: Did you pick up any feel for relations with Saudi Arabia?

KOVACH: It was interesting because the Houthis who are Shia have been fighting a minor war the last two years in Yemen were kicking up. There was fighting in the north. The Saudis were very wary of the Yemenis and apparently they had agents within the Sunni northern tribes.

I remember a trip up north with some colleagues of mine to Sadah which is where the Saudi influence was felt and they had a wonderful open air souk called Souk Atul. I don't know whether it was weekly or monthly but it was amazing. You could buy anything.

I bought a prayer rug. I have become quite a rug collector and my first rug was a prayer rug from Baluchistan purchased at that souk. In the stand right next to the rug merchant they were selling AK-47s. I have never been a big gun fan. I was invited to shoot one and didn't. My friends all did. Right there, in the middle of the market. It was just a wild time, the shooting and guns and intrigue.

Back in Sanaa, the Fulbright professor, a key part of our USIA work and long term strategy, was Dr. (Richard) Michael Murphy a crazy Arabic speaking poet from Texas, indeed from a fairly major political family in Texas. He was former Senator Yarborough's nephew and just a free spirit and out of the box thinker. He and I totally bonded. With a couple of Peace Corps volunteers and a couple of other junior officers and two other mission crazies, the mechanics, the contract mechanics for the embassy motor pool, total crazies. We were a crowd. The poet was a very heavy drinker. He eventually became a full-fledged alcoholic and then beat it. He is one of my closest friends in the world to this day. (Michael dropped dead at a hot spring in New Mexico in October 2014.)

There was a night during a local festival where there were a whole bunch of people, all male, gathered at my house and up on my roof and someone was shooting fire cracker rockets at my house. We started throwing rocks at cars in the street and I will tell you, there was a more senior officer in the embassy up there partying with us and throwing rocks at cars with us. (name withheld to protect the not so innocent) This was really nutty. As host, I was saying wait a second. This is my roof, guys. I don't want my roof getting shot up by some tribals. It was funny in retrospect but I had to live in that house another day.

I remember going off to a tribal area outside of Sana'a. Bob Hall was a colleague of mine, very laconic guy, was uncomfortable with the Foreign Service, uncomfortable with government service. He eventually, ironically enough, through close association with a far straighter colleague Dan Howard, became assistant secretary of public affairs at the Pentagon. He was Dan's assistant at the White House press office first, then at the Pentagon. Howard suddenly moved on and my buddy, Bob Hall, about eight years later became the assistant secretary for public affairs at the Pentagon. He didn't even bother in those years of success to have OERs sent to the USIA, so little did he care about his career. So I mean this guy was an O2 or an O1 and he was the assistant secretary of defense? Unbelievable.

Bob and I went out to this village with his really crazy ex-wife, a dancer. She was a flirtatious one. She and my poet buddy got together I think in another place and time. But here we were in this village. The local kids started throwing rocks at us (we must have seemed extra-planetary to them) so there we got into an intense rock fight. Our arms were

better so the kids beat a retreat. Now that was dumb on our part. What if elders had shown up with AK 47s?

Professionally I brought in a classical guitarist and we had some wonderful sessions with some of the best oud players and the best poets in the country. We got a lot of positive press for our efforts. One of the formulas for successful cultural encounter like that is that there is resonance, that it bounces to a wider public than those that immediately experience the exchange. People are always going to be ambivalent about the United States in Yemen of that day, especially with the Palestine issue. That jam session with the oud player was a highlight.

In the spring all of a sudden one day I suggested that I do a party down in Taiz at the remaining USG house for the young elite from the Taiz Province. I packed the projector and a generator in case the electricity went out, a lot of booze. Yemenis are real stoners. It is not only khat but maybe because of khat they need to drink and in some tribal areas they smoke hash to come down to go to sleep and it is a daily habit.

We had the booze and I was driving the office car, four wheel drive Dodge Charger on one of the two straightest stretches of highway, two lane highway in the country in broad daylight. We passed a guy on the other side wearing a futa (some places called a lungi), as they are called and he had an AK-47 but so does just about every adult male in the country. As we whiz by at about 70. He started waving the gun and I am thinking to myself he is on the other side and he is hitchhiking. What could this waving about mean? He seemed to be hitching in the other direction. As we shot by him he shouldered the weapon and luckily he had it set on single shot. On an AK and other automatic weapons you can set the gun on single shot. He shot putting a hole right through (I was driving) through my side view mirror, two feet from my spine. The second bullet probably ricocheted off the road, went through the rear tire well, went through the front seat and lodged in my ass, so I got shot. I felt this numb, pressured sensation.

I stopped. The econ counselor, it was the econ counselor, the Fulbright professor and his nephew who had been sent to Yemen to go to school with the professor because his sister's family was dysfunctional. So in the car we had this little redneck, 14 year old Texan, we had the crazy Fulbright professor and we had the econ counselor who had little common sense in that situation, also a first tour officer. He was urging me to hit the gas, hit the gas.

I pulled over saying, "He wants me to stop. He also has a straight line of fire." We had already taken two bullets including the one lodged in my bottom.

Meanwhile the Fulbright professor was freaking out from a strong flashback. He had been the head of the AUB, the American University of Beirut, English department when the civil war in Lebanon broke out. He had been in a shared cab (a 'service') where the driver had run a checkpoint and got shot dead, body slumped against the gas and they hit a wall going about 50 mph. Professor Mike had broken his neck. He was in traction in the

AUB hospital during the time when the fighting was most intense on campus. He had a dangerous flashback.

I said, "I believe I've been hit." Professor Mike said, 'Oh, Kovach, you ain't been hit.' I reached down and yanked the bullet out. 'Exhibit A', I said.

I backed up. Let me describe the scene. Two cars behind me had stopped, Yemenis whom we knew from our English school so it was apparent that we were clearly being tailed, no coincidence that they were there, all that distance from Sanaa. One of these men was literally screaming at the shooter, just screaming at him. "You dumb tribal donkey, you shot an American diplomat."

I am thinking, ok, there are two holes in the car, government property. There are two holes in the car; one hole in the officer. I need to talk to this guy without mediation. The shooter was in tears at this point with these two people biting his head off.

I said, 'Hey, come on brother. Can you and I talk?' I took his hand, Asian style and we walked behind a rock. Just sit down and tell me what this was all about. You shot me, you shot the car. I need to report, I am going to be all right, so no big worries. You need to tell me why you shot at us.

So he told me that he was trying to stop traffic because the president was at an army base three kilometers up the road and the president's motorcade was going to come out and head back towards Sana'a and so he decided on about the straightest stretch of paved road in the country that he was going to stop me and hold traffic.

I said, First of all, you are not in uniform.

He said, I am a tribal soldier.

You don't have a barrel and you don't have a stave. That's what a checkpoint looks like in Yemen. You don't have a radio and you don't have a wristwatch so how on earth do you know when the president is leaving?

He said, I am so sorry.

I got what I needed from him, enough information to write a report.

Three days later back in Sanaa, I confirmed with the Defense Attaché that the president was indeed up there at the time and that his entourage at about that hour had headed North back to the capital.

The shooter and the followers were obviously in the know so they urged us to just continue, go fast and that we would beat his motorcade. We arrived in Taiz just at dusk about 2 1/2 hours later.

Instead of going to a clinic as my cohort was urging, about 10km down the road, I pulled over and using the emergency first aid kit our USG car was supplied with, cleaned the wound with iodine and taped significant amounts of gauze over it. That iodine really hurt for a few minutes. But I was adamant about making it to Taiz and our event going on; and I felt OK other than the initial numbness and then the sting.

Meanwhile the Fulbright professor who was a heavy drinker and was totally traumatized by the incident, quietly without us noticing as he was in the back seat downed most of a bottle of bourbon during the rest of the drive.

So off we went. We got to Taiz. I was paying attention to the driving. Doug, the econ guy is just sort of zoning out. Michael is drinking himself blind in the back.

So we got down to the Taiz house that the embassy still owns and Michael was just going nuts. He grabbed the fire ax and started chopping at a wall. So Doug and I and his nephew who was similarly appalled decided we are going to have to tie him up and gag him. So we literally tied him up and we gagged him because all the young elite of the town were soon expected. We threw him in a closet on a mattress. We put a mattress in the closet. We put a mattress in front because if he was going to make noise, we wanted to muffle it but luckily he passed out. We took the gag off and just put a pillow under his head put a blanket on him and he slept.

We had the party. It was very successful party.

We had a wonderful adventure the next day, with Professor Michael back in fine form and all memories of the previous day's traumas erased. There is a mountain behind Taiz with a distinctive terraced agriculture. The people are not Qahtani, the racial group that predominates in the Southern part of the Arabian Peninsula, but rather bear the physical features of people from the coastal plane of Yemen known as the Tihama. They are more like Somalis; very fine features, sort of lighter brown. More distinctively to our foreign eyes, they represent a matriarchal society and it was pretty amazing to go from Yemen which is the ultimate patriarchal place to this matriarchal society. Women out in the fields, men hardly visible.

Then we got in the car that afternoon and drove back up to Sana'a. We went to my boss's house. We arrived after nightfall. His wife and his kids had gone to bed and he is with us alone. We decided since he is alone that we are all going to turn around, drop our pants and say ok, which of us has a story to tell? So we did that.

And he said, to me, 'What happened to you?' So we told him the story and we agreed, Well, clearly I have to do some reports.

He said, Well, come to the embassy in the morning to country team and talk to the DCM who I think was the chargé at that point. The DCM was a wonderful guy with a wonderful sense of humor, Ron Neumann.

He said on my telling, please go to that typewriter and write this up in more detail, just a page of what happened and especially the interview that you took with the shooter and how the two guys were following you and the whole thing.

And I did. He said, "This is the best incident report I have ever seen." He was in the infantry during the Vietnam War. He was just laughing his head off. I reported deadpan on two holes in a government vehicle and one in a junior officer. But all the while I realized how really fortunate we all had been that nothing worse had happened. Even the gunman hitting a tire at the speed we were going when he shot could have led to a catastrophic accident.

Q: We will pick this up.

Today is the 15th of May, 2012.

You were talking about your PLO shirt. I had the distinguished position of consul general in Saigon. I had a young guy who really wasn't ready for the service particularly, big bushy hair and all and here he was interviewing all these GIs on various things. Somebody came to me and said have you been to his office yet? He had a poster full of local cartoons about Richard Nixon and none of them were complimentary. I found myself explaining to him that since he was taking the king's shilling, he better not denigrate the king. And the cartoons which I found delightful, I looked at them and snickered and all but they weren't seemly in that position and he took them down.

KOVACH: And probably five years later when I was in Morocco, Dar America, as our library/cultural center was called hosted a poster show produced by USIA of political cartoons many featuring Nixon in a less than complimentary manner. Our ability to exercise self-criticism, speak truth to power was the point of the show.

Q: Of course, we were dealing with an era where it was thought it was cool to not trust anybody over 30 and stick it to authority. It was considered funny and the universities were sort of kowtowing to it. It did reach the point where you had to say

KOVACH: That's the reason I didn't think of joining until after the Vietnam war was over because it was an illegal and ill-advised war on every level. And being pro-Palestinian is not, after all, being anti-American. We did support the 1948 UN resolution creating both a Jewish and Palestinian state.

Q: You mentioned you had a little story you wanted to tell.

KOVACH: We got through the shooting and all.

The next interesting story, as sometimes happens, concerns marital relationships in a mission that are on shaky ground, the ground shakes a little too much and they fall apart. In this case the wife of one officer took up with another officer. The cuckolded officer was oblivious. He was a fairly oblivious character in general to be blunt. The kids in the

missionary primary school that mission kids attended were talking about it in crude playground terms. Everyone knew about it except for this poor guy. Eventually I believe the woman retreated, she wasn't American either. She was European and she retreated to her home country which was near France and like in Casablanca where there is one flight a week to Lisbon, we had our Air France flight weekly to Paris and it was sort of a lifeline. It was the way most people in the international diplomatic community got in and out of Yemen.

I was going on R&R about a month after the shooting and I was going to be home a minimum of time you could take R&R and I was going to come back and be acting PAO because my boss had moved on. I had been acting PAO quite a bit of the year. They had a baby. They had to go to Jordan to deliver the child. There were complications. He wasn't there towards the end very much.

This scandal was in the air when I was going. When I come back on the Air France flight three weeks later and disembarked the Air France flight, there was a bevy of people from the embassy there, (not for me) and they are in a bit of an uproar. This is what I confronted.

The officer who was carrying on with the wife of the other officer was on the plane for Paris to meet her, to rendezvous. The officer himself, the cuckolded officer had just been thrown out of the country by the chargé because he finally found out what was up and he kind of lost it. At a country team meeting apparently that I had missed three days before during the onion speech moment for the departing officer who had the liaison with the wife, the 'wronged' cuckolded officer lost it and Ron Neumann, then Chargé literally had to pick him up by the lapel and toss him from the room.

Apparently there had been a real brouhaha where the officer who was cuckold stood up in country team and instead of a humorous roast which is the manner of country meetings at your last country team meeting, told the other guy off and told the whole embassy off and totally lost his composure. The chargé who was not one to be fooled with literally lifted him by the collar and pitched him out of the country team conference room. The drama had an odd bit of theater on the outside due to the configuration of the chancery which was in an old Yemeni palace that looked like a vertical gingerbread cake.

The two executive secretaries, the ambassador's and the DCM's sort of sat on a platform about a foot above the waiting area with the conference room entry just to the side of the Ambassador's secretary. Suddenly this body, literally comes flying out the door.

So apparently unbeknownst and unconnected, all principles were in this sad but comic tale were on this flight including my boss and his family. He said with his heavy Boston accent, Peter, these guys are both on the plane and ____ (the betrayed husband) is crazy. He might kill the other officer on the plane. He s crazy. My family and I are on this flight. Help.

Then the deputy of the guy that was having the affair with the other's wife entreated me and I think he was going out too, somehow the deal was someone had to go back to the embassy quickly, phone the woman in Paris and tell her not to meet the plane at Charles de Gaulle Airport in Paris.

So that goes away. No one got hurt. Having been informed that her husband was also on the plane, she stayed away from the airport. The woman and the guy she was having an affair for with eventually got married, had two kids and are still together 30 odd years later.

Q: Still in the service?

KOVACH: I don't believe so.

Q: The Foreign Service is like many other places except sometimes the feelings get more intense because you are in this foreign clime.

KOVACH: I go back and I settle into my role as acting PAO for a few weeks.

I loved Yemen. Initially I was supposed to succeed my boss. I had done well and I very much looked forward to staying. I was sort of middle age and had some life experience and, despite the PLO tee shirt incident, was generally mature and on top of things. Suddenly the big boss in Washington decided it is bad policy for someone within a unit to be moved up because the local staff won't respect them. That may be true but if the local staff doesn't respect them, they probably didn't anyway in the first place. I think it was a dumb principle. So basically I knew I was moving on in about a month.

But my penchant for extraordinary adventure in Yemen continued. In that month the following took place: I had a grad school friend from Fletcher, a Yemeni whom I can talk about because he is unfortunately deceased. He called on me; he left a note with my houseboy and said I urgently need to see you. He was a professor at the university and lived out at the university faculty housing compound at the edge of town. I got home from work, ate quickly and hopped in the car to go out there. No phones.

My friend is usually a very bright, humorous and welcoming personality. That evening, he had a very blunt and direct manner. He said, Peter, I am sharing this with you because of our friendship. I am doing it at risk to myself and possibly at some risk to you.

He had gotten wind of a credible plot against the U.S. Embassy to blow us up by one of the more leftie PLO fringes and their Sana'ani allies. He provides details.

Well, ok. Not only am I running a remote facility that not only has my offices and my people but we are housing English school, were housing student advising and we are housing our research institute. So I'm responsible for the safety of a lot of souls housed outside the compound in what anyone could see was a soft target.

This was pre Pan Am 103 after which the regulations changed and we had to give due diligence in warning the public and warning the staff. The modus was to keep it quiet so I basically called the DCM on the radio. I had the Marine guard patch me through to the DCM and I said I need to come to see you right away.

It was Ron Neumann. We had a good rapport. He said, "Peter, it is 11:30 at night. This better be good."

I said, "Unfortunately, you are going to agree with me that you are glad I came."

So I come over there and Ron is there in his pajamas and his robe and we sit there and I gave him the details and he said we are going to call emergency action committee really early before country team the next morning. Be there. He thanked me for getting him up.

He wasn't the chargé, the ambassador was there. Ambassador David Zweifel a great leader in an emergency, as it turned out. He is still an inspector. He is almost 90, very sharp. He wasn't ideal for Yemen but I think very highly of him.

So we are in there and we are exchanging views around the table about what to do and how credible this is and how various people going to check it out.

Then the ambassador turned to me and I thought he really handled this beautifully. "You are kind of the worm on the hook, he said. Are you comfortable with that role?"

I said, Sir, it is my duty. First of all I am in charge of the most vulnerable presence we have in the capital. The building was about three kilometers from the embassy. I am in public service, of course. My source, the Fletcher friend, made it clear he would only talk to me about this. I added that there is no doubt that he believes what he is telling me. I trust this guy. He's got a PhD from Fletcher school and I have known him on a friendly basis for six years. I have socialized with him. He is a credible human being. How credible what he is getting I have no judgment of but I trust he is passing on something in good faith. I might add that he was known to others in the embassy as an upright scholar and government advisor, so their believing me was not that much of a stretch.

So for the next three weeks we were in a really crazy mode. I decided I needed to have one ally in my office. In those days USIA had administrative officers who were FSOs. I trusted this guy, the son of an FBI agent. So I said to Robert, Let's go for a walk. I told him what was up and I had a pad in my pocket and I said let's make a list of what we need to do to batten down the hatches here.

We did that. We kind of quietly with cooperation of the RSO, we battened down the hatches. What I wanted was I wanted to get all our registration records and all our student advising records out of the building and behind a hard line because let's say something happened and they hit us as a soft target I didn't want anyone to get persecuted because of the connection to the U.S. government. I felt that was like a primary equity so did that

and just kept going to see my friend every day or two or sometimes he'd call me when he had something new. He was in good faith and I was in good faith.

About three weeks later working with National Security, the would be perpetrators were arrested. In fact, we found out the plan was a lot closer to fruition than my friend realized. We were probably weeks away or so the authorities told us. So that was quite an adventure and think people felt very good about the way I handled it and I felt like I don't want to do this again but you know, this is what I signed up for.

In that month there wasn't much I could do with the program. The officer coming in to take my boss's place is someone I knew and thought very highly of so I left him very good transition notes. A habit I maintained throughout my career and even into my retirement gigs overseas.

I have always from that point on, from my first post on, religiously left behind good transition notes because one of the biggest vulnerabilities we have as an organization is the transitory nature of our positions. We generally move out in two to three years so I have always left very thorough transition notes. I say in one paragraph in the preface you can file these in the round basket, you can read them, you can laugh, you can cry but I would be remiss in not leaving you my vision of what the challenges are and what the parameters of this job are; the problems and my suggested fixes. I did that.

Q: Looking on your time in Yemen, the USIA effort, the public diplomacy effort, what was it and what do you think it accomplished or didn't accomplish?

KOVACH: I think it was pretty effective. My boss and I were both very type A and very active. While Yemen was hardly a media saturated environment we pretty much, I think we really took it the last three feet effectively. There was this difference that I explained that I had a less elitist view of what we should be doing but not one where we should be going after rural populations. I followed that direction and Jim was a big enough boss to understand it was wise to let me do that. The indirect result of which was broadening greatly our footprint getting our materials into Yemeni radio and TV which people did watch and had saturation over about 90% of the country, that was big. We started placing this VOA and early Worldnet stuff so I would say that was probably the highest impact thing I did. All accomplished because of my initiative venturing out and doing modest placement of 'Wireless File' material in the two Muslim Brotherhood news letters.

The English school was huge. It was the biggest foreign language school including Russian, Chinese in the country and I felt it had a great impact in that small insular world of Sanaa.

I guess I should talk a little about the Cold War. Yemen sits on the Bab-el-Mandeb, the Southern end of the Red Sea. As such it sits astride one of the world's great nautical choke points. So the great game was definitely being played out there in Sana'a. At the time (pre Tiananmen Square) and after the opening to China we were definitely cozier

with the Chinese than the Soviets. It was very interesting how we kind of liaised with them in my world.

There was a prominent tribal sheik that was definitely enmeshed in supporting ambitious development projects in his area and he ran a huge Chinese restaurant, a very good one, one of only two really good restaurants outside of hotels in Sana'a, the other being a Lebanese style place. We'd go there and it was again a little like Rick's in the film Casablanca. Everyone was there. It was where people came to be seen and watch who was seen who and it had that air of intrigue.

Q: For someone reading this in the dim future, when we refer to Casablanca we're referring to the classic movie.

KOVACH: Indeed. The classic 1944 movie with Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman and Claude Rains.

Q: It had Peter Lorre and Sydney Greenstreet. It had all the creepy characters too.

I have to tell you a story. A man I interviewed was nominated, was in Casablanca as chief. It was during the Reagan administration and Reagan had the delightful practice of calling people who were going to go be ambassadors and say would you accept this and word would be passed on that he was going to call. Really very nice, you know.

So he was being nominated to go I think to Tanzania or something and I talked to somebody who was one of his Reagan's keepers in the White House, White House staff and he knew about this. His calls usually lasted about two minutes. Reagan gets on the phone and says do you accept the appointment? Yes, sir. And then he starts talking; you are in Casablanca. I was offered that job and I didn't take it. They started talking.

All the president's keepers were very nervous. Why is he on the phone to this diplomat? Reagan was back in the movie mode and once he got into that.

KOVACH: That's an interesting tidbit that he was offered the part.

What we did was we started planning hikes and playing softball with the Chinese. One of the interesting and creative international recreational activities we shaped was this. The expat community was divided between cricket culture and softball cultures and so what we did was we brought together every embassy we talked to and NGOs and so forth and we started a league. Every team had to be made of 50% baseball people and 50% cricket people. One weekend we would play one sport and the next weekend we would play the other sport. I found that to be an extraordinary international exchange, informal as it was. Unfortunately we didn't involve Yemenis.

The cold war played out with both the Russians and Chinese having their sort of tribal sheiks and surrogate influencers. We tended to cozy up to the enemy of my enemy, clearly the Chinese vis a vis the Soviets in those days and I would say in my career right

up to 1989 that was the case. We were cautious and we reported contact and all that but there was sort of a warm and fuzzy feeling with Chinese whom we hiked with in addition to playing baseball/cricket.

Q: There has always been this warm and fuzzy feeling towards China. It goes back to the beginning of the republic.

KOVACH: I am a Japan hand. I worked in Japan as we discussed in my mid 20s and it was right at the time that Nixon went to China and we established relations. The Japanese after 20 years of a very positive occupation and reconstruction experience there got really neurotic about the restoration and publicly so. They coined this English phrase as they are wont to do for new phenomena they can't describe in their own language and it was called 'Japan passing'. The theory was the United States had found its true Asian compatible culture in China and that Japan would be progressively ignored. It took 40 years. They were right. I feel that way personally. I know Japanese pretty well and have lived there longer than any single country outside the U.S.

But the Chinese are pragmatic, they tend to be empirical, evidence based thinkers and like the United States I would say the two great syncretic cultures, and I have not been to Brazil which may be a third syncretic culture among major countries as are China the United States. We both have that impulse to sort of mix and match and take the elements we like from one system or something or other, mix it and stir it in the pot. So there are similarities.

I felt even though in my late career I was cast into advocating to China on points of difference. I was never posted there but I certainly went there and made representations on sometimes controversial issues between the USG and the PRC. I always felt very comfortable there and felt very comfortable in the culture in a way; despite having language in Japan, I never will feel so comfortable. I think there was something about the Japanese sensed about that difference writ large with the interesting early 70's concept of 'Japan passing'.

Q: You were in Yemen?

KOVACH: 81, early spring to 82 midsummer.

Q: This is before the fall of the Wall.

KOVACH: Absolutely. Locally speaking, South Yemen was a separate country. We didn't have relations

Q: The Soviet Union was still riding high.

KOVACH: That was an element of it.

I think the English school had a huge impact.

Q: What were they after?

KOVACH: We were after, some people would leave school after a short time but could interact with foreigners in the universal language and work more skillfully, for example, in development schemes to do the skilled labor part of hydraulic engineering; on the high end, we used the school to prepare people who were potential Fulbrighters. We ran our own Fulbright program. There was no commission. To just get a Yemen that had never been colonized more connected to the world and preferably to the European world was a huge gain and English was definitely a key to that.

Q: Also the Yemeni were world renowned travelers, sort of like the Albanians. You had Yemenis in obscure places doing, they got out a lot more than many did.

KOVACH: Not so much in my era. I'd say the last century was a time of splendid isolation for Yemen except the Egyptians incursions raining on their parade a bit in the 60s. Isolation was more the rule after the Turks withdrew.

You are thinking of a thousand years ago, my friend, when Yemeni merchants plied the seas to the East and in the process converted the Indonesians, Malaysians and Chinese to a kind of Sufi version of Sunni Islam.

Q: Was there any reflection of American reaction to the Egyptian attempt to take over Yemen?

KOVACH: No, I never sensed it. There may have been. I prefer you ask Jim Callahan if he ever comes and does an oral history to do that.

Yeah, I think the English school was tremendously important.

I think the few little exchanges we had, I think we had Dr. Abdul Aziz Said from American out to talk about Islam and Islam in American history.

Q: You are talking about narrow minded versus broad minded.

KOVACH: Yes, we definitely were in the business of shattering stereotypes, though I'm not sure we would have put it that way back in the day. We were able to get him and Arab-American speakers like him on TV because he was fluent in Arabic. He was Syrian.

Another dichotomy in the Yemeni mind at the time was sort of Syria versus Iraq which were the two great Baathist powers. Most of the Yemeni officers were Iraqi trained so there was a real palpable Iraqi influence but Syria was kind of, I don't know. I think the fascination with Syria might have been with the more western orientation of Syria. I looked Syrian to them and they used to call me 'Assuri', the Syrian. I always thought that was said with warmth, affection and positive affect. I sensed that they liked Syria and

they liked, especially educated Sunnis liked the old Umayyad history. They related to the great Muslim dynasties as social paradigms.

That was another definite dimension of life there.

The American Institute of Yemeni Studies brought a few scholars over and sent some Yemeni scholars to our archives and graduate schools. That was a positive thing. I think my mass media penetration and the English school were the shining cities on the hill in terms of American influence though.

I don't think we did a very good job of publicizing what AID and Peace Corps were doing. This lacune was to eat at my conscience and lead to a good deal of creative initiative at subsequent stops in my career.

I will talk about one very influential person, a military guy, an American military guy. He is a really gifted linguist, with really good Arabic. He was an army officer, went to army staff college and then he went to Jordan the very next year, where the Jordanian army had taken our staff college model and curriculum lock, stock and barrel and he did his same course the next year in Arabic, totally in Arabic.

I will tell you where the cold war was fought in a nitty-gritty way was the ministry of defense. We had inroads with them but they were very Iraqi Baathist, Arab nationalist and in Cold War politics, pro Soviet. This guy single handedly, because his Arabic was better than any Soviet military adviser's he blew a trumpet and the walls fell down. I think I need to put that in this narrative.

Q: What's his name?

KOVACH: Richard Winslow, an iconic down-easter, from Maine, a lovely guy. His wife became my secretary for a while. He was terrific. It just shows the impact of language and culture immersion and this was the throttle hold of the Cold War. I think we had much better traction than the Russians on a people to people level because we are good at the last three feet. I may have had this difference with my seniors over what element we should spend our time with but that was fine. There was room for both. You certainly didn't want to blow off the elites.

At the time Public Diplomacy (PD), point of history in USICA, the PD theory was very elite oriented. It has totally changed now, post 9/11. Probably too much so. I was always a bit more inclined towards let's analyze who is important and where the levers of influence are and where the future levers may be; let's be objective and not say, you had senior PD officers when I came in that would say we should never be talking to anyone that is more junior than a graduate student. That became a line. I know Jim didn't agree with that and I would say let's blow it off. I was going out to Sana'a University and mixing with students regularly. We had a great Fulbright professor, the aforementioned Mr. Murphy who is fluent in Arabic and he had a circle of students and I'd go and hang out with them.

Q: This is the problem you get when you get people who hand out dictums. Usually these don't work very well.

KOVACH: Good public diplomacy should be based on listening skills in cross-cultural contexts and good research. I think we have always had a spate of good listening skills despite the increasing tendency towards doctrinaire diktats from Washington (e.g., 'broader, younger, deeper') or the earlier elitist cant where some seniors said we should not be dealing with anyone younger or lesser than graduate students. But the other part of the formula for success are research capabilities, a very uneven history. In the W Bush administration, I cobbled together whole of government 'deep dives' on crucial communication challenges in areas like Afghanistan and Pakistan. State INR, USAID contractors, VOA, the Intelligence Community and DOD all contributed along with major private partners. In this feckless Obama era, this capability has been dropped, something they are just now realizing 6 years into their time.

So I left Yemen after the tumultuous month of terrorist threat, had a week of overlap with the new PAO which was great, sensible, smart great investment of the tax payers dollar. We went over all my notes.

I flew directly to Bahrain where I was given my first PAO operation, on the stoop of a major war. First of all I was a little down leaving Yemen. I was in tears at the airport. I just didn't want to go. It was a year whose intensity of friendship, life experience, and engagement made a deep imprint. (And I had been promised to succeed my boss at one point during the year, a promise rescinded in the name of some half-assed management principle.)

Bahrain was a real opportunity for me. They put me there knowing there was a war on the doorstep, the so-called Iran-Iraq tanker war and this was going to be a hot little place. We had five-seven officers basically, depending on how you counted. Plus a naval base that everyone knew was there but that no one talked about. The U.S. naval force in the Gulf was home ported in this country.

Q: As a historical note, I was a vice consul in Dhahran and went to Bahrain maybe once a month for a day or two and that was American diplomatic representation. This is in the late 50s. Dhahran covered Bahrain, Qatar and all the Trucial states.

KOVACH: There were seven of us with State positions including me. Covering the War really became a lot to handle for such a small mission. We started getting non-stop high level visitors from Washington. I might add that I was one of two Arabic speakers in the mission, including the military base and the first Ambassador, Peter Sutherland I worked for. I got to know Armacost, Armitage, Rumsfeld because they'd come out repeatedly out of USG concern over the tanker war. There were no echelons. I was one of the only; I believe I was one of the seven I think only two of us spoke Arabic. One of us spoke Persian. As junior as I might have been, I was an integral part of these high level

briefings time and again and felt quite at ease with the three repeat visitors mentioned above, two of them easy and extroverted.

Q: I recall in Bahrain, I was there when the British changed seats and there was a problem of Persian Iranian migration, legal and illegal to the island. How stood things then?

KOVACH: Basically they were almost as secretive about their demographics as the Saudis were. Our estimates were that the country was 75% Shia and of the Shia up to a third were of Persian origin having migrated in more recent times and the rest migrated down from Shatt al Arab in Southern Iraq hundreds, maybe thousands of years ago.

Q: We re talking of Shia Sunni. Think of Saudi Arabia as being the preeminent Sunni and that was and these are our guys.

KOVACH: Kind of. I got out there after the Iranian revolution so that signature event generated some interesting perspectives, to say the least. I was out there two years after, two and a half years after the Iranian revolution.

Q: What was happening in Iran/Iraq at that point?

KOVACH: They were at war. This was the so-called tanker war, at least from a Bahraini perspective -- it was mostly a land war. The navy installation and a resident one-star admiral ('Comideastfor') were part of our mission. That put our little mission at the center of the action on the war. Another agency had one of their top Iran experts stationed with us. So there was a lot of watching of the war, evaluation of capabilities going on and a great fear in Bahrain in the society where after all I did work as a public affairs officer with my ear to the ground; a fear of a possible Persian Trojan horse or Shia Trojan horse. There was a lot of mistrust. I would say on the balance that the Shia were almost more paranoid about being misinterpreted and misunderstood and seen as disloyal as the Sunnis were suspicious of them.

Persian Shia I think were more loyal to Iran -- at least relatively speaking -- but the Bahraini Arab Shia were loyal to the monarchy for the most part. That's my estimation after three years. The clerical class in the banks and the oil refineries were Persian Shia and a lot of them were graduates of the Gulf Polytech which was run by a very progressive Persian Shia guy, a working class man who had pulled himself up by the bootstraps, and whose father had been a carpenter. He became one of my really tight contacts. He and I even e-mail once in a while today.

There was a tension. It was a tense time, a very busy over-burdened embassy. We worked very hard.

I remember the first week or so my secretary, my admin secretary, a British ex-pat took me around. I like to buy rugs. My wife and I are both shoppers. I remember some of the stuff at our house in Southern Maryland this weekend as three or four things I got in

Bahrain. I got them in the first three or four weeks. I got too busy to do that kind of shopping afterwards. I met my future wife about the third week there. She was a senior stewardess for Gulf Air and we met at the first non diplomatic social event I attended. With an American high school and college education, she was a Thai native and citizen.

It was a funny thing socially. I had a single friend, the pol/consular officer and he kind of hinted to me my first week, 'Look, you got to make a decision. You re single, you re straight. You gotta decide to either date Asian or European. It is a very big divide.' It will be hard to do both, he hinted.

More important, he had a sailboat and I am a sailor. I bought a sailboat indirectly from the noted historian Rashid Al Khalidi. I never had direct relations with him but I think a friend or relative of his had the boat to sell so I bought his laser dinghy and was a member of the Bahrain yacht Club, which was a very interesting social, milieu: it was truly mixed. It was integrated which is good. I was able to mix with members of the ruling Al Khalifa, leading Sunni and Shia business people, expats of every stripe all united by a love of the sea and to a lesser extent, beer drinking in relaxed company.

I said, David, I don't buy that racial dating divide. He had an Asian girlfriend. I will go to this party you are suggesting I go to but it doesn't mean if I meet a nice British stewardess or teacher I am not going to go out with her. I don't buy that. It was my old civil rights thing. I find racial divides offensive. I said it in a nice way but I think he got my seriousness.

So I went to this first non-embassy social event and met my future wife.

Q: What s her background?

KOVACH: She is from a Bangkok family. Her father is educated, was a government official and then went off and did very well in the electric parts business. For a while they were quite wealthy. The father has the worst judgment of any human being I have ever met. Basically people stole his money from him. He lives in sort of congenial poverty now in his mid 90s. At that point they were living in a nice house and he sent five of six kids abroad to school. The oldest son who is schizophrenic, he sent off to Denmark because he had an uncle who was a Thai diplomat in Denmark. The eldest became a gambler and a total wastrel.

The second sister was uneducated and sort of a peasant. They kept her almost like a supervisor of maids and she is the one taking care of her father. I think frankly she was kept home because she just wasn't too bright.

The third sister became a very successful businesswoman and is married to a retired British officer.

My wife is the fourth one. She and the fifth one, another girl, were sent to the United States in high school as au pair girls for an elderly couple in 'the Valley' in San Fernando

Valley so she went Ulysses S. Grant High School in San Fernando Valley and graduated. My wife is somewhat introverted, an artist. Then they both went to college at Northwestern State in Louisiana in Natchitoches, Louisiana which apparently had been for years sort of a Thai degree mill, with a lot of Thais there in grad school. They were the first two undergraduates. My wife got a BA there and then she went home.

She was a managing desk clerk at the old Erewhonn hotel. Socially she just wasn't happy. I think she wanted to be more independent. There is pressure at home to get married but no introduction and she felt if she started dating under her parents' watchful eyes, that would be not a happy thing.

My wife also is a very well coordinated girl. As well as being artistic. She is pretty. She wanted to study classical dancing and her father saw that as prostitute's art and forbade it. It's really a shame. I could see her taking that training and becoming kind of a stage comedian because she has a wicked sense of humor and really acts out well; this despite her introversion.

She never got support for who she was so she opted to go with the airlines for upper middle class girls, a respectable enough path. She couldn't do Thai Airways. She is too tall. She is 5'7". She is very tall for a Thai woman so she got on with Gulf Air and moved to Bahrain where they are headquartered.

Q: What was our embassy like?

KOVACH: It was in an old Al Khalifa villa. The ruling family I believe rented it to us. It probably had some charm once but now it just had a string of functional add-ons. I was in the old wing, the public affairs USIS wing and I had the historic painted ceilings and beams. Even the Ambassador conceded that I had the best, biggest and classiest office in the compound. It was a gorgeous office. There were mercifully few windows in the intense heat so I didn't have much light. That was nice in Bahrain to have a dark office given the muggy tropical climate.

It was the fifth highest threat mission in the world when I arrived because everyone so paranoid about the fallout from the Iranian revolution, and what the Shia might do. They built a higher fence and the compound really got real uglified. We now have a new embassy which got trashed, got burned when Ron Neumann was ambassador over a remark he made at a public event that was inflammatory (but true and needed to be said.)

Q: Who was the ambassador when you were there?

KOVACH: When I was there I had two ambassadors. One was the late Peter Sutherland who was kind of a character; I mean a real character and curmudgeon. Peter and I had a good relationship. He was an Arabist and I was an Arabist and there were just two Arabic speakers including me on the staff. So he liked us.

He had an old Chinese junk that he somehow bought from someone who was in the Gulf who'd actually sailed it from Hong Kong and we'd go sailing. I'd crew for him.

He would always rail about how his becoming an ambassador was an accident which it was. They needed someone. He was political counselor in Kuwait. They needed someone fast who spoke Arabic. He was a terrible manager. He was notional. I think that I was probably the one among the country team most comfortable with him. He had a very good DCM and that DCM pulled his chestnuts out of the fire. The DCM went on to be DCM six times in his career.

Q: Who was that?

KOVACH: Chuck Brayshaw broke the all time record. No one in State history has been a DCM six times. He was chargé, he was chargé in Mexico for a while, I believe. He was DCM in Algeria, in Lebanon, and several Latin American countries I think.

Q: Where is he now?

KOVACH: He's retired in Argentina. He had a cabin up in southwestern Wyoming which I think he sold. He was a Rocky Mountain kid.

Q: What was the political situation like in Bahrain? You were there from when to when?

KOVACH: 82 summer to 85 summer. It was exactly three years to the day from my arrival that I left, July 22 arrived and July 22 left.

Q: What was the political situation?

KOVACH: I don't think that sort of token parliament that later evolved into a fairly robust parliament existed. The emir, Sheikh Isa bin Salman Al Khalifa, was much beloved, a very soft and sweet man, very accessible, I could go and have tea with him just by going out to his beach. (Only foreigners allowed there.) He knew me. I would sit and have tea with the emir as a relatively junior officer. He also had an open court about three times a week and everyone even the most disaffected Shia villagers that I knew really felt they had sort of a friend. So there was that.

Then there were the village Shia, the Baharna villagers who were poor and I remember in December seeing kids running the street bare assed and barefoot. There was poverty, there was real poverty.

Q: Oil really didn't have, by that time had the oil gone pretty well?

KOVACH: No. Bahrain had an interesting history with oil. Because it was historically the British coaling station in the Gulf, they developed a merchant class early and merchants were drawn from the Iranian coast especially Sunnis who came over from the Shatt al Arab and the Iranian coast.

Then the palm oil trade became big and Bahrain was the center of that trade. Then came the pearl boom and Bahrain yet again was the center of pearling and guess where oil was first discovered in the Gulf area? It was Bahrain even though they have by far the least.

Q: Babco

KOVACH: BAPCO. Bahrain produced about an average suburban swimming pool full of oil a day back then. It may be less now. The Saudis to sort of nail this, and Bahrain had been a Persian colony under the Safavids three hundred years ago before the Al Khalifa came down from central Saudi Arabia -- the Saudis built a mega-refinery in Bahrain, running the oil in underwater pipes from the Eastern Province. Bahrain had an interesting and complex history, much more incremental development than other Gulf emirates. It wasn't like the United Arab Emirates who transformed from camel herders to oil magnates in a generation.

Q: For some it was the site of the Garden of Eden.

KOVACH: Some people believed that. Had these ancient burial mounds. It had symbols from the so-called Dilmun civilization, a 5,000 year old civilization. There was a sense that being Bahraini you were part of something older and well established and it had that kind of an ambiance of being anchored in a proud history.

After the Iranian revolution, however, when I arrived it had this suspect population looking out to the Gulf and east and seeing an worrisome air war, the beginning of a serious strategic Sunni-Shia animosity for the modern era. And the attendant domestic paranoia in a country where the population was about 75% Shia but ruled by Sunnis, with army and the police all Sunni.

Q: Were there ayatollahs or cassettes ayatollahs of being played in there?

KOVACH: I suspect among the Persians, yeah. Not among the Baharna, the oldest inhabitants who were Shia. The Baharna were loyal. They really felt their stock had gone down after the Iranian Revolution and that they were mistrusted.

I had Persian Shia contacts in the clerical middle class that I mentioned earlier tell me that if the ayatollah ordered me to blow up the refinery, I'd blow up the refinery. They'd tell me that in a very matter of fact way. They knew they were suspected of being a fifth column. Not everyone but it was amazing how open they were with an American diplomat.

Q: Weren't the Yemeni the police?

KOVACH: Yemenis less than Baluchis. There were a lot of Baluchis and the Yemeni that were there as police were definitely Sunnis, not Zaydis. One of the major complaints

of the Shias in the uprisings lately is that the al-Khalifa are trying to populate the country with more Sunnis by giving Baluchis in particular citizenship. There s that element.

Then there was interfamily tension. The prime minister who is still the prime minister all these years later and has been since independence is a thug. He was always the hard assed guy and he still is. I have thought to myself if the king, (who changed his title from emir, proclaiming himself king) Hamid wanted to do something symbolic to try to move things forward, he d get rid of his uncle.

Q: What were you up to?

KOVACH: I inherited a public affairs section that I would say was close to dormant. They distributed the Wireless File and they followed the passive aggressive USIA formula of programming three IVs and three U.S. speakers a year. There was a sense, especially at smaller posts that there should always be a balance of about equal amount of international visitors going on our signature professional exchange program and an equal amount of U.S. speakers or American participants, now again called U.S. speakers coming out to lecture on X, Y, Z.

My predecessor, who remains a friend, was very laid back.

This seemed ridiculous. I shared my appraisal with my front office and with USIA that there is an underclass in this country and there is no USAID and there is no Peace Corps. There are programs badly needed like medical support in the villages and the education system to guarantee upward mobility which needed a shot in the arm. So with the support of both my ambassadors but especially the second one

Q: Who was the second one?

KOVACH: Don Leidel. A management cone ambassador whom I would say was probably the best career ambassador I worked for. (I tended to like my 'politicals' better)

Talking with the dean of the college of health sciences, we identified the area of emergency care and triage as badly wanting. I sent a couple of strategically picked IVs in the field, we sent out a Fulbrighter to study our systems. I felt Bahrain was up to training in those fields. They just needed state of the art ideas.

Another thing that was shocking to me with the new wealth in the Gulf in the early 80s was how deficient Amideast people and information systems that provided most of our student advising services in the Arab world were in the Gulf. Strongest in Syria-Lebanon-Palestine (Jerusalem) and Cairo. There was so much money in these newly oil rich countries, so much aspiration and means to realize dreams. Yet the fly by night, unaccredited schools were having a heyday, with no responsible narrative and advice available to help our Gulf friends get the best education for their money.

Q: The Lebanese provided most of the money for it.

KOVACH: I don't believe so. Amideast had been exposed in the 1960's as a CIA front organization or at least an organization with CIA funding and had the Saudi door shut for years after that revelation. But I was pleasantly surprised in a culture amply given to conspiracy theories that few remembered the tie. At the point in time in the early 80's we are talking about, USIA was paying the freight and Amideast had no credible competition in providing the best information possible on American higher education.

The Amideast representative in Amman, Jordan, Alain McNamara was a very close friend of mine, a great Arabist, whom I trust.

I went to DC the next summer on my honeymoon and made a point of getting in to see Orin Parker, the long-time head of Amideast. I told him, With all due respect you are losing a huge opportunity. These countries are rich. They pay their own way but there are all these fly by night schools, unaccredited schools out there marketing themselves. For America's sake and the sake of a positive influence and for business, let's get you down here. And I persuaded him to send Alain down.

Alain started circuit riding and then eventually they opened an office in the Emirates or Kuwait. That was I think a huge accomplishment on my part. More to come on what I got done through Amideast later.

Bahrain was again, another sub tribal society where, look, I was the counselor, in charge of a section of what they viewed as one of the most important embassies in the region. Everyone knew my first name, the emir, the foreign minister. It was that kind of place. I got to know the minister of health quite well. He introduced me to the head of the psychiatric section of the hospital, a wonderful, brilliant and compassionate man. He and I, with the head of the Gulf Polytechnic who was this working class Persian Shia guy, first generation educated, we decided they should beef up their offerings in public health and triage and all that. So I essentially played some of the role that AID would play with the blessings of the embassy. I believe I mentioned that already.

Another very positive thing I did at the Polytech I got close to Dean Ibrahim Hashemi, the self-made academic of Persian Shia origin early on and the minister of education was also a really close contact early on, a brilliant man, a Baathist, sort of an Iraqi educated Baathist but had gotten his PhD at the University of Alabama so he had some good American roots. We were very comfortable with each other and he was Dean Ibrahim Al Hashemi's patron in the Sunni elite.

At one point Ibrahim and I spent a long social evening talking about the Gulf Polytechnic. One of the problems was that a lot of the foreign faculty were aging Brits who stayed on after the British withdrew to 'East of Suez' after 1968. With computers coming in it extenuated the deficiencies of an aging British trained faculty. Not only was Britain relatively slow to take up automation but these folks that stayed on in their comfortable Bahraini sinecures had no significant way of updating their skills. (For context, it was during my Bahrain tour that we first got our Wangs.) You need a younger

generation and I would argue that America is miles ahead of Britain in its educational system. I suggest you need more Americans and I would be willing to help you get them. Now to underline the importance of this conversation, the Gulf Polytechnic was indeed the only institution of higher learning preparing students to work in the dominant petroleum and banking sectors. That's how important the quality of the education was to Bahrain's future.

He said, Absolutely, absolutely to my offer. We went to see his patron, Dr. Ali Fakhro, the minister of education and he gave us the nod.

What I did was I went to Washington and saw Orin Parker at Amideast again and I laid out the possibility of a lucrative recruiting contract out to Amideast. I asked him what terms would you give the Bahrainis for recruiting, for a special recruiting project, a faculty recruiting project? We worked it out over a few weeks' time over telephone and did the negotiation. Parker very definitely was behind me. (Much to the surprise of various colleagues who had given up on him as a superannuated survivor of the Saudi - CIA debacle in the mid-60s) It took more to get them to come down with student advising but he gave me a great deal. It hardly cost anything and from one year to the next we went from zero American professors at the Polytechnic to 23. Young and eager. Suddenly Ibrahim was all smiles. Then I got a call from Dr. Fakhro, the minister. He said, Peter, can you come by? I've got to tell you what happened this morning. He seemed mirthful and of course, summoned by a senior official, I saddled up and went to the ministry.

The British ambassador who actually was a good friend and fan of mine was very down on his British Council head. The head of the council was old school and the Ambassador wanted an aggressive officer like me that looked out for local need and current opportunity rather than imperiously presenting a tired British culture. The Minister related the following to me: The British ambassador had demarched him about this undue and sudden American influence at the Polytech. This was after the dramatic increase in American faculty from one year to the next that I had brokered through Amideast. He laughed and we both agreed that the British Ambassador was a good guy and just complaining pro-forma. He knew too well that the U.S. had just trumped a major source of British influence.

Ali and I had some other interesting episodes. I ran my own Fulbright program again. I got very persnickety about who we would let come out as Fulbright professors because despite the relative wealth, there were definite sectors that lagged behind in development and as said, with no USAID or Peace Corps, my programs were the only development assistance we could give. On one hand Bahrain is perceived as this very oil rich country but they had real development problems. We were offered through Fulbright a woman from the University of Indiana, who was an expert on, she did her PhD thesis on ministries of education and setting curriculum policy and the like and she was on offer.

I asked Dr. Fakhro if he would let her work in the ministry, not at the university. That's where her impact would be greatest. I had to do some sweet talking with Fulbright which

is, talking about ideological and doctrinaire bodies, the board of foreign scholarships is unreal to work with.

Q: Do they have their own rigid standards?

KOVACH: Oh, yes. This is an exchange primarily and this should not be used for development and this should be about high minded ideas moving across cultures in classrooms. I basically ran the idea up the totem pole at USIA and my bosses in NEA were totally supportive. They saw the value; getting more critical thinking, discussion of human rights and democratic themes into the national curriculum -- all this in a pedagogically modern way would be far more of an impact multiplier than just having a professor in a classroom.

The woman came in and she was going great guns. The minister's niece was her boss, a very bright woman, British educated but I think also drinking the American Kool-Aid and everything was going swimmingly and then one day I got another call from Ali and he says, Peter, we need to talk. There's a problem with Joan (the Fulbright scholar).

So what happened was (and this is was an intimation of the way trains jump tracks in the internet age) she had been writing dispatches home for use in a department newsletter at Indiana and Indiana, her home university, was one of the places the brighter Bahrainis often went to graduate school. Every one of these little countries has a couple of American universities where a whole lot of their people go to grad school. Indiana was where the brighter Bahrainis went. The dumber ones went to Texas, Arlington. Some of the Bahraini students on campus had just happened to see this newsletter lying on a table and it said some very uncomplimentary things about the ministry and so forth and so on.

We had a long talk because he knew how good the work she was doing was and he wanted to keep her and in the end I persuaded him to keep her on the promise I would make her realize the damage that such indirect communication could do, and apologize as it involved a loss of face in what fundamentally is a shame culture. The Fulbrighter was a person of big heart and big mind and wrote both her boss and the minister letters of abject apology.

Q: Did she realize she was out of line?

KOVACH: I don't think she was totally out of line. She was just naive about the world of communication. I think she is a professional and was there as a professional and she was certainly free to write for this newsletter (that's an important part of an 'exchange' like Fulbright) but I think she realized we are beginning to come into an age where people read these newsletters not just closed circle of colleagues. I think it was more that. I think she had every right to do what she did.

Q: The openness is two sided. It does cut down on conventional communications.

KOVACH: I think I felt very good about my Fulbright administration.

Q: How about relations with the U.S. navy and the tanker flagging business?

KOVACH: It was very present in our mission. I was more internally involved but as press attaché which I was, that was one of the two hats I really wore as PAO, we had to be very careful about what we said because in the Gulf you had a really disparate press environment from country to country in my day. Bahrain had the most restrictive press environment though in some other ways it was more open than other countries. It was one of these ironies. There was a compact with the government. We would not talk about the U.S. navy presence. It was one of these things where you could not escape noticing the huge U.S. naval vessels' presence if you drove on the main causeway between the capital, Manama, and Sitra down island which most Bahrainis, rich and poor, Sunni and Shia, the powerful and villagers all did. It was like broad daylight but if you didn't mention them in public discourse in a certain manner or perception, it was like they weren't there.

Q: I take it the sailors didn't get out.

KOVACH: No, not in those days. We tried to keep them in the Administrative Support Unit (ASU) as it was euphemistically called. It wasn't a great liberty post. They'd go elsewhere for liberty. If they went into town they definitely didn't go in uniform. There were a lot of foreigners in Bahrain so they didn't look that unusual.

Where this came to a head on my watch further illustrates the dynamics of a shame culture. One of the interesting aspects of being Ambassador to Bahrain was that the admiral of the Middle East Force, usually a one star, was also resident there. Predictably, the Al Khalifa at times were more interested in cultivating the admiral than the Ambassador.

I served with two admirals who were about as different as day and night. We went from (Charles) "Hi" Gurney, a good old Southern boy, Annapolis grad from Florida, a great teller of tall tales, a charmer, smart guy. The emir loved him. The emir I am sure was in tears when he left, liked him more than the ambassador and that was another tension unique to this embassy that the admiral was either perceived as more important or, in this case, also more likeable than the ambassador.

Hi Gurney left at the end of my first year along with Ambassador Peter Sutherland and in came Ambassador Don Leidel who is not an Arabist but a very smart and decent guy. And in came Admiral John Adams. John Adams was a Harvard educated admiral, very smart, kind of charismatic in a different way, not stiff but kind of formal. He was a tall, good looking, very articulate guy about six three, six four. And he was a Boston 'Adams', a descendent of presidents. On arrival in Bahrain, he did his first tour of the Gulf States. Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates were Gulf ports of call with considerably more press freedom and relatively unfettered papers than Bahrain, which I'll remind you had far the most restrictive press environment in the Gulf, probably due to the tricky Sunni-Shia demography.

So my great colleague and to this day a close friend David Good who was PAO in Kuwait put together an Adams introductory interview with Al Siyassa which was a very open paper that could speak truth to power. The admiral who is a bright and discursive guy is talking about our strategic presence in the Gulf and home porting in Bahrain. Well, people read Al Siyassa in Bahrain. That's the other thing. Al Khalifa restricts their own press, their radio, TV and their print media but it is a Gulf wide media environment with several thousand copies of Al Siyassa and the most influential UAE paper coming on the market daily.

Within hours of publication, the Ambassador and I were summoned by the Prime Minister and the very powerful Minister of Information and Culture. I am a little vague whether this was late 83 or maybe early 84, probably 83. We were really dressed down. In essence they said that if another item like this appears in public, the U.S. Navy and home porting are over. Needless to say that in the middle of the Gulf War, that would have been a major regional crisis for U.S. interests.

We raced back to the Embassy and I immediately got on the high side where the Ambassador and I agreed that I would write a primer of what could and what could not be said about the U.S. Naval presence in the Persian (Arab) Gulf. This went to high levels at DOD and State as well as to senior USIA officials. I had talked to both State and USIA over a secure line in advance so they knew this was coming. They were instructed that what we said would have to be the writ of the land in the Gulf.

You don't know if they are bluffing but still when you are demarched like that, you have to pass it on with a vital U.S. military interest at stake in the middle of a war. The gist of the rule I wrote and cleared was we don't discuss this anywhere in the Gulf media, this home porting arrangement.

Everyone bought into my guidance. It got blessed at the assistant secretary level and higher. It got blessed by the front office at USIA and DOD public affairs blessed it and to their credit as complicated as the information side of the house is at DOD, their people kept their lips shut.

The other big part of the naval presence is that we would get these high level visits I mentioned earlier. I remember coming out several times where Armitage, Rumsfeld and Armacost who all rose to greater prominence. I can say I briefed these people. I wouldn't say I am arrogant but I don't get easily cowed. I have briefed two presidents in my career, Clinton and George W. I don't get cowed by that.

Rumsfeld and Armitage who have very good facial memories recognized me years later in different contexts. Armitage, I ran onto cooling his heels outside Prince Hassan's office in Jordan and he said, I know you. We had a great talk. Kept us cooling our heels for an hour and a half. We had overlapping appointments too as it turned out.

It was a very heady period for a second tour officer.

Q: Just to capture the feel of this, Iran and Iraq were going at it hammer and tongs. Iran had taken our people captive and so simply were not our friends but at the same time Iraq was under Saddam Hussein who was not a very nice person. What was the feeling there towards the war?

KOVACH: This is my interpretation. I would say we leaned toward Iraq. There was no liaison with Iraq going through Bahrain. Or at least none I knew of. We in our reporting were pretty much, this is pretty much through military intelligence, were pretty much trying to objectively report what was going on from things the navy had seen, documents intercepted and with seafarers we'd have conversations with.

Q: I think we were, it has never been quite clear but we were passing on photo intelligence to the Iraqis. It was a very, a relationship, a strained one but a relationship.

KOVACH: Let me tell you something that was an undercurrent here and I think is worth recording. First of all the Iranians in the air war over the Gulf were totally kicking Iraqi butt.

Q: Had better planes.

KOVACH: Better planes (American as opposed to Iraq's Soviet planes) and pilots that had been trained in the United States. Among our military colleagues the view was that Iranians were real fighters and the Iraqis were pussies, the just didn't have their heart in it and were cowards. I read reports that described Iraqi planes turning away from missions to avoid a fight, fearing Iranian prowess in taking the fight to them. So there was that element. An emotional undercurrent I sensed among some of our military people was that these Iranians may have bad government but these are sort of our, these are our planes and we trained these guys and they are better. There was a little bit of that.

Q: I can't remember the name of the destroyer that got hit by an Iraqi rocket. Did that happen during your time?

KOVACH: No, that was the Vincennes and it got hit in my successor's day.

Q: Were there Iraqi and Iranian representatives on Bahrain?

KOVACH: Good question. I don't remember. Iraqis, for sure.

Q: How about Soviets?

KOVACH: No. This was a family values, religion and capitalism kind of place. Bahrain didn't have any relations with communist countries.

Q: How about Saudis?

KOVACH: They were present and they would go for weekend binges because you could drink in Bahrain.

Q: Did you have much contact outside official contact with Bahrainis?

KOVACH: Yes, I had many good Bahraini friends. Some of them were my official contacts. I was very close to Dr. Jalil Al Urrayad who was from a major Shia Bahraini aristocratic family. He was the rector of the university. Dr. Abdellatif Al Rumeihi, from a major Gulf political family, Georgetown PhD in political science newly returned and was an adviser to the prime minister -- he and I hung out together a lot. I sailed with Bahrainis.

Q: Were you married while you were there?

KOVACH: I got married about a year to the day after I arrived. I got married on Bastille Day. I figured that being a devout cheapskate that for the rest of my career the French would have my anniversary party covered. (Bad joke)

Q: I was married on the anniversary of the Battle of Waterloo in on the 18th of June.

KOVACH: I went to the priest and said, Look, will you marry us? I am a baptized Catholic.

He said, But your wife is Buddhist.

I said, Yeah, so what?

He said, No, not without taking catechism classes.

Give me a break. I went to the Anglicans. The Anglican priest there was a very sweet, naïve Irish guy and he agreed to marry us. He loved this idea of all these mixed marriages. He was totally naïve about it. He said the only thing you have to do for me is you have to do two counseling sessions. I will guarantee you it is not going to be about religion.

He really pissed my bride off, however. He somehow had this feeling that she was an older woman who was sort of hitting on me. In fact, I am six years older than her. It was the biggest age compliment I had ever gotten other than getting carded a couple of times when I was over 40. She really got offended by that. She never said a word in the counseling after that.

So we got married. We had a pretty big wedding. We had over 100 people; Bahrainis, expats, Americans. The best man was a Bahraini Shia leader, my senior FSN, Mirza Aman. Our maid of honor was a Thai Buddhist, from a prominent Thai government family and our best friend.

Q: Did this open up or had it been open before but the female side of Bahraini society?

KOVACH: It was interesting. I had friends, professional Bahraini women whom I had dinner with along with their families sometimes or they were cousins of other contacts of mine. On the expat scene, what was interesting was a lot of the expat males around Bahrain were gay so in a way as my colleague who took me to that party where I met my wife said to me, it was almost too easy.

There were a lot of interesting women. I found that his characterization of the racial divide was exaggerated but I fell in with my wife pretty early. I think early in our relationship I think I dated two other women, both European interestingly enough. One Asian I went out with once and two Europeans. One was a Canadian of Eastern European origin and the other was a femme fatale, very smart. I think she was American.

My wife and I, it was a slow relationship. For me despite all my cross cultural orientation, I had always been very cautious about dating outside my white American culture. I figured dating and relations with women were complicated enough emotionally to just keep the cross-cultural element out of the equation. Let's not throw another thing in. That was sort of a big break for me.

I think I dated another couple of other foreigners. I dated an Australian briefly years and years before and I dated a Trinidadian woman very briefly after my freshman year in college. I think those are the only two international relations I'd had to that point. And I like women so there were a lot of girlfriends in my past.

Q: The Bahraini women, were they taking a significant place in society?

KOVACH: The upper class women were definitely taking a place in society and at the Bahrain University, the liberal arts and social science school was almost 70% or more women. I don't remember the exact number or percentage. What were they being educated for? They were being educated probably to be good housewives and raise bright kids but a lot were becoming teachers. I think that was a time of great opening for women.

Q: Did you get any feel for where the Bahrainis stood in that world of the Persian Gulf? The Kuwaitis have, nobody liked the Kuwaitis. I was wondering at this time, what about the Bahrainis?

KOVACH: I think Bahrainis are generally liked. They were seen as having this more incremental development. I think it is a very important fact, it can't be emphasized enough. They weren't rich. I think people thought they played a constructive role.

I believe the foreign minister, became the head of the GCC. They were respected and I think there was some worry too about the Shia demographic. I think government officials and Sunnis from big families up and down the Gulf were aware at just how Shia the

Eastern Province of Saudi is, where all the oil is. There was fear that Bahrain could be a first domino to fall in an Iran inspired uprising or the like.

Of course, everyone hated the Kuwaitis. I remember going to a play in Arabic in Bahrain that made fun of Kuwaitis, their accents, their attitudes.

I will tell you what I like about Kuwaitis, being of Central European extraction. They have a sense of irony and if there is one thing in the Gulf Coast culture that really bugged me is there is no sense of irony at all. No ironic humor and no cynical humor. The Kuwaitis because they are so vulnerable, I think, they may be arrogant but they have a real sense of their vulnerability under that arrogance. I like Kuwaitis; I like their manner in general.

Q: How did the as the American representative there, how did the Israeli factor play?

KOVACH: Less in Bahrain or less negatively even than when I was in Morocco or Yemen; the two places in the Arab world where there were Jewish co-citizens. I think Bahrainis wanted and I suspect still would want quiet trade ties with Israel.

Bahrainis really, I was acting commercial attaché my first year and a half and there were all sorts of Americans that were looking for agents so I was pretty active. That was part of my public affairs portfolio and I got to know a lot of sort of the middle Sunni merchant class and the upper middle Shia merchant class and they were all on the page of Israel is so admirable, especially in the field of technology, what they have built and we need to be part of that singular success story in this region. I wouldn't say it was prevalent discourse and it wasn't public discourse. It was a face thing but privately you'd get a lot of that in conversation.

So I don't think there was much resentment. Yeah, once in a while get these Baathist types who would kind of go on the usual harangue if you pushed the right button and the robot gives you the line, anti-American, anti Zionist, anti-communist all the enemies of the Arab world but frankly I didn't feel it that strongly in Bahrain.

You asked me about the Saudis before. There is a Saudi chapter to my professional experience there. The Saudi chapter was the creation of the Arabian Gulf University, this regional university. I am not sure how regional it ever became. The deans were very interesting. The deans were from mostly Hejazi families. The Hejaz is the western backbone of Saudi Arabia, the Jeddah side, probably ethnically Yemeni, though they would never admit it. They were from rich families that didn't have much political influence in the Riyadh areas where the ruling family prevailed but these were the brightest kids. They'd go to the States and get PhDs. They had PhDs from Stanford, from Chicago, from Princeton. These were some very bright guys but you know what they looked like? Not all of them but most of them. They wore short robes, sandals and long beards so guess whose generation they were in and guess whose world view to a certain extent they shared? Osama bin Laden. Bin Laden was of the same social class. He was basically a Hejazi Yemeni, no franchise in Saudi Arabia and these guys were basically

banished to these jobs to get them out of the way of having any influence in Saudi Arabia. They were initially reticent but we had almost two years together and after they grew to trust me a bit and I think respected Islam and respected the culture, they opened up and complained of near total disenfranchisement. I could have followed my father's footsteps and gotten rich in Jeddah but I got more religious in the United States, went the typical narrative. It was a very common theme. I am disenfranchised religiously, I am disenfranchised politically. Being a Saudi kind of sucks and here I am, stuck on this weird island, high and dry.

They hadn't fought in Afghanistan; they hadn't had their mental eggs sort of scrambled by the fog of war and become radicalized like Osama bin Laden. I am not a bin Laden biographer but I have to think that was part of what sent him off the edge. These guys had a very dispassionate and cynical view of the world and were quite deeply religious.

The most telling anecdote I can relate regarding their interaction with me is this. They had a goodbye tea when I was leaving. At the tea the senior one of them stood up to offer a caffeine toast to me and said, Peter, we congratulate you. You've been a friend and he continued saying some nice things about me. You are going to the most progressive, open Muslim country in the world. (I am thinking they mean Morocco my next assignment? They knew I was going to Morocco after a year. I think some of them even knew I was going to Palestine to finish my PhD research because I had a half year open on my dance card.)

Catching the slightly discombobulated look on my face, the senior dean said, 'No, no. You are going to the United States of America.' This was in 1985 where it was perceived that America was absolutely the place where a serious Muslim could practice his or her religious freely. I thought that was an extraordinary remark.

Q: Now you've had your chance to be exposed to Islam and speaking in 2012 Islam is not exactly if you can personify religion persona grata in the United States because of 9/11 and ongoing war with al-Qaeda and all this. As one looks at Islam there are certain elements, the treatment of women, their hatred of the United States and all this at least in some elements. How did you feel about Islam?

KOVACH: Very positively. I think it is the superior religion in many ways. I am a Muslim in the context of being a student of world religion. I am a Buddhist mediation teacher too.

I feel very positive about Islam. Islam suffers a lot from its sociology that has taken root in some chronically undeveloped and backward societies -- at least after passing the torch of European classical civilization on to the Renaissance, during an earlier golden age. The irony is that the Prophet confronted exactly that scenario in his day in Arabia and that doctrinally it is the most feminist religion I have ever been exposed to but unfortunately the doctrine doesn't seep down to change traditional cultures.

The anti-Americanism I understand that perfectly. These are people, especially the Sunni world due to our lean to Israel and now Iran in a very exacerbated and special way since we contributed to the overthrow of the Mossadegh social democratic government in 1953 that have reason to be ambivalent about us. The Sunni world has been back on their heels basically since the early Ottoman years where they were the shining light of civilization and carrying in many important respects the transition of classical civilization to the Renaissance for Europe. They became ingrown, they became corrupt. They became eclipsed as a positive and progressive cultural force which they unarguably were the first several hundred years after the Prophet.

I don't like religious extremism. I think that the Islamocentric obsessions of even people that mean well in this country post 9/11 go way overboard. I just went to visit an NGO last week. There are a couple of prominent American Muslims involved and I read their literature over the weekend and I was appalled. I think just the way they frame the problem guarantees they are never going to be part of the solution. I have mixed feelings.

One of the things that I like about Islam as a mystic, whatever label or whatever altar I am praying at, meditating at, I think it is the religion that is most conducive to mysticism and towards a direct unmediated relationship between man and god, leaving Shia Islam aside for a moment. Shiism has its own mystical tradition but it is certainly not unmediated. It is more like Tibetan Buddhism.

I am actually very Islamophile but I recognize it historically and attitudinally, there are some real problems.

I do a lot of public speaking and one of my lines if I am talking about religion is this: I will give examples from within my lifetime of genocidal episodes committed in the name of the tradition of every major religion. They all have had a blast of apocalyptic violence. Yes even Buddhism and Confucianism, despite the peaceful stereotyping they enjoy. These are problems of doctrinaire religion or people that use religion to fuel an aberrant psychology. And cherry picking passages from 'sacred' texts in violation of the spirit of the particular tradition in question.

I have worked a lot in counterterrorism but I have a very, in some ways I am sure contrary to some who are set in a negative mind-frame about Islam, a very positive attitude about the religion. In any case, the importance of engaging moderate Muslim voices in countering violent extremism is indisputable. And it pays off in two major ways: 1. you get Muslim voices speaking to co-religionists with a great deal more credibility than U.S. Government mouthpieces but also, you validate and give a sense of inclusion and security to our co-citizens of the Muslim persuasion. This is a bulwark against domestic radicalization. I think a lot of people in the interagency that worked counterterrorism in the late Bush years (which is when I mainly did) don't think I'm way off the reservation partly because we are seeking out, we know good Muslims and there are plenty of them. In the Washington area, oh my god. The ADAMS Mosque which is the biggest mosque in the area and the second largest in the U.S. is just like a shining city

on a hill. Touting all American values, tight ties of cooperation with local synagogues and churches, huge scouting movement.

Q: I always think when you say the mosque out at Dulles Airport there is supposedly John Foster Dulles our secretary of state sat down with Nasser, the dictator of Egypt and said can't we settle this like Christian gentlemen? It was John Foster at his very best.

KOVACH: To digress: Dulles Airport has an evangelical chapel. This is the gateway to Washington, DC the capital of our variously poly religious, pluralist and non religious country. I am always for having a seat at the table for people that have no religion. That's something I am adamant about.

This chapel is a disgrace. I'd just come from Amsterdam where I saw an incredible interfaith chapel. I walked into a room and orthodox Jews are praying, Muslims are praying and Christians are all praying in different corners of the room. They have chaplains on call from every major tradition in the world; Buddhism, Hindu, Confucianist. These people totally get it. And there is no one dominating religious ethos other than being a haven for the religious or spiritually inclined traveler.

Q: Was Al Jazeera on Qatar was this at all a presence?

KOVACH: No. Qatar, next to Saudi Arabia, was the most restrictive country in every way. I think women drove and that was the main differentiation between Saudi and Qatar. Then the nephew overthrew the emir and suddenly Qatar has established itself as sort of a middle ground.

I think Qatar and Dubai are fascinating places and I group them with Singapore because I think these are the harbingers of the kind of urban space that will work a hundred years from now.

Q: We will pick this up the next time. You went to Morocco.

Today is the 17th of May, 2012 with Peter Kovach. Peter, you have some things to say about Bahrain.

KOVACH: One of the things in keeping with my more populist approach to public diplomacy epitomized by my approaching the Muslim Brotherhood in Yemen is that it struck me as very important that the mission get out to the villages much more and not confine contacts to the upper middle class of rich merchants, officials and scholar-intellectuals.

My senior Foreign Service national was a prominent Shia and carried a lot of informal weight in a pretty big village. He was active in the 'matam' or the sort of village convening point, public square.

He asked me how interested I was in getting to know my world? I said, Extremely. Invite me out to weddings funerals, whatever. So I basically started going out.

What I picked up, not only from the villagers but from my more educated Shia contacts, this was 1982, 1983, my first year in Bahrain. This was two three years after the Iranian revolution and the hostage crisis. There is a real feeling among the Bahraini Shia that they were on America's 'shit list' because of guilt by association with their co-religionists in Iran. You know one Shia, you know them all. I discovered after a few months of conversations that the attitude toward America among the majority Shia in Bahrain had been extremely positive. The story of why is interesting.

Justice I would say plays large in Islam, to generalize. It is like Judaism where justice is also a huge thing. The displacement of illegitimate rulers is a subset of that. Guess what episode in our 1970s history they totally glommed on to? The impeachment and resignation of Richard Nixon. The peaceful removal in a democratic society of an unjust ruler which is how they saw him. The views of the U.S. among many people whom I would say at the time were probably in their early to mid 20s and above, were very positive.

That in turn reinforced another underlying historical event about five years before Nixon and that was when an American management team took over BAPCO, the huge, huge oil refinery in Bahrain. The Saudis piped oil to it as I mentioned before. The Bahrainis in my day produced about a suburban swimming pool full of oil a day, which is very little.

When the British ran the refinery, it was like the old South. It was separate restrooms, separate water fountains, and separate eateries. It was almost a parody of some of the external aspects of discrimination in our Old South.

The day the Americans came in they took down all the signs and everything was open to everyone and that's never been forgotten among the largely Shia workforce. So it was a very positive bedrock of opinion to build on. One of the things that struck me other than an obsession around funerals that I kept going to and very few weddings is that these villages all had sports clubs and a lot of emotional and psychic energy went into rooting for sports teams and into training for sports.

Bahrainis in the Gulf despite inferior nutrition and poverty in these villages (compared to the Emirates) begin to bloom on the playing field and they were real good.

Q: When you talk about sports what are you talking about?

KOVACH: Soccer and basketball primarily. It just suddenly struck me why not do a basketball exchange to further wed our small mission community to the Shia villages representing the demographic majority of Bahrainis. I floated a cable out to the whole Arab USIA collective and said that for my country program in Bahrain it would really fit to get a college basketball team out here from America to scrimmage, conduct coaches clinics and actually play a game or two.

There was resonance in two other countries, Jordan and Kuwait, if I remember correctly. USIA responded very positively and told me that they were already trying to get me UCLA, I said, No, no, no, no. I want a division 3 basketball team from a school of smart kids that understand the human exchange value of what they are doing and understand the political implications.

Q: Not the paid.

KOVACH: Not the paid college athletes. I wanted a team too that could legitimately lose a game or two while they are out here playing their hearts out.

So they got me Case Western Reserve. That wasn't a liberal arts school but it's certainly among the top private engineering schools. They came out and the kids were just exactly out of central casting. They were exactly what I wanted. The coach was a jerk and his jerkiness emerged in the circumstance that international basketball rules have a lot less calling of fouls so the game is rougher. There are a lot more elbows and kind of body checks in the game. He wasn't prepared for that. I had specifically written in one cable please have them study and prep by international rules because that's what the Bahrainis will expect to play by.

So they did some clinics, which were great. The kids learned probably as much from the Bahrainis as the Bahrainis from them. The coach actually was good on technique. He wasn't a total jerk. He just didn't get what he was there for.

Then there were three games, formal games, and scrimmages, whatever you want to call them. We played three village clubs and moved it around to different parts of the not so big island. One of the clubs beat the Americans. I had the press all over this too by the way. I don't believe in doing cultural exchange events without projecting it to a wider audience through the press somehow. Figure out a press angle, make it happen. The Bahraini victory was headline news and brought the outsized image of the United States down to a perceptual level the public could relate to.

Then they went up to Jordan where they got their asses handed to them by the national team. They didn't win a single game. They won two out of three in Bahrain. They achieved exactly what I wanted. Suddenly what my embassy colleagues were getting in feedback was gee, you care about us. You reached out to us. Something you care about that is not political that is your sport, directly from the United States. This was a turning moment and suddenly the invitations to come out to villages for all seven of us in the mission just proliferated and I think it was kind of a small turning point.

Q: Did you get any feel for political movement, vis-a-vie Iran or anything like that?

KOVACH: No. I just got some of these Persian Shia, the clerical class in the oil refinery and the banks. They'd make comments as said earlier. If the Ayatollah ordered me to

blow up the refinery I would do it. The innocence in saying that to an American diplomat I think told me there was no organization. These people are just being emotional.

I met some dissidents among the Bahraini Shia. They were very much not on the Iranian program. They were on their own. Their posture was, 'We are the majority here and we want to kick some ass and enjoy some political expression of that demographic fact. If my readers follow the news, they will realize that is still going on today over thirty years later.

So that was the tenor of things, I would say.

Q: Do you want to talk about the yacht club?

KOVACH: I worked very hard in Bahrain. It was my second tour, I was a PAO, I was on the doorstep of a war. It was heady stuff. All these high level people were coming out. Since my two ambassadors couldn't muster much of a country team and I was one of two Arabists on the staff, I got a lot of exposure to Rumsfeld, Armitage and Armacost -- the three I remember.

The yacht club was my release. I grew up in the Boston area. I grew up around boats, a father who liked boats.

So I bought this laser dinghy as I mentioned and housed it on a sandbar upside-down in the sun ten feet from the Gulf. Without much premeditation I could go down, it was about a 15 minute drive from my house, flip the boat, go to the locker, put the mast in and I kept my gear bag with my rudder and so forth there, just stick the parts in the holes. So from about an hour after I am thinking I'd like to go sailing, I could be out sailing with everything, rigging and all.

The club was nice. What it symbolized to me was the integrated nature of Bahrain. We got a lot of Bahrainis including a few of the al Khalifa but they were minor al Khalifa.

Q: Al Khalifa being?

KOVACH: The ruling family. Some people in the police, some Kuwaitis which was nice. Bahrainis and Kuwaitis had rich stereotypes of one another so that was nice that they mixed at the club, a lot Brits, Australians, Germans, some Palestinian expats, more than Egyptians. It was just a very nice part of life. My fiancé, later my wife, would sail with me quite often.

Q: Did the causeway cause, people talking about the causeway? Because in my time there was not a causeway and we had to go through a lot of things and get on a little plane run by Gulf Air to fly us over to Bahrain from Saudi Arabia when I was in Dhahran. Was there much seepage from Saudi culture into?

KOVACH: No, the causeway was being built in my day. It was never open. I once drove across it as part of a VIP tour but it was under construction. So I never experienced the full impact.

The apprehension and anticipation of the causeway was rife in the culture, especially in my last year. The feeling was licentious Saudis going over to drink, even womanize would corrupt the society. They would fuel prostitution. The restaurateurs and bar owners and hotels were thinking happy days are here again. I never quite caught what the Saudi mentality was but I think it was probably very positive. This is a release for us without getting on a plane, given the Wahabi restrictions on alcohol, womanizing etc.

Q: Well, it was relief for us in Dhahran the ability to go to Bahrain and have a beer.

KOVACH: Right. So it was there. It was in the culture. I guess my most memorable moment vis a vis the causeway was this: was I had an overweight friend, one of these educators who had been recruited through my efforts at Polytech.

He was a sailor and he had a bigger boat, about a 17 foot boat and there was an around the island race. He asked me to crew for him. It was a hot day and we had a lot of water with us but he was beginning to show signs of sunstroke right by the causeway so I maneuvered us in under in the shade while one of the accompanying boats that had a radio eventually came by. I said, "Look, we gotta get ashore. My captain is sick." So they pulled an ambulance to the base of causeway and so the causeway infrastructure essentially saved the poor guy's life. That's my personal causeway story.

Q: Is there anything else we should talk about Bahrain?

KOVACH: There was one issue, an international issue that kind of became more problematic in Bahraini society in those years. This was because Bahrain was a transportation and commercial hub as it always had been in the Gulf, the drug trade was burgeoning. Because Gulf Air was headquartered there and was the major regional airline, there was a lot of transshipment of drugs. I am trying to think of what the drugs were that were being transshipped. I really don't know. I think hashish but hashish isn't all that profitable and I have the feeling some harder stuff like prescription drugs were being funneled through. And inevitably, some of the drugs filtered down into society among the youth.

Because of the role I played in the embassy of being AID and Peace Corps as well as USIA, we did the ambulance, we did the triage training the emergency training and this head shrink that I mentioned the other day, Dr. Ali Matar was a very wise and good friend he started talking about doing some drug education in high school. USIA had on offer a very good speaker, an Arab American who could present in Arabic. I proposed to bring him out. What was very interesting was the ministry of health was totally behind me in doing this but Dr. Ali Fakhro the very wise education minister and frequent ally of mine whom I've mentioned in different contexts was just dead set against the idea of drug education. He felt that by doing drug education in middle and high school you are

advertising that drugs are out there; that kids don't have the maturity to get the intended message but in fact will confound the message and do exactly the opposite. It's going to drive them toward drug use, so he thought. So we had a little bit of a problem there.

I had already said yes to USIA's offer to send him out. I put him up in front of all the relevant audiences that were interested and positive about the potential value of education. I even took him out to some of the village clubs which I think was important and introduced him to some religious educators on the village level but he never got traction with the minister of education because the minister was dead set against it and made his views known to both me and my ambassador.

Q: Did you get any feel for what the ministry of education was doing or the religious schools, the madrassas. I think with Saudi Arabia right across the way and as we got more mature in Islam, we learned the madrassas were not always the benign institution. What they were teaching about the attitude towards particularly, westerners.

KOVACH: I don't think private religious education was a major factor at all in Bahrain in my day. There were some radical Shias but it was more about political legitimacy and rights. On the Sunni side of the street there was kind of a fundamentalist streak. Some of the big families had an errant cousin or the like that were in a Sunni kind of cell that the police kept a close eye on but never created any, never shook up any dust. They didn't have schools so that wasn't an issue.

Q: Shall we move on?

KOVACH: The next thing after Bahrain, I am very positive person. I feel blessed with this career and I feel serendipitously I have gotten some great jobs. But I experienced a negative determination early on. I was promised to succeed my boss in Yemen and then suddenly the same area director that blessed that arrangement suddenly got a new management principle that it is not good for an underling to succeed his boss, a blanket statement, not taking into account personalities or anything.

Then the next disappointment like that came 2/3 of the way through my Bahrain tour. The new area director came out to Bahrain. What happened was interesting. When I was in grad school at Fletcher and came down to USIA to kind of nose around on a Washington trip one of the great guys I met was this crusty old Boston Irishman named Francis Donovan who had had no interest in the foreign service, had been at Boston College in the early 50s.

Francis told me a story about his roommate who was obsessed with the Foreign Service. He never passed the exam but he said one year he challenged Francis to take it on a dare. Let's see how you do, jerk ass. And so Francis just wiped the slate. He got a very high score and got in. He said, "What the hell? I'll do this."

Q: I can't tell you how often I have heard guys or gals talk about how they got in the Foreign Service and their boyfriend or girlfriend said, I am going. Why don't you come

along and take it won't take long and of course, the story was always that the boyfriend or girlfriend didn't make it.

KOVACH: So Francis got in. Your generation in USIA produced a lot of very solid press guys. A slightly later generation sort of after the height of the Vietnam War got a lot of good culture people; in it and I think I was more in that generation. Francis was a crusty old, I think he was a journalism major. He was IO in Islamabad.

Q: Information officer.

KOVACH: And Francis, when I had a half year left in Bahrain dropped dead at his desk one day. So when the area director came out, he not only spoke with one forked tongue but with two. He said, Peter, would you transfer to Pakistan on a month's notice?

I had the degree in South Asian studies, I had Urdu. And the job was rated two ranks above my current personal grade so I said, sign me up. It was good for my career. I got in at 35 and I will admit I had ambition. This was a great move, two grades above my grade. I got promoted a month later but this was hard to foresee.

The other thing this director, I'll put his name in the narrative, Jim Thurber, had led me on about was this. I had wanted to start kind of a reading room, what we now call an American Corner down in the main Shia town which is called I think Isa Town. He had been very positive and the ambassador thought that was a terrific idea. He was writing supportive notes to State to push USIA. We had gone quite a way toward planning this facility within the mission. So both my Ambassador, Don Leidel and I were anticipating good news of support for the concept and funding, as we had heard nary a negative from Washington over the months of planning.

Now Don Leidel looked like Donald O'Connor, a real charmer, a wonderful man, very laconic, a good manager. But Don had a temper and I only saw it, never against me, but I saw Don lose it about three times in the two years I worked with him.

He was a very light skinned. When his temper arose, you could literally see the blood sort of rising in his face. I said oh, my god. He's going to lose it and chew Thurber out. I was glad because I thought that Thurber had totally double crossed us. He led us on for months and then came out and pretended like we hadn't had the conversation. That was really dirty, a down and dirty thing to do. Leidel vented at him because I had copied him on everything and he had weighed in with NEA at State given the importance such a reading room, down island could have for outreach to the Shia middle class.

On that trip Thurber laid the Pakistan proposition out and then two weeks later am not hearing anything so I think at that point we had e-mail. I sent him a memo and said what's going on with Pakistan? My wife is aboard. We are ready to move.

His response was what? What do you mean? I just named someone to that post.

This guy had a very sweet personality and was very popular. But I see him as a double-crossing slime ball. Interestingly enough, I've found a couple of other people over the years who saw through his sweet disposition or had been similarly double-crossed.

Q: Who was this?

KOVACH: His name is was James Thurber. Not surprisingly, he retired and went into politics which is just about where a liar like him belonged.

Then I have always wanted to go to Indonesia and guess what opened up? Medan which is the largest city in Sumatra, PAO job in a consulate of four opened up. I said sign me up. My wife being Asian, she liked the idea of going back to East Asia.

What happened was I bid and I basically had a handshake on it. Career wise it wasn't great but I really wanted to go to Indonesia. Two days after I got word that I had the handshake, I got word I had been promoted. My immediate boss in Washington, in those days USIA PAOs got rated both by Washington, by the bureau and by the ambassador and DCM at post. My rating officer in Washington, the Deputy Area Director who thought very highly of me said, I am going to be PAO in Morocco. I want you to be my press attaché.

I had gotten promoted to two. The IO job in Rabat was one step above. It was a big operation, I think 13 FSNs, another American officer. So after going back and forth, I had been to Morocco once for a PAO conference during the Bahrain and immediately thought of my wife because it is so visually compelling and my wife is an artist. I said she'll like this place. So I took it and blew off Medan.

Do I have regrets? Some but my life would fundamentally have changed if I hadn't gone to Morocco.

So I get Morocco. Another nice thing about Morocco as the assignment was a year hence and one only needs a half a year to learn French. I already had the Arabic score I needed so I had a half year free on my 'dance card'. I had this lingering thesis from Fletcher. I had taken the PhD comprehensives and I wanted to do a continuation of this 350 page MA paper I'd written and I wanted to go out and do field work in a Palestinian village within Israel, within the Green Line. Those were the Palestinians I was studying, not the occupied Palestinians.

I did a proposal, got it by committee at Fletcher. We moved up to Boston. We got a room in a nice suburban house with a woman who has become a lifelong friend. I left my Thai bride there and I went off to Israel.

I petitioned for leave without pay while still in Bahrain. One evening, I got a call from personnel at USIA. Peter, we've got bad news for you. I am thinking to myself, uh oh, no leave. Personnel said, 'We are going to give you the leave but we are going to make you take all your accumulated leave before you go on leave without pay.' I said, wait a

second. Where is the bad news here? You mean you are going to pay me to take four months off, essentially. There would be about three weeks that I wouldn't be paid.

I am thinking where's the bad news here?

So I took off for Israel and got a good discount ticket, got out there and it was a glorious three and a half months, rich in human experience. Went out to Jerusalem where I had a very close friend, the PAO in Jerusalem working out of the consulate.

One of the FSNs there was an interesting guy who lives in, a Palestinian-Israeli village outside of Jerusalem. Beit Shalom it's called or something like that. This guy lived there and he took an interest in me and my work. He introduced me to a man from Kafr Qasim.

Kafr Qasim is in what they called the 'little triangle'; the eastern backbone of Israel proper right on the green line, central Israel, a little triangle of Palestinian villages. It is the biggest village there. It is associated with a dreadful historical episode that took place on the eve of the Suez War in 1956. The Israelis declared a curfew but didn't do much by way of communicating that curfew. Kafr Qasim farmers not having heard there was a curfew, were coming in from the fields at night, it was probably harvest because it was in the fall. 56 peasants were massacred by the IDF so it is one of those infamous places where horror was wrought on the Palestinian people by the IDF.

The man I'd been introduced to explained that his sister is married to a guy in Kafr Qasim and that he has a big house. He has 13 kids but he'd probably be willing to put you up. I wanted to do a village study adding to all the book research I had done and some interviews with Palestinians I had done years before in Israel so I went off to Nablus where he had some relatives because what is interesting is that the traditional marriage lines among Palestinians go east to west and that actually extends to Lebanese and Syrians too. When you look at the post colonial borders of all kinds not only Palestine, Israel and Jordan but the Syria Lebanon vector too there is a lot of disruption of these east west marriage ties and now Nablus was traditionally a marrying zone for people from the little triangle so we went to Nablus and I did some good interviews there with some people who had relatives on the Israel side of the line and then went to Kafr Qasim and I met Daoud Isa, my host. He showed me this wonderful little room with a desk I could use as a study. He immediately saw me, he saw that I was sympathetic with Islam, he could tell. He had a 15 year old daughter he clearly, was interested in marrying off to me. He knew I was married; I was very upfront about it. He wanted his daughter to be my second wife. This came out gradually over the three months and she was the one that brought me breakfast every morning and she was assigned to me. She was the most attractive of the daughters and she was the brightest and she was edgy which I like. I like bright and edgy women. This was funny.

The whole experience in the village was amazing. My life is really complicated in Israel because I have Jewish relatives in Tel Aviv. My father, the Israeli side of his family is one branch. Instead of being sort of lefties, social democrats like most on both sides of my family, the Lazars were right-wing Zionists and his cousin who is the only member of

my father's, my parent's generation, blood relatives still alive and now 91 and in Israel, They took me in a lot in 78 when I was there. So I had that to fall back on too. Despite the fact that we don't agree on much politically speaking, I really love those relatives.

Then I had these academic connections, professors who were interested in my work at Haifa which is a very liberal town and where there is a lot of Jewish- Arab, Palestinian dialogue, discourse, commercial partnership and so forth. It's a healthy city, in my view.

Then Jerusalem where I would go to do interviews of academics and so forth so I developed a triangular life where I would go from one place to another using public transportation. I had no car. This time I had Arabic and it really changed the way everyone looked at me, especially Jewish Israelis. Suddenly people thought this guy has cracked the code. He's got the language. We gotta talk to him. It was like day and night compared to my time in 1978.

At the same time I didn't make it any secret that I was a U.S. diplomat on leave, on academic leave.

Q: What was your theme and what were you trying to get?

KOVACH: I was trying to get a village study to validate my earlier MA study and eventually I expanded that to two villages, Kafr Qasim and the neighboring village to the north which was very different. The thesis aimed to examine how judicial processes and the skewed Israeli bureaucracy with the bulk of the huge development budget of Israel funded by Zionist organizations in the Jewish Agency and intended only for Jewish populations -- so there is that discriminatory aspect -- and to just see how kind of being a citizen bracketed with their own personal law courts with the Israeli courts making some judgments and yet being voting citizens of Israel to examine what their attitudes were, how they reacted to and on various points. What their experience confronting the man through politics and expression of a parallel nationalism constituted. And to do it on a micro level; to do the study of what turned out to be the two villages.

A little description of the two villages is in order. Kafr Qasim had unpaved streets, open sewers. Really underdeveloped, and with three distinct populations. One was Bedouin and they were looked down on and no one intermarried with them. Then came the straight Sunni Palestinian population with their marriage ties to Nablus and so forth. They were divided into Sufis and more mainline Sunnis.

The mainline Sunnis voted with the Israeli religious party and were cultivated by the religious party that represented a Jewish/Muslim version of what we would call 'values conservatism' in our American politics. The massacre. I was there 19 years after the massacre. The largest percentages, the plurality of people massacred were from my clan so that hung heavy. People were very open in what they said. It was a very congenial place, almost bohemian. The barber who gave me my haircuts was a wonderful poster artist and I still to this day have a couple of his posters framed on the wall. One with a Palestinian peasant carrying the Haram as-Sharif, the recognizable mosques sticking out

of a backpack and hunched over and on top of the world. A great poster. He became a great buddy of mine.

I liked my host, Daoud and a couple of his sons and I bonded in a platonic way with the daughter who was taking care of me. We had many a serious discussion in both English and Arabic.

And then the second village, okay -- more explanation needed. It turns out that the sister of the guy who introduced me to Kafr Qasim, my hostess, was from neighboring Kafr Bara which is the first village to the north. Now in Kafr Qasim they suggested, I was very open about what I was doing by the way; they said you should look at Kafr Bara too. First of all, you don't need a car to get there. All these villages were like a dead ends right up against the Green Line off the main highway so to get there even though they were quite close to each other by car you'd have to go out to the main road, about three miles, go up about a mile or two and in about three miles. And there were no cabs. So I just walked. I walked right along the green line through these glorious orchards in the hills of Palestine, these walks were wonderful historical/nature idylls for me. So I went to Kafr Bara with an introduction.

Kafr Bara was disdainfully known as 'little Kuwait' among Kafr Qasim townspeople. Why? Politically the whole village council was affiliated with the religious party and all the people were Salafists of some sort or at least maintained that pretension. The policy, I think from the time of Begin, I wouldn't swear to that, on had been to cultivate religiosity and support it among Palestinians. The thesis being that religiosity and Palestinian nationalism would be a zero sum relationship. Huge miscalculation. So they let Saudi and Kuwaiti money in to those villages and the Saudis and Kuwaitis having money were very glad to support these villages for their own reasons.

The head of the council who was the relative of my hostess was very kind to me.

I need to describe what Kafr Bara, little Kuwait, looked like. It looked like an American suburb, had paved streets had curbs, it had the kind of sewers that when we were kids our baseballs would drop into and we'd have to bend a coat hanger and then fish our baseballs out of the sewer. It was like an American suburban town. The whole council had taken, everyone on the council had taken some civic management courses, whether they were certificate or degree courses at Bar-Ilan University which is the conservative religious right Israeli university and had very good relations with Bar-Ilan University because of the Israeli policy supporting community development. With the funding that the Kuwaitis showered on them, the Israelis showered on them an equally valuable expertise which is Israel's great blessing. Just running things well and smartly.

So it was quite a contrast between these two villages and that's what I focused my research on.

I remember going up to Haifa and talking to a Palestinian and Israeli that ran a joint research center together and I said I really want to, I want to look at the history of how

these two villages voted in elections. The Jewish Israeli scholars predicted that the authorities will never let you near those records. I didn't want to get in an argument with him and I didn't entirely trust him but I said to myself if you don't ask, you are never going to hear a yes.

So I went up to Jerusalem where I had some connections including to Dan Meridor who at some point had been the minister of justice. My father's cousin's kid (my second cousin? never can get these relationship tags straight), she had worked for him for a while right after her service in the IDF. I told him upfront I am an American diplomat on leave. And that I am Gabby's second cousin. I'd like to look at the election voting patterns of these two villages since the beginning of the State.

He said, No problem so he called the custodian of the records in Tel Aviv in the Shalom Towers. I haven't been in Tel Aviv in 18 years. I hear there is a real skyline. At that time there was just one tall building, the Shalom Towers, and toward the top of that building is the Israeli Election Commission.

With the introduction, I went down, stayed with my Dad's cousin whom I call 'auntie' there. At the election commission there was a sweet older man, maybe ten years younger than I am now (67), sort of elderly and he s sitting there. He welcomed me and gave me an unending supply of tea and cookies but a lot of the stuff, especially column headings were in Hebrew. I don't read Hebrew and am having to copy it and eventually had it translated. Basically the numbers were in standard Arabic numerals, what we call Arabic numerals but the headings were in Hebrew so I had to get those translated. Some of them were in both Hebrew and Arabic.

It was very interesting to see the voting patterns.] It was a great experience.

One interesting thing happened that's sort of a side bar. I was up in east Jerusalem with David Good, my colleague through whom the introduction to Kafr Qasim happened. I remember spending a night with him while I was doing some research at Hebrew University and playing with his young daughters to whom I am 'Uncle Peter' and just having a very nice cozy night, enjoying an Indian meal because his wife is Indian when a knock came at the door. I answered the door and there are these people out of uniform but with machine guns, militant settlers and they have heard there are Mormons in the neighborhood. These Mormons are desecrating Jewish graves, goes their story. We re going to get them and throw them out. David and I looked at each other. We did a quiet aside in Hindi, which we both speak passably, we decided what to do. Basically I said let s lie to them. Throw them off. We knew exactly where the Mormons lived about five houses away. Let s get on the phone and warn them and phone the consulate, get then call the police. So we did that. We lied to these fascist assholes and they went off in the wrong direction and we called the consulate and they called the police. They came up and protected the family and got on the case. We described the settlers. I am not sure they were identified or what happened but that was an interesting incident.

Q: Tell me, while you were doing all this, here you are an American diplomat, had served in Arab countries. What about the Israelis? I would have thought you would have had Israeli agents, authorities buzzing around you.

KOVACH: I did and this is how we handled it. When I moved into the village, into Kafr Qasim, I was totally transparent to my host Daoud. His brother, I believe was a police informant or agent of some kind. His brother had good connections with the police and he said I want the police to know you are here and know who you are and what you are doing.

I said, Great. He said by the way, the Shin Bet guy that overlooks Kafr Qasim lives in the town south of us. He names the town which I immediately recognize from my service in Yemen and my earlier research on the 'Second Israel' as a Yemeni town. It had been a 'mahabarot', a tent city, when the Yemenis came over, in the late 40s or early 50s and turned into a full-fledged immigrant town and so I said why don't your brother invite the goy over for dinner. He can look at me and see how bad my Arabic is but we can talk about Yemen.

I also told the Palestinians I was part Jewish in heritage though not in upbringing and that I had relatives in Tel Aviv. Transparency was my mode.

So the guy came over and when he heard that I'd lived in Sana'a, at that point three years ago, he was ecstatic. He said, Oh, my God. You have got to come to Shabbat every Friday night. We are just going to love to have you. We even chew khat. They were growing their own khat.

Q: What is khat? What is it in natural form?

KOVACH: I don't know those Latin names for plants.

Q: Is it equivalent to marijuana or it's not a flower thing?

KOVACH: The khat bush looks like a forsythia bush, the leaves and the braches at least, but if it flowers, I don't know. I certainly chewed. I chewed probably two three times a week in Yemen.

You 'takhazin' the khat. The Arabic root 'khazin' means treasury or storehouse and you literally store the qat leaves in your cheek so it is like chewing tobacco and you just take the top soft leaves off your 'rubta', your bunch of khat sticks, and you put the leaves in your mouth and you kind of run your saliva through them. You kind of make a pocket in your cheek and it's between your jawbone and your cheek and you run your saliva through it. You do that for several hours. You build up a big chew. You kind of look like a baseball pitcher that has a bad tobacco habit.

The effect of it to me, going back to Yemen now, including my Israeli khat chewing experience or two, was more like coffee, getting a little wired and a nice kind of buzz.

One time in Yemen I actually had a different experience. I was always respectful of that. I had a date with a Yemeni friend on a Thursday afternoon (which is like a Friday afternoon because weekends were Friday Saturday when I worked in Yemen) to chew. Both of us had to work late and so it was two in the afternoon by the time we got together. We had a half day on Thursday. He said I don't know if we are going to be able to find any khat. He lived in the old city which was really nice so went into that magical wonderland of towering mud and brick homes looking like inverted loaves of gingerbread. We went to his khat dealer and his khat dealer told us, you are in luck. I have the governor's khat and the governor was called away on an emergency and can't chew today. We got the governor's 'rubta' or bunch of khat which he told us was worth five times our normal, pedestrian khat. Khat was not cheap, by the way but he would sell it to us for the usual price we relatively impoverished types would pay so we got the governor's khat and we went and chewed it.

About two hours later I felt like I was back fifteen years to my hash smoking days. I felt like I was hallucinating. I was on a magic carpet flying through the sky. Mohammed felt the same thing. He said this is amazing so we went out on a long walk. We walked through the whole city and then we decided to bother some friends who saw the state we were in and didn't want much to do with us. They were just on the normal khat high. We literally were bouncing off the walls. I don't think I got to sleep until 3 the next afternoon. It was wild.

Back to Kafr Qasim. I went down to this Israeli- Yemeni village for Shabbat. What a feast. Yemeni food is east African, sorghum based. They served me a wonderful sorghum soup. Did you chew in Yemen? 'Yes' I replied. After dinner they brought out some khat. It was very weak. It was just a wonderful human connection. I believe I went down one more time for Shabbat. They loved me. Whatever this guy was going to report about me would be benign.

Q: I have found working in a communist country have to go and try to straighten out birth dates and all this that I would repeatedly go to the police and say I am an American vice consul and I am here to do this and that which was absolutely true and I'd get full cooperation. If you tell them what you are up to rather than slipping around.

Were you finding anything between these two disparate villages?

KOVACH: I am finding a pattern that basically, Israeli politics worked in a very machine political way. If the Muslims supported the Jews on what we would call a religious right conservative agenda, which is what they did, the Jewish religious party, or coalition of parties I believe took very good care of them out of the national budget (rather than the Zionist Jewish Agency budget)

For the Jews I won't say it was quite a free ride. The Jews gave them all this technical support through Bar Ilan University programs and the Kuwaitis paid for implementing.

Meanwhile, Kafr Qasim people were left to percolate in their own squalor.

Q: I think the Arab population Israelis citizens did not serve in the military.

KOVACH: No they didn't. The only Arabs I believe that served in the IDF are the Druze and I don't believe they do anymore.

Q: The Druze are sort of a

KOVACH: A very mystical inward turned Shia Islam. A lot of Shias consider them infidels and most Sunnis do too.

The other group that serves is the Bedouin; they have always served as scouts. I believe they are still used.

Q: Did you pick up anything about normal Israeli view toward the orthodox? The fact they don't serve in the Jewish defense force at all?

KOVACH: My relatives are secular so I certainly got many earfuls during my fulsome dinners with them; basically saw the Orthodox as freeloaders. They had no patience for religiosity and actually found the fact that I was sort of spiritually oriented in any tradition kind of charming and exotic but in the end they saw me as 'normal'. I didn't have a beard and was a public servant in my own country. They respected that. I have always been their favorite outside relative. On the Palestinian issue we don't agree much.

They have come around politically. They were with Begin and Shamir and they came around. They came in the immigration to Israel sponsored by the right wing Likud party consisting largely of right wing Central and Eastern European Jews. They joined the Kadima party which is Sharon's party more recently, a middle of the road party which unfortunately went down in defeat.

They were full of negative attitudes toward the orthodox. I don't have that many Israeli friends. I had a friend at Fletcher that was Israel who was with Mapam, sort of a social left democrat party, the left wing branch of the labor coalition and he had the same attitude toward orthodoxy. To give the state legitimacy we have to go with the Torah as the constitution fiction and just enact basic laws but my Fletcher friend said it is a huge mistake in my view and that Israel would eventually pay the price.

I am not sure how representative these views were. I was never there to interview Ashkenazi Israelis on attitudes towards orthodoxy.

Q: While you were doing this was there any connection between you and our consulate general in Jerusalem or embassy in Tel Aviv?

KOVACH: Yes. It was Tom Pickering's embassy and I knew him, he knew me because he was my area studies teacher 5 years back. It was a unique time in the embassy in Tel Aviv. We had a lot of Arabists. Tom Wusich, a brilliant political officer was there. I'd

talk to them. Tom gave me some quotes for my research. I wouldn't go often. The consulate general I would go by because one of my best friends in the Foreign Service was the PAO as mentioned. David and I were very close. Some of his FSN staff as mentioned were very helpful to me. Doug Keene was the Acting CG I believe; he later became a boss and a good friend of mine from our service in Jordan.

Q: Did you get your PhD?

KOVACH: I didn't. Having the PhD or having the ambassadorial title would have opened a lot of doors in retirement, so it's too bad. I made minister counselor in record time and that embassy just eluded me and the fact is, I wasn't chasing it because the places I would have gone to would have been very small and I might have been very bored. I was a little ambivalent about it. And I never wanted to be a DCM.

A couple of times I went for DCM jobs because I knew the ambassadors were great and one time I was asked by an ambassador to be her DCM. It was someone I knew I could work with and would like to work with. (Wendy Chamberlin in Pakistan in 2000) I never chased DCM jobs. At one point I was up for a big CG job; it was promised and I didn't get it. My personnel dances go on and on but by that time I had a very different perspective on a lot of things.

This was a great little episode in my life.

Q: Off to Morocco.

KOVACH: Yes, but not so fast. I had a very hard time with French training. USIA had this eccentric idea we did better in private schools than at this glorious institution down the hill (from ADST), FSI, big mistake. The FSI French program was very good. USIA thought they were doing me a favor. They gave me a Moroccan woman teacher at this private school. She was a very nice woman, and a good cultural informant. I got a lot of cultural information from her but she wasn't a professional language teacher. What was interesting in 12 weeks I went from zero to 3 in reading probably because of my Latin background but speaking was just a nightmare. I don't do well in languages where the people who judge you expect you to speak very grammatically so Japanese and French were my bete noire, so to speak. Japanese has a wonderful expression, 'bumpoteki na gengo' which are over grammatical languages like Japanese and French. I just had a bear of a time speaking those two even though my pronunciation was good. I don't speak terribly grammatical English, I realize. Having these German native speaking parents who spoke in endless sentences, concise English or any language for that matter is just not my style. I do much better with languages like Arabic and if I had studied Chinese I think I would have done well. With spoken Chinese you don't have to speak terribly grammatically. It is rather freeform. People have good ears. Arabs have great ears for other Arabics. There are many different dialects, different country dialects, rural, urban dialects. Chinese I hear is the same. I have never had the privilege of learning Chinese.

I didn't do well in French. It took me 32 bloody weeks to get the S-3. At about the 20 week mark I raised a real ruckus and they transferred me to FSI. There I felt at least I was getting professional instruction and they really took an interest. They liked me and I liked them and they got me there in 32 weeks. USIA held up my going out to post until I had that elusive 3/3. They would not let me go. I was supposed to go in late July or early August and they didn't let me go until the first week in October when I finally got that 3. By that time my reading was 3+ and I think they said I missed a 4 by one mistake. It is still my best reading language among my foreign languages.

So off I went to Morocco.

I ordered through diplomatic sales in a new BMW from the factory in Munich, flew out to Munich and stayed with and the same guy that was in the car with me when I got shot in Yemen, the former econ counselor. We had a delightful time. It was at the height of the foliage at an embassy compound down on whatever the river is that runs through Munich and there were outdoor beer gardens and it was beer fest. It was like a dream. We were there for about three days, picked the car up, drank a lot of beer and then drove down to Morocco.

Q: You were in Morocco from when to when?

KOVACH: From October 86 to August of 90. It was my longest tour.

Q: What was the situation in Morocco just before you got there?

KOVACH: King Hassan the second had a firm grip on things. His very powerful interior minister, Driss Basri really controlled the police. Several of Basri's predecessors had met with untimely accidents, usually having their cars flattened by cement mixers on the highway. He lasted a long time.

The greatest source of instability was the rural-urban migration and these illiterates who ended up in these makeshift shanty towns, shanty towns on the edge of Casablanca, Tangier and other cities, were almost immediately influenced by these fundamentalist teachers who were themselves half literate and were basically Wahabi or Salofist influenced and so there was a great fear of radicalization and fifth columns.

The army was very strong. Moroccans, like Yemenis, are among the few really good fighters in the Arab world. The Berbers are tough fighters in Morocco. So fairly stable.

It was the prelude to the end of the Cold war and so the great game was being played on the Straits of Gibraltar a water passage that was still of incredible strategic importance because of the commercial shipping that went through there and in a confrontation with the Soviets there is no doubt that control of the Mediterranean by allied navies would have been a key strategic element of a hot war if it had ever come to that -- so a very important place for both sides, strategically.

We had a huge mission. I cannot tell you. I am going to Pakistan this summer where the mission is exaggerated in size beyond belief. In Morocco we had a mega mission but we had very good penetration in the society. There wasn't the security concern that constrains us in so many places today.

We had 11 American officers in USIA in Morocco. That was huge. Most of us in Rabat, one in the consulate in Tangier until it closed and then we put one in Marrakech and we had one in Casablanca. We had America Centers in all those places.

I was the press attaché. Press was pretty much controlled by the state but it was still challenging because we were putting scads of money into the country and weren't getting nearly enough public acknowledgment. We had the ninth biggest Peace Corps, one of the top ten AID missions in the world in terms of finance. We were pumping a lot of money into that country. Huge military cooperation, including civil affairs work where they would literally dig wells and build clinics in villages. So huge, huge, huge involvement.

Q: I am here looking at a map of Morocco. Ok, it sits at sort of a strategic place because of the Straits of Gibraltar and all that. But someone looking at a map it sure would look like a sideshow and it might seem like, being a cynic I would think that Morocco is getting all this largess from the United States because it had a relatively benign attitude towards Israel. What was there about Morocco?

KOVACH: There is no doubt that the quiet dialogue with Israel helped us finance our strategic presence. I don't think there was any doubt that factor greased the skids to a degree with Congress but I don't think that was a major factor. I think it was mainly the cold war. The difference between the rich and the poor was about greatest I had ever experienced in my life. At the time as an American with Japan experience, in particular, because in Japan in the 70s when I was there one of the things one notices was how little difference there was between the rich and the poor or maybe the richest were discrete and kind of like good New Englanders they hid their money well. The gap really stuck out in Morocco.

But the place was progressing. There was investment. There was stuff happening and it was on the Straits and it was probably the most pro-Western government in the Arab world. Algerians were in a phase of post revolutionary socialism, Tunis was small potatoes and didn't have any resources, Libya was oil rich but run by the nut case, Qadhafi. Reagan's bombing of Libya happened while I was in Morocco. And Egypt was Egypt, a cauldron of chaos, controlled chaos I would say so Morocco had sort of a singularly positive aura from an outside perspective.

It was professionally a great tour for me. I came in as an 02. My former boss that had recruited me was drinking very heavily and clearly unhappy and out of sorts with the front office when I arrived. He just didn't get along with anyone. He was an Arab American. The ambassador was political (Morocco more often than not get political ambassadors from the U.S.), who was a Lebanese American, literally the son of an itinerant rug merchant, grew up in Iowa, the only boy in his family. Obviously his mother

and his sisters totally doted on him from his air of entitlement and a few tidbits his wife confided in me.

Q: What s his name?

KOVACH: Tom Nassif. Tom Nassif had risen to high favor among the right wing because he had represented the grape growers against Caesar Chavez in California and was a great favorite of the Annenbergs. A very dubious distinction. I thought he was a jerk on some levels but I got along with him. I was in Berkeley during the height of the Chavez era and I didn't eat grapes for two years and I was out there picketing with Caesar Chavez and his people and this guy, well, it 's a democracy.

So he was there. Deputy chief of mission was Harmon Kirby. Harmon and I also got along very well.

One of the interesting reflections about Moroccan culture emerged from informal conversation among the three of us that were Japan hands of one kind or another. Only one had served there with the Department. Harmon had been there in the army and I had been there on my own and working for the Japanese government in my 20s and we were just seeing these amazing similarities between Morocco and Japan; a kind of inward turned culture, Moroccans guard information. They don't like to have conversations with political officers trying to piece things together. They really resist that kind of conversation so getting information was like pulling teeth.

There was also this element that once you had a breakthrough with a Moroccan you had a very candid relationship. This 'tatamae' or face in Japan where you don't break through, you just keep it on the surface and 'honne' where you break through on occasion -- that described both cultures. We d comment on that often. So that was an interesting sidelight. The difference is that underneath that placid exterior, Japanese lead a very sentimental, emotional inner life as reflected in their art and poetry. Moroccans are much more attached to tribal culture.

So Boulos Malik, my PAO was kind of going downhill and was on the outs with the front office. I became, and this is very typical of not only USIA operations but public affairs sections now that we are integrated in State. the go to guy for the rest of the mission. The IO, if you have a good press attaché, they often become the darling of the front office. It makes it very hard for the PAO. That never happened to me as a PAO later in the career or even earlier. I didn't have an IO in Bahrain. Nassif would bitch to me. Harmon would ask me if I could subtly engineer this or that.

Boulos really resented that emerging mission trust in me so he gave me the worst OER (we call the evaluations OERs in USIA) I have ever had. I cared about my career so I negotiated with him tenaciously over that and finally he accepted some of my changes and said, You know something? He was prophetic, he was right. He said, I recruited you. We haven't had the best of relationships but I am telling you this OER, the way it is written now, is a favor to you.

I said, How s that?

He explained, 'My reputation in Washington is so bad that, with your very good reputation, when they see this EER from me it is going to get you points.

That was 87, spring. 89 in December I got promoted to 01. You have the freedom to check your rank. I was first on the 01 list just two years out from a terrible EER. It was interesting. Boulos was right.

There were so many things professionally that came up that tour. The first year with Boulos not so much. One of the things that started under my guidance was a painstaking and long renegotiation of a previous gentleman's agreement to build a new VOA relay station near Tangier. VOA had an old relay station in Tangier that broadcast to most of Africa, parts of Eastern Europe. Ambassador Joseph Verner Reed who was this very patrician Rockefeller type had been Rockefeller's bag man at Chase, was ambassador in Morocco in the early 80s and what a character. What a character.

Q: He has the reputation, sort of corridor reputation of having once sent a telegram saying Our king. I think there was a crisis. I can't remember what it was and he was on leave and he said should I return to post? There was complete agreement at the State Department; for God's sake, no.

KOVACH: A gentleman that doesn't need written agreements. What we, in Central European circles, used to call in New England a 'hoch WASP', a high falutin', white Anglo Saxon Protestant. In Morocco written contracts were not in the culture which conformed to Ambassador Reed's country club style.

They had agreed on a piece of land for the new relay station. Everything was just in the form of verbal agreements for this half a billion dollar project. VOA wanted to implement and as the IO, I was the liaison to the existing relay station and they decided, the new one. So over 2 years I painstakingly had to renegotiate every aspect of the agreement, major and minor; put it all in contractual form that would give a U.S. entity enough confidence to go ahead with this half a billion dollar project.

This negotiation at different times took place in four languages: Arabic, English, French and Spanish because it was in the North and the older generation spoke Spanish, not French. It was quite a ride. For me it was really a high stakes but not high profile proposition. I was the diplomat. Once in a while I would invoke my next boss, John Graves. We just got through it. We negotiated every single aspect of a bewilderingly complex project, the water contract, the sewage contract, the electricity contract, the land drainage contract, the road access contract. I had never done work like that before. VOA nominated me for a superior honor award but I gotten one within a year and in those USIA days, at any rate, you weren't allowed to get two in a year. That was an interesting part, not exciting.

I feel like I accomplished a few things that were really quite out of the box. This was the Reagan administration the first two years of my service there. Right before his summits with the Soviets, it just struck me that we were in this country, on the Straits, were playing the cold war game.

By the way, the USIS office was right across the street from the Chinese embassy and this was pre Tiananmen Square where we were still in that nice miasma of good enough bilateral relations after the opening to China under Nixon and the economic liberalization under Deng 'Chou' Ping. The Chinese ambassador was a Harvard graduate as was his wife. I hung out at the Chinese embassy often with the diplomatic community. The wife taught Chi Gong which I practice. I'd go over there to do Chi gang. They'd have these sort of beer and movie nights and the whole diplomatic corps would attend. Everyone loved the Chinese. That was a nice part of my life without much forethought or after thought. No one was alarmed going in groups due to security or fear of compromise. You did not have to file contact reports. Some of the people that outranked me would socialize with the Chinese. I think Harmon went to Harvard. That was one sidelight.

The Russians before the summit, I had gotten to know

Q: You say summit. What summit?

KOVACH: I don't have a good memory for when they were, but there were two or three during my Morocco tour. I somehow got to know, by moving in press circles, the head of Novosti. I never knew whether he was a real journalist or not or what. I saw stuff he wrote translated so unless it was being ghost written for him he definitely had respectable journalistic cover. He and I kind of bonded at these press receptions.

I said to him, Since we are in a state of negotiation, our leaders are meeting, let's do an event, a joint scene setter.

The Moroccan Press Club just jumped at the prospect of hosting such an event. No one was doing this in the world, right? I got my then boss, John Graves who spoke fluent French to represent the U.S. Harmon's French was very good but he thought let PD do this fairly high risk and visible summit scene setter -- with USIA there was deniability. It was the Russian DCM and my boss, a minister counselor. As a sidebar, I should mention that John Graves had been a hostage in Iran -- he was PAO and the senior most hostage actually in the Embassy compound. He got promoted very quickly out of that nightmarish experience. We actually pulled this thing off. We got permission from Washington. It was one of those things. John being a wise old codger. He said, 'Let's not get Washington too involved in the planning of this. About a week out you do a cable' and this is a classic format for people who did creative, out of the box programming. 'Unless we hear otherwise, we plan on this date to do this event.' was the gist of the message we sent.

I drafted a cable. Unless we hear otherwise -- and we got away with it the first time.

I don't remember how many times we did it but then I think that even after the election and H.W Bush's advent, after Reagan we figured this is a set piece by now. We were the only post in the world doing this. It was my idea. Bush was meeting Gorbachev somewhere, I don't remember where and we did the usual cable. But this time we got shot down by Washington the day before. Bush suddenly got cold feet about it. Someone had leaked something from his White House. Someone on his bloody staff had leaked something to the press and they got all paranoid about pre summit press coverage and they shot us down.

I am thinking, oh, my. This is the moment of truth. The Russians can really make us look bad, with our claim to be an open society. We wear it on our sleeves. We claim to be an open society ideologically and they've got us dead to rights. I was just putting myself in the shoes of my Russian counterpart. 'We are going to eat these guys for dinner.', I imagined him thinking.

But the Soviets didn't do that. The DCM did his usual thing at the Press Club. We were invited and we went. The ambassador decided to let us go. By this time it was Ambassador Mike Ussery, another political, the best political I ever worked for. He and Tom Foley are my two favorite politicals. We were represented on a high level at the Press Club and afterwards we are informally talking to the contacts and since they'd heard the Russian view on the podium they went to us. The Russians were totally decent about it. They didn't shove our face into the dung pile.

Q: Great things were happening in the Soviet Union during this period. Were you and your colleagues sort of realizing that you were sort of on the brink of a real change?

KOVACH: Yes, we felt it. I think that through this incident I felt it in a very personal way as I obviously had a bit of ego tied up in the series being shot down and being so vulnerable to being totally outed by our Soviet adversaries from their relatively closed society. For them to give us a pass and not humiliate us, I said to myself and to my boss this is really the end of an era. So that in a very visceral way brought that point across to me.

I guess the cordiality of our embassy, the Chinese embassy up until 1989 when it all changed was another harbinger. The Vietnam War was over. It felt like things were changing. So that was a tendril of my Morocco experience.

Q: What was your impression of the king of Morocco? Who was the one survived a coup, shot down a plane, a birthday party?

KOVACH: That was Hassan II, the king during my time in Morocco, indeed for several decades.

There was a rebellion in the north when Mohammed fifth was ruling and Hassan II was the Crown Prince and the Defense Minister. He put a rebellion down in the North in 1958, I believe. Hassan never forgave the region and one of the reasons I think drug

trafficking became such a staple of the Tangier economy was because Hassan wouldn't give the North any development money. He held a grudge against the region his whole life.

Mohammed the sixth, his son has totally reversed that and is a much wiser economic head.

Q: Were there any instructions, caveats in dealing with the monarchy as the information officer? I mean, tread lightly here, don't tread there? Any of that?

KOVACH: It was a friendly monarchy and we weren't going to embarrass the throne in promoting democratic values or the like. We felt the biggest threats to freedom were the Interior Minister and his cadre. Granted they acted at the behest of the monarch in carrying out their policies and occasional arrests at urban Islamic centers and so forth. Basically we were concerned by the Salafist inspired fundamentalists in the urban slums which was a shared concern with the powers that were in the day.

We generally stood aloof from Morocco's leading role in forging a North African regional association, the Maghreb Arab Union, that of course included Col. Qadhafi.

Q: That was the craziest thing I have ever heard. All of a sudden you had this real nut case, Qadhafi and the king of Morocco so called uniting.

KOVACH: My recollection which is a little bit vague, I didn't deal with that aspect of the relationship much is this. I think in the end we chose to look positively at this effort what with a Moroccan king kind of being the leader of this, he will be a very positive influence on Qadhafi and tamp Qadhafi down. That was the view we took. After initially being ambivalent and being pretty vocal about our ambivalence we sort of stepped into line. That's my recollection.

Q: While you were there did you have anything to do one way or the other with the Polisario business?

KOVACH: Not very much directly. I think we were pretty neutral on that. We are afraid that the Polisario might be falling under leftie communist control; there was a lot of cold war interest there. On the counterclaims over the Western Sahara, we kept a good distance from that conflict as we do to this day. There was a very bad incident that happened, however, in which I was thrust in my professional role.

North Africa suffers from cyclical plagues of locusts, one of these 20 year Biblical style locust infestations. One occurred in the middle of my second year there in 88. I had just gotten back from home leave. It was the fall and they came right at harvest season. Some days, it was really like being in the Bible. The locusts were everywhere in my backyard. In response USAID paid for these old DC-6s and 7 s that were converted into spray planes. They flew over the Atlantic literally at 10,000 feet. They couldn't carry oxygen because they were outfitted to carry insecticide in the chambers usually dedicated to

carrying oxygen. The crews were real farmers, aggies from interior states. One of these planes spraying near the Western Sahara/Algerian/Moroccan border was shot down by a Sam-3, a Polisario missile and these innocent farm boys from the Mid-West whom we literally had been drinking with at the embassy club three days before were dead. I was the spokesperson at the embassy.

Their hometown papers and radio stations, not recognizing a fine line like time differences, would call for comment in the middle of the night and my number was the one that was out there so literally my wife moved out of the bedroom to the guest bedroom. The phone was on our night table and I had the guidance taped to the side of the night table so I could do a radio interview cold from a stone asleep at three in the morning. It was a terribly sad time. It was coming up to Christmas, the season of joy.

Then the Pan Am 103 tragedy followed on its heels just as we were kind of getting in the season mood. I lost a very close friend in Pan Am 103. It was a grim Christmas.

That was my main involvement with it.

Q: What was the press like?

KOVACH: You know, educated, very Francophile and the Arab press was Arab nationalist, bristling for more freedom but knowing very much what the lines of the ritual dance were, very formal, which is a combination of Bedouin, French and Arab formalities. There was a quality that maybe the old Japan hands picked up on.

My main concern with the domestic press frankly was to get more publicity for the incredible amount of USAID, Peace Corps, USIS and DOD project work we were doing and this friendship between the two peoples. I didn't think that the typical sort of ambassador and governor cutting a ribbon at a formal event tells you anything about what they are really doing or what the project is bringing to the Moroccan people. I was determined to change that.

I drew up a program outline and John Graves just loved it. I presented the mission with a two page strategy on how to publicize what we did in cultural affairs, what USAID did, what Peace Corps did and what military civilian affairs did. My plan was centered on the idea of locating the beneficiary of a project and getting them to talk to the media describing the benefits with gratitude; in other words, generating powerful human interest stories in testimony of American largesse.

The plan, which Ambassador Ussery blessed with enthusiasm called on all program elements in the mission to incorporate a communications strategy around each and every project and, in the case of USAID in particular, to obligate often self-centered contractors to commit to and cooperate in carrying out a mindfully conceived communication plan to amplify the contribution a project represented.

I as the IO, the press attaché of the embassy would quarterback by critiquing and clearing these plans. I would have relations with every one of these donating agencies, DOD, Peace Corps, AID and our own office where I pretty much go to the relevant senior officials, do a top down and say with each of your projects I want you to look at it like a fruit tree. That was my metaphor, a fruit tree. As the fruit ripens, as the fruit comes to fruition I want you to come to me and we sit together with my staff and do a more detailed strategy to publicize the project and the main question the publicity will answer is what did this investment do for the people that are benefited, not the ambassador and the governor cutting a ribbon.

The AID director totally got what I wanted. I said to him since you do all your work through contracts because AID is basically a contracting agency I'd like you to write into each contract that, as a project nears fruition you must collaborate with the embassy, with the press section in publicizing the project. He did it. He had a lot of resistance from his middle and upper middle level officers.

Q: Why were they resisting?

KOVACH: USIA was just meddling in their bees nest, not staying in their bureaucratic stovepipe; and it will be an additional burden, a pain in the neck; and it's going to sour our relationships with the contractors. A lot of the contractors in Morocco were very Francophile and were basically stabbing us in the back, taking credit or worse letting out the impression that the largesse behind the project was French, not American. I went out to villages where they thought the French were giving the aid, because most of the contractors were French. These people were scoundrels.

I said, and the USAID director Charles Johnson agreed, yes, there's going to be resistance because these guys are taking us to the cleaners. The ambassador was totally behind this initiative of mine as was my boss, John Graves. I totally got him behind this idea.

So we there were several approaches.

Once we had a 'ripe fruit' or a project nearing tangible fruition, if it was a big enough project and near any airport where the ambassador could fly his little two engine Beechcraft, a DOD plane, we would do a ribbon cutting with the governor but USIS would advance it. We would go out there, one of my people, my junior officer or FSN, find articulate people to be interviewed on camera or go on a radio mike and talk about what the project did for them -- basically to generate a human interest story about the project.

We would get the ambassador and governor out, do the ribbon cutting. I would use the three office vans, 16 seat vans. We'd organize a picnic, use representational money; wine, sandwiches so at low cost, transform these trips into rolling parties that the journalists looked forward to. The journalists loved it because they didn't have to do any other work all day and they'd have these interviews just handed to them. They got out there. We'd have the sandwiches. We'd drink the wine, have soft drinks for the few that

were religious and they would get their interviews and suddenly there is a new kind of journalism. Morocco papers really didn't have human interest stories in their repertoire.

We began to get mega publicity for what we were doing. So this was a huge success.

To add to it we are doing a lot of stuff, in very remote areas some south of the Atlas Mountains. How are we going to get publicity for those, was my next challenge. One of my buddies from my Yemen tour, a USAID officer on secondment, was the director of the Peace Corps in Morocco, a huge Peace Corps. We socialized together. I knew a lot of his volunteers were teachers so in addition to the ridiculous number of days in a year a Peace Corps volunteer gets off, his volunteers were off during the summer, had nothing to do.

Let's see among your volunteers, I proposed, who might have been an editor of their college paper, had some journalistic or writing credential and would volunteer for a journalistic travel adventure instead of just hanging around their school doing nothing. My proposal was that we would give them USIA per diem domestic travel and send them out in to the boonies with a tape recorder and a camera and a pad and a paper and interview these people and get them to testify to the benefits they received from our USG funded project. We'd edit what they produced in my section and place it. And that worked too. We got five Peace Corps journalists trundling around the country on second class trains and rural buses and FSN per diem. It was nothing. We did that and it kind of caught the attention of senior types in USIA. I got a lot of attention. This was the main reason I got the superior honor award.

Margaret Tutwiler when she was ambassador there years later (and she knew me and I worked with her when both when she was the A/S for public affairs and then Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy) she kind of revived what I did on her own -- exercising her great press and political instincts. This was interesting because a good friend of mine was her PAO who just didn't drink the Kool-Aid and basically Margaret bounced my friend because Margaret had my agenda. It was one of these ironies.

Q: She is a public relations child.

KOVACH: Right. And she got the importance of doing it. Maybe in the cold war context it was more important.

When I was closing out after my four years I went up to Casablanca where most of the press was. Rabat was not really the place I should have been. The journalists association threw me a lunch with some of the chief editors. One of them stood up and offered a toast. He said our hats are off to you. You changed Moroccan journalism. You introduced the human interest story to Moroccan journalism and we want to express our gratitude and our respect. It was probably the highest compliment I ever got. The Moroccans are Arab nationalists. They didn't totally drink the American Kool-Aid and such compliments were particularly rare there.

Q: Also you were coming as I recall at a time when all of a sudden the major newspapers in the States like the Washington Post and all of a sudden a bill would be passed and there would be Gomez of Palo Alto says this. Journalism was becoming much more personal about the effect on people and all. That was the style.

KOVACH: An anecdote about the press and how important TV was. With my press vans, I always tried to make sure a RTV crew was aboard and that we got on the news.

I was hiking with the same, with the Peace Corps director in the Atlas Mountains and we stopped for lunch above some villages. We were pretty high up on a bluff and there was a kind of a date palm oasis and villages below and we're benignly looking at the villages. I am thinking to myself, something is wrong with this picture. I mentioned my puzzlement. My friend David Fredrick, the Peace Corps Director, said what are you talking about? Then it hit me, I knew what it was. There were TV antennas on the roofs of these houses yet there was no electricity and no wires.

It turned out that the government was so eager to use TV and radio as a means of inculcating a sense of connection and allegiance to the monarchy that they basically subsidized these villagers having TV sets and the TV sets worked on these rechargeable batteries. Every week when you went to market with your produce or your product, it cost about two cents, literally, two cents U.S. to recharge the battery. This is how people on the fringes heard everything.

They had some of these Chinese radios, these wind up radios too. I realized how important the electronic media was in a society with a high illiteracy rate.

This moment emblazoned in my consciousness to always include TV and radio in the mix of my press events, large or small. It's not that I didn't try to do that or realize the importance of electronic media in a society with such a high illiteracy rate. It was a kind of visceral realization of an abstract truth.

In Tangier where I frequently traveled because of my VOA duties, in addition to the negotiations for the new relay station, I'd go up there to do press placement. King Hassan had written off the north but one of the things there was a MEDI-1 radio station, a French chain and that was a free radio station. So I did a lot of placement with them. I'd send people up there to do interviews just because we could get points of view heard there that we never could get on RTV (Radio and TV Morocco) or the main street press so it was one of my side lines.

Amidst the grind of the negotiations to establish formal contracts for the new relay station, we had a staff mutiny at the old relay station. Staff were largely engineers from Middle America, unschooled in cross-cultural skills and very unsophisticated. Here they are, they are living in Tangier which is a kind of sin city. It is sort of the gay capital of the world with the drug trade among the drivers of the local economy.

Q: This is where the Brits sent their remittance men. People the family didn't want, they'd subsidize them so they could go and be gay or be

KOVACH: The town's economy was substantially grounded on a sort of seedy intoxication or sex.

The director of the old station was an autocrat. He played the embassy very well but I'll give myself a little credit. I see character. I saw that this guy would probably be hell to work for. And I made a point of keeping my ears to the ground when I'd go to Tangier. So one trip when staff began to pepper me with requests for one-on-one talks, I braced myself. The Director was being an obsessive Captain Ahab, nutty and autocratic and then his deputy, a sweet guy but with a difficult problem, his wife had discovered that she was gay and she was having an affair with a woman in town and this guy was just falling apart. The boss was treating him like shit. Two of the other engineers had problems too; one became a drug addict. He got hooked on hard drugs, went from hashish to hard drugs, from alcohol, to hashish to hard drugs and he was an addict and he was unraveling. And there was a fourth one that was unraveling and it was really a dicey scene, there were only about eight people out there. It was getting to be a mutinous situation.

I heard from one of the Moroccan FSNs who knew me because of the negotiating that a couple of them were walking around with knives and pistols concealed. They were plotting to kill the head.

So, after conferring with Ambassador Ussery and the DCM, I got Dick Carlson, the head of VOA on the phone. Dick came out with Joe Bruns who is now the vice president of WETA. They agreed with my evaluation of the situation and they removed all three of the worst characters; the manager, the deputy and the guy, the addict. That was another aspect of VOA in Tangier.

Q: It's had that reputation for years.

KOVACH: That's VOA. What else?

I should talk a little bit about the late John Graves, my boss; a wonderful bon vivant, just a guy really always smiling, always positive.

Q: What was his background?

KOVACH: He was from northern Michigan and he had a minor strain of French ancestry that he in high school became totally obsessed with, became fluent in French, went to grad school at Laval in Quebec and spoke an antiquated high falutin French which is akin to the kind of French spoken in Limoges in Central France about the middle of the 18th century. Educated Moroccans speak beautiful French and they would listen to this guy and behind his back they were laughing at his ancient French. The French historians of the language at the university were fascinated and amused. So John had this obsession with his Francophonie.

It was at his memorial service probably a decade later in a farm outside Leesburg where I met his brother and I finally realized this was French business just totally a personal obsession. The brother told me that none of the rest of us Graves siblings speak French. We don't relate. Yeah, we had a French ancestor in Upper Michigan but John just became obsessed with this and it became his consuming identity.

He was the PAO in Iran and was a hostage PAO. He was the senior official that wasn't in the Canadian embassy or protected in the Foreign Ministry. He was with the students the whole time and kind of a nutty, wildly creative guy. I felt totally appreciated by him. He was so supportive. I thought he had bad judgment in some respects. He was just positive and creative and let's see what we can do with this rather than thinking of ten reasons not to do something. So I loved John. The front office developed a parallel aversion to John; parallel to the former front office's aversion to Boulos. So again I got thrust forward but this time my boss appreciated my running that interference for the office.

After the relatively negative OER I got from Boulos, I got two absolutely glowing ones. I got a superior honor award and under 'special circumstances' on one of the OERs John said VOA was going to nominate me for a superior honor award for my work on the negotiations and the mutiny but they couldn't because USIA FAM's prohibition on getting two superiors at the same time.

Another of my Moroccan ventures: Prince Mulay Ahmed Alawi was the first cousin of the king and he was kind of the cultural commissar and he was also the publisher of the two major French dailies, Le Matin du Sahara and Maroc Soir; daily morning and evening papers. He and I became friendly more because of our interest in culture than our formal contact between publisher and press attaché. We'd even have a glass of wine once in a while. He clearly liked to talk to me.

We had an African American group come over and I wish I remembered the name. (Moorish Science Temple of America, I think.) It is nominally Muslim but sort of a hybrid between evangelical Protestantism and Islam. More germane here, the narrative of this African American church is they are all the descendents of Moroccan slaves who were freed in the south. The guru of this church was the teacher of Elijah Mohammed who founded the Nation of Islam so there is a lineage. This group is independent and they still have a following, a church or two in northern New Jersey, in Newark in particular.

So they came out to Morocco and they let the embassy know hinting that they expected to be received as prodigal sons and daughters and projecting a great deal of pride in their being Moroccan. The Moroccans never know quite what to make of them. No one in the embassy had ever heard of this group including me so we didn't know what to make of them either. John would give me the complicated things to do that were somewhat cultural because he didn't trust any of his cultural attaches. He gave me this and I did some research and discovered a bit about them.

Apparently they contacted the palace too. Their appeal to be received got shunted to the culture department. Moulay Ahmed's staff phoned one of my FSNs and asked that I in turn give Moulay Ahmed a call. He wanted to hear what the mission's candid views are about this group and informed us they have contacted the palace. So I went to see Mulay Ahmed. After confirming that we too had received a similar letter, I said to him that we had just huddled and that we planned to receive them with respect but in a low key manner. They are American citizens. We plan to respect their narrative. After all, it's a very pro Moroccan, pro American narrative. I told him to take my words not as an official recommendation and confirmed that I was the one in the Embassy charged with working this. I told him, 'If I were you I would receive them, not in a highly visible way. If I were in your shoes, I wouldn't let them near the press. Be kind and courteous to them. Whoever meets them and it could be you, you are the cousin of the king, just treat them with respect and put on a nice spread.' That's what they did and the people were very happy.

The conversation continued, however. By introduction, When I was in grad school we did a career retreat with a guy named Dick Irish who had written a popular book called What Color is Your Parachute, about finding the right career.

Q: It was about retirement.

KOVACH: No, it was about careers. At the retreat he said you have a half an hour to sit in a corner and write up what you want your gravestone epitaph to be and what you want your signature project, the fantasy of your signature project in the world, one that just exemplifies your values and so forth. I don't remember what I wrote for my gravestone epitaph but I remember the project I quickly concocted very well. I really got into a fantasy. Nepal hosts, (because Nepal is multi racial, multi religious, multi cultural and it is the Switzerland of Asia) Nepal hosts an international festival of sacred music. All religions are invited and it becomes a fixture on the international circuit. So I put that idea out there to Moulay Ahmed Alawi.

Five years later came the Fes Festival of Sacred Music; in other words an event that embodied precisely my idea. It is repeated, been repeated every two years since. I know Mulay Ahmed was still alive and was as always, the cultural commissar of the country. I count that along with inventing ultimate Frisbee my second Al Gore moment in this life. (Poking fun at Gore as the putative inventor of the Internet.)

Q: My goal was to set up an oral history program. We have 1700 on the internet now.

KOVACH: Just to give you an idea of the cultural extravaganzas this guy ran by the way he got the French Bordeaux Radio Orchestra, a top French orchestra and the best chorus in Czechoslovakia to the Bahia Palace in Marrakech for a spring moonlit performance of Verdi's Requiem. The ambassador sent me to represent him. That was one of the most magical evenings, one of the most magical evenings of my life and I love Verdi's Requiem.

Q: How did you find in Morocco Christianity and Islam? It is a country with a French catholic origin and Islamic origin.

KOVACH: I found that Christians were tolerated. There is a large Jewish community of 3- 4,000. There was tolerance. I think there was more paranoia in attitudes toward Christians than Jews.

I remember in Tangier once going up there for my frequent visits for VOA and placements on liberal radio up there. I remember it was right before Ramadan and the Jewish community as a fund raiser before Ramadan ran a huge makeshift casino in a big auditorium and basically, everyone came to gamble. The northerners, the Tangerois and so forth have much more attitude about Europe, much more negative, and it is partially because of the Spanish enclaves and claims and ongoing tension. You would never hear a bad word about Jews up there but boy, the 'Nazarenes' as Christians are disparagingly called! They referred to Europe as the Nazarenes in disparaging terms so there was some tension especially in the North.

The Catholic Church I think was very visible, very hierarchical, in a hierarchical society was familiar enough. They let it go.

What was interesting was there were all these sort of evangelicals and they had a school in Casablanca that actually academically was quite good called the Washington Institute or something like that named after George Washington. They had orphanages up in the Atlas Mountains. They were clearly converting the kids. The kids would come down to the embassy once in a while. These Moroccans were Christians. It was all kind of tolerated.

Q: Did you get involved or maybe the time had passed the Americans and Europeans whose kids were going off to Marrakech and getting high and all?

KOVACH: Sure. There's the iconic Crosby, Stills and Nash song about getting high on the train to Marrakech (The Marrakech Express).

Q: Did it have any effect on you?

KOVACH: I would say none. I am sure if I had been in citizen services in the consulate, there were a few bodies we pulled out here and there and so forth.

There are actually two more stories, one deeply personal and important.

Despite never having served a day in my career as a consul, I have had as a duty officer some very interesting citizen services cases; one in Morocco. The Ambassador wanted to give me an award for what I did. I was duty officer and I got this call from an American citizen who is married to a Moroccan and she has been moving about with her in laws in sort of a caravan, not a coherent story, and she is sure they are trying to poison her. Murder Moroccan style is slow poisoning with arsenic. That's the Moroccan way and she

is convinced this is happening and she sounds out of her mind. She says she has run away, she has bolted from her relatives. She is in Sale, the city just across a small river from Rabat. I get a car and went to retrieve her. She seemed paranoid.

So we got her. She had money so we put her in a nice three star downtown in Rabat. By this time it is about 7 in the evening. I went home and maybe an hour later I got a call from the hotel manager. Your guest is tearing up her room, she has barricaded her door and we can hear her breaking things. Please come and get her.

I said, Could you tell her to pick up the phone or connect, tell her it's me?

She actually got on the phone. I was surprised. I didn't think he would cooperate or that she would pick up, but there she was on the phone. OK, you need to stop what you are doing because you are going to be liable and may get stuck in Morocco for even longer. Let me ask you something. What would make you feel secure? What would calm you down? Where would you like to be? What kind of environment?

So she basically took me up on that question and started in effect describing my house; a house in a semi rural area with a high fence, with an armed guard and with a vicious dog.

My wife is there and I am thinking do I want to submit my wife to this? So I said, Hold on.

I said to my wife, There is this woman and she is having a hard time and can we put her up in the guest room?

My wife said, Yes so I went down to the hotel and we check her out. The hotel assures us we are going to get a bill for the stuff she has broken. I take her up there and she says, This is exactly what I visualized. This is fine. I am at peace.

She slept like a baby. Meanwhile we contacted her relatives, from a rich family, and they wired an air ticket and eventually funds to cover the hotel damages and we got her out the next day to Detroit.

To me that was doing my duty. I just see this as my duty. I don't see this as extraordinary. This is what the Foreign Service is about.

Q: During the time you are in Morocco you have a wife who is of Thai nationality and served in an Arab country Bahrain before. How did she find Morocco?

KOVACH: She's very charming if you meet her socially but she is actually very anti social and I think the more formal entertainment style actually she liked. She liked the stylishness of it. She liked the visual beauty of Morocco which is why one of the reasons (other than sheer ambition) that I jumped from the Medan potential posting to take Morocco. She painted a lot. She made a series of the cards of her paintings and they sold like hotcakes so she made some nice money. She felt good. She had friends. That was a

huge mission. She had friends in the mission. Her French was terrible so she didn't have many Moroccan friends. She liked it. She had a good time in Morocco. She had a much better time than I did because I am very extroverted and of all my countries that I have lived in for an extended time either in the service or outside the service I think Morocco is my least favorite.

Q: You were there until when?

KOVACH: Until 1990.

Q: How did you and your colleagues if you can characterize it react to the fall of the Wall and the really cataclysmic change at the end of 1989?

KOVACH: I was a mid level officer. I don't remember, the Moroccans are a lot like Chinese. The axis of the world goes through Morocco. They see the great game; they see it as a side show so I don't think there was a very pronounced reaction there.

For us the main thing was the sudden rupture in relations with China and the social isolation of this very outgoing ambassador and his wife, both Harvard PhDs from the rest of the European town after Tiananmen. That was the memory. It was graphic for me because I was basically right across the street from their whole compound. It had been kind of an anchor of my whole social life; their movie nights and chi gong and that was gone.

Q: Because they stopped or we stopped?

KOVACH: We stopped. They were left high and dry by most of the Western diplomatic community at least. We stopped because we found what happened in Tiananmen objectionable.

In terms of geopolitics the shadow of my last half year was more the Arab summit in Casablanca which I worked and saw all the Arab leaders close up. It was hosted in a round conference hall. We were up in the press booth I remember and it was almost like, well, let me make this comparison. I grew up around the Boston Bruins. I am a great hockey fan and played hockey. It was almost like going to a pro hockey game when the players from both sides enter the ice and skate circles before the national anthems. It was a little like that experience, Saddam was there, and crazy Qadhafi looking like he'd torn the curtain off the airplane, the one that separates first class and economy and had it draped around his shoulders, looked totally drugged out. They were all there; Assad was there, King Hussein was there. The Emir of Bahrain was there. They were there. It was really quite something to watch after almost a decade in the region.

It was interesting because I ran into Tariq al Moayyed, the irascible and very powerful information minister in Bahrain with whom my relationship by the end of my tour had gotten really tight after our pretty rough start. It was not only the demarche about the admiral's interview with Al Siyassa that got me hauled in but I had recruited a couple of

his employees without going through him and writing a diplomatic note for the IV program. People I saw as up and comers in the media. I got called on the carpet without an ambassador to take the heat for that. By the end of my first year, however, he gave me a generous wedding present. He gave me a nice wedding present with a receipt that had exactly the limit of what I was allowed to accept under our regulations. He was a character and by the end he was coming to my house for dinner. He really grew to like me. At the summit, neither of us were players. We were both straphangers. We had a wonderful meal together but unfortunately it was to be our last meeting. It was the in the famous lobby at the Dorchester in London, a famous place to be and be seen for prominent Gulfies. Where Tariq had a massive heart attack or stroke and died, not too long after 1990.

That was quite a summit and what was clear substantively, not that I had anything to do with substance, but through scuttlebutt was that the tension between Kuwait and Iraq was palpable. In the spring there were more Arab League meetings.

The important part of the summit historically was it was our summit in a way, and this is a measure of our close relationship with the Moroccans, this was where Egypt got brought back in the Arab League fold after having been thrown out because of the peace with Israel. It laid the groundwork for Jordan in a way. That was one major thing. Mubarak was there and there was a lot of cheek kissing and the usual formal face saving stuff.

As that last half year of mine in Morocco wore on I had a stream of conversations with Moroccan friends whether they were journalists or officials who'd come back from these other smaller Arab world confabs and say the Kuwaitis and the Iraqis were at each other's throats. Moroccans don't like Kuwaitis much, by the way. The spin I'd hear was, 'These Kuwaitis are so arrogant and they are kicking the Iraqi hornets nest and nothing good could come of this.' You could sense the storm clouds gathering.

Q: I have talked with people who served in Kuwait at the time. We didn't get along well with Kuwaitis.

KOVACH: I like Pakistanis which very few people do. I like Kuwaitis.

Q: It gives a feel for the atmosphere.

KOVACH: It does.

The last thing that happened in Morocco a huge personal milestone occurred in May of the year we were departing. My wife and I we are of different races and we had not been able to conceive a child. We had been married seven years and had never used any contraception. It was clear that we would not conceive. About the second year in Morocco we started talking about adoption. My wife said I can't have a Caucasian looking kid because everyone in the States is going to think I am the Filipina maid when I push him/her in a stroller.

I said, 'Let's adopt a Thai kid.' We have connections in Thailand. I don't mind wheeling a Thai kid around.

Then we decided 'no'. She didn't like the idea. We dropped it.

We got up to Tangier for me to do a day of VOA business the day before the Muslim Eid. Our plan was to drive to Oujda near the Algerian border over the Eid. Despite four years in country, we were among the few in the embassy who hadn't done that trip on their own. A testimony to how professionally demanding my role in Tangier was. We were headed to do that trip in any case. I left Rabat at 6 after a full day at work and we drove to Tangier, a three hour drive. We were staying at the American Legation Museum.

The American Legation Museum is our oldest diplomatic property in the world given to us by Sultan Mohammed the third in 1820 or 21. It is the only property on one of our historical registers outside the United States. It is a beautiful 20, 30 room semi palatial structure in the Kasbah in Tangier.

A couple of interesting background facts. The person who had been the director of it I think had been a retired priest, someone who dropped out of the church and was just a scholarly fuddy-duddy, with a self-inflated notion of his own importance. He never used the facility for anything. My thinking was: we don't have the consulate anymore. This facility should be our shining city on the hill in Tangier. In my parallel universe of cultural interest, my boss's confidence and my access and influence on the front office, I engineered the appointment of Helena Coon Prentice as the resident curator, a most dynamic woman, half white Russian and half, a Yankee blueblood, a direct descendent of General Doolittle, sort of North African, American 'royalty' you could say. It was like royalty, I mean American royalty in North Africa. What's more Carleton Coon, the famous anthropologist, (not the ambassador of the same name, the ambassador was her cousin but his father) was the pioneering generation of anthropologists. His specialties were the Rif cultures in that mountainous region between Tangier and Oujda and Albania. Leaving his Harvard teaching post to serve during WW II, he had been head of OSS in North Africa or in Morocco and he was basically was in a hidden room in that same legation museum building. From that room, with just a radio connecting him to the outside world in Vichy controlled Tangier, he guided in the allied invasion of North Africa. He was a spy. So in addition to Helena's intelligence, discernment and dynamism, she embodied the history of that building and so she was a beautiful appointee. With me pushing at the Mission, her vision and the mandate we pushed was to make this a cultural center, the American cultural center in the north. We need to make friends. We are perceived as friends of this King who hates the north. This was such an opportunity. She took it and ran with it, she was more active on the cultural scene than our small public affairs operations in Casablanca and Marrakech where we had officers. She hosted concerts, she hosted seminars. She really brought the place to life and made it worthy of the title legation.

So Penny and I arrived a bit after 9 pm and really tired. Helena invited a small table of guests for a late dinner. Soon the talk turned to the small, private orphanage in town as the director was among the guests along with a couple who were desperately trying to adopt a child. 'Oh, there is such a beautiful baby at the orphanage' the conversation went. The orphanage itself was largely supported as a U.S. Navy charity and housed on the grounds of the best private hospital in the North of the country. At the time, I believe it housed 18 kids with six daytime attendants. It was like being at the Ritz. I am just rolling my eyes the intent at the table -- to get us interested in this kid -- was so obvious.

The next day I had my work at VOA. 'Should I go?' Penny asked. 'Sure you should go see what a nice orphanage is like.' Most of the Moroccan orphanages are like gulags, 400 beds and you could smell the shit three blocks away.

I phoned her at noon from VOA and she said to me, 'Talk to your son.'

He goo-goo-ed into the phone and I said a few words. He was 14 months. Do you really like him? I asked. He's a beautiful kid and I just walked in and he held his arms out to me, she replied.

A note here -- it's Very hard to get male babies adopted. There is a real market in the Emirates for abandoned Moroccan female kids.

At any rate, I went to see him with her the next day, the first of the Eid. I put him in my lap and fed him his lunch. He was indeed a beautiful kid and just coming into a word or two and almost walking.

The next day, thinking about little else than this lad, we went off to Chefchaouen which is a traditional city in the Reef Mountains not far from Tangier. We spent the night there, still talking about the kid. The next morning we decided to abandon the plan to drive to Oujda. We knew of a Club Med on the coast heading back towards Tangier. Our intention was to sit on the beach and think if we are going to adopt this kid or not. I had this inflatable rubber boat in the trunk of our small BMW. That afternoon, lazing in the peaceful Mediterranean swell, we decided to adopt Alex.

We spent the last day of the Eid at the beach and headed back to Tangier that evening. We were told that the Minister of Interior had to make the decision for foreign adoptions at that moment in time. In fact, the atmosphere was hardly conducive to foreign adoptions as testified by the American couple at Elena Coon Prentice's dinner table at the Legation that first night we heard about Alex. They had been waiting months for a little boy. Why? Several months prior, there was putatively a kidnapping of some babies from the main Tangier orphanage whom it was alleged were taken to Europe and sold. We were further told that we would have to convert to Islam, a commitment which I liked. My wife did not like that idea. Depending on how the ministry views you, you may get this child very fast or it may take months and months and months. We were scheduled out in mid to late August, 3 months hence.

So we put in to adopt Alex. My chief press FSN I know was wired to the Ministry, at least informally. The Ministry of Interior also served as the Ministry of Information so it was essentially the main ministry I had done business with for four years. I told all my staff on return from the Tangier trip that we'd made this momentous decision -- we are going to put in to adopt this wonderful baby. Two days later at work the next week my press section FSN colleague came to me and said, 'You are going to get the baby.'

'How do you know?' I asked.

'My friends at the ministry told me.'

Later we were at a reception with the Minister who knew me a bit after four years. He said, 'Congratulations. You are going to be a father. We have watched you for four years. We know you respect Morocco and our values and respect the religion so you will bring this kid up well even if you bring him up as a Christian, you will tell him about Morocco and his society.'

'That's absolutely part of the bargain,' I said.

We went to a qadi (like an Islamic Justice of the Peace) and converted. You know how easy that is, right? He gave us an attestation that I have taken to every subsequent Muslim country just in case I need to prove I am a Muslim for some reason.

In fact, the next weekend we shot up to Tangier at week's end to see Alex. They actually let us take him out of the orphanage and spend the night with us at the Legation thanks again to Elena's hospitality. He slept with us that first night in an antique wooden rocking cradle that I think belonged to the Coon family.

We came up every weekend to visit him. The next weekend he took his first steps and then he called me daddy. It was great, it was just wonderful.

By mid June, a month later we had him. They wouldn't let us take him to the legation museum after that first weekend. They got more uptight about the security of orphans around foreigners.

In our last of many trips in our blue BMW 323 in that most beautiful place we've served, we triumphantly brought Alex back to Rabat with us. We stopped at a lovely beach West of Tangier, a stop that seemed to delight Alex. By this time, with all the weekend time we logged with him -- he seemed to trust us totally.

I wrote this fanciful short piece. It presented positive view of his story back from the day when he discovered that he was adopted. We weren't going to force that narrative down his throat. We decided to let him come to the realization in his own time. When he started asking questions, mainly about why he didn't look like his mother, we would gradually give it to him. This narrative was about how Morocco is a poor country and your parents

loved you but they didn't have enough money because there is no economy in the North. I put it in simple terms I could read him.

This was all well and fine -- I almost believed it because it certainly captured the general origin of babies abandoned out of poverty in Morocco at the time. But you know something? As time went on and I mulled the circumstances of his abandonment; a more accurate realization hit me. Alex was abandoned in a mosque, poor people who abandon babies either throw them in dumpsters or put them on the steps of someone's house or a public building. They don't abandon them in mosques. He was abandoned in a mosque, he was in new, quality clothes, he was freshly bathed, he was in a new blanket, a clean blanket, he was well fed and he got taken not to the gulag, he was brought by the Police no less to the Navy charity (El Kortobey) orphanage.

As months go by I am a happy young father I am thinking this kid is probably the illegitimate child of a rich family.

A last sidebar on my son: I consult astrologers, very good professional ones. I studied astrology myself for a time in my 20's. The one I went to back in those days, now deceased, actually had a plethora of Foreign Service clients. I asked her if she could do a natal chart for Alex. I know roughly how old he is. I could supply some key dates in his life; the day we met him, the day we adopted him, day he left Morocco, the day he started pre-school, things like that. Can you do it? I asked and received a positive reply.

She took about a week to do his chart. She then announced that with my permission, she wanted to consult a psychic too. So I went and saw her about a month later and she gave me the chart and the pro bono write up from the psychic. I deliberately didn't tell her anything about the circumstances surrounding the adoption and my suspicions about how Alex was abandoned and do you know what the narrative was? Exactly what I had extrapolated from fact. There was a teenage woman who had probably had sex with an uncle in the same household, extended family. She loved the kid. She clung to him. She treated him beautifully but then the shame factor cut in, the face they'd lose when they couldn't explain the existence of this kid when she wasn't married. So the family wanted him out of house and out of the country. That was the explanation.

That was one thing about the navy orphanage. All the kids were adopted overseas and by Europeans or Americans pretty much. There were no domestic adoptions from there.

That's what I truly believe is at least close to my son's story. I have since the initial telling of this history broached the subject with him. I have told him he was abandoned in a mosque and that he was well cared for. He was about four months old. He had been in the orphanage ten months. And I told him the circumstances pretty much added up to his having been from a rich family but not a legitimate child. He's accepted that in stride. He is very adamant that we are his parents, no one else. Curiously parallel to the attitude of my favorite first cousin once removed, also adopted but domestically in the U.S. where the right of an adopted kid to know who his biological parents were is almost taken for

granted. He has absolutely no interest in pushing to know. Alex's attitude is about the same.

Q: We will pick this up next time.

KOVACH: Leaving Morocco

Q: Today is the 29th of May, 2012 with Peter Kovach.

You adopted a young boy and you are getting ready to leave Morocco, is that right?

KOVACH: That's right. There is one thing I did professionally that I didn't mention last time and that I feel very good about. It falls under the category of my expeditionary forays into the cultural side of the USIS aisle.

I think I've mentioned that my second boss, John Graves, was a great fan of mine and put me in to do the big cultural things when he didn't trust his cultural attaches and one of the things I got to do which was just a terrific experience is I got to organize from A to Z everything to do with a Dizzy Gillespie live performance in a private palace with an A list guest roster. I did the sound checks, planned the stage angle in a square courtyard garden. I read up on how you simulate a full room so you can figure out how the bodies will tamp the sound and decided how we were going to stage it because the courtyard was square, used a little bit of my sense of 'tokonoma', the Japanese orientation of a formal sitting room because there was one angle that I think was nicer to look at and just every other detail; guest list, everything.

At the last minute Dizzy threw a bit of a curve ball at us and I handled that one too. As you may or may not know, he was a Bahá'í and at the time the Bahá'ís were having kind of a rough time in Morocco.

Q: This was when?

KOVACH: This was probably late 89.

Q: The Bahá'ís had a deadly time in Iraq.

KOVACH: Some of these Bahá'ís were Iranians and I think that was part of the problem. At that time the Moroccans were very anti-Shia and Iranophobic, if that's a word. That's changed a bit and it's interesting. Two years later on TDY in Brussels, I was stuck in a cab due to a noon time strike/demonstration with a fundamentalist Moroccan driver. We really had a great conversation. He told me that the attitude among those that 'think like me' is that Iran and Indonesia are the Muslim shining cities on the Hill because of the freedom of theological discourse. He mentioned a well-known Iranian theologian by way of example. I retorted, 'but he is in jail'. The driver replied, 'yes, but they haven't killed him'. Just three years earlier, and my contacts among religious Moroccans were strong, no one would have dreamt of praising Iran.

So back to Dizzy, that was one accomplishment I felt particularly good about. It invoked a set of skills that you have to be ready to tap into when you serve abroad. You have to play professional when you are a rank amateur at times.

Q: How did you find Dizzy Gillespie?

KOVACH: He wanted to have an evening with the Bahá'í community. And he wanted it to be visible. The embassy was good with that. We didn't like how the Bahá'ís were being treated. There were some American Bahá'í school teachers at the American School so there was a bit of a constituency that enabled me to organize that event too. He went and had dinner with them. I deliberately backed off from offering to do the press. We are fine with this if your community wants to bring some journalists along, we're totally fine with that, we said.

And he did and they had a few journalists. He was very happy and very positive because somehow he had expected resistance on our part. The Bahá'í were glad for that validation, and we were very concerned. This was pre International Religious Freedom act. We didn't quite have the authority to do those sorts of things except in a manner based on intuition of what was right and consonant with our American values.

I went home at Christmas.

Q: Who was the audience?

KOVACH: The now king was there, then crown prince, royals, ministers, senior professors and jazz experts. Moroccans, were far and away the greatest jazz aficionados of any country I served in, yes, even Japan. They had jazz radio shows. The experts really knew their jazz.

Q: The word comes from around there, doesn't it? Jazz, I think, has an African root.

KOVACH: It was a great night.

The last half year in Morocco, I don't think I discussed this, the clouds of the 1991 Gulf War were forming. We had the Arab summit that brought Egypt back into the fold (after expulsion for making peace with Israel) that the Moroccans sarcastically dubbed America's Arab summit.

Some of the conversations I was having on the side were from the press angle were beginning to reveal serious tensions between the Kuwaitis and the Iraqis. Kuwaitis, as we discussed, tend to be pretty arrogant and brook very little and they were pushing.

Q: For the most part they were not holding hands with the United States, either.

KOVACH: No, they weren't.

I ran into Tariq al Moayyed, the very powerful Bahraini Minister of Information who had started out disliking me because he thought I was meddling but then we became very fast friends after he accepted my work around of our problems. We met on the margins and snuck off for a meal. A big player at home, at the Summit he was more or less a backbencher like me. He told me that there was a bad wind blowing in the Gulf region centered on tension between Saddam and the Kuwaitis.

The last half year I was in Morocco I had a number of encounters, there were a number of Pan Arab meetings as there always are and I talked to some of my journalist friends that were there covering and they week by week would tell me that things were getting worse. There was outward tension between Kuwait and Iraq and in the last weeks of my tenure in Morocco, I didn't leave until the end of August, the invasion took place. That was definitely a sequence. I contributed the substance of these conversations to the political reporting that we were doing, of course.

On my return home for Christmas in late 1989, I got the news of promotion to O1. Recall my troubles with my first boss in Morocco, the one that recruited me for the job but then resented my activity and access to the front office. What was interesting and ironic, this is common in the personnel system; there was this really stinky EER in my file from him just three years back. I have always asked for my rank when I actually have been promoted. I was at the top of the O1 list. That didn't happen before or since, let me tell you. That difficult bosses words about how a bad review from him would do me good was spot on.

It was a very triumphant part of my life, professionally and personally and I was going back to my first assignment in Washington after ten years in the service which even in USIA was a bit long to stay out. Mentors and advisors were saying that you should take a job where you are managing Americans. I said that is perfect because the job I want is to be the manager of one of the International visitor program branches. That's the cultural program that even officers that have no understanding of PD appreciate. I think it is an incredibly important program. All the cross-cultural accommodation studies, how fast people adopt and emotionally what the stages of cross-cultural adaptation are all point to a three to four week program as the optimum where you have submerged your own identity a bit while you have kind of gotten your sea legs in the new culture and they are falling all over you to give you an intense and wonderful experience. You get out just as it gets complicated in terms of identity. Decade after decade the veracity of this research from the 1950's is borne out.

I got the NEA/SA Branch Chief International Visitor Program position in and I realized my first week of work at USIA that I was coming into a bad situation because of the number of countries in the Arab world that were either leaning towards Saddam or totally on Saddam's side, including some stalwart friends like Jordan. I realized I might have some real trouble rescuing my budget with the heavy political shadow the invasion and subsequent diplomatic alignment cast on the region. I came in right away and went up to

the Near East Bureau in USIA and got to talking to Ambassador Bill Rugh whom I'd never known before, Ambassador Bill Rugh, PhD from Columbia on the history of the Arab press.

I warned him, 'We are going to get our pockets picked by the other branches if we aren't careful.' I remember my first week in Educational and Cultural Affairs people saying to me, in little asides in the hall, 'man, we got big eyes for the money you aren't going to be able to spend.'

Q: The title of your job?

KOVACH: Branch chief.

Q: Of what?

KOVACH: Of the Near East and South Asia branch of the International Visitor Program. (The newer rubric, International Visitor Leadership Program, came years later.)

I was turning the dilemma over in my head compulsively. How am I going to save that money? Two things came to mind. I can't take full official credit here. One was to greatly expand what we called normalization grants. These grants were available if Arab world countries could persuade their minions to attend a program with Israelis, the post would not be charged for the program against their annual IVP budget. I really ratcheted that up and not only ratcheted it up but did a lot of arm twisting, suggesting improvised topics for such exchanges based on overlaps in country strategies I bothered to read. It was really more of a communications problem to say, look, we think it is a good fit for normalization. We had these nominees from Israel. Step up to the plate and get a free IV grant.

That worked really well. I think publicizing it more program by program was the breakthrough. I will take credit for that.

The second thing we did involved India and Pakistan, who were at a bad juncture with one another at that point in time. The thought was that given the intense shared history of culture and history, cultivating professional to professional ties made sense. Beyond the immediate professional sharing, professionals in these societies are respected influencers and meeting with the 'other' and working on common values and professional interests would have a demonstration effect and be a game changer. I proposed more visits, more Pakistanis going to India than vice versa but it may not seem that way to the outside observer. My undergraduate study in India and my MA from CAL focused on South Asia really served me well in this new or at least intensified adventure.

At the time there was almost no professional to professional contact so we kind of concocted between with input from my office and NEA which was really NEA/SA it was one bureau in those days. We decided to put some money into situations if Indians could be persuaded to go on programs with Pakistanis that we would put some free grants into

it and it would be in my budget so I basically not only rescued my budget with these fairly aggressive initiatives but I got extra money. For my first Washington assignment, I think I totally read the tea leaves right and won a bureaucratic victory.

Q: Let's take the Arab Israeli joint programs. How did they work out? Did you get any feedback on this?

KOVACH: Everybody at post has got to dutifully do a program report after the fact. In those days it was rather unsophisticated. It was one report. Now we have these interview reports two years, five years out and a highly organized structure to keep in touch with program alumni. In looking back at your program how did it change your thinking, your life, how do you view it?

At Fletcher School where I had gone to grad school for better or worse, the Arabs and Israelis hung out together constantly, naturally and to the exclusion of almost everyone else at times. It is a very natural thing. So I knew these normalization programs had a lot of potential to achieve human break-throughs.

These were successful programs. They worked and I saved my money from the clutches of some dogged GS-15 civil servants in the other branches that saw this naive FSO coming in for his first Washington tour.

There were a couple of other interesting things in the wind that year.

There was a lot of fretting about political Islam. This was the early 90s and ECA and the assistant secretary who was a political Bush appointee, an economist from the University of Texas, Austin, bright guy. I think that William Blade was his name. People didn't like him because he was a bit remote. And remote in a very 'stove-piped', hierarchical bureau.

Q: ECA?

KOVACH: Educational and Cultural Affairs. I immediately refused to be inhibited by the hierarchy, not with arrogance but just I felt that if I had an observation I'd make it. People appreciated that. I think I did it in a nice way. Bill Codus, who was the political in charge of the IV program, a wonderful guy, open guy, very concerned about political Islam and how to use exchange programs to address the issues. I succeeded a good friend from Morocco as his advisor on Islamic outreach. While I can't relate any great triumphs, there was a lot of tweaking of programs and moving of resources. It was a time in Washington of a lot of these sorts of blue ribbon panels convoked and I remember John Esposito from Georgetown and Abdulaziz Sachedina from UVA kind of being called in regularly along with some other academic experts. There was a lot of wheel spinning that demonstrated that there was a lot of concern about it.

After a year in that job, Ambassador Rugh was taken with what he described as my out of the box thinking in our NEA family meetings that brought people together who worked

NEA portfolios in each of USIA's many programs. He had a college classmate who was his policy officer. In the old regional bureaus in USIA there was a director who was like an assistant secretary, a deputy and the third person was a policy officer and it was usually someone around my rank or an OC. He asked me to leave the IV program and become his policy officer. I did it with a heavy heart because I love exchanges and I love running them. Because of the delicacy of some of the Arab and Israeli programs, I'd run those myself so was able to break out of the role of supportive boss and have the immense human satisfaction of assembling and working an actual program.

One anecdote; we had a prominent Iraqi- Jewish politician from Israel as an 'individual' visitor. He was a big guy, a big, macho guy. He grew up around Mosul and he had been a cowboy in Iraq, a Jewish cowboy. He was a member of the Knesset in Israel. We got him out to Montana. One of the project goals was to look at local government and we could do that anywhere. I want to ride, I want to ride. I want to be around horses and cows, he told our USIS colleagues in Tel Aviv. So we figured this is a guy with a lot of political promise so we gave him a week of local politics and the federal system out in Montana in cow country. He had the time of his life, lassoing cows and doing his cowboy thing during his weekend there. His program ended. The last week of the program we got wind he was being investigated in Israel for corruption and possibly about to be brought up on charges.

Two days after his program I got a call really late at night from Israel, it was their morning. Our guest had disappeared; he never came back. He never got on the plane. We got on it and found out he was in hiding in Brooklyn. I don't know what ever came of it. Apparently, he was convicted. Whether he went back or disappeared somewhere, who knows?

I went up to Bill Rugh's office to be the policy officer about 10 months after my return from Morocco and this was an exciting career break on several levels. After the fighting in Iraq where we had this whole portion of the Arab world, including countries like Jordan usually close to us which we suddenly became alienated from, things were topsy turvy to say the least.

Several really important things happened that year, in my view that really shaped my view and my thinking. One is that we started coordinating, and this was my initiative, with the psychological operations and information operations people, the special operations command and other communicators in different government agencies. The VOA was part of USIA so we sort of had them under our thumb a bit more than we do today. We had agency people, we had White House people and it became very clear from feedback that we were getting, because we were the ones with language expertise and media monitoring mechanism (The old USIA R or Research Bureau) that despite this coalition of 27 countries, a really brilliant piece of diplomacy on HW Bush's part, we were not sending consistent messages out. We had VOA, we had clandestine radios, and we had other communication networks. There was no coordination of strategy or message and no coordination of what we want to say to which audience; avoiding falling all over the same audiences or media we felt was listened to only by elites or this sort of thing. It

became very clear we had to bang heads so I asked Bill if he would convene a meeting, a sort of summit which I ran.

We pulled it off; all parties seemed really grateful to convene and connect. At the same time this and every such future effort I was involved in, communicators and researchers generally have to come into such meetings with the interests, budgets, turf of their departments in mind. Their jobs depend on it. An interesting cultural sidebar, the psyops unit most involved in messaging to the area around Iraq was the so-called 4th POG at Ft. Bragg. They brought their Arab-American colleagues, their translators along. Immediately and instinctively, we foreign service types directed questions about message, nuance, how something we might hear one way is heard another way, to the Arab Americans. You could immediately tell by body language that we had touched a nerve. The American staff looked nervous obviously feeling out of control. the Arabic language informants looked liberated and responded to our questions and natural respect with brilliant at times answers obviously predicated on months of mulling the big questions and never being consulted by their military officer colleagues. One officer allowed to me at his astonishment at the brilliance our respect and deference evoked in their response. He said the lesson would be taken back to base. The Arab-American informants were almost tearfully grateful.

This coordination of strategic communication efforts government wide became a motif of the last third of my career. This was but the overture, in my life.

Q: At that time, we are talking about the early 80s?

KOVACH: No, we are talking about the early 90s.

Q: What was, when you say communications, what were the media?

KOVACH: Radio was the major thing. Radio was the major thing. The Internet was fledgling. We didn't do much there. FAX machines were huge too.

Q: Self publishing.

KOVACH: Yeah, self publishing was not relevant to communication on this scale in operational time. But radio was huge. It was really all about radio in many parts of the world including the Middle East.

I think everyone understood the importance of doing this.

Q: It was intelligence.

KOVACH: It was intelligence, it was communication based on intelligence but more fundamentally on research whether produced by the CIA or by public pollsters. And it was communication in the white, gray and black domains. This is military, get information out fast to complement the battle plan functions but mixed with public affairs

material, mixed with overt propaganda. Complex stuff with communication communities within the military that didn't necessarily get along very well. So that was very important. While the black side has to be operationally separate (unattributed communication, untruthful communication meant to deceive an enemy) it is essential that they know what the communication, the messaging strategies are on the overt side. And, at a sufficiently senior level, some communication 'adult body' has to be able to coordinate and deconflict as necessary between the two domains. This is vital to the national interest in the international communications field whether from a PD or PA perspective, VOA, USAID, mass media, Internet media. State, the IC, DOD communities, VOA, USAID etc all need to be sections of the same symphony with the White House directly running the operation or its direct authorized surrogates running the show in their stead from State -- with the NSC having their backs.

Q: Were you able to get the disparate communities in the military together in meetings?

KOVACH: Yes, we made a point of it. I think the first summit I didn't know the players but I learned fast. It became very clear that we had three disparate DOD communities and we had to bring to the table to keep public affairs, psyops, which is a lot like public diplomacy in the way it works and information operations which often was black, unattributed and untruthful information, usually broadcast to accomplish battlefield deception. You know, the classical art of the war of the darker information arts.

At the same time as important as it was to work with those people, it was very clear to me we had to draw a real fire wall between overt, ascribed communication and unattributed information and deception. There has to be coordination but they have to be totally separate in the way they could be perceived by audiences day to day or in a query by the press or an IG.

Q: What were you learning from the Arabic advisers who had not been listened to previously?

KOVACH: Then they heard this on this radio, and then they heard this contradictory information on that radio. This is how people on the ground reacted; not as 'we' in the U.S. had predicted. These people have clearances, they read intel and they knew. They listened to tapes and it was pretty damning. We had some people from the Voice of America, some of our really good Arabic language people. We had people, a couple of people from our Arabic language magazine, Al Majal. I brought them into this too just because I respected their intelligence.

I should mention that for me, the precipitating impulse to pull this all together was a specific piece of deceptive and confusing information. The Shia population of Iraq in the Basra region heard from clandestine radio that if they rose against Saddam after the fighting drove the Iraqi Army out of Kuwait, that we would have their backs. It was a barefaced lie and led to tens of thousands of deaths up to two several months after the fighting ended. It was my 'inner Hungarian' that was provoked, as weak as my identity is. In 1956, U.S.G. radio, including the Voice had done precisely the same thing leaving

Hungarians to think that if they rose up against the Soviets, we would have their back. A patently immoral and potentially deadly kind of deception in my view.

Q: This is a footnote. We have gone through various things as far as how we key our broadcasts and all, including advertising big guns from New York in to help USIA which hasn't worked very well.

KOVACH: Talking about advertising big guns, let me talk about Charlotte Beers later because I worked very closely with her. I thought she was great. I thought she was exactly what we needed. Yes, there were things that didn't work well you are correct. But the overall impact was sound and helped us pick up our communication game greatly, I would argue.

One minor victory in my time as policy officer in NEA that I felt a pride was this. In January of 1992 there was an election in Algeria, a free, open democratic election observers declared to be relatively clean. Guess who won? The Islamist Party won. Immediately I remember going to Bill. He came in early in the morning and I remember riding my bike down to USIA real early from my house in Columbia Heights to get him and I said, Bill, I think we gotta come out positive about the results here. We supported the election, we supported the process. These people won because they ran clinics without siphoning off money, they collected garbage, they ran schools when the old secular parties were corrupt, stole from the people. I said, Let's declare this as an important victory.

I wrote some guidance, god knows what it said and he loved it and shot it right over to A/S Djerejian who was the assistant secretary of NEA at State, a terrific guy and a North African hand at that. He signed off on it and put it out there. The French barely talked to us for half a year they were so pissed.

Q: You needed these things. If you talk the talk and walk the walk and then the time comes when something happens particularly the way you d really like it to happen, you've got to take a look at the good side and there is a very good side.

KOVACH: The thing I would contrast this episode to would be the 2006 Palestinian elections. We declared in the middle of the process this was the cleanest election ever held in an Arab country. This is terrific, a great stride forward for the Palestinian people and guess who won? Hamas. We repudiated the result that we had been praising just hours earlier; so fast it took the breathe away. We did exactly the wrong thing, exactly the wrong thing. We vilified Hamas and we vilified complex organizations that have people that are very open to talking that are probably less dogmatic about these things than we are. We shoot ourselves in the foot in the Arab world again and again and Hamas and Hezbollah are two good examples. The Zionist lobby and their lackeys on the Christian right dictate policy, that flies in the face of strategic sense or genuine support for our values in the region.

Q: The shoe that hasn't dropped for years is Saudi Arabia. We all know if there is a fair election who is going to win.

KOVACH: That's an interesting thing. Who is going to win?

Q: Well, I would think an Islamist party would win.

KOVACH: The wild card is how many Shia there are and how, if they were really given this sort of hypothetical freedom, how strong a slate they would mount, whether they would build alliances or build a wall. To me that's the wild card but I may be exaggerating. Look at Bahrain.

Q: Elections in the Arab world don't necessarily go the way one would like them to and in the long run if you learned to live with certain elements, things can change.

KOVACH: But I am not sure as you put it that one necessarily knows what's best. One has very strong opinions. I look at these two candidates that made it to the runoff in Egypt, I'd vote for the Islamists.

Q: Right now we've got this thing in Egypt; the first election in 5,000 years and we've got an Islamist and somebody associated with the former Mubarak regime. And they are going to have a runoff and it's going to be close, probably close.

KOVACH: I think if they did it free and fair the Islamist, he is a moderate, would win. From his rhetoric that I read over the last few days, he is sort of Turkophile and the party is pretty much modeled after the AKP of PM Erdogan. That was certainly an interesting moment about a decade back when Erdogan and AKP triumphed in Turkey.

Q: Let's talk about the inner workings there. When you came up and said let's support the free and fair election which we (noise) and a party that is except for the Islamic interests in as far as delivering to the populace, it's done a good job. What sort of

KOVACH: As the great phrase we used that year, that was coined that year, that we opposed parties that were about 'one man, one vote, one time'; that we had no inherent problem with political Islam but that certain behaviors would not be acceptable to the U.S., no matter who behaved in a proscribed manner.

Q: Did you run into much opposition?

KOVACH: No. We really tried to move quickly, Bill and I and got it through.

Q: Before the opposition had a chance.

KOVACH: Bill, who to me is such a mentor; here's a tidbit, some of the people in the office behind his back, would call him God, so much was he respected. He really was a giant among our Arabists. One of the things he did extremely well is he understood the

complex nature of our USIA relationship with the Department and played it very well so he had an interaction with NEA that no other one of the regional directors at USIA or associate directors of USIA for Near East and South Asia, had with their respective bureaus. Frankly, when I was back in Washington and working on the reorganization in the late 90s, those lessons stuck with me. Having a Bill Rugh in every bureau is not an option. I was for the merger which makes me a little unique in my cadre because I saw a lot of good in it. I saw how exceptionally poorly others did from their USIA regional bureaus getting traction with their State counterparts.

One of the things I started in that year as Bill's policy officer, was a monthly lunch among the other policy officers. Those sit-downs convinced me of how idiosyncratic the relationship was between each associate director and their respective State regional bureaus.

My view was that in government one has to build structures, not just here and there and not to back off the search for better structures just because of good personality chemistry relationships occasionally working.

I took that lesson out of watching Bill and starting those lunches and just seeing the different states of relationship between my USIA colleagues and their State counterparts.

Q: Was there significant deviation in Asian policy, particularly China between USIA and State?

KOVACH: It would have depended on the chemistry between Ambassador Rugh's counterpart in EAP-USIA and the EAP Assistant Secretary at State.

We had a great confluence in having Ambassadors Rugh and Djerejian together and I hoped we could derive structural lessons for USIA-State interaction from a good interpersonal model. Djerejian's predecessor Ambassador John Kelly had been a disaster from that viewpoint.

Q: John Kelly just recently died. During the Operation Desert Storm and Desert Shield, he had stirred up an awful lot of He had been ambassador to Finland and had no particular East Asian credentials.

KOVACH: You are thinking about Jim and John, they are brothers. John had something to do with Lebanon briefly.

Q: He was ambassador to Lebanon.

KOVACH: He really didn't get it, he really didn't get it. Horrible to work for, horrible to work with, didn't take advice well.

Q: Tremendous anger, used to blow up, according to people.

KOVACH: If he couldn't come over to the NEA meetings at State, Bill would send me. So I saw that. Kelly was just not a good player. Ed came in, a career Arabist, a guy with style, a guy with brains, a guy with humor, a guy with a good ear to listen to people and take advice.

Ed, I don't think I knew him before, but he and I started a kind of dialogue about contact work in the Arab world. Remember I told you how, when I got to Yemen, my first post that my gut reaction that we spent too much time hanging out with elites who think like us and not enough time engaging people who are important players but from a much more local milieu. It shouldn't take a PhD in anthropology, to know who the political salient groups are, whom we need to at least engage even if we have widely divergent values. We may not persuade them all the time but at least by knowing us, especially in Arab culture where a personal relationship counts for a lot even if you don't agree on much, having that traction and recourse to dialogue in a crisis creates a neutralizing ambivalence rather than hate or rejection.

There is the additional point -- if people know you on an affirmative personal level, even if there are disagreements, it will create dissonance, not dislike or rejection across the board. They may still be Arab nationalists but they are going to think that those Americans aren't bad compared to the other players screwing up Yemen in those days, for example; the Russians, the Chinese, the Libyans. You know? Not bad.

With all this fretting about political Islam I alluded to earlier, these considerations of whom to engage and whom to avoid became central to the dialogue. After meetings I would get a word in with Djerejian and Bill certainly knew how I thought. We started saying we need more of a popular kind of a public diplomacy and dialogue outreach. We need guidelines, we need a manifesto. I did talking points for a speech that we were trying, Bill and I, were trying to persuade Ed to give.

We succeeded. He gave it on June 2, 1992 at Meridian House up on 16th Street. It basically set the tone for how we were going to do diplomacy in the Muslim world but of course with situational nuance. This generic policy on approach pretty much lasted from that date to September 12, 2001. It was basically let's not be phobic of people with beards or even short thobes and sandals. (Salafist/Wahabi types) Let's engage them. Let's go over, call on them, and say hello. Say we'd like to be in a dialogue with you. If they were open to it, we were open to it. We were naive about winning the hearts and minds, although in some cases I think we did. In the back of my mind in this whole policy gambit were those early dinners I had experienced in Yemen where all these great Arabists were talking in English to locals -- many educated in the West -- who shared the same cultural outlook.

I think it was great policy guidance and it was one that absolutely reflected my temperament. His speech writer just took my ideas and ran with them. There was a phrase in it, One Man, One Vote, One time. I don't think it was uttered first in that speech but I think it was uttered at one of these experts meetings a couple of months before. He gave

the speech and it was a great vindication for me. For ten years I had had this gut feeling about the Foreign Service in the Middle East.

He is not cold, he's a very warm guy but there is a little bit, there is a reserve there whereas I am very engaging and extroverted and I think he is sort of saw that my instincts were probably good and probably something that should transcend the temperament of any given officer and have more of a policy footing. So that was something I took great pride in.

The basic two points were talking to those who would talk to us and that engagement is good for its own sake, that we realize it could lead to a variety of outcomes but very rarely would it be an out and out rejection in the Arab context because of that interpersonal capital, because of how important it is to shake hands with someone, look them in the eye and have a conversation.

Q: How did this play out as far as relations or lack thereof with Iran?

KOVACH: The enemy of my enemy is my friend? I am not quite sure. It was

Q: Were we able to nibble around the edges?

KOVACH: During Bush 43, we actually felt like we needed to start having dialogues with Iranians. I feel right now it is a screaming need.

It will be hard. They really hold a lot of their miserable history since 1953 against us. Our 'friends' the Brits persuaded us to topple the elected social democratic PM Mossadegh because he was perceived as threatening to Western oil interests. Iranians hold that coup against us as well they should. I would be furiously anti American if I were an Iranian with some appreciation of the last 60 years.

The overthrow of Mosaddegh by the CIA was the galvanizing event in modern Iranian history and it wasn't a good one. It got you the Shah and his thugs and it got you the mullahs and theirs.

Q: We have our own but I was wondering if there was any, our own galvanizing moment taking of hostages and all.

KOVACH: Frankly, no one was murdered, no one was seriously tortured. John Graves, by the way, who was the boss in Morocco that I thrived under, was one of the hostages, the senior-most of the majority held in the embassy.

Q: This was not a benign incident. OK, we both got our moments but at the time you were there, Iran was part of the Middle East, is that right?

KOVACH: It was in the NEA Bureau.

Q: Were we able through any means to try to, call it, nibbling on the outer crust or something of trying to be positive in some areas?

KOVACH: No. It may have been going on but it was going on off my radar screen.

What I became very focused on in Bahrain, during a period right after the revolution and the hostages, was relations with Arab Shia. I am not an expert on that. I would rather beg off, to be honest. Now I have some strong feelings.

Q: But we are talking about at the time.

KOVACH: At the time, no.

Q: Iran was practically off the

KOVACH: There was none of that.

Q: It was just beyond the beyond.

KOVACH: Yeah, it really was.

Q: We had a close relationship with Saudi Arabia. Did the Saudis play much of a role about how to play things or were they such in a way a foreign power that we didn't ask, how are we doing?

KOVACH: I never was involved directly in Saudi bilateral relations but I think we talked to them, listened to them. They were important and I think they were very Iran phobic and Shia Islam phobic, as they still are. I think there was abject paranoia about the Shia in the Eastern Province. They have never articulated it that way but that's the way as someone a few miles across the narrow strait saw it. In my case I saw it that way.

Q: I think there was a little of that, very little but it was very important when I lived on the other sides of the Straits.

What about Jordan? I have interviewed our ambassador to Jordan at the time of the Gulf War.

KOVACH: Roger Harrison?

Q: Yes. He speaks about being put in a very difficult situation and playing it by essentially ignoring instructions because the Washington operators, and I have seen this happen again and again, the mid level operators like to have an enemy and beat up on a country. If it is a small country, it is more fun to beat up on. He was given these things; you go tell the king, this is Hussein to do this or do that or we will do this or that and all. He knew the king had little choice and his people were, they didn't like the Kuwaitis and they thought this is great what Saddam was doing later. They were celebrating at the

beginning. They were all for Iraq taking over Kuwait. If the king had gone against this thing, he probably, to put it nicely, been deposed. And yet we had people in Washington saying, did you run across this?

KOVACH: I did but what you don't know is the next chapter is Jordan for me. This is what I want to talk about.

Q: But how about at this time you were in Washington?

KOVACH: I was less aware of that. I became aware of it and certainly in the context of my IVP budget battles and victories which I described. Jordan was probably the biggest client in terms of IV money that I could not spend because of the approbation you hint at. We were not inviting Jordanians that year and I needed to rescue that money and parallel tranches of money for a few other pro-Saddam leaning countries.

There was a little bit of that but I don't think and Bill Rugh certainly didn't look at it that way. Our office was not on that program and Ed Djerejian who had Jordanian ties, he wasn't on that program. I think you put it mid level. My analysis would be the opposite -- the White House and front offices with mid-level ciphers just carrying out instructions.

Q: This is when you show you've got balls, to use a masculine term. African countries too. Let s really show them if a country doesn't do what we want them to.

KOVACH: When I was dealing this as Roger's counselor for public affairs a year later, it was even clearer to me that there was definitely a neocon influence damning Jordan because they had sided with Israel's enemy, Saddam. There was definitely that element. I will talk about Christopher's first visit as Secretary, to the region. I worked more than 12 Christopher trips in three years to the Middle East and at the beginning of the first one this all came out.

But first I'd like to reflect on the personnel systems as they worked somewhat differently at USIA than at State. It's the story of how I got the Jordan assignment.

One of the unfortunate differences between State and USIA happily resolved in 'integration' because State's way was better in my view, was that at State colleagues were politicking for jobs, a practice that USIA considered bad form. People did it but quietly. At State if you don't do it, the attitude correctly in my view was if you can't advocate for yourself, how are you going to advocate for 'Uncle' when you are overseas? I found that attitude at USIA reprehensible. I got in late, I was reasonably ambitious so OK, I am doing really well. Recently, I'd done well in the IV job, great ratings, I was just promoted to O1 in less than a decade. I decided because I was relatively old I was going to open my window. I needed to get a job that counts. That's a third of the battle. The other two thirds are doing a good job, thinking out of the box, and getting a good write up from a boss you hopefully get along with.

So I am working for Bill. Bill loved me and hinted he'd support me for a major PAO job. But you had to go down to the personnel people at USIA to make the system work. One of the interesting things about the USIA personnel office at that point was there was a sizable percentage of smokers. If you sauntered out to the front of the old SA-44, the old USIA building over by the VOA building at 4th and D or C Street Southwest, right about a quarter of 10 in the morning, guess what was happening? Everyone was out there with their cigarette and their cup of coffee.

I am a light smoker, have been sporadically smoking since I was eight years old. I am not addicted. Once in awhile I have a cigar or puff on a pipe. So I'd go out to the outdoor railing and hang with my 'buddies' in personnel. That interaction slowly led to that Jordan job all through informal discussions out there. Bill was the main decider inside the building so I had him in my corner. He wanted me to do it and I was ready to do it. It got a little crazy because the guy who was in Jordan in the public affairs office job way outranked me. A strong and competent officer and a fine human being -- Jonathan Owen.

I was the only North African expert in USIA NEA at the time, certainly among us three executive level managers in the Near East and South Asia Bureau in USIA. There was a PAO in Morocco (my old stomping ground) who wasn't doing well. I was getting back channel messages from a handful of disgruntled officers and FSN's in the section. The reports said that this guy is a disaster. He is drinking. His judgment is shot. He is paranoid, he is suspicious. Bill basically relied on me. I recommended that we get this guy out.

They had had a series of eccentric to ineffective PAOs including John Graves as much as I loved him. John was kind of a nut case. I mean, I thought he was smart, I liked his judgments but he was very dismissive of people he didn't like, had no relationship with the front office, nor did he want to. To have an IO that he trusted, it was great for me. They hadn't had a decent PAO in 15 years and we were looking for Mr/Ms Right. I was going through who would be good, who would be good in my head? We decided on the guy in Jordan Jonathan Owen, very good French, and good Arabic and a very even judicious temperament. I knew him personally. I know Moroccans. I know the kind of personalities that Moroccans do well with. He was out of central casting.

So basically I manipulated, I put the parts in place for him to get that job once we pulled the drinker out. I did that but ended up sabotaging my own second year of Arabic that was to precede my going to Jordan So had a great summer, late summer. I ordered a new Volvo at the factory through diplomatic sales. My son and I flew out to Sweden to get the Volvo.

We both looked pretty Arab, my son, very Arab, me pretty Arab. We were sitting on a park bench in Gothenburg, Sweden and were approached by skinheads and we kind of high tailed it. I sensed danger. I think they saw us as a couple of immigrants, Muslim immigrants. We picked the car up and got the hell out of Sweden, the only time I have been there. I think it is the only time I ever want to be there. We went to Denmark where

Penny, my wife, was with her best friend (and our maid of honor) who is married to a Dane and was kind of hanging out there.

Then we drove down through Europe, ferry boats over the Baltic, to Berlin, to Prague, to Rome, to Sicily and from Sicily to Tunis. A wonderful trip.

Got to Tunis and it looked from communication awaiting me there that like I was going to have a very short happy life in Tunis. Everyone in NEA had bought into this John Owens guy taking the job. He left early because he persuaded them to send him to a very fancy French school on the Riviera for refresher. I was transferred after three weeks in Tunis. I had settled in, had a beautiful house, had a sailing partner, a guy who had a 26 foot sailboat. I was in hog heaven.

I was finding Tunisian Arabic wasn't that different. It was more like standard Arabic than Moroccan dialect had been. I was hanging out in the cafes, chatting people up in Arabic.

But we had to move to Jordan and with regret on all our parts, so we did. It was lucky because of the times and the circumstances the mission was confronting in Amman, mid-1992.

Q: Before we go to Jordan, is there anything else you want to talk about this time when you were sort of the adviser to Rugh and all and dealing with the conflict?

When were you working on sort of Cold War in USIA? When did you have this job?

KOVACH: This was 91 to 92.

Q: So this is the war?

KOVACH: While I was up in NEA advising a lot through personal conversation and my leadership in the family meetings during the actual fighting in 1991, I joined in the post war situation which was even more tricky from a PD point of view.

Q: Was there concern among your group when the war was on about the end game?

KOVACH: Yes, there was. That's a good question.

Q: I have interviewed people who said we got into war and we didn't really have an endgame.

KOVACH: Exactly. It is good that you ask that.

I had very strong views. I felt we should have finished the job. I think I even signed a dissent memo or there was something in writing. My office was split. I am not sure; I think Bill was much more temperate about that. I felt let's finish Saddam off. I recognized that if we didn't, the consequences for the Shia plurality could be grim.

OK, the Shia in the south, when we were talking about radio messages and mixed messages, were probably exhibit A of badly coordinated or uncoordinated message campaign. There were broadcasts; U.S. broadcasts we are not going to talk about from where directed to the south, to the Basra area, the preponderant Shia area. These broadcasts were admonishing them to rise up. We were saying, largely through clandestine DOD and IC channels to the Shia that we've got their backs. As a Hungarian ethnic, not terribly over identified, I have to say looking back at '56 it was a little bit of deja vu all over again where people rise up, we are implying very heavily if not saying outright over the radios that we've got their back and then abandoning them. From these errant broadcasts, the Shia thought they would get air support, they expected something. 12, 000 Iraqis died in the fighting to oust Saddam and the Iraqi Army from Kuwait. That's the revised number, roughly. I think it is even revised down a bit. If you believe the Iraqi scholar up at Harvard, Maliki, the Iraqi intellectual, according to his research, over 100,000 Shia died when Saddam later in the spring and early summer put down the uprising. An uprising we had encouraged through uncoordinated radio broadcasts. The ethics of this leave me shamefaced.

I felt totally vindicated in my view but bottom line, I felt we should have finished the job and rid ourselves of Saddam at that time, not out of the blue 13 years later. I know that the concern was that we had really made this a multilateral effort. Bush's pragmatism, I applaud. I felt comfortable with his foreign policy but I guess I felt we just should have brought the partners to the table and said okay, we really got get rid of this guy or the consequences are going to be horrible and the blood is going to be on all our consciences. Let who is with us stand and let others abstain from support if they have to. It might have been half of the coalition.

Q: From a practical point of view, the coalition. It was fine. It had very little to do militarily.

KOVACH: I was going to say it was all about legitimacy.

I really regretted that. I think that was a huge mistake and thank you for asking. I was active and vocal about that.

Q: Although Chas Freeman who I have interviewed talking in the middle of this thing what s the end game going to be and never got an answer. Obviously a diplomatic ending would be making as many of the parties as happy as you could.

KOVACH: I think if they had moved the marker to make the endgame overthrowing Saddam and then convened the conference, you could have redeemed some of the diplomatic gains of the coalition I think without totally losing face. It wasn't rocket science to see what was going to happen.

I was getting feedback on our clandestine radio broadcasts where it was stirring up. I don't really identify much as an ethnic Hungarian but you know, you scratch my

Hungarianess, it comes up. It is to me as an American looking at recent Hungarian history, what we did in 56 was unconscionable. We did the same thing to the Shia in southern Iraq in the Spring of 1991 after driving Saddam from Kuwait.

Q: I am not too familiar with this but I think this is very close to how we treated the Kurds in

KOVACH: Yes, the Kurds, there was some ethnic cleansing but it wasn't like a wholesale slaughter.

Q: Did you feel there was sort of a disconnect? Here was an extremely important equation, India and Pakistan but being in this bureau which got so terribly absorbed in the Israeli business and if that wasn't enough, then you had Iran.

KOVACH: The Israeli business is worth talking about. I wasn't terribly involved. I had a deputy policy officer and the Madrid conference took place while I was in this policy job. I basically left that up to her. She was a Lebanese American. She had very good granularity on the issue. And I honestly felt at times I was too unabashedly pro-Palestinian to work the issue in any way I wouldn't consider unethical. I really trusted her and frankly, that was such a high level thing, it was above my pay grade and I just realized one best engages in lower level battles where you can have an impact. I guess I felt so happy it was happening. What's not to like about this? And I decided to focus more on the Gulf and reconciliation with Arab allies that had leaned towards Saddam.

Q: You had been in Bahrain, Gulf politics, the Emirates, Qatar and all. Were they much of a factor when you were there?

KOVACH: No, no. I don't remember the year that the nephew overthrew the Amir in Qatar and totally changed that country. That country is so radically different than when I was in the Gulf. I don't think so.

The GCC was very

Q: Gulf Cooperation Council.

KOVACH: The six countries and sometimes Yemen and sometimes not Yemen. I think they were very focused on Iran, to be honest. That's my impression. I don't have much direct experience in this 90 to 92 timeframe, my Washington tour. It wasn't on my radar screen much.

Q: Let's move over. You are going to Jordan.

KOVACH: I am going to Jordan and this great car trip from northern Europe to Tunis.

Q: You were in Jordan from when to when?

KOVACH: Early to mid September of 92 to 95, in the summer sometime.

Q: You want to describe the situation to which you were going?

KOVACH: Let me talk about our drive. A lot of officers get to do that kind of long drive somewhere in the world. I went to Berlin for the first time and it is a city I truly love. It is my favorite city in Europe. I went to the Tempelhof, to the old U.S. base there. Because I was a 01, I was a colonel equivalent, I was the senior guest the night or two we stayed so we got the senior suite and I will tell you that suite came with the biggest bathtub in the world. The tub probably went from that cabinet to there. You could have bathed an elephant in it so my wife and our toddler and I, we took a great bath and just laughed our heads off. It was a fun night.

Q: In Athens I am a big guy but I am six feet tall and I only had one bathtub in my life I could stretch out in and that was in Athens in our house. For some reason we build baths which are designed for rather small women. It s terrible.

KOVACH: My mother always took baths. I don't think she took two showers in her life. I am American, I take showers.

Q: I take showers because the bathtubs, I can't get all of me in.

KOVACH: It was a wonderful trip, we drove down through Italy, just had a great time, visited an Italian diplomat friend of ours from Morocco who was married to a Japanese, had a glorious time. I have a cousin who is expatriated in Rome, had a great time with her. She turned out to be a mutual friend of the diplomat.

So I got to Tunis, everything is just ideal except of course, I am having strong premonitions that my time in Tunis is going to be weeks, not a year and sure enough, we were transferred to Jordan; in good part resulting from my own machinations, albeit for the good of the order.

The scene there from a USG perspective -- Jordan was still very much in the post Gulf War doghouse in Washington circles. I had an ambassador whom you have interviewed and whom I liked a lot and who liked me who was really dead set on getting Jordan out of that doghouse. That was the first agenda -- to get Jordan back in Washington's good graces and it was more one of these situations where a diplomat has to represent the host country and the potential for the relationship going forward back to Washington. So we were almost advocating for Jordan in a sense.

Q: Did you get any sampling from your local employees of the flavor of the country? How did they feel towards the United States?

KOVACH: One of the problems with my local employees, and this is very typical of a lot of places like Jordan in the Arab world, is a lot of them were Christian. I hired a couple of people in my time -- both were Muslim. I just felt this is a Muslim country, we are

engaging in Muslim outreach or whatever. This is crazy. The relations you have with your FSNs in the country are such an important aspect of taking the pulse. In Jordan I don't think we were getting much good feedback, to be honest. These were not people who were enthusiastic about the king's necessary support for Saddam but I think they understood full well what you said just a few minutes ago which is the king had no choice. He was between a rock and a hard place.

Q: What at that time within the Foreign Service the opinion of King Hussein?

KOVACH: I believe it was high. And I sensed that the Agency's ties to the Palace and the Mukhabarat (Jordanian external and internal intelligence shop) were strong too. Years later, I hired a lawyer in DC to work on our wills, do some work for my aging Mom. He and I bonded and it turned out that his brother, Jack O'Connell documented the tight CIA ties to the Palace in a memoir entitled 'King's Counsel'. Jack had in fact been Station Chief in Jordan and afterwards left the Agency to become a kind of advisor/lobbyist for King Hussein. I saw nothing in my day about 15 years later that made me think that special relationship had changed although as PAO, or even as Acting DCM, I wasn't in a really good position to evaluate -- nor frankly was I that interested in this particular aspect of the relationship.

An indicative tale about dealing with the Palace. I was at a real stalemate with them. I might have been acting DCM. It was the night before Secretary Christopher was coming for one of his many visits during my three year tour. Different this time from others, he was coming overland from Israel which really had everyone tied in knots. And of course that meant that he was coming over through the Occupied Territories and over the Allenby Bridge. Here you had a U.S. Secretary of State crossing what many in Jordan considered its sovereign territory lost in the 1967 War and what the world regarded as Israeli occupied Palestinian territory. On top of security concerns. Literally about midnight the evening before the morning of his scheduled arrival, we were in small Palace office negotiating. I had one mid-level officer with me and I think there were three of them and we found ourselves at a total stalemate in terms of security and logistics on how Secretary Christopher was going to cross the bridge. We were talking about a trip that was scheduled to begin in about eight hours.

Suddenly there was a knock at door of this small office and the King walked in, greeted us, sat down, in fact sat backwards on a small folding chair leaning forward against the back rest and said, Can I help you?

I say to his minion, please tell his Majesty your views on Secretary Christopher's arrival and then allow me to kindly tell him where we have disagreements and then I am sure he will see the way forward for us.

Everyone started laughing and tittering -- a little bit nervous. The Jordanians meekly stated their security problems with the folks crossing the Bridge. This was not policy. They were talking on the level of security problems but frankly now that I recall it there was a policy angle that underlay their arguments. They didn't like Christopher crossing,

coming to Jordan through the Occupied Territories. That having once been Jordan the visual was a little too complex. Coming through what had once been Jordan, what was now occupied by Israelis it might upset Palestinians who comprised about half the population of Jordan, it was not comfortable. I think they focused on security because they were so nervous about the other optic and thought they could win us over to another arrangement (for example, helicopter) for getting Christopher across by citing those security considerations. That was my own interpretation of the impasse.

We worked it out. The King said, Oh, sure he can come over. We will talk to the Israelis and we will make sure everything is coordinated and secure. It was absolutely smooth the next day. So if my interpretation of the Palace minions' hesitation was right, Hussein blew those concerns off and focused on the surface issue -- security.

That incident illustrated the informality of the King.

Christopher made so many trips. There was a good hunk of time where I was acting DCM after Ambassador Harrison left so when this occurred, I can't tell you, to be honest.

Q: I met the king once when I was in Dhahran. This was about 1957 or so. He was just a young guy.

KOVACH: In his mid 20s or so.

Q: I kept thinking he's going to be killed within a few years if not sooner. There was no doubt in my mind that he wouldn't make it.

How did you find Harrison as ambassador?

KOVACH: I had great respect for him but to be honest about it he had problems and the problems didn't involve me directly except in one respect.

He and his wife I think both contributed to this problem. There was a real what I call 'upstairs, downstairs' problem with that mission. In all fairness to Roger and his good lady, part of it was structural. The ratio of staff to diplomats in that embassy was extraordinarily high because a lot of agencies had regional operations there so among the Americans, it was almost one diplomat to five staff. Even within the diplomatic staff, Roger and his good lady whose name I am not remembering, the heads of section, they loved us. They knew us by name, they knew our families, they were really, it was a very nicely integrated family feeling but not for the people below. I had three or four American officers working under me. They felt neglected, invisible. My senior FSNs hated to go over to the residence to organize events because they felt they were treated like maids, and these were some very highly educated people. That was the Harrisons' problem. A brilliant guy, probably the best and I say this as the perennial press attaché, probably the most skillful with the press I'd ever seen. Brilliant analyst, loved to brief journalists on deep background. No Western diplomat speaking on background but off the record, just steal this idea if you like it.

This was still in the day when big American and British papers kept very robust foreign bureaus and put very good people in them. How journalism changed in my career we can maybe talk about at the end; pathetic and alarming from the point of view of a citizen.

I think in part he won a Pulitzer Prize for one of the Washington Post writers whom he talked to regularly. The foreign correspondents loved him. His insightful analyses essentially gave them a broader analytical framework. I would insist on taping the conversations. He would say, nah. I would say this is what I am paid to do and it is for your protection. I think he was great.

Then he and I collaborated on an out of the box project that almost certainly swung a national election. This was probably one of the singular high points in my tour. Jordan was coming up on their second parliamentary election after the 17 year hiatus during which there was no elected parliament. The first election had been in 89 and this is typical and we are seeing this in Arab Spring in a different context. When you run an autocratic regime and it is in an Islamic country, the only kind of opposition that has any kind of infrastructure and organization is the mosque and that's because regimes can't afford to completely chop the legs of the Islamic civil society off because then they lose the legitimacy of governing in some kind of at least symbolic consonance with religious values.

In the first election of 89, the Muslim Brotherhood won a lot of seats and the second elections were coming up and we were obviously interested. By the way, this is sensitive. It's not secret and it's not, it doesn't involve clandestine actors but I think it is important that we put this out there. The people involved are mostly dead.

I am observing that there are all these rich people newly exiled from the Gulf back in Jordan after the 1991 War all with Jordanian passports. I hesitate to call them Jordanians without adding this qualification. A lot of them were Palestinian and they got thrown out of the Gulf because of Jordan's siding with Saddam. So there were literally several hundred thousand of returnees, we are not talking about a few handfuls here. You saw all these mansions coming up in the hills and I knew who these people were; they were generally highly educated, often Western educated. And rich. Even the ones that were observant Muslims were I would say rationalists. My social circle had expanded in that direction so my thinking was based on first hand contact.

People were getting on edge about the election prospects. The Brotherhood had better organization and it struck me that the key to this election to ensure a moderate parliament, certainly the direction the Palace and appointed cabinet wanted to see things move, that is towards moderation and secular governance. It turns out that Ambassador Harrison and I were thinking the same thing -- get these people to think of themselves as Jordanian citizens and maybe they would bother to register to vote. He said, You know, there are hundreds of thousands of people here and what can we do?

He piled me in the limo to call on the Minister of Information. We steered the conversation to the elections; and then to the question of what could we do in the media to persuade these people to register to vote?

I cannot be honest whether it was Roger that came up with this concrete idea or me but we were kind of were feeding off each other at that point. I said, How about if I bring out an expert on public service announcements and we do a TV and radio voter registration campaign and the images are these people, very recognizable, building their houses up in the hills.

I explored that possibility. I reached back to friends in Washington. Who is out there that could help us help the Jordanian establishment. I heard of a man, Henry Valentino that some in the US had dubbed the 'father of the PSA'. He was semi-retired but had taken on work for USAID in Latin America teaching PSA campaign and production skills. Meanwhile, the head of the TV who was a neighbor with whom I was on cordial terms. He and I talked over a whiskey at his house that week. I said, If brought a man like Valentino to Jordan Radio and TV, could you get a cadre of people from among your directors; that kind of get the politics of the notion I had? Get what we are about and willing to play along without making a scandal?

He got a cadre of about eight TV and radio directors. Mr. Valentino agreed to come out but an immediate problem was that he was used to pay at the higher USAID rates that significantly outstripped the modest honorarium and per diem that USIA paid. I said to Roger I can get this guy but I can't afford him from my post budget nor can my agency so what I suggest you do is take the USAID director, take him by the feet. Shake till the change comes out because the kind of money we are talking about is small potatoes for USAID. They didn't want to deal with it. So I said, get him to give get us the money under what they call a PASA, which is an acronym for some kind of money transfer. Roger did it. Shook the money loose and this guy wanted a \$500 a day consulting fee and \$300 per day per diem and he wanted to fly business class, the whole nine yards, as we New Englanders say.

Valentino came out and he was terrific -- even better than advertised. He and I are still friendly. We still see each other. He is kind of a Perry Como type, smart, observant of human interaction, charming and knows how to do this work technically perhaps better than anyone else in the world. He worked with the designated directors designing the campaign. Acting on another of my welcomed suggestions, I said to the TV Director friend, just in case word of the core campaign gets out, let s do a couple of other campaigns. The Director agreed and he and I thought about what else is important? Traffic safety issues were looming large and the accident rate was going through the ceiling. Traffic safety was an obvious one and the last one was a little like California in the 20s. People were building houses right on earthquake fault zones. Jordan has very active fault zones. How about earthquake consciousness? Get municipalities and tribes to survey their regions before they build a new building right on a fault zone? Those were the three PSA campaigns Valentino helped shape on our USG dollar; we did all three, all came out about the same time.

The registration ads were really good. They had exactly the right images, exactly the right voices, exactly the right accents, exactly the right nuance. Among the population we were aiming for we probably got about 90 or 95% to register. Intuitively, they understood what the underlying political challenge was.

Q: In your statements, were you saying this is being a good citizen as opposed to otherwise those

KOVACH: You didn't have to say it. This is a very attuned society. You didn't have to say it. You just showed these secular people building their houses in the hills. These people got it, they totally got it. They got it that they had no other place to go and that it would be a good idea to vote given the balance of political forces in the country. Given the size of the electorate, several hundred thousand additional votes most going in one direction swung the election.

Q: They had just gone through this tremendous shock of the Jordanians Palestinian expulsion from Kuwait.

KOVACH: Not only Kuwait. There were sizable numbers expelled from the other Gulf countries, the Emirates, Saudi, Kuwait, Qatar.

Q: How did you see the politics of it? How were they settling in?

KOVACH: They had scads of money. They were, they all carried that Jordanian passport but as far as their allegiance or emotional attachment, I think, they appreciated the king a hell of a lot, frankly and some of them had been pro Saddam too, to be brutally honest. They understood the politics of that perfectly. I don't think

Q: Did you find an increased appreciation for the United States because we had certainly shown in that brief little war great technical expertise and all that.

KOVACH: I think they realized we were the right ally to have.

I think that after Saddam's defeat at our hands, Jordanians began to see is that it might be time to bring their ongoing relationship with Israel out in the open. That of course became the jewel in the crown of a very intense three years for me. I saw things through the peace treaty and have those stories to tell too. It was a very seminal moment in time.

Q: Did you look at that constituency as being sort of an American policy supporter.

KOVACH: Not necessarily; I think most of them were opposed to the Brotherhood and leaned towards a secular kind of politics if not the Palace. But even if not Palestinian themselves, they were very pro-PLO which put the United States at best in a kind of 'gray' area in their sentiments.

I think the policy they looked for was moderation in government and frankly, a government that would show some leadership in keeping the street at bay which clearly hadn't happened with Saddam. It was the street that forced the king to lean towards Saddam.

Q: When you say street we are talking

KOVACH: The Arab street, public opinion.

Q: It has been the great bugaboo of our foreign policy towards the Arab world and we always talk about the Arab street. Sometimes it does, sometimes it doesn't. I think it is overplayed sometimes.

KOVACH: I think it is too. In Jordan I don't think it was overplayed. It was huge. The street was very powerful, very powerful.

Later on in my tour when the king first got lymphoma and I think he went off to the Mayo Clinic to get treated; the day he came back flying the Alia, the Air Jordan commercial jetliner himself there were over a million people in the streets in Amman. Close to a quarter or a third of the country was out in the capital city. They were out and the king flew in and he did an aerial salute, wiggling the wings or whatever you call it before banking South 30 kilometers to the airport. The people received this in a kind of blissful hysteria. They didn't fire guns in the air like the Yemenis. But this was really powerful, very powerful. I have not seen the like event in any place I have ever been.

The other thing was that several huge swatches of Amman were formerly Palestinian refugee camps that morphed into urban neighborhoods -- and that 'street' was unequivocally pro-Saddam.

Q: What was the Jordanian government like then? Did the king have a coterie?

KOVACH: The king had such a good feeling for the tribes and for regional balance. Cabinets would be juggled every few months for two reasons in my view. to make sure that a non- palace power base would not get too strong but also just to make sure everyone got their, had a sense they were getting a piece of the pie in terms of power. The Mukhabarat intelligence service was very strong but subtle.

Foreign Service officers with a three year assignment cycle, we felt like we were the rocks of Gibraltar out there. There was a sort of sarcasm along those lines in the embassy. Instead of bureaucrats outlasting the ever transferring diplomats, the diplomats tended to out last their senior most contacts in government -- a real reversal of the usual pattern.

Q: How was the USIA instrument used there? Was it used well?

KOVACH: I think so. I think my predecessor, the one that went off to Morocco but who never made it, was a good manager. He was a good Arabist. His main problem was we

had a really intelligent and good staff, probably the best staff I have ever had and he never kept them in the picture. They never understood why they were doing what and that's not my style. Without giving away secrets or classified information you can give people a brief on the general idea behind our programs and actions and you know something? You get their feedback and their expert opinion. With him, he unfortunately is dead so he can't defend himself but he just didn't do that. He was very sweet. He wasn't like a horror show boss. They loved him but they felt like he treated them like little children.

Q: This is one of our major problems that people talk about. How one treats the local employees.

KOVACH: My approach with a structure like a USIA office or public affairs section is that we are a team and I make sure there are social occasions and make sure there is a real feeling of solidarity. At a picnic there is no hierarchy. We are all kind of out there with our families. I did that in Jordan. We had a couple of great picnics out in the desert on the road to Baghdad. There are some old ruins there. One of my senior FSNs, she didn't die of cancer. She had a cancer. She died of chemotherapy. That broke our hearts. That brought us together the last year and a half in a way those earlier picnics never did. She was so beloved. A wonderful woman. I also kept an open door. Even though I have a strong, directive management style, it certainly did not keep my Jordanian staff or my American subordinates from frequently darkening my door with criticism and advice.

Q: What about the media in Jordan?

KOVACH: It was controlled but there was a lot of license to bang on the USG regarding Arab-Israeli issues. It was a vent. The Palace and Government would let them vent on that issue against us and then they won't do investigative reporting or look to scrutinize domestic scandals. There were some journalists that would habitually attack us in the editorials but if you saw them in person, you could have a very nuanced discussion about any issue under the sun including the Arab Israeli conflict.

Frankly, I think the program side of my job was more important but I tend to think that in any place.

Q: Let's talk about the programs. What were the major programs?

KOVACH: The overwhelming change that I had to cope with was the move from a downtown office, extremely well located to all the other major offices in the government and in the city, even the large refugee camps that had become the urban neighborhoods to a then remote outer suburban location in a new fortress like (so called Bobby Inman) embassy.

I took over the USIS about four weeks after the move and so one of my challenges was to draw the public to our new locale. We had a large library, a beautiful program room,

getting people out there and getting them over the security was the challenge. That was a really major part of my first year to put us on the map in a positive way.

Q: How did you do that?

KOVACH: I did it first of all by doing a lot of negotiation with the RSO about

Q: Regional security officer

KOVACH: about access to my part of the compound and we actually I think put up a fence and closed the gate and that allowed them to screen people coming to my part a lot less. The place was beautiful. It was a beautiful embassy, in a high end neighborhood. Once Jordanians got in there and saw it they felt they were complemented that we would build an embassy like that in Jordan.

And then just getting a lot of programs out; getting musicians out. We'd program them in town but we'd always have an event out there at the Embassy when we knew we had a draw.

I had a cultural attaché who was a very big environmentalist and we did a huge Arbor Day (pre-Earth Day) exhibit largely improvised by him because Jordan had, there were enough Western educated people. They had a strong environmental movement for an Arab country. We did this huge fair in the courtyard. People flocked to it in April. The weather was just gorgeous. It was just really great.

We had an exhibit hall and I decided I wanted to get a blockbuster exhibit under our roof and fast that year. Somehow over the years I had gotten to know this very interesting Catholic priest who was an academic, Father Carney Gavin, at Harvard and he had put his hands on one of the best photo collections of the Middle East going back to the beginning of photography in the 19th century. And there was a bombing. No not at our embassy but at Harvard! Some building had been bombed. This phenomenal photo collection had been hidden in the ceiling and like a rainstorm these photos just poured down. The good Father snagged them for the Harvard Middle East collection. I saw him in the States. We are both gregarious Bostonians so we kind of bonded and he said I would really like to get these out to the region.

I was thinking I will put them in my new hall. I suggested that and a few months later we got them, I really did good press work. I got CNN and a couple of the networks to broadcast it, the opening. We had in two months 7,000 visitors. For an embassy exhibit hall this was pretty major. My colleague in Tel Aviv relayed Israeli jealousy at Jordan getting the exhibit first and the Jordanians were out and out flattered.

I did it that way. I would often invite people up in small groups to tea. If we had someone who was press worthy I had a very nice conference room, held about 25 people. I would do the press conference there. When Christopher started going to the shuttle diplomacy in

the ambassador's house which is on compound, I remember a couple of nights where we had Arafat on compound. We had some pretty high powered press events on compound.

Q: What about universities?

KOVACH: We had strong Fulbright connections but we didn't have a Fulbright commission which I remedied. I negotiated the Fulbright commission into existence. As of this editing in early 2015, the Commission has been going for 21 years.

Q: Why hadn't there been one?

KOVACH: I think what had happened is my predecessor had wanted to create a commission but then the Gulf war came. In my day, after 1992, everyone felt it was time and so I inherited a very loose template and basically had to negotiate the thing into existence. It took over a year, pretty much all of calendar 93.

Q: How about visitor programs? Did you have a pretty good cadre of people?

KOVACH: We had a lot of grants for a country of Jordan's size. In addition we felt it was particularly important for Jordanians to travel on normalization grants for two reasons: one just to get more Jordanians traveling but so Jordanians, Occupied Palestinians and Israelis would be exposed to one another by going on programs together so I was able to mushroom the size of our International Visitor Program participants in that way while making them a real building block for eventual peace. And, capitalizing on a program formula that I had just 3 years earlier given a big boost to in the context of the ECA budget wars.

Q: How did the West Bank play? By this time Jordan had renounced its connection to it but it was occupied by the Israeli army. Were you able to get much going with the Jordanians and the West Bankians?

KOVACH: Not so much. It was mostly in the States where we were the agents of contact between the two populations. Jordan, I think, was ambivalent, or they were ambivalent about losing the West Bank and they were a little bit scared about the Palestinians among them, educated, mobilized and then the masses in a few teeming refugee camps and urban ghettos formerly camps. It was not a picture that would give an East Bank Jordanian a sense of warm and fuzzy stability, to be honest. For in any scenario of regional chaos, the Jordanian Palestinians and the Palestinians in the West Bank would in their numbers overwhelm the East Bankers.

We did a lot with exchanges but the commission was really important. They are such good academics and Jordan University is a very good university. Crown Prince Hassan had started this Islamic university on my watch and we gave them a lot of positive attention too.

So we got the commission negotiated. It was Washington, as usual, that was the main problem. I got really sick of doing Fulbright deals in my career, fighting Washington. Three times in my career where I was commissioner or head of the commission, I would have to fight Washington in different ways.

Q: What was the problem with Washington?

KOVACH: With Jordan it was actually a persnickety junior officer classmate of mine who was the branch chief for the Near East for the Fulbright programs. She was just being a stickler for technicalities. I back channeled to the lawyers in USIA's version of L to get to sanity, to get to yes, because she didn't want the commission to happen for whatever reason, that was clear.

The Crown Prince and the U.S. Ambassador were to be the chairs and the Crown Prince in those days was a player and someone with great intellectual inclination. He was very supportive. At times I had to have him pull strings in the States to kind of knock heads for me because I just had to work around this Fulbright office. This is a perfect example.

Then we got the commission, we got it signed on my terms, great, great. Hiring the executive director we had 144 applications and of the best five, three of them were good friends of mine. So I structured the final interview process and then conveniently went on leave when the commissioners had to make the final decision. My best friend among the 144 got the job. Guess who the commission director is now? Nineteen (21 years as of this editing) years later he is still there. He has made this thing into a colossus. He's got private sector funding. He has really played the game well. He has made it into a really model commission. And he didn't have to battle the shadow of somehow having been installed as a favorite of mine, in the early going.

Q: Did Syria play any role there?

KOVACH: It did. Black September had support from these radical

Q: This is 1970.

KOVACH: The more radical PLO factions the Damascus regime, was coddling at the time. They were very scared of Syria and then some of these northern Jordanian tribal families had family members in the Hauran, the southern part of Syria. Borders were artificial. They were colonial borders so yeah, there was a lot of paranoia about Syria, at the same time a real effort on the surface of things keep relations on the up and up and happy.

Q: Did you yourself and your office have any relations with the American embassy in Tel Aviv?

KOVACH: Yes.

Q: What were you up to?

KOVACH: The PAO in the day was one of my closest friends so we identified areas of overlapping interest. In Jerusalem with another PAO at the Consulate who was a friend we did that even more so. That came into play when the peace process really began to gel. I left Washington just before this period of fervent follow-up of Madrid where all three sides, the States, the Palestinians and the Israelis all signed onto the Oslo pact which was a kind of secret diplomacy that showed so much promise. For those last three years after Madrid and Oslo I was involved in a policy I felt great about. We had a young president that I thought was energized and had the right vision so I got drunk the Oslo Kool Aid too.

What was very exciting was big things were happening between Jordan and Israel. The king was meeting Rabin more and more. You had a feeling that something big was going to happen and it did.

Let me talk about the first of the many Christopher visits during my three year Jordan tour.

Out came the secretary, this very lawyerly deliberate guy, a very nice man. The first morning of this first trip, the country team got him in the 'bubble' for a country team brief.

Q: The bubble is a plastic room which is designed to keep eavesdropping out.

KOVACH: The country team was in there with the secretary and his staff. The Ambassador was still Roger Harrison. The secretary doesn't know the Middle East, that was clear and he was big enough not to hide his ignorance. He seemed to want to learn.

Well, Mr. Secretary, what did they tell you about us? Ambassador Harrison asked.

Christopher laid it out and it was a very hostile, anti-Jordanian, stupid pre-briefing he had gotten. I think again it was certain mid-level elements in Washington, certain neocon elements that just filled his head full of nonsense.

Roger said something to the effect of: Sir, with due respect, I think we have another story to tell here.

The Secretary said, Let's postpone my first appointment. So we were in there for three hours. We asserted that the king was an ally, a moderate. We reminded him that the monarchy has been meeting with the Israelis secretly since King Abdullah's days. If we are thinking about peace, this is an ally we absolutely need to have. We hadn't achieved regime change in Iraq. This was a fuse in the Middle East and that we needed to work with Jordan, the gateway to the Levant. There was too the lingering link -- up to 1958 when officers including Saddam toppled the Iraqi monarchy; the overthrown monarch had been a first cousin of Hussein's, a Hashemite.

Really his whole attitude, his whole affect changed. He had very good meetings. I think he respected the Jordanians and they felt the love. He said he was going to put a lot of emphasis on the relationship and that our pre brief for him had been a paradigm changer. I never experienced that in my career where a principal came out with such a contrarian pre brief from Washington.

Q: Were you aware of this hostility?

KOVACH: Less than I should have been. I guess I felt naive at the time.

Q: Were others too complaining about

KOVACH: I think the Ambassador understood it better because he had been with Kimmitt in the mid 80s. He knew the policy level and the attendant domestic pressures including the Israel Lobby with a familiarity I never could claim. But it was clear that King Hussein's lean to Saddam in 1991 to save his skin domestically was still being held against him in Washington.

Q: Why were the neocons, this is a term used for neo conservatives who later became very prominent in the Bush 2 regime.

KOVACH: I think they had it in for Iraq. It was a very Israeli centric view point that almost deliberately wrote off alliances in the Arab world as a way forward towards peace and reconciliation. I think they saw that this guy Hussein (and maybe they didn't give a damn about the Arab street) that he had sort of stabbed them in the back and that he leaned toward Iraq and Iraq was the main enemy. People that are more pro Israeli than pro American interest frankly saw Iraq as the main threat and we hadn't vanquished it in the end; and here was this guy who basically stabbed us in the back after all this American largesse and affection and I think that's where it was coming from. That was part of it.

Q: I would think there was more than somebody whose feeling towards Hussein as not being just almost like a rejected lover. It was this real emotional thing.

KOVACH: I think that is well put.

Q: Harrison in his oral history talks about he was getting these instructions to really stick it to the king. He was basically ignoring his instructions or at least modifying them to such an extent that it wasn't the confrontation that the dominant voice in the Department hoped to get. There are times when this is what an ambassador really should do.

KOVACH: I think he was damned good at it. At the policy level he was superb. You know him well enough having interviewed him to know he's got a light touch of humor, a sense of irony. I think he is a very whole person. I think the world of him.

I had access because by that time I was number three in the embassy. Doug Keene, the Deputy Chief of Mission, another wonderful, wonderful guy, much maligned by the Department later, he never got a mission, good Arabist, a very personable guy, bright, good on policy, great manager -- but much, much maligned.

Q: Why was he maligned?

KOVACH: He was maligned because he liked to drink beer. It was a very puritanical period. They had him labeled. I think at one point he was being considered to be ambassador to Lebanon which would have been very appropriate. He had served there. He was blackballed because they thought he had a drinking problem. He didn't have a drinking problem; he just enjoyed beer at social events. We have some real puritan streaks in the Department and in the society.

Q: How did things flow from this first meeting with Christopher?

KOVACH: My impression was we turned a corner, that we had a new secretary and we had intervened forcefully enough to compel him to question the pre-brief he'd gotten from Washington and that he'd gotten it right and he came away with the right conclusions.

Q: About that time did you have any contacts at the palace of say, here's your problem and we are working on it. Did they understand the problem?

KOVACH: My impression was we were pushing them forward on the peace process but at the same time there was a blockade of Aqaba which I need to talk about, a U.S. blockade of Aqaba. That definitely extended into the period a long period where Doug Keene was chargé and I at times was the acting DCM.

Q: Do you know where Doug Keene is now?

KOVACH: He is either in McLean or Maine. He is a Maine-iac and a real crusty New Englander. We used to see them socially but I haven't seen him in years. I can't tell you.

They were from this very interesting town on the Maine coast -- it was basically a Northern Baptist commune. We visited them up there once. I remember being on this very rocky beach and the water cold enough to give males in particular a very hard time. I remember we had a very, very nice visit with them up there. It is quite a special little place where they met and both their families went in their childhood. I think they may have gone to Colby College together too. She was from Massachusetts. They are great people, lovely, lovely people.

My feeling was ok, we wouldn't suspend the blockade but we said begin to lean forward, begin to lean forward in negotiating alternatives. It became increasingly obvious to me, as a second string senior negotiator that the Jordanians would insist on lifting the

blockade to move beyond a certain point with Israel-at least publicly. For our part, having valued the coalition in the Gulf War and not wanting to exceed its mandate -- which was just pushing the Iraqis out of Kuwait, we were afraid that without these enforced sanctions against Iraq, Saddam might rearm and that our decision not to push in and take Baghdad would come back to haunt us politically at home. What we believed we were preventing was the downloading of sanctioned goods in Aqaba which would then be transshipped to Iraq by truck.

It was humiliating for Jordan. The visual was that it was a kind of punishment for their lean towards Baghdad in the Gulf War. This continued through the end of Roger Harrison's time as Ambassador and into the better part of the almost one year Doug Keene was charge'.

Q: While you were there, did we lift the blockade?

KOVACH: They never would have made peace with Israel without us doing so. It would seem like we forced them to make peace with the blockade still in place. I believe too that the meetings between Rabin and King Hussein were intensifying. It was a hard sell in Washington again. The Embassy, I think, started advocating at a certain point that ok; we need to get rid of this. Jordan has really leaned forward with the Israelis. These are my impressions. Someone like Doug, a political officer and acting chief of mission, he is going to give you much more granularity in this analysis of sequence but these were my intuitions, based on being the number three or number two in the mission. We are sort of teasing, carrot/stick, and carrot/ stick. The blockade is a stick and at a certain point the carrot game was being that blockade still in place but we committed to our Jordanian interlocutors to do a lot of back selling in Washington. That's my impression. But I can't help but believe that the Jordanians were asking the Israelis in their quiet talks to pressure us to lift the blockade.

Q: Did you have a feeling again as you were saying, you weren't right at the heart of this negotiation.

KOVACH: There were a couple of meetings I attended where I was acting DCM.

Q: Did you have the feeling that you were negotiating with the Jordanians and the Israelis with a not overly positive presence in Washington overlooking you?

KOVACH: Let me elaborate a hunch I have and put it bluntly. I think at a certain point the Israeli lobby saw that it was time to suspend the blockade and put due pressure on. I think the back reach involved a more than a little of that.

Q: There are so many players in anything dealing with Israel.

KOVACH: Yes, there are.

Q: Did you feel any of that?

KOVACH: I think my bias would be to suspect an influence maybe where it didn't exist. I really need to be careful about this. I always sensed it was a factor. Roger would have been a much more adept player. Doug Keene was a career Arabist and laid back and feeling that he was in charge. It wasn't totally his show. I think it was more the stream of visitors we had.

Q: Did you get visitors, Americans who were coming who were closely identified with AIPAC? American Israelis?

KOVACH: I don't think so. It is not part of my recollection. I think it was more the high level government players like Secretary Christopher who visited Jordan 14 or 15 times during my three year tour who may have brought that message back to those elements and to the lobby and said that Jordan is really leaning in the right direction but this blockade of Aqaba is a humiliation. If I were them I would have said we didn't finish the job in Iraq. You've gotta accept Iraq is still there and for Jordan that truck commerce is not insignificant. I suspect that these arguments were all made in the right chambers. And through a combination of our direct advocacy as a mission, through our high level visitors and through Israel whose leaders met with Hussein regularly on a discrete basis.

Q: Did the king make any visits to Washington while you were there?

KOVACH: Oh yes. The one I remember and I am sure he made more than one. I believe too that when he went for medical treatment he had some meetings too. The main one was where he met Rabin at the White House for the first time.

Q: He'd met him before, hadn't he?

KOVACH: Many times secretly, yes but they had an 'outing'. I think it was July 26, 1994; certainly that week. I was on home leave but was asked by NEA to time my Washington consultations so I could handle international press access at the White House that day. Which I did. There were some interesting credential kerfuffles that aren't worth talking about. It was a great day; memorable and gratifying.

Whether Arafat was part of that or not, I don't remember.

Q: What was your impression, just by hearsay and all but mainly by personal contact, of Arafat?

KOVACH: I think Arafat was a pretty sincere guy, a sort of straight shooting, but in an Arab context, driven manner. I think in a way, like King Hussein, he had a high falutin education but was more a man of the people. He had to be. When the PLO renounced pushing Israel into the sea in about 1988 our naive assumption or at least in some circles around NEA was that OK, his fantasy was to be the George Washington of Palestine where in fact he was always more comfortable being Abu Jihad as he was called, affectionately by his people, literally the 'father of the struggle'. It would take an awful

lot to move him off that dime. As the Taba rejection in 2000, late 2000 that he turned his back on proved. It is probably a better deal than the Palestinians will ever get except from father time because I think eventually there will be one state and it will be a Palestinian state but I think we are two generations away from that. If there are any sands left in the hourglass of opportunity for a two state solution, I think they have pretty much run out.

I still think it is the ideal solution. I say that just knowing the Ottoman legacy and the communal/tribal culture of both the Arabs and in a different way, the Jews.

You know what Rabin said once in my earshot to King Hussein? He said we have lived as the bully on the block alongside our Palestinian cousins. We have been an occupying force. Even cousins need a divorce before they can remarry. He was for the fence idea but a straight defensible line, blocking off settlements, putting some Palestinian villages along a green line in Palestine. He was for squaring off the borders which I think was a really not a bad idea.

Q: So solutions to the Palestinian problem, did everybody have their own plan?

KOVACH: People had different plans, yes. Certainly different factions in Israel did. In our government I think we were just for anything that the Israel lobby would support. With the exception of Madrid, Oslo (mistaken as that approach proved to be) and Clinton's attempts at Camp David in 2000. I think Baker was particularly poisonous, as skilled a diplomat as he is because he had this sort of Republican thesis (that Bush 43 rejected to his credit late in his administration) that it is not our place to offer bridging solutions when negotiations hit a stalemate. Baker was adamant about that and I vigorously disagree with that, despite my pride when Baker crafting the very timely Madrid meeting. I think it is a total misreading of our politics and the expectations and the efficacy that we can have. I don't think the Lobby, even the most stalwart AIPAC people would disagree with my view, unless they got paranoid and felt that we were going to shove something down Israel's throat. There was probably a vein of that but I think overwhelmingly both the Israelis and the Arabs always expected us to play a heavy handed role when necessary, more than mediation, at times stepping in and being the arbitrator or putting a bridging solution on the table for negotiation.

Q: The Camp David Agreement has all sorts of bridges in it.

KOVACH: Exactly. It is the only thing that works and I think we, at least partly because of the lobby, have missed some major moments. I think Rabin's assassination was hugely tragic because I have had been in a room with Arafat and Rabin. Those two guys, God. They could be like schoolboys. They'd laugh together. For Arafat, that rapport was fundamentally important and I think if Arafat had had Rabin rather than Ehud Barak, who is a figure I don't think very highly of, in Taba, he would have taken the deal and the rest would be history.

Q: Today is the 31st of May, 2012 with Peter Kovach.

Peter, we are in Jordan, halfway through.

KOVACH: Did I talk about the founding of the Fulbright commission the last time?

Q: Yes, you did.

KOVACH: The main stick in the mud was the NEA Branch chief in the Washington Fulbright office. That was to be the first instance in a pattern where I was on commissions and took somewhat bold initiatives or championed them and Washington resisted.

Q: Before we get started on that, could you explain from your perspective what was in it for the United States, the Fulbright commissions?

KOVACH: It was a way to get American scholars out to put themselves in other shoes and see the world through other lenses but also do the opposite. But with far greater depth and intensity of time than you get with the shorter professional exchanges or speaker programs. I think the idea of a commission which was a perfectly bilaterally balanced group of usually about eight people, four from each side is a very sound one. The formula was usually two government, two private members for each country. It was a good way to run an executive board of a commission. It gave us more outreach in terms of private fundraising and a kind of mutuality, at least a symbolically a semblance of mutuality.

Right now the Department is frowning on creating new commissions, as you may know, which is something I don't quite understand. Maybe Fulbright's day is done but why you wouldn't want to manage educational exchanges bilaterally frankly escapes me. It may be my own narrow-mindedness but it escapes me.

Q: Do you think it is just showing that you no longer care or is it symbolic?

KOVACH: Do you know what is interesting to me? One of the tensions that I felt with the Jordan commission and later with the Pakistani commission but not with the Japan commission is that the Jordanians and Pakistanis definitely had developmental agendas for any scholarship recipients they sent abroad. Ironically, in Pakistan to look ahead to that, ECA was a major funder and they resisted developmental considerations and scholars coming in fields like agriculture due to pressure from the Board. The Board of Foreign Scholarships under every President I have ever served has always immersed itself in this mantra of this is for mutual exchange and high mindedness about each other first and only about what you study secondarily but with one exception -- a lingering attitude that people studying in the humanities or soft social sciences somehow experience exchange on a deeper level than people who study science, engineering, agriculture. There has always been that tension. When you are working with Fulbright in a developing country or second world place like Jordan, Jordan being a fairly advanced country, or Pakistan which has huge disparities between the developed sectors and the majority of the country which is in abject poverty and ignorance -- under those

circumstances the host country members are rightfully going to push for sending scholars to the U.S. to fulfill urgent developmental needs, not to study literature.

There are tensions there. I still haven't quite sorted out what the ambivalence about commissions is. I may in the next week because I will be up in ECA doing consultations.

Q: Did Petra ever cross your radar?

KOVACH: Oh, sure. I was down in Petra many a time, luckily never saddled with taking VIPs down there.

One interestingly prominent exception was the former chairman of the board of AIG, the huge insurance group that has fallen into disrepute in the last four years. He later became chancellor of Brown University, his alma mater. His wife, a Brown professor, was a major league archeologist of Jordan. She had an incredible project that apparently at the time was revolutionary in archeology that we in the mission supported, largely moral support, the usual minor intercessions with the Jordanians an embassy does. They were digging an old temple from about a 3rd century AD in the valley floor of Petra. What they were doing was each day they would photograph and sketch the new stuff they found and kind of put this in a computer program they had created. The program could be compared to a layer cake. They could just by pushing a button or projecting on a wall, they could construct and destroy an image of the temple at a push of a button. This was phenomenal. I found it fascinating. We did the most to kick open the doors for these people, both in Jordan and at home, frankly. It was so important, what they were doing. I think that was of major significance. I am not the hugest archeology buff in the world but I have to say, that captured my imagination.

Through support for American archaeological researchers and a USAID contractor who was by training an archaeologist, I was able to pull together a team with funding to rescue one of the oldest human sites on earth.

In supporting the Petra work and the American institute that backed archaeology research, I became friends with Prince Raad. He was the royal most passionate about and supportive of archaeological research. The contractor, Dr. Cherie Lenzen (who had a brief career as a PD coned FSO later on) was a friend too. One day, she came into my office in a state of distress. She explained that a Neolithic site at the base of Jabal Amman on the Eastern side of the capital had just been bought by investors, returned from the Gulf and that they planned to build a high-rise. The site had yielded more than a handful, if I remember correctly, of white stone figures that had been dated about 5000 BC. Two of them for many years were in the atrium at the lowest level of the Smithsonian's Sackler Gallery and I believe are still in the collection.

I immediately recognized that we'd have to act fast and engage Prince Raad to get a dig organized to at least make sure there was no more statuary before the site was developed. I quickly discovered that the knowledgeable archaeologist was in fact an American who was teaching in Germany at the University of Heidelberg. Realizing we might have but

weeks to act, I cold called him by phone -- he agreed to come down at the end of the term in a few weeks if funding could be found. Furthermore, I discovered he had a connection to the Archaeology Department at Yarmouk University in the North of Jordan. He spoke to a professor there who said he could corral a team of graduate students to dig for a few weeks, if the American professor could make it out.

It all happened very quickly. Prince Raad (who would have been the Hashemite King of Iraq had the monarchy there not been overthrown by the Baathists in 1958 and whose son was in recent times Jordanian Ambassador to the U.S.) used his influence to forestall the bulldozing of the site and the permit to develop it. I found the money (I wish I could remember where) to bring the professor down.

The stunning outcome of this came within the first few days of the dig. They dug down maybe another 6 inches and found the floor of the Neolithic city that had produced the statuary, as well as more statues. Any question of a permit to build ended and one of the handful of oldest and well preserved sites of human civilization on earth has been preserved to this day. While I am not the biggest archaeology buff among Arabists of my generation, this was an effort of which I am duly proud to have quarterbacked.

Q: What were sort of developments in the second half?

KOVACH: We talked about the Aqaba blockade as an obstacle to a peace that Jordan was leaning toward. We also talked about domestic American resistance to warming up to Jordan on the part of the lobby, which I think was coming around in the face of King Hussein's obvious lean towards a bilateral peace treaty. But that push on the Lobby to back down I suspect came from Israel. At home, the Lobby remains the tail that wags the dog.

King Abdullah had met the Israelis in the early 1950's. King Hussein was meeting secretly for years. I think Jordan was getting ready to follow Egypt's steps and the pace of this all intensified. I mentioned the White House ceremony in July, 1994 where I was the chief press officer. I believe that is the first time Hussein and Rabin met publicly. We didn't realize how quickly this was going to lead to peace. They were meeting then publicly and regularly almost I would say a couple of times a month after that. Suddenly one day in mid October we knew that Rabin had helicoptered over to one of palaces that looks down on the Jordan and Dead Sea Valley, an easy drop from Jerusalem. Suddenly the ambassador was convoked, as I recall. They announced to us they were signing a peace treaty in six days and that they wanted President Clinton to be the witness.

The new DCM, as I recall, had just arrived so in a way I was operationally still in charge as I had Arabic, knew the key Jordanian players and had their trust. I got reinforcements in from other posts, including my designated successor. We had a two site presidential visit; the easy site was Amman where the Clinton White House wanted him to do a speech to an Arab parliament. He felt this was a good moment. An American president had never spoken to an Arab parliament and this was truly a freely elected parliament.

The second was the actual treaty signing site which the two sides decided they would do in the desert on the Jordan-Israel border about ten clicks north of Aqaba.

The thing got more complicated from the embassy's perspective because the Eilat airport, if you have ever gone down there in southern Israel, has a very short runway. It can only accommodate two engine jets, despite all the tourism whereas the Jordanians in more of a militarized society had almost a two mile runway at their airport out in the desert and could accommodate Air Force One, a jumbo jet of journalists, yaddah, yaddah, yaddah. So the signing logistics from an American point of view had to be staged pretty much from the Jordanian side.

The White House advance came out, run by Ambassador Will Ito, who is a terrific guy. He was our ambassador to Thailand and he was NSC chief of staff at that point. He came out and everything seemed like sanity and light for the few hours he gave us the next day and then the Clinton Schedule Cs came in behind him, what a contrast.

Q: When you say Clinton Schedule Cs? Explain who they are.

KOVACH: These are political appointees but even worse, as you may recall, Bush Senior had a large White House travel office which Clinton inherited. The size of that travel office had gotten exposed in the press in the waning days of the Bush administration. The scandal was that all these people were kept on payroll just to support occasional presidential travel and almost every function they supported was a duplicative of things that could be done by State and other agencies under an Embassy tent. Clinton to avoid that perception of a redundant travel office of mostly idle hirelings abolished the White House travel office, but kept a cadre of ex-campaign people on call. The Clinton White House would call on these people who had been advance types on the campaign trail but who were currently in the private sector back to do these big visits. These people were just like lunatics, out of control. They were undisciplined, they were unresponsive to direction. They didn't understand the embassy, they didn't understand the beginnings and ends of authorities and the fact that we were operating in such an ambiguity because we were planning this, we were sort of the back benchers as Jordanians and Israelis at the upper mid level sat down for the first time ever, in face to face planning meetings that represented the total forbidden fruits of all their upbringing; this to plan this huge event in just a few days' time.

We decided I would run the Aqaba event and that I would leave it to my PD colleagues that flew in to help to do the Amman parliament event. I had already written the talking points for President Clinton's historic speech. Returning from the Aqaba signing ceremony on the press plane, I rode into Amman on a bus with Dee Dee Meyers, Clinton's spokesperson. She asked me who wrote those talking points and I said as a matter of fact, I wrote them. She heaped me with praise and she said they were terrific. What I wanted to do in writing those points was very simple; I wanted the American president to give a speech to a foreign parliament, this being a pioneering speech to an Arab parliament that was addressed to the people in that country in the Middle East, not

talking through them to the American public or worse in this case, the Lobby, to score points.

They pretty much did that and my memory is weak but I put in some concrete images that they could use to illustrate certain points, democratization in particular. I remember getting some calls from a couple of my parliamentary friends that were very anti American, one an Islamist from the Ikhwan Muslimeen (Muslim Brotherhood) and one from the Baath party. They said we are going to boycott your president's speech. I hope you understand this shouldn't affect our friendship.

I said you make your own choice but give it a listen. One of the two said that they might attend but if so, threatened to stand with back turned to him and arms crossed in protest.

What was amazing when he gave that speech is that the same people that had called me were there and they were stomping in the aisles and applauding. It was just amazing how he won them over, in part with his personable style of speaking but in part, through the metaphors and images I had put in the talking points to touch Jordanian sensibilities.

The logistics of the signing ceremony were daunting so I had to devote my full six days to leading the U.S.G. team in Aqaba. We loaded up remote equipment and so forth and so on. We were told by the White House Press Office that we would probably have a press contingent of 275 journalists, a jumbo jet full. They were coming from Egypt; I guess the president had stopped in Egypt. The White House press lady, I found her one of the most incompetent, arrogant officials I have ever run into. I believe she was a Schedule C but only a GS 12. Her name was Ann Edwards. E-mailing about credentials we had painstakingly arrived at certain agreements by the second day of planning. She never fulfilled any of the things we agreed upon and then threw a fit when the plane arrived and we didn't have credentials ready for everyone. I said you never gave us the names. She was a disaster -- a manipulative liar.

The first day of planning, I led my embassy team down on a Jordanian troop carrying 'Hercules' C-131, along with the Jordanian planning team. We dramatically met the Israeli delegation in a tent in the desert. It was the first time any of these Israelis or Jordanians had ever met the other which is pretty amazing because these were sophisticated people. They were international beings from the prime minister's office and the palace, respectively. In our own International Visitor program, as I have explained, we often did a mix and match and the level of human break through was pretty amazing as a life time of suspicion and prejudice dissolved in momentary encounter, a handshake, eye to eye contact, and in this case -- working out details of a ceremony that would redefine their respective regional identities.

We arrived at the meeting spot, in a fancy tent right on the border to be symbolically correct. To my surprise it was an air conditioned tent. I had never in all my experience in the Middle East been in an air conditioned tent. There was a long table and of course the Israelis and Jordanians wanted me as head of the American delegation to sit at the table and moderate. I had talked this over with my ambassador, Wes Egan and we decided we

should step in where necessary, bridge where necessary but basically be back benchers. So after, they insisted we sit there initially so all three delegations did individual introductions. Then I said with your understanding and permission, the American delegation will now take seats behind the table which I had set up in the milling around on our arrival at the site. I told them that we are here for you, we are listening, we are flexible about our role but feel that this is your ceremony. You have asked us to witness it so let us do this meeting in the same symbolic fashion.

It was about a three hour meeting in which a lot was accomplished. We decided that the ceremony would take place in a patch of desert that two months before had been cleared of mines and we would have a bleacher that was set up 50% on the Israeli side, 50% on the Jordanian side. They agreed that all the logistics would be staged from the Jordanian side because of the huge American entourage needing an airfield that could accommodate Air Force One and the press plane, a second Jumbo Jet. I had to accommodate the 275 journalists in covering the event with phones and fax machines. That was going to be my piece of work, not my colleague in Tel Aviv's.

Nowadays, you'd expect Internet. In those days you needed telephone circuits, you needed a couple of functioning fax machines and you needed a podium with a PA system to broadcast or to do a background briefing or even something on the record should the need arise. This was just amazing to set up in the desert, on the border between two erstwhile enemies and on such short notice.

We agreed that we would accommodate the traveling press in an open tent with a goat skin cover. The Jordanians easily set that up.

I was sleeping not at all. I was 50 years old and I slept in that week ten hours the whole week. It was 24 hour duty. We got the phones installed. What was really the nail biter at sunset the night before a 10 am ceremony the next day, was the electricity. The Jordanian side with my press tent still hadn't been wired. I went at midnight to the home of the Jordanian General in charge of the Southern third of the country whom I had met that week. We were coordinating partners and I said, look, we still don't have electricity.

He said, I have done everything I can do. I am tearing my hair out.

I said, Can we let the Israelis do it?

He said, Yeah, but on the condition that no one in uniform crosses the border.

I said, I don't think that will be a problem so I drove over to the Israeli side which I was permitted to do in a car with diplomatic plates. I talked to the PM's people on the ground and gave them the conditions -- no uniformed presence in Jordan. and about three in the morning we had electricity. To the more spit and polish Jordanian military, the casual uniform style of their Israeli counterparts would hardly qualify as being in uniform. The Israeli electricians who showed up were in fact army but they came in jeans and tee-shirts.

Meanwhile, we are out there in the tent slowly setting up other things, and I am totally biting my nails. One of my minions, still an active officer in the service who is not terribly confident with logistics, he's more of a policy guy, he had to get the fax machines out. He had little supervisory instinct. The truck arrived with my colleague and the fax machines -- precariously placed but not secured on the truck bed. One of the two fax machines literally fell off the back of the truck and broke into pieces. So we had one fax machine. Everything else worked. By 4 in the morning we had podium speaker system working, and 75 phone lines which frankly was a triumph given the setting. I was cautioning the useless White House site advance that there was not going to be a phone line for every journalist here. There's going to be about one for four. They swallowed hard and philosophically quipped that this is going to be colorful.

I arranged with the Jordanian Commander to have his bagpipe unit on hand, they had a bagpipe brigade down there to play for the press after their plane arrived and I had them in place.

My very close friend, David Good, PAO in Tel Aviv at the time, was there with his crew and we brought them over to the tent so they could lend a hand, because we needed the help with the press. They had been e-mailing the Jordanian counterparts with increased intensity as the peace process warmed up and here they were meeting each other for the first time. That was a very emotional moment.

The president arrived. The press plane arrived with no credentials. I said I am sorry. There are busses, everyone stay together. We'll get you on the busses and onto the site and this will be a visit without credentials.

So we got them out there, sat them down. They loved the tent. The journalists were happier than clams. Mike McCurry who later became the White House spokesperson after Dee, he was the State Department spokesperson and a very good guy. This woman, Ann Edwards was just getting hysterical about everything and anything under the sun. He said, Don't worry about her. I've got her under control. Ignore anything she says. Tell everyone to ignore anything she says.

Q: What was her background?

KOVACH: I'm not sure. I think she was an advance person, press handler, political. It could be that she was a civil servant. I recall that she was just a GS-12 but boy did she throw her weight around. She was tough and incompetent. That is a very bad combination. Incompetent and disengaged works a lot better.

Q: What do you do with tough incompetent officers? You shoot them.

KOVACH: The event happens, absolutely great, emotional historically epochal event. President Ezer Weizman was there, the King and then Crown Prince Hassan were there, Prime Minister Rabin was there.

Q: You mentioned the crown prince. Who was the crown prince and what was his role as you saw it at the time?

KOVACH: It was Crown Prince Hassan who is a very bright, abstract kind of guy, overeducated and totally lacking his brother's popular touch. He was more the crown prince of the intellectuals as some people used to quip. He was married to a Pakistani woman who was just really full of herself and who made him no friends.

Q: Wasn't she the one who essentiality was supposed to have gone in looking over the King's

KOVACH: Measuring the curtains, she was the one who put meat on the cliché of measuring the curtains in the Palace as King Hussein lay on his death bed a few years later. Her attitude was the final straw. I have served in more monarchies. I'm thinking Japan, Bahrain, Morocco, Jordan. Four out of six countries where I did full tours were monarchies and of course, the embassies all play the guessing game. Who is going to succeed the current monarch? With Prince Hassan we always assumed there was vulnerability because of his character; that is to say, that he really couldn't fulfill that role of Bedouin king, comfortably 'schmoozing' with the tribal leadership, a gesture that came so naturally to King Hussein. It is interesting to me how history played out in those last weeks of King Hussein's life.

I think King Hussein did his country a tremendous service in essentially moving Hassan aside and naming his son by his British ex-wife, Prince Abdullah to be the next king.

A very quiet guy. I remember that Abdullah had been the paratrooper commando chief. We had three July 4th parties during my Jordan tour and he and now Queen Rania would stand off in a corner. I'd see them and chase down a laggard DOD/DATT/MAG team colleague, pulling rank and ordering them to go over and make Prince Abdullah feel at home. He is a solid soldier and has more military credentials than any of the other guys. Go pay attention to him. My wife and I would always go over and talk to them because no one else was talking to them. It was partly because he had a bit of a reticent personality and he was very humble. He was very smart. We had intelligent conversations with this guy. Rania was quiet, a deceptive silence as she has become at times divisively assertive as Queen, or so I'm told.

Q: What about the Bedouin, the tribal basis. How did this work out for the embassy, particularly USIS? What was our focus there or did we have one?

KOVACH: Our focus was very heavily on supporting democracy in the parliament and strengthening it. That included dealing with all parties, that included talking to Ikhwan (Muslim Brotherhood) and tribal elites in Amman, for sure, sending some of them on IV programs, talking to the tribals, the East Bankers and at the same time keeping some ties with the Palestinians, especially the rising professional classes.

I had one really out of the box program in addition to the election PSAs. Parliamentarians would talk with me about how our Congress is so strong and independent. My answer to them was that independent fact finding and aggressive staffing was a good part of a complex mix of factors guaranteeing the independence of Congress. I brought out a brilliant congressional staffer for a month, to tutor the Jordanians in setting up at least rudimentary fact finding capabilities.

Eventually, these efforts got my USIS staff the coveted Franklin Award given to the one post world wide each year that did the most to promote democratic values. It was not for me personally. It was for my office.

I would say that was the emphasis. It was very much the strengthening the democratic institutions, especially the parliament domestically in Jordan.

Q: Did the tribes go in and vote as a block bloc?

KOVACH: No. An interesting division arose as peace with Israel and a lean towards the U.S. became more apparent. My closest Jordanian friend saw his career capped because of this division -- in this case involving just East Bankers. Salah Al Zu'bi was the Secretary General of Parliament. A former diplomat, he understood that in countries like the U.S., the strength of parliaments lay in significant measure in their capability to do their own fact finding. Having achieved a meeting of minds on this point through social contact, I got an exceptionally bright Hill Staffer out to Jordan for a month to train the parliamentary secretariat to gin up mini CRS and GAOs. This followed a very fruitful visit by former Maryland Congressman Gilbert Gude, who became the head of CRS on quitting Congress and really championed this notion of independent parliamentary fact finding.

At any rate, there was a parliamentarian from the north a tribal, very patrician, very well educated, every articulate who was a moderate, in fact a bit of a socialist. I don't think he had a religious bone in his body, to be honest. He opposed the peace treaty with Israel. Because tribally he was associated with Al Zu'bi who was then secretary general of parliament it kind of ruined Salah's career because it was assumed, sort of guilt by association. Salah was all for the treaty. Very typical of Jordan, that whole tribal region was damned because of this one guy who was a very influential and articulate guy. I don't think he was a bomb thrower. He just said we haven't gotten enough for this deal in guaranteed economic benefits.

To me, the parliament was a key institution. I really focused on it a lot.

Q: As we were working on a peace treaty, was the embassy at all involved?

KOVACH: No, I don't believe so but I may not know everything.

While King Hussein and PM Rabin had met openly after what we understood were secret meetings extending back years, We were surprised when we heard on a Tuesday in mid-

October of 1994 after Rabin helicoptered over, met the king (we knew about the meeting but not the conclusion) and at the end of the day the ambassador got convoked and was told they had agreed to sign a peace treaty I think it was the next Tuesday or Wednesday, October 24th I believe was the date.

Q: Looking at the peace treaty, were there any particular issues we recognize or was it more issues?

KOVACH: I don't think there were any issues. I think that they talked so much. I think the real question mark in the minds of the Jordanian public was the economic dividend. Where s the peace dividend? What s it going to look like?

That was muted a little bit because King Hussein with that wonderful popular touch, so popular among the East Bankers and maintained his ties with the Palestinians too but you know, the joke used to be among the diplomatic corps that if he was in a room and economics came up his eyes would curl to the ceiling and close. He had no sense of economics and I think the subject bored him to tears. Abdullah is very much more an economic minded king. He gets it even though economic inequities and dissatisfactions are rife today in Jordan.

I think the main public perception was OK, what is in it for us? We are sort of stepping out of the Arab consensus. It is a very consensually oriented society. What are we getting? Recall too that King Hussein for decades was associated with the view that the peace between Israel and the Arabs needs to be negotiated primarily with the Arab League, and not bilaterally. So there was an angle of Jordan being justly compensated in terms of economic opportunity for going out on a limb via a bilateral peace. My understanding is that Hussein was exasperated at the ineptitude of the League and maybe to a lesser extent the Israelis in seizing this more logical and politically safer multilateral path to peace.

Q: How did Clinton relate to the various elements, particularly in Jordan?

KOVACH: I think very well. His style of American politics is almost the equivalent of the popular touch in Jordan. I sensed a very high comfort level, not that I was right there for everything. The ceremony was very nice. It was a real love fest. It was exactly what we wanted.

After the ceremony I was tentatively scheduled, and this was not a sure thing as I recall. I was going to fly back up to Amman to hear the speech before Parliament and take charge of my troops up there if I could get on the press plane. We had no airlift. I wasn't getting on Air Force One. The President took off for Amman because he had meetings. Meanwhile we USIS types did a picnic, a joint Israel Jordan USIS staff picnic. This was phenomenally moving because some of the Israelis were busy on that side and couldn't cross over. It was really nice. We met right at the line halfway through the bleachers. Someone had brought some food or there was food we might have snatched from some VIP table. Somewhere there was food that materialized. We had this really warm lunch.

It was really nice. The FSN's knew each other from e-mail, and by reputation but had never met face to face, despite working within 150 miles of each other as the crow flies.

I remember then having to beg off from this happy occasion because I found out I had indeed been given a seat on the press plane and I had to run. My parting words to both our staffs were, 'now we have to put our thinking caps on and decide how to follow up.' And that's where I ran into Dee Dee Myers. She was on the bus going to the hotel from the airport before the speech to parliament. I was so tired.

After she asked me who had written the talking points and I said 'I did', she said you are going to be really happy with this speech. I got to parliament. I was really on my last leg physically and I had to get up at 3 in the morning for the departure, to handle the press at the airport. So went to the parliament, he gave the speech. My Jordanian doubters were stomping in the aisles. They loved it so much. I had him talk to Jordanians about Jordan political development using Jordanian images and metaphors. They were flattered.

Clinton went for his usual two hour night's sleep, remember, this is a guy who hardly slept. I think he slept for a couple of hours. I went home, grabbed a couple of hours myself and then mobilized my wife and son to the airport -- I think there was to be a Presidential greet for country team members and families. Of course, Clinton was late. What else is new? He was always late. He was not late for the ceremony but he was late to get to the airport. It was a double departure because he was going to Syria to talk to Assad and Hillary was going to Israel so there were two planes, two departures. He came and my son and my wife had significant encounters with him. My son was three and he had a toy helicopter in his hand. Clinton stooped down, looked at the helicopter and had a little conversation with my son about it that I think I still have on video.

Then the formal country team line was formed once the King arrived -- triggered by final word of Clinton's arrival. As the king and the president came by my wife suddenly got stage struck with Clinton and wouldn't let go of his hand and everyone else in the line was just laughing their heads off. Clinton in his sleep deprived stupor seemed stunned but he took it well so that was kind of a nice moment. Then luckily, because it was getting pretty hot out there in the sun, my wife and kid got shuttled back to the embassy. I had to stay around until Hillary left two hours later, adding to my sleep deprived state. Then I went home and slept 16 hours; I believe the longest I had slept in sickness or health as far back into my childhood as I remember. The whole week, from the announcement that a treaty would be signed until the departure of the President on October 25 I don't think I slept more than 10 hours.

Q: How long were you in Jordan after the signing?

KOVACH: About eight months.

Q: Were there any significant developments that you could see on the ground between Israel and Jordan?

KOVACH: Not much. Basically we became the ghost Israeli embassy and I quietly helped the Israeli charge when one came out several months later. I was number three in the embassy. I met him. I basically gave him all our contact lists both on the cultural side, the economic side and the press side. And did a lot of handholding. I saw the guy at least once a week, I would say.

Then eventually they staffed up after about five or six months. That was part of it.

What in the final analysis I was proudest of in follow up the peace was doing a first program with a working level Israeli civilian on the ground in Jordan. Following up on my words to our combined staffs at the bleacher picnic in the desert after the treaty signing, I'd do these long calls with my counter-part to figure out a first symbolically significant exchange level visit.

David Good's staff in Tel Aviv, probably to get me off their case, came up with a really good idea, it wasn't our idea. There was an Israeli scholar named Asher Susser, he still is, as a matter of fact. Our paths have crossed again since this oral history was started. He was at University of Arizona on sabbatical and worked very closely with my brother. Back in the day, Susser was the reigning Israeli expert on Jordan. He had written about Jordan his whole career. He had written his PhD thesis on Jordan and he had never been to Jordan. What's more, he was a bit of a darling among the Jordanian tribals because, and this goes back to the Black September instability in the early 70s that we spoke of the last time. Wasfi al-Tel was a very popular prime minister among the tribals in the early 70s and the al-Tels were a huge northern Jordanian family. Prime Minister Al Tel was assassinated by the PLO or some Palestinian group and became a real hero, kind of like an iconic hero to the East Bankers. His authoritative biography was in fact written by none other than the Israeli scholar Asher Susser. And this book was widely read, commented on and appreciated by the Jordanian establishment years before the peace.

David and I decided we were going to bring Asher Sasser over to Jordan on a trip along the lines of the 'U.S. Speaker' model -- accept that Susser of course was an Israeli speaker. The Israeli embassy wasn't ready to run a speaker program which this was so I shaped it from A to Z and ran it. The Allenby Bridge is the iconic land crossing from the Occupied Territories into Jordan. There is a second bridge and in my three years there all the visits and all the back and forth and me going up to either the Palestinian territories or Israel innumerable times, I had never been to that second bridge.

We somehow decided it would be better to bring Susser over that bridge. So we got down there, fetched him and discovered a very personable, bright and sensitive guy. I reached out to a lot of different Jordanians that I thought might be interested and they were cautious on one level and enthusiastic on another level and said he is absolutely the right person to bring over, but we are nervous about receiving an Israeli on our turf, in our homes or offices.

I am pretty good at this kind of stuff. One of my better friends and the husband of my Amideast student advising operation director was Yasser Al Tel, a nephew of the late

Wasfi al-Tel. He was the head of the Jordanian international shipping line, rich with a large home. He was particularly happy because the lifting of the so-called Blockade of Aqaba was an obvious boon to his business. He also was very easy with Israelis because he had had quiet dealings with Zim line going quite a ways back, he told me.

I had a hunch that Yasser would be the perfect host for a large first night reception for Professor Susser. The biography of the venerated uncle, quiet dealings with the Israeli shipping counterpart and a certainty about his status in Jordan all led him to give me an enthusiastic 'yes' when I approached him to host.

I suggested that I give him a guest list of the Jordanians I would instinctively attempt to 'program' Susser with and of course figured he would take care of his clan and myriad other interested parties.

Yasser threw the party. It was mobbed -- no one turned us down. Professor Susser is a very charming, outgoing man. He didn't have horns and a tail. Everyone saw he was a good human being. He knew a lot about Jordan, appreciated Jordan and suddenly the next morning our phones were just ringing off the hook. Everyone wanted him and they wanted him for two day seminars and the like. I said wait a second. A week ago we couldn't get anyone to come to anything connected with Israel so everyone is going to get a piece of him but it is probably going to be just a piece and we would invite you to invite him back and I am sure he would accept.

What a whirlwind week that was. I have never run a speaker program in all my years that was that heavily booked and with the speaker in such demand. It was a perfect first visit, first collaboration following up the peace treaty. It's impact didn't need measurement. Dr. Susser and his interlocutors described the encounters in terms like 'a real breakthrough on the cultural and human level.'

Q: Was there a very strong both the Jordanian and the Israeli sides those that are interested in the other world trying to find out more?

KOVACH: Israelis have studied Jordan. Whether there was a boom in Jordanian studies, subsequent to peace I don't know. In Jordan I would say the biggest interest in the potential relationship was in the business community.

Q: What about the Saudis? Were the Saudis folding their arms and turning their backs on the whole process?

KOVACH: I don't think so. If they were, I wasn't aware of it. I think that was one of the things that, you are asking me the question, and it is not in the narrative I have thought out. I think any negativity we might have anticipated from the Arab world didn't pan out. Jordan was not ostracized as Egypt had been.

I knew from my days in Bahrain in the early 80s that they really wanted to have commercial ties with Israel. They had a very pragmatic view toward it. They couldn't do

it. It is a shame culture. In business, ties eventually will be outed but I know Bahraini merchants said that if they felt they had cover, could save face, they would be in Israel in two minutes.

Q: Did Syria play any role at that time?

KOVACH: No. Syria was quiet. It is interesting to me that Clinton flew up to talk to Assad and brief him on peace right out of Amman the next day, the 25th or 26th of October. It was accepted that Egypt had run interference for this. From '79 to '94 it took 15 years for the next country to recognize Israel. Egypt had been welcomed back into the Arab League fold only after being shunned for a decade.

Q: OK, I'll turn it back to your list.

KOVACH: I mentioned the democratization. And I mentioned falling in with Saleh Al Zu'bi this retired diplomat whose career was derailed because of his perceived association with the northern tribal parliamentarian who was for going slow with Israel. It had hurt his career tremendously. But I knew him as a very bright, open, intelligent man and a real democrat. I remember meeting him and having a chat. He asked me one day, in our system which has a separation of three branches, what gives Congress its strength as an institution?

I said, Let's look at that. I think I sent him over on an IV trip to look at it. He knew or I sent him, I don't remember. It was basically Congressional Research Service, having a research arm, having the GAO, having an investigative arm and the configuration of separation of powers in Jordan was a little different. You had the palace, the prime minister and the appointed officials. You had the elected parliament and you had the army.

He kind of drank my Kool Aid on this idea of a parliament with independent investigative capability so he asked if I could send him someone not just as a speaker but to someone to come out for a month and do seminars with various parliamentary factions and leaders and staff and help us design a staff development model?

A wonderful guy that had worked for me when I was the IV branch chief, Steve Prieto, a really creative officer, found an individual for me, a Hill staffer named Joe Pinder, a terrific guy. He was a protégé of the Iowa Republican congressman, Jim Leach. After he left Congress Leach became the head of the National Endowment of either the Arts or Humanities. I think Joe was on the staff on the House Banking Committee or the Financial Services Committee. The guy had a journalism and economic background and was from a major Iowa press family. He was perfect. This guy, out of central casting, personality wise. He became so popular in Jordan in his month or six weeks with us. His program affirmed my belief in the kind of professionals in residence format that has come and gone during the course of my career. Typically, we got Joe to Jordan on a cost sharing basis the Jordanians put him up and gave him per diem. We flew him over. It was such a triumphant program. At the end there was a party for him. It was sort of like a

Jordanian wedding where they take the bride and the groom and in a chair and palanquin and bounce them around the room on their shoulders to music. They literally did that with Joe which I suspect was a little disconcerting to him as he was a little bit handicapped.

Finally, very systematic or strategic use of the visitor program to send the right people to the States to strengthen parliament as a national institution independent of the palace and the bureaucracy got me the award. I don't know who nominated me because you weren't, we weren't self nominating. I have never been one to self nominate for an award but I gladly accepted the award for my staff.

Another interesting moment -- Madeleine Albright came out for a visit, her first visit to Jordan as the UN rep. It was at a time when Clinton had just reinstated the position as a cabinet level post. When cabinet level people visit from major countries, they get a joint press conference with the king. But in the case of Madeline Albright, the palace really resisted doing the conference. They somehow perceived her as a Europeanist and just sensed she was a hostile force for no rational reason. It was really interesting because I believe the outing of her Jewishness came in the New Yorker I believe around a year later. It was almost like they sensed that. This was a latent kind of anti Semitism in Jordan. I remember when Gore ran for vice president, my first year, one of the major newspapers ran a story that Gore was a Jew. Given in 88 when he had been one of the candidates in the primary where Mike Dukakis won finally, he was the one that had more support in the New York City from the sort of AIPAC element. Operating on some subliminal intuition, some advisor explained accurately that this has been on and off again a cabinet position. Therefore it is not really a cabinet position. Therefore we would rather not do a joint press conference.

So her staff, Jamie Rubin, who became our spokesperson and assistant secretary later, was just chagrined. I said I have been back to the palace several times, tried to turn this around. I am on your side here but at a certain point he is the King. He doesn't want to do it. So it's not going to happen. Jamie just wouldn't talk to me. He talked, vented with Wes Egan for a bit or it may have been Doug Keene.

Finally he had a young press attaché who is now a senior FSO and MC, Walter Douglas, about to go out to India as minister counselor for public affairs. I knew Walter when he came in the door. I reached out to him at USUN because I needed someone who would talk to me and solve a problem; not scream at me. I said to Walter that Ambassador Albright is an important figure. And assured him that we are talking her visit very seriously. I suggested an out of the box work around to solve the problem that Jamie Rubin's insistence was creating. I would like to do something for her and the press. These suspicions about her spread into the press. There was a certain democratic contagion in a society like that. This is what I proposed. We will host her in my conference room that seats about 24 people. I will invite every journalist individually. We will walk her in. We will have her shake hands around the room, introducing her to each journalist individually, which is a very un-press conference kind of thing to do. why did I insist? Because once you make eye contact and press the flesh in Jordanian society, you are not

going to stand up and denounce and give speeches. There is a human relationship established.

I invited people from all the mainstream media, government and private. I also invited both the Ikhwan (Muslim Brotherhood) publications for which my secular Jordanian friends never forgave me. The Ikhwan people were so smart, they were so smart. Guess who they sent? They sent their senior women reporters or editors. They were so smart because they knew most of the people in the room would be guys. So the visual right off was that in a certain sense, the MB was the more progressive faction. Ambassador Albright certainly noticed and commented on that afterwards.

She entered, we go around the room. Rubin and company had accepted the scenario. It was just a great press conference. They asked her sensible, tough questions. She is very good with the press. She gave a terrific set of answers. The Ikhwan ladies asked the best questions and later she asked me, Who are those ladies? They were just terrific and I said, They were from the Muslim Brotherhood papers.

She said, It just goes to show how important dialogue is.

Q: Would you explain the role at the time of the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan?

KOVACH: They were the scions of the only party that sort of survived or had an infrastructure in the 17 years since the parliament was suspended in 1972. Parliament had been suspended after the Black September period and was never reinstated until 1989. When they had the elections, the Brotherhood won a plurality because again, a semi autocratic, Arab regime cannot totally put down the Muslim infrastructure without compromising its own legitimacy, especially when the monarchy rests on carrying the bloodline of the Al Qureyshi, the prophet's family, and that's part of the charisma of the King Hussein lineage.

Q: They are Hashemites. Do they have any connection to the Muhammad?

KOVACH: He is believed to be a descendent of the prophet or the tribe of the prophet.

They play a very important role even where the Jordanian government tends to relatively honest, not like the PLO that was putting money in Swiss bank accounts and then Hamas was the only provider of basic human services like clinics and education and so forth. That's why Hamas won the 2006 election. It wasn't because they wanted to drive Israel into the sea. At a certain point these Muslim organizations provide services that the state doesn't and rightfully win a lot of support. They might win my vote if I were voting in those societies, to be honest. That's the importance of providing the sense of security in society that comes from being able to count on basic social services.

Q: Madeleine Albright, how did she relate to the government there?

KOVACH: Her talks were very cordial. She is a very, I don't know if you have ever had encounters with her. She is a very straight forward, articulate, clear speaking, clear headed individual. I don't think she was a great secretary but I think very highly of her.

I guess the last part of the Jordan thing yet again were the escapades of finding an onward assignment. It got to be onward assignment time and the counselor of the USIA, the number three, the senior Foreign Service officer was a woman that I had had repeated clashes with in my career. She put out in a world wide cable right when I was bidding in January of 95 kind of an encyclical on public diplomacy. I wish I remembered the specific point but I reacted quite negatively to one part of it. I felt it really it missed the boat in an important way and I pushed back in a cable. I was very busy and did it a little impetuously. I should have, we had a very good area director, Kent Obee, more a South Asian hand and he liked me a lot. He stepped forward to protect me when I kicked this hornet's nest but it would have been nice if I had warned him that I was about to kick it. So I send this thing in and she just went ballistic. She basically had a lot of prejudices about geographic bureaus and different kinds of service. She figured Arabists were a bunch of wastrels, that we had success handed to us because there was such neurosis over the Middle East, that we didn't do much, that we got promoted fast for no reason at all. So she really had it in for us and my whole career at that point had been in the Arab world or in offices associated with our public diplomacy there. She also had to approve all senior assignments, so OK.

What happened is Kent Obee who liked me a lot put me forward for the position he loved most in the world which was PAO in Pakistan. This was an MC job. I had just been promoted to OC in Jordan in January of 94. He put me forward for it. I was all ready because years before in Bahrain had almost gotten to be IO there way ahead of my time and I said yes but the ambassador in Pakistan, who was a very complex and interesting guy, I have gotten to know him in retirement because he is a friend of a friend of mine up in Boston, was insulted that someone who was a newly promoted OC would be put forward by USIA for this very important PAO job and he turned me down. The woman who was the counselor of the Agency who had really by this time really become negatively obsessed with me said, Well, I would have opposed it anyway. I had some enemies. Should I note here that I have a U.S.G. financed masters degree in South Asian studies and very good Urdu. A fact that was out there in the eyes of both the Ambassador and the Counselor of the Agency.

My first boss, Jim Callahan, he got put forward and he was three years further in OC-dom than I was and the ambassador rejected him too.

They finally put forward a guy that was on his last legs as an OC but had been deputy director of the NEA/SA public diplomacy office. He is a wonderful human being but he has some flaws. His flaws were manifest, he'd been minister counselor for public affairs in Saudi Arabia and there he and his officer wife had had some sort of a parting of ways after a 30 year marriage or so and he had taken up with the DCM's secretary. He took the Pakistan job and finally the ambassador accepted him. He got out to Pakistan, moved the secretary and her two kids to the PAO mansion, a very famous PAO house. Then he

started having mini strokes. He had a deputy PAO who later got moved to be CAO when they began to eliminate some of the deputy positions who was not a Pakistan hand or even an Arabist. He was a Chinese American guy. The poor guy; he just got eaten alive. He got eaten alive by the Pakistanis; he got eaten alive by the ambassador. The PAO checked out, he was getting sick, finally flew home, ditched the secretary and got back with his wife and they are happily retired together. His daughter is a very successful officer in the senior Foreign Service. It was very public.

My history with Pakistan is Road Runner like. After not being sent out as IO in 1985 or as PAO in 1995, Ambassador Wendy Chamberlin asked me to be her DCM there in 2000 -- but MED would not let me go. I finally got to this post, one I had always had an itch to serve in a decade later -- as PAO.

Finally when I got out as PAO ten years later the one, you know how it is when you get to a post and someone in your position or another position was a legendary person in that position? Well, Ambassador Simons, who had rejected Jim Callahan and me, to his credit was like that. He was the one person that people in Islamabad really remembered well as being caring, having gotten out in society, having gotten beyond the usual suspects in social circles. I met him. He is a delightful guy. He was very well liked in Pakistan. And I have poked at him humorously for not choosing me as his PAO.

I dig in and said that I am too busy to fret over assignments and told personnel to call me when you they had something. The summer before when I had been home in part to support that White House outing ceremony, I had gone over to USIA and done some politicking. We had to have a list of six, as senior officers we had to have a list of six PD bids. There was one job that in the worst of all possible worlds I would have taken and liked but was not career conducive and OC rank is a vocationally dysfunctional stage in FS careers. You have six years, you are on a slippery slide and you gotta have the right combination of the right job that writes up well and a boss that gets along with you and either lets you either write yourself a great EER or writes one themselves. It is very precarious.

I went to the East Asia Bureau. The cultural attaché in Japan, one of the five super CAO jobs in the world, was on the list. George Beasley, the Area Director as they were called in USIA, was a wonderful officer and friend. I said, George, we've known each other a long time. If I bid on CAO Tokyo as my throw away bid, do I have a chance of getting this job?

He said, Senior CAO in Tokyo without ever having served in Japan before? Even though he knew I had lived there for three years in my 20s, he said, 'not a bat's chance in hell' his exact words.

So I put it on the list and in late January of 1995 I get a call from a buddy of mine in USIA's NEA/SA bureau. He said, Peter, Are you sitting down?

No. I replied.

He said, You might want to sit down for this. You have just been named CAO in Tokyo.

I said, I can't believe this. I am not going to fight it. This just shows how totally absurd our personnel system is. I am just going to sit back and go ahead as if, get the Japanese language training, even though I had some Japanese but I am my ears will be open for other opportunities.

So I did. I left Jordan, moved to a neighborhood about a mile from FSI with my wife and six year old son, the latter about to start first grade.

Q: We are in Arlington.

KOVACH: Loved Arlington, loved the neighborhood. I had my 50th birthday party three weeks after I got back from Jordan. Got into FSI Japanese, found I remembered less than I thought I should since I lived in a group house in Japan in my 20s but my pronunciation, the teachers were just so happy with my pronunciation.

Arlington was uneventful except for one thing; the furlough, Contract with America, furlough, Gingrich idiocy. The first furlough was around Veteran's Day, four days.

Q: We are talking about essentially the government shutting down. This was when Newt Gingrich was running the House of Representatives.

KOVACH: I was very influenced by growing up in Irish Boston and the Kennedy generation; ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country. These are the mantras of my youth and suddenly to be locked out? I was traumatized. We couldn't come to school for maybe three days at that time. I was really traumatized. I didn't expect it on one level but I knew it was coming on another level. I felt betrayed by the Congress. I don't think my view of Congress has ever come back from that, to be honest.

Then when the big furlough came a month later, we knew it was coming, I had the car packed. I was not about staying around Washington and being depressed. I was getting out of there. I had the car packed, the kid packed, was pretty close to Christmas vacation so I took him out of school for a week. We headed down to Louisiana where my wife has her younger brother and sister and spent the holidays with them and went to Disney World and got back in January.

This huge blizzard, I don't know if you remember? There was a huge blizzard, one of the worst in recent Washington history, right as the furlough was lifted so we went literally from furlough to three snow days. Driving up from North Carolina we hit the storm and I remember driving through the storm with a rear wheel drive Volvo. My childhood in northern New England driving rear wheel drive cars came in useful. Most people had to stop and stay in motels. I made it back to Arlington and was just shoveling snow the next three days.

One personal note that year of studying Japanese here; my father had Parkinson's disease. He had one of the longer cases for his day. He had it diagnosed for 23 years. That's almost a quarter of a century and he had been in a nursing home since I believe 1990 so he had been almost six years in a nursing home. In May of 96 as I was finishing up my year at FSI I went up to Boston for Mother's Day. I went up to Boston once every six weeks. I made that a practice. Went up Mother's Day and I dutifully went down to the nursing facility to see my father who usually wouldn't recognize me, to spend a ritual ten minutes with him. My mother said there is a day every now and then when he is totally lucid. I had just had never run into it, never expected to. He was not doing well and they began to suspect he had stomach cancer. I walked down to see him for the ritual ten minutes. He was sitting up and smiling, totally recognized me and it was a little like the scene in the Brothers Karamazov, that famous scene where Alyosha has that conversation with Fr. Zosima who I think is dying of TB, or something. It was like that. We had a three hour conversation.

I had just spent some time with a wonderful woman whose husband had been very high up in diplomatic security, Charles Ackerman. They were my investment advisers. She was also a Catholic deacon and a very wise and compassionate woman. After talking about where my pittance would be invested, we started talking about my father. She said, Sometimes you need to give someone you love permission to die, that he may be holding on because he is having anxieties that he hasn't provided enough and who is going to take care of the wife and who is going to take care of you and your brother. If you ever get to talk to him and he is lucid, kind of give him permission to die, she recommended. So suddenly he is all there in my presence but I decided not to bluntly give him permission to die. That is a little too blunt; I loved my Dad so what I decided to do was to just give him a state of the family report and kind of trace it all back to him and how well he has done by us.

So I did. I said that mom is living upstairs in a retirement community. Costs have been provided for. There is enough money from the sale of your company. You gave my brother and I a great education. I am a senior civil servant in the federal government, having a great career, a wonderful time. That was thanks to the family background and a cosmopolitan background and my brother is a full professor and department chair. We are doing well and it is all thanks to you and what you have given us.

He talked to me and asked me questions about me and my brother and even my mother who visited him every day. We had a delightful conversation and he after about two and a half hours he went back to sleep and that was my last conversation with him.

FSI started in August and was out by the end of June, so one can live in VA and avoid the 183 days in a tax year rule. Foreign Service doesn't have quite the tax breaks the military does and I knew I had to get out before July 1, because I came in August. I knew I couldn't live 183 days in Virginia in the next year in 96 or I'd have to pay taxes. We were out of FSI the 20th of June or 25th of June and we had plans to give up the house and travel. We were going to go up to Boston and then go to San Francisco and hang out and

then go to Hawaii and hang out and then go to Japan in time to start the second year of Japanese in Yokohama.

My father, however, right around the last week of June went into what looked like his terminal crisis so everything suddenly went on hold. I kept the family in Virginia. I went up to Boston. Dad had been fed by feeding tube for the last two years. They told us that they were going to have to pull the feeding tube. His body just couldn't handle even a liquid diet anymore. He couldn't swallow for two years. Now he couldn't even handle digestion. You are going to have to let him go, they told us. That was the recommendation. We looked at his horrible quality of life. It was very hard to do but my brother and mother and I all agreed to pull the tube. He was supposed to last two days. So I was up there for what essentially was a death watch -- and that for the relative I have always had the deepest love for. He lasted nine days. I guess one of the great blessings in my life is that I was with him when he died, holding his hand.

As macabre as it may seem, we planned the funeral, we had the venue, everything -- all in those nine days after the feeding tube was pulled. We cremate in our family so there's no great urgency. We had the funeral the next day. We had over a hundred people. My father was much beloved by people who worked for him. My parents still had a lot of close friends that were still alive. We did it out in Lincoln, Massachusetts at an old carriage barn that was part of a historic estate, nice clear wooden floors, beautiful place. He had told my brother the piece he wanted played at his funeral about 30 years ago so we hired a string quartet to play the piece. My brother played the piano with the quartet. It was the second movement of Schumann's String Quintet or Quintet for Strings and Piano in E and it was a really great ceremony. My mother decided she wanted a rabbi because she had been raised as a Jew, she wanted to have a rabbi but it was very hard to find a rabbi that would preside at a ceremony for someone who was going to be cremated because Jews and Muslims have very strong negative feelings about cremation.

The next day I got on a plane to Virginia. Eerily enough, we flew right over Duxbury on the South Shore of Massachusetts Bay where he that day was to be cremated.

Back in Arlington, I rounded my family up, and had this huge dinner which many friends from different parts of our lives attended. Remember the Vietnamese place on Wilson Blvd in Arlington that was shaped like a boat? My wife had organized the evening with some great, great friends, including two people who are P/DASes now and some just amazing friends and we departed for Japan. It cheered me up. But I did not adequately mourn my Dad -- it's hard when the last years of a loved one's life are essentially a death watch. But there is a huge difference emotionally between the loved one being alive and passing. I felt that I paid a steep price for not doing so and have passed that life lesson on to others. You need to take time to mourn, even if the death of a loved one is long anticipated.

We stopped in Hawaii because I had some consultations at the East West Center and at PACOM. I didn't mourn my father. It was very hard. In a way when you die that slowly

you are in mourning for years. I think that immediate turn to the next assignment came back to haunt me.

So we arrived in Japan and settled into FSI. Not much to say about that year.

Two things about that year; one is I would go up to Tokyo more than most of my fellow students because the USIS boss was very outgoing. Some of the other officers were kind of laggards in this respect. My predecessor was going through a divorce so he was throwing a lot of tickets to events my way. So I had a great time going up to Tokyo.

I was receiving meanwhile this monthly report that my section, the cultural section, was putting out on what we do program wise and it is like counting widgets and I am thinking this doesn't tell me anything. Meanwhile, I was talking to my future colleagues and asking, who are our program partners? I notice a succession of speakers were programmed in the same place and what I discovered was we had this totally occupation period legacy of feeding speakers, typically, to the same group of about 18 or 20 NGOs. These NGOs I am aware, because I knew Japan from before and I have gone through two years of Japanese training, are rich. One of the big beefs we had with U.S. speakers, especially if someone was very tall or overweight, is we were flying them cattle car, economy class. These groups would fly quality U.S. speakers over business class because they could afford it and business class was proffered as a gesture of courtesy and respect. I said this is crazy. We are in these patronizing relationships to these organizations that have resources and have imagination that far outstrips ours.

So when I got in the job in the late summer I pulled my staff together and I said I want to have lunches with all these organizations, either together in meaningful groups or singly. I want to do an outreach. I want to do a letter to them saying that look, we would like to be equal partners, that in a way our relationship reflects a bygone day and now Japan stands tall, I said all these flowery things about Japan.

A lot of my staff were occupation generation. They thought, 'This is terrible. This is terrible. They are just going to see you as greedy Americans wanting to pick their pocket' and you know something? I was right and they were wrong. The NGOs loved it, they were flattered. My staff later said it is because you are respectful of our culture. It was the right thing to do structurally.

Q: You might explain for people who might not understand what the occupation was.

KOVACH: This is a country totally destroyed by World War II that, we by a very intelligently run occupation basically not running huge purges, strung up the worst five or ten human rights offenders and moved on. We were kind of a senior big brother to the rebuilding of Japan. Of course, the Korean War helped tremendously economically. History played into the hand of this relationship but basically it was patron to client and a lot of our Foreign Service Nationals in the cultural section had come on in the 50s and were used to that relationship of patron to client. I said this is crazy.

Instead of the widget counting report I had been receiving during my time at FSI, I designed

Q: You say widget.

KOVACH: It was sort of a report we got every month that here in fulfillment of our country plan we have had this, this and this encounter. This was counting beans, literally. Instead of that, I did a kind of a newsletter that discussed in a few lines what the main communication thrust of each speaker program was and offering our upcoming speakers to these same NGOs but with a reciprocity. You let us know who you have coming from the States because we might want to take them on for a program at the American Center.

Guess who this led to? Colin Powell came through on one of his lecture tours. This was during the Clinton years before he was Secretary and one of his great spear carriers in life was Richard Armitage. Armitage was a DAS/D at the Pentagon, a certified Japan hand if there ever was one, knows Japan, is respected by the Japanese. This group told me that Colin Powell is coming and he is bringing his friend, Richard Armitage. Their visit fell right at the time we were finishing the negotiations to extend the security treaty and this was the first renewal since the last months of the Eisenhower administration. Eisenhower and Prime Minister Kishi signed it. This was a huge milestone in the relationship.

Q: Extremely controversial.

KOVACH: Not really. Japanese supported the renewal overwhelmingly, I believe by over 70%. But it was somewhat controversial, especially around towns that host our bases so what happened is that I got Armitage, the beloved Armitage, better known in Japan than Powell at that time anyway, I snagged Armitage to give a speech on the security partnership at the American Center the day the Treaty renewal was signed. It turned into the biggest event in American Center history. We had 150 journalists in the room. We had 14 cameras, every major network was there and we grabbed every headline with the positive spin Armitage gave the signing. We gave him talking points but he didn't need them. He was so on top of this stuff and so bright. He just hit a total homerun and diffused opposition and talked about the need to be sensitive and have a new kind of platform for relations with communities hosting bases. Huge, huge triumph.

Then my FSNs, basking in the glow acknowledged 'now we understand what you were trying to do.' That was in terms of the office my great triumph.

I think this happened around the APEC Summit which was in Seattle that year that somehow we had a very important Senate delegation, headed by Lieberman and two other senators, very defense oriented. Lieberman is a very smart guy. Somehow it was the B team there to brief, so many folks including Ambassador Foley I think were off in Seattle. I was representing the public affairs section. Ambassador Foley was not there. Instead of the defense attaché we got the Air Force one star who was the commandant of Misawa Airbase, a man whom I had never met before, General Wright.

Q: Is Misawa Airbase still going?

KOVACH: I am not sure.

Q: I was stationed at Misawa.

KOVACH: General Wright gives his spiel, one star (OC) Kovach gives his spiel. There were just five of us briefing the senators. It was a good session. You could tell by the body language that they were engaged. Lieberman and the others asked good questions. It was a good conversation.

One of the subjects that we got onto was base -- town relations. I had some views on that and Wright had some views on that. Totally unrehearsed, our views were incredibly complimentary. One of the things I said is the problem is you invite the local Japanese onto the base for formal occasions. I am a Vietnam draft dodger and peace activist, remember. You put me on a military base and I feel like I am on another planet. Yet I feel I am in touch enough with Middle America so that is not an element of my alienation. Just think about putting the average Japanese on an American base and how alienated they must feel. What you need to do is move the relationship, the town -- base relationship from the base into the town.

Japanese will culturally see your sincerity, will feel you are taking an interest in and respecting the culture and you will have the rich experience of Americans getting to build a relationship with Japan as it is, not hosting on these moonscape bases embedded in the heart of Japan.

Wright, I can see, is just loving my narrative and he says complimentary stuff. When the briefing broke up, Wright and I made a beeline for each other. He says, Got any lunch plans, buddy? So we went down to the cafeteria and we had a two hour lunch.

I said if you can give me some funding from the 'morale and welfare and recreation' budget, if you can give me some of that money, I can line up something for you that will put flesh on the bones of what I was saying in there.

He said, What can you do?

I said, I don't know how much of a jazz fan you are or how much you get into Tokyo or Osaka which is where the jazz scene is but Japan is very jazz friendly and there are a lot of top line American jazz musicians who more or less jumped off the train of big bands in Japan on tours. They typically have snagged a Japanese wife and they just find they can make a good living, and enjoy a much calmer lifestyle. They learn the language.

There is a very good movie made by I think an African American guy, Reggie Life, a Tufts graduate so he and I have an affinity, on African Americans who have stayed in Japan and settled and married and settled into society and several of the people featured

in this film are these jazz musicians so I said I can put together a jazz all star band of people living in Japan, Americans and what s more, I am kind of a jazz buff, I like jazz, there is a six year old Japanese kid who is a harmonica player who is a genius. He can't read music and he plays with some of these jazz groups.

So we put together this group and he agreed. General Wright would get me the money and we would launch a series of concerts in the towns outside the bases, not on base, and a certain cadre of people on the base are going to be ordered to go to the concert whether they want to go or not and they are going to be ordered to have dinners, have dinners sort of like a picnic under a tent and they are going to mingle. We started doing that in Okinawa. It was a huge success.

Unfortunately, both General Wright and I were suddenly transferred out within months of this initiative and I understand, astoundingly, that it was not continued.

The Foreign Service sometimes reminds me of that old adage, stick your hand in a bucket of water, pull it out and see how much of an impact you've had. I think the frequent career rotations, and the almost compulsive drive to make a mark in the time you have lead to the scuttling of a lot of good ideas. Reflecting, however, on the positive side, I think the Internet has unwittingly led to more initiatives being institutionalized -- things that just a couple of decades ago would more easily have been brushed aside in this crazy rotational merry-go-round of high achievers.

This is the end of my Japan stories; changing the structure of how we programmed speakers and how we related to these NGO partners, the Armitage triumph and this I would say were my three great triumphs. They weren't that great.

But for a second time in my career, Fulbright, in the case of Japan my sitting on the Board of one of the two best endowed commissions in the world was an arena where I was a key force behind a very unique program carried out under the Fulbright name. My role was key in pushing back against both my boss in the embassy, the other USG member of the commission and indeed the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs at USIA.

My year in the CAO job coincided with the 50th anniversary of the creation of the Fulbright program by congress. Our two Japanese government Board members relayed to us that the government of Japan wanted to create and fully fund an effective but out of the box exchange and bless it with the Fulbright name. Their idea was this -- that they would bring to Japan for four week visits hundreds of American high school social studies teachers. The four weeks would consist on cultural familiarization with the backdrop of tours in a major city or two (Tokyo and Kyoto if I remember right -- I might be wrong) and a substantial fraction of the 28 days in a rural town and school district.

The resistance from both the USIA bureau and my boss the PAO was palpable. Fulbright is an academic exchange of active scholars, either researchers or professors or English teachers, not a short term, one way teacher exchange. Implicit was distaste for our

prosperous Japanese partner 'buying' the Fulbright brand for a program out of the academic purview. I pushed back in respectful but firm terms with my boss and later with Washington Fulbright people in ECA on the highest level. No one was budging. When it came to the vote, I voted with the unanimous Japanese block which created the program by one vote in strict accordance to the Commission Charter. Since Washington was not asked to fund a single penny of the new exchange, they did not have the leverage to stop the conferring of the Fulbright name if the commission by majority vote endorsed it.

The impact was huge. While I don't think the program has survived, in the few years it existed, literally thousands of American teachers visited Japan. They returned to the States, knowledgeable, stimulated to do deeper study and by and large introduced what they learned into their teaching, introducing tens of thousands of American kids to Japan. More crucial, two generations after the war and occupation, the widespread and far-flung U.S. network of 'Nichibei Kyokai' or Japan-America Societies were beginning to fade with the aging of the Occupation generation of Americans who founded these local groups to deepen the ties with a culture they had grown to love and respect. This influx of returning Fulbright teachers single-handedly revived a dying network. This was a great boon for Japan but also for American students and communities across the land.

Another Japan story, mixing work and life. Albright was the Secretary. She was coming out to Japan. She decided that she wanted to do a university speech on this Japan stop. This would be her first time on campus since the debacle in Dayton, as we called it, where she and Bill Cohen and Sandy Berger gave a presentation at the University of Dayton on Iraq at a bad time in Iraq U.S. relations and the students had totally gotten on them and practically created a riot in the room. If I recall correctly, vegetables were actually pitched at them.

She wanted to do this; that was her order to us. As the cultural attaché, Ambassador Foley wanted me to do this as he and I had a good relationship. Big visits in Japan they do blindfolded walking backwards, both sides, ours and the Japanese. But this was a bit out of the box, especially given S staff neurosis over the 'debacle in Dayton'. Adding to the general neurosis, I picked Sophia University as the venue which was a risk already.

Q: It's one of the top.

KOVACH: One of the top. It is a Catholic school and it is a partner school of Georgetown, which was of course Secretary Albright's affiliation, but Sophia was also a long-time hotbed of anti-Americanism and radicalism, which was the risk factor. I visited campus almost every work day for three weeks prior to the event. I was drinking tea with the president, the deans and eventually, the relevant department chairs. What I was getting almost every day were two calls from Albright's staff. One is the good cop; she's a professor. If the questions are stilted and the whole thing seems rigged, she is going to smell it a mile away. She will not be happy.

The other caller would say with ritual precision, remember what happened in Dayton. Keep this under control.

So I am good Buddhist inspired kind of guy. I am wanting to strike the middle way with this event. We negotiated that the audience would be comprised of grad students of international relations only, a group that would easily fill the small auditorium chosen for its good TV angles, and people that had been to Georgetown one way or another would also be invited. There are over 200 such people on that campus. We did it in an auditorium that seated maybe 300. The grad students in international relations will be the ones that will get to ask questions. Questions will not be rehearsed. But they would be coached. They would be given one instruction. Arabs and Japanese have something in common; they tend to give speeches instead of asking questions. We tell them please ask a tough conceptual question but don't give a speech.

Then we arranged for a photo with Albright and the people who had a Georgetown connection.

Meanwhile I am getting very sick during this period. I am coughing. My staff is saying just get away from us with that cough. Go upstairs to the nurse's office. Do something, Kovach. We are getting sick of you and your cough. We don't want to get sick. I am ignoring it, ignoring my health which is something I tend to do.

Then the day of the event arrives.

We had this backup armored limousine in our motor pool and it is jacked up on high springs. It looks like something out of South Central LA, so that's the car she gets; little stubby legged Madeleine Albright who wears skirts much too short. I am at the event site with the university president waiting to welcome her. I was the senior embassy person there. The door of the limo opened, the secretary in a short skirt swung her legs out and her shoe falls off. The Japanese are sucking in their breath in horror. Culturally and temperamentally, I am on the opposite page. I will fret during planning an event but once it is going, I am on with the action. I go with the flow and with a smile.

I swooped down, got on my knees, picked up the shoe, I took the secretary's foot, put the shoe on and I said, 'Madam Secretary, I hope this event is a Cinderella story.'

She has a good sense of humor. She laughed heartily.

The event in fact turned out to a total Cinderella story. It went exactly as choreographed. The students asked great conceptual questions. No one prefaced their question with speeches. She loved the group photo. We declared victory and it was over. And we were basking in that 'wheels up' feeling.

The next day was the old emperor Hirohito's birthday which is the beginning of what they call Golden Week so the country more or less goes on vacation for a week. I was at home, just sick as a dog. The nurse agreed to see me. She listened to my chest and declared -- you probably have pneumonia.

She insisted that I have a chest x-ray right away so they arranged for one with a Western clinic that is still operating, despite the holiday. The next day the nurse gave me the result: you have pneumonia and I am going to put you on very strong antibiotics and you are to stay home during Golden Week. You are probably going to have to have further evaluation because there is a shadow in your lung that is not explained by the pneumonia.

I got better. I was pretty sick having let this go on for three weeks and just coughed instead of dealing with it. I got better slowly and then I went down to Yokosuka Navy Base where they gave me a CAT scan and they said, have another x-ray two weeks later. Nothing had changed after those two weeks which was good news. The pneumonia part is cleared up but the mass is still there; it is unchanged. They gave me a CAT scan and it came out showing something.

I said, What are the options?

They said, None of them are good. You may have a fungus but that is rare under 65 and it usually happens to someone who leads a sedentary lifestyle, which is hardly you. It could be TB or it could be cancer.

We could medevac you to, the Navy has an oncology center in Hawaii if you want, as soon as tomorrow.

I say, This hasn't changed in two weeks. How significant is that?

They say, Well, if it hasn't changed, it is probably pretty dormant, whatever it is.

I was going on home leave in July.

We want to give you another CAT scan in a few weeks and if that shows any change, you are on the next plane. We would order you out.

I continue, nothing changed so I was allowed in late May to postpone dealing with my lung situation until home leave in August.

With the advent of the computer, one of the things I was frankly a pioneer in advocating and this is an important PD point; in Morocco, in Jordan and in Japan is that we start capturing our alumni on spreadsheet databases. The USG has spent millions of dollars on the alumni, whether on USIS programs or USAID participant programs or the military IMET programs or the like. We aren't corralling these people afterwards, sustaining relationships with folks one generation of officers have hand-picked for their professional promise in areas of strategic interest to the United States. And we turn over in our jobs every two to four years. It is just really important to keep these people in contact and in dialogue with the embassy and word processing gave us the key to unlock that door.

In Morocco, within a couple of years of getting the WANGs, I got my boss's permission to the delight of the Ambassador and DCM to put the computer tech on to compiling such a list for the whole mission.

My exchange section (mine as cultural attaché) in Tokyo controlled a data base. Every Japanese who has been on an exchange in the last 50 years my FSN in charge boasted she could find them. To test this, I had a high school classmate who was a Japanese AFS student. I gave my chest beating FSN her name and challenged that colleague to tell me where she is. Of course I gave the maiden name even though she was probably married all these years later. I had had no contact with this person. So the next day on my desk I had her name and phone number. So I gave her a call and it turned out indeed to be my classmate and the beginning of a relationship, mostly correspondence, that has lasted to this day. My FSN had put her money where her mouth was. I was impressed.

So it proved this keeping of databases was a worthwhile development and beginning to happen.

What really drove this alumni contact thing an initiative which is going full swing in today's Foreign Service and we are now putting thousands of dollars as is appropriate was this Gore/Bush, Bush W. push to measure results of USG program investments. Gore started GIPRA which was a government program evaluation template. He really put an emphasis as vice president on evaluating programs. George W. Bush was our first MBA president. He also had this belief that good management means that when you invest in a program you evaluate it. His OPM head, Mitch Daniels, who is a brilliant guy really emphasized evaluation throughout government. I think it was that imperative to evaluate for exchange programs -- you have to keep going back to people. How does this experience look to you two years out? How does this look to you five years out? That's what really put a fire under it. It is an interesting hallmark in public diplomacy and more coherently passing the torch of contact to each successive generation of FSOs coming into and leaving a mission has upped the impact of our programs greatly.

When we first got computers my last year in Bahrain I didn't think of it but when I got to Morocco and we had the Wang systems in the office I said we really gotta do this. My first boss in Morocco didn't like me one bit but was very supportive of my initiative. The cultural attachés, because I was the press attaché, resented my incursion into their turf. I m sorry, this is my turf too. We send journalists out and have other program investment and contact in that community. I got the ambassador going on it. He put the nag on everyone, all sections of the embassy, to cooperate with me (my request) so it was good.

That's pretty much my Japan experience. I got home. The CAT scan didn't change.

Q: You were in Japan from when to when?

KOVACH: From 96 summer until 98 summer. One year at school and one year in the job.

The job would have been a terminal job in my career. There was no way a CAO, even in Tokyo was going to get promoted to MC.

Q: But your CAT scan turned out alright?

KOVACH: The second CAT scan was alright -- by alright I mean no change but the mysterious mass was still there; so I said, OK, I am just waiting until home leave. No medevac.

We went on home leave in mid-July, stopped in Seattle. My best friend from college was in Seattle in those days. We spent ten days with him and his new family. He was on wife number two, kid number two. Went up to the Olympic Peninsula for three days of hiking and I had a folding kayak. We were all kayaking around the lake there and enjoying mother nature's hand immensely. Then we flew out to Boston to see my parents who were in the house I still own up on a lake outside of Boston.

Then I finally went down to Washington and, lest my reader is thinking I am too, too nonchalant, I had shown enough concern to schedule my home leave physical real early. I brought all my slides and film and sent all the reports ahead. MED to their credit had a thoracic expert on call and they had him there right away the morning of my first appointment for labs. He said I can tell you what is wrong with you. I can tell you exactly what you have but it is going to be very hard to prove it and you are going to be in this weird situation where you are more or less seeking the cure before you totally demonstrated that you have the disease.

He was prophetic. He was absolutely right. He said you have a kind of cancer but it is not really lung cancer. It is cancer of lymphoid tissue in your lung. It is the excretion of your lymph system that has gone cancerous. The cancerous lymphatic tissue is in your lung. This is a fairly rare kind of cancer and being in the lung is even rarer. It manifests in the stomach most often or behind the eyes. He warned me that I would have to check everything out, to have to have a lot of invasive tests. He concluded, 'I can promise you no one is going to treat you until you get a really clear biopsy.'

So I went for a biopsy and it was like a bad parody of dumb lawyers writing a medical report, the first biopsy. He was right. If I were an MD, I wouldn't treat anyone with a diagnosis expressed as ambiguously and especially a treatment as invasive as surgery or radiation or chemo. Those are the three options, separately or in combination. So he was right.

Meanwhile I should say that am very down on Western medicine. I think it is like advanced garage mechanics. So I am going to these clowns. The thoracic surgeon wants to cut because that's what he knows how to do. He had no conceptual framework to even balance what he can do versus the other options.

The radiation people are more intelligent. They think we can deal with this if it turns out it is only in one place and you get a clear biopsy.

The chemo people of course want to do chemo. Yeah, chemo kills everything.

The oncologist this great State Department consultant sent me to was a jerk. He was a kid whose father was a famous surgeon, had a total complex about living up to his father. So after three weeks I fired him. He did my bone marrow biopsy. That's really an awful test.

So I switched up to Hopkins, supposedly the best hospital in the world. Lymph is considered a blood cancer, anything wrong with the lymph system, the scores of lymphomas. Hopkins had the biggest hematology oncology department in the country and they take every case to board so all eight of their oncologists look at every case and you know you are going to get to a reliable truth in that case. They basically said, like State MED's thoracic expert, we know what you have. We are pretty much sure it hasn't spread because by that time they had run all these tests. We recommend (and it was their thoracic surgeon at Hopkins that wanted to cut) no surgery. We think you should have radiation. Then I checked that up with the famous Dana Farber Center in Boston where I have family and friends on the staff.

In addition, I connected with the number two at the cancer institute at NIH through a close friend and I asked him for his view. They all agreed that radiation was right. I picked my radiation oncologist; the highest rated in Washington Checkbook and even better, located at Suburban Hospital in Bethesda where I lived. That would be a double boon as the treatments are daily.

I went to her and she said I will take your case on but you have to get a clearer biopsy. This is a lawyer's report, not a medical report. So I checked into Alexandria INOVA Alexandria and had the biopsy. I got the original oncologist that I eventually fired to check me in. He agreed to check me in for 24 hours because I had discovered, advised by someone in MED, that the federal government won't co pay if you don't have one 24 hour stay. I had no idea about co pay. He said you won't get co payments unless you are in the hospital at least 24 hours. Well, this was a much more invasive test. They will want to keep you 12 hours anyway to make sure your lung doesn't collapse because the test comprises sticking a needle deep into your lung through your ribs.

So I had the test. I spent the night. In the middle of the night these aides or orderlies tried to hook me up to an IV, luckily I wasn't unconscious, they mixed me up with someone else and they were about to give me an intravenous feed. I said get out of here. I am just here for observation. You got the wrong guy and this is how bad Western medicine is. It is really awful.

The next day was a great day. The largest cancer rally in DC history just happened to be taking place on the Mall. They'd never had one like this before or since. So there was Chuck Donaldson who was a cancer survivor and they had Queen Noor as King Hussein was not too long for this world with his blood cancer. This was in the last three months of King Hussein's life and Noor was hanging out at her house in Potomac. It was quite a day and I hosted a big picnic of friends. It was really nice.

I started treatment the next week. The report came positive; unambiguous medical language, not lawyerly. Meanwhile I was back in USIA. I wanted to go back to Japan. I knew it would be terminal for my career but I liked Japan and loved the job. At the time I just figured I would retire and move into a job in the Tokyo private sector and make big bucks. My wife loved living in Tokyo. The kid was in the best school he was ever in. Even now as a kind of college dropout and 23 years old he said that Nishimachi was the best school he'd ever attended.

MED would not let me go back because they distrust not the technology but the medical culture and the relationship between doctor and patient in Japan. That bond is so fundamentally different in Japan compared to the States, MED didn't trust their system. The main difference is that doctors in Japan routinely lie to their patients.

So there was no going back and you know I had a good corridor reputation. I made OC in 13 1/2 years. That was pretty good. Joe Duffey was the Director of USIA. Duffey had been the Chancellor at U Mass, Boston when I was teaching religion there and knew me from those days. Suddenly the position as head of his office that used to be called Policy Guidance, but in more recent times was redubbed the Office of Strategic Communication came open. As suddenly with the support of Director Duffey and the quickly mustered recommendations of past bosses I suddenly found myself in this top job. My office was physically nicer better than Duffey's, the nicest in SA-44. I had a view of the capital, top floor, real executive suite and I had an incredible staff. I had ten planners, all in a flattened office rank-wise, very much in the Gore spirit of flattening hierarchies. I was an OC. I think I had one other OC. I had a colonel. I had two GS-15 schedule Cs, politicals. I had a civil servant or two that were GS- 15 so we are all basically colonels or one stars. It was the most wonderful office. I went to work every day. The only day I missed for cancer was the day that was spent at Alexandria INOVA for observation and to check the 24 hour box as MED had advised me to do. I went to work every day, had my radiation at 5:30 in the afternoon. The last ten days I got pretty weak but I still went to work. It was a great office.

To me I was motivated to take the job and it was probably a great career break but because of my experience in the Gulf War and all the disparate messages that the U.S. government organs were sending out to the war zone and the Arab region I wanted to be part of developing a structure that combats this free lance communication that can cost lives and U.S. credibility; an office that looks at various government media and make sure our efforts are layered and make sure it is based on good research and that we combine our resources and coordinate our various efforts.

In that segment there were several high points.

Q: You did this from when to when, by the way?

KOVACH: I got that job after just hanging in the East Asia Public Diplomacy Office I think the last week of September of 1998 and I had the job until late summer of 1999

until the end of USIA which was October 1st, 1999 and then I was in sort of a funny interregnum and then I basically had a functionally similar job but on a new footing that I helped create until Summer of 2000. It was really wonderful that I got that opportunity.

In terms of campaigns that were important, the Kosovo air campaign as we euphemistically called it was one where my office assumed our interagency role very easily. Everyone recognized it was a crisis. As jaundiced a view of State as there is in the interagency, DOD the IC USAID etc recognized that we were the logical quarterbacks for this media and message coordination effort in a hot war where we basically defended Muslims.

One of the things that I engineered when I took the office over was based on the realization of how low our repute was, USIA and State's reputation among interagency partners at the time. I made sure we had someone on the NSC that took an interest in the strategic coordination and that would give my work the authority of the presidency. And Joe Duffey more or less backed that up on a political level so we were kind of able to engineer it initially.

It worked very well with Kosovo. It worked a little less well in Columbia. There was a conference on one of these global issues, a big worldwide conference. It may have been climate change. It was one of one of these hot issues and that was more of a press coordination challenge. By this time I had developed a lot of experience from mistakes we'd made in covering international negotiations. I had written a paper on this.

One of the things that happens is people just think that it's the final press conference that you have to cover. In most of these conferences you have several stages. One is the Sherpa stage where the real policy wonks who are kind of upper, upper middle get together and prenegotiate and then in come the ministerial level people. They do the negotiation but those negotiations can break down, can erupt into total discord or can reach success in all hours of the night over a period of several days so you've gotta be fully mobilized. You gotta be feeding the press during this time. You've got to be giving them backgrounders. You don't just wait to the climactic event.

So I laid this grid out and we had a real goofball as the PAO in Columbia who just didn't get it at all and unfortunately I asked USIA to fly, I had a very good officer, Cynthia Farrell Johnson who was my Latin America expert and she totally got it and I wanted to put her on a plane and get her down and they just wouldn't give me the money so exactly everything that my template was written to prevent happened.

We went from the Sherpa stage to the ministerial stage. At three in the morning on about the third a day the ministers were together they reached an agreement. A very hostile anti U.S. government New York Times guy was the only guy that they convoked, that they were able to convoke. So we got the most negative spin possible in the New York Times which went viral over the wire services. To me it was a huge negative case in point. I never forgot that.

I felt miffed. I had tried to fix it. I had anticipated exactly the problem and I just didn't have the resources to play ball.

The presence of Jamie Metz, initially on board as a White House fellow, after his year as a White House fellow ended, stayed on as a Schedule B employee in the realm of strategic communications. Jamie was a protégé of Richard Clarke who was the great Cassandra who proved to be right on counter terrorism issues in the late Clinton years. No one listened to him then. Bush kept him on, didn't listen to him. He was the one trying to connect the dots hinting at the Al Qaeda build up towards 9/11. If he had been listened to, we might have been able to stop the attack. That's now widely acknowledged, at least in a muted sort of way.

Jamie and I had very similar views/visions about interagency strategic communication planning and using his tie into Clarke, we got a meeting with Clarke. Jamie and I decided we should do a charter for a new kind of organizational creature, a secretariat, a permanent structure to do this coordination. We knew that Richard Clarke was willing to take this to President Clinton and try to persuade him to sign it as a PDD, a presidential decision directive.

So Jamie and I for about a half a year rolled up our sleeves and worked on this charter. Based on all his experience on the outside, he was a scholar, a lawyer, an expert on incitement and counter incitement, using mass media. He had written his PhD at Oxford on the subject during the Khmer Rouge rampage in Cambodia. I believe he had a Harvard law degree too and he had been teaching human rights law at Georgetown law school before he got tapped for the White House, a brilliant guy.

We got great advice. We got Bud McFarland who had been Reagan's last chief of staff who really believed in our concept. He had tried in the last days of President Reagan's time to stand something like it up. We got him involved.

Another guy who was an ally who later had his 15 minutes of fame (infamous, I'm afraid) was a guy named Mike Furlong who was a retired psyops colonel, working for SAIC and he believed in this too. He helped us. He had his downfall in Afghanistan. He, as a military contractor, was running what the press depicted as a rogue intelligence operation when he was supposed to be doing public information and humanitarian aid. It was real mess. He made the New York Times. He got his 15 minutes. He's sort of out now. But Furlong had a great head for this concept.

I remember going to SAIC and meeting with Bud McFarlane and Jamie and Mike and hashing this draft charter out. Jamie and I brought our draft and took their criticisms of it. We ultimately produced a seven page charter.

I think it was on April 30, 1999 that President Clinton issued it as PDD 68 of his administration.

Clinton issued the PDD. USIA was dissolved five months later in October. I had this wonderful staff of ten people and I cared, I take care of my people. I may not be easy to work for at times but I do take care of my people. Duffey disappeared because the Department and then the White House grew to think he was dragging his feet on 'reorganization.' Penn Campbell, his deputy became acting director for the last months of USIA. I told Penn with whom I had a pretty good rapport that one of the assistant secretary equivalents, the head of what is now IIP, the information bureau that had emerged from the old USIA P bureau had big eyes on my operation. He really resented my status. I was afraid that my office would be diminished. It did not work as a creature of one bureau, especially a bureau that would move across to State and probably be a total back bencher. And a bureau where he was essentially an assistant secretary, a bureau bigger than most bureaus in the Department but that was not called a bureau because we didn't have the necessary Congressional blessing to call it one.

My office had an on-site off-site, the kind of thing which I believe in doing with units I supervise, even in normal times. Taking a day, not going through all the expense and embellishment of really getting off site, we got one of the conference rooms on the first floor in the SW corner of Main State. I went in to talk to Penn the night before our off-site to coach him on what I thought he should say to my group. I said, Penn, what you gotta do is assure us we have a future and that you are going to stand up for our independence in the emerging structure as we work out the reorganization.

He guaranteed me that he would.

What happened was that the first undersecretary for public diplomacy, a political named Evelyn Lieberman was in tight with the IIP head, also a political, and ten days before reorganization they said informed me that we were going to be swallowed into IIP so I was basically betrayed. I went to Penn and said, You made a promise to me. Ten people's careers are on the line here. What can you do? It is time to be a mensch here and stand up.

But the office was abolished. This assistant secretary, the head of IIP at State was useless. He didn't know how to use us. We tried to do some campaigns out of IIP. Everyone in the interagency smelled that we had been diminished and that we really didn't need to be listened to. Even the NSC lost interest in having our backs.

Jamie, meanwhile, was working behind the scenes to try to get the structure that Clinton had signed off on stood up. With Under Secretary Lieberman's support he succeeded. I was only a senior adviser. They had their first couple of meetings and Jamie had the wrong personality for our partners, in the Defense Department in particular and in the intelligence community. Evelyn convoked me and said, Peter, I want you to take it over. After a few months totally out in the wilderness, I probably in retrospect mistakenly, frankly, agreed. I had gotten a very prestigious next job in that bidding cycle as the head of the three foreign press centers, very operational job. I had signed on to leave but she said would you run this thing for a few months you have left? I said, Absolutely and I do

very well in the interagency. I am a good cross cultural operator. I think I am pretty good at dealing with different bureaucratic cultures too. It's all very anthropological.

I got to run this body and we did two campaigns that were really something special.

The main one was the campaign to overthrow the Serbian thug Milosevic. It was a coordinated strategic communication information campaign, backed up by a number of federal agencies, that worked, if you would do a parody or a Hollywood feature film on how this thing, PDD 68 and its structure, International public information (IPI) is what the rubric was, IPI could do, this campaign just fulfilled it.

The Serbs were restless we knew, but Milosevic's Serbia was close to a total police state so domestic debate on any meaningful level was out of the question. We put makeshift FM antennas around Serbia. The navy installed them for us. VOA took care of production and training for the pro-democracy Serbs. VOA and Fulbright trained the Serbian journalists, the independent, pro democracy journalists.

Someone and to this day I don't know exactly who but I have my suspicions rented a million watt antenna in Budapest. It was like that huge AM station in Buffalo that you can hear at night over most of the East Coast. It was that big. The Internet wasn't big. It was fledgling but we did send some stuff by e-mail that was downloaded, printed out and disseminated by Fax and distributed as 'underground' literature by pro-democracy activists on the ground. FAX machines were a huge part of the campaign.

Journalists that could travel in and out were huge. We had this Milosevic thug surrounded and let me be vague about this. There was intel. The NSC totally backed us and we had a reach in to the intel community. Basically we had a thrice weekly report on how our messages were being heard by Milosevic and his leadership. We had a report that included what counter measures Milosevic and his cronies were thinking of taking so it was perfect. We had research from VOA, we had research from FBIS, and we had intel. It was like a symphony. We were really able to manage the message and adjust it literally thrice weekly if we needed to.

With all these media; if one wasn't working according to our research and feedback, we'd move onto the next one. All these agencies cooperated and worked together to make it happen on a large budget basis. That million watt antenna, those FM stations, VOA taking their whole Serbian staff to train Serbs on the borders in other countries basically left the Serbian service on auto pilot. It was an important part of the mix but the credibility of the young democracy journalist activists on the ground was greater. It was amazing what we did and how far out of the box interagency partners would venture with a proper management structure with the NSC behind it.

And we won. Milosevic was democratically overthrown, as I recall -- he resigned after a disputed election that he looked to be losing.

The other thing that we did that didn't work so well but I think was a positive prototype and showed people what we could potentially do. The virtual civil war in Sierra Leone was at its height. Jamie and I together did a kind of press plan and we marketed it out to the UN and we marketed it out to, there was a European cluster group as there is on so many of these crisis issues and marketed it to our interagency. We had a series of meetings that I hosted as head of the IPI in the Africa Bureau that led to the implementation of at least some of our ideas but it was more notable in that we were able to convoke a table that included NGOs that included a European quartet or quintet with other partners that included our interagency and that included the UN too. That I don't believe had ever been done before.

Frankly, the results were sparse but it was a process victory.

That was a really great episode.

Q: During this time you were working with Duffey, Duffey has gotten very bad press or whatever you want to call it from the people who worked for him. He sold the agency down the river. Let's hear what you have to say.

KOVACH: I am more guardedly positive. I won't say positive. He was very weak. Did I tell you when he became the director of the agency, I believe it was in September of 93 he had his first regional PAO conference and it was the NEA conference and I was PAO in Jordan so I attended. The NEA Bureau in USIA had a nice habit of pulling us to nicer places for conferences. We were Arabists. They'd take me to Cairo for a conference, I loved it. But in this instance, they pulled us to the American Studies Center, at the famous 'Schloss' in Salzburg, Austria. Joe and I have known each other for years. I remember everyone being a bit uncomfortable with him. He and I sit down between sessions one sunset by the lake. I said to him, We are old friends. Please be honest with me. What's the agenda of this administration? Is it consolidation of USIA with the Department?

He said, Peter, I am afraid it is. To reiterate the date, it was September of 1993. He said, This is the mandate that has been handed to me. He talked about the realities, political realities dictated by the like of Senator Jesse Helms -- but who was the leftie that was for this? Eventually it became Albright when she was secretary. There was a senator on the left that agreed with Helms that in the post Cold War environment having a separate communications agency was an extravagance.

I told you my reaction. I always sensed there was a curious dysfunctionality about USIA. We were losing on economies of scale with so many redundant management functions. We were out of the policy loop. We had a delightfully eccentric corporate culture, so to speak, but I'm not sure how useful that was in dealing interagency or at times, with straighter overseas interlocutors. That said, I personally loved the USIA culture. I wasn't down on that but I have to admit it, it seemed eccentric, it was too fun in a way. I don't think we worked well with State as a result in many cases and we generally weren't at the

policy table in on the proverbial take offs, not just the hard landings as the iconic Edward R. Murrow put it.

I never was against consolidation/reorganization, the two terms people used to describe our integration into State. I took it in when Duffey answered my question directly that autumn day in Salzburg. When I got to work for him in 1998 he was perceived by State people to have turned against consolidation. He felt the way it was done was by force majeure, not dialogue and that he was being railroaded. He got his back up and he was pretty much uninvited from the table at his level. It wasn't easy. He had to relegate running the task force to others in the 1997 planning iteration and later in 1999 when I was involved in the final planning.

In 97 they had had some task forces that had been a failure and it was largely because he was discredited, at least that's the version I heard. The reorganization task forces were all reconstituted in 1999. I became the senior USIA representative on the most important task force which was focused on how to consolidate our regional bureaus in USIA into the State regional bureaus and how to bring some PD support to the global issue bureaus as I preferred to call them, rather than functional bureaus. If you study the FAM functional bureaus for units that support diplomacy on global issues is a misnomer. A functional bureau provides a service -- ECA, IIP and PA are functional bureaus as are A and IRM.

Global issue bureaus are obviously the G bureaus (as of 2015 the J bureaus); the arms control bureaus, the T bureaus. These are the global issues bureaus.

I was very adamant that they get PD support as an important value added in consolidation.

One of my lessons learned was from that awful experience with the Columbia conference that demonstrate there was no wisdom on how to do press support for a major International negotiating conference. I saw a solution to that in each issue bureau having a small cadre of PD/PA experts on hand to put forward U.S. policy positions on the issues and to build a cadre of connected professionals in the important issue areas through our exchange programs.

As for Director Duffey, he punted to Penn Kemble on reorganization and to Harriet Elam, the ranking FS officer and number three in USIA at that time.

Penn I worked well with. He wasn't able to protect my old office which I held against him but he and I have always been cordial. He died a few years ago but we'd see each other around town and we'd always sit down together and chat for a bit when we did.

Joe and I have remained cordial. Every year or two he invites me to lunch at the Cosmos Club. He's been a patron. He's been good. I find him a great humanist. I find him compassionate. He is an ordained Methodist minister, works in conflict resolution, interfaith bridge building. He has been involved with Sylvan Schools a questionable

commercial education enterprise, according to friends in academia, but I like him. I think he was a very weak director of USIA, however.

Q: He didn't travel much. One really has to listen to the accounts I have had from your fellow colleagues. It's not a pretty picture.

KOVACH: No, it isn't.

Q: I have always been a strong supporter of USIA, the old USIA. I felt that anything that would diminish it was bad for the United States.

Where do we pick it up next Tuesday?

KOVACH: I will talk about the Foreign Press Center.

Q: Today is the 5th of June, 2012 with Peter Kovach.

Peter, you were going to take on being the press office or something?

KOVACH: There are a couple of things to clean up.

One is at the end of USIA I had mentioned I was the senior person on the committee to integrate the USIA regional bureaus into their State counterparts and public diplomacy personnel into the global issues bureaus, as I prefer to call them. Examples would be the military bureaus, the global issues bureaus, human rights, economic and business bureaus, that sort of thing.

I was very unpopular among my colleagues in USIA because most of the senior officers involved to any extent in reorganization were pushing very hard to get a deputy assistant secretary in each regional bureau in charge of public diplomacy and I saw this as a real negative and I will tell you why.

A deputy assistant secretary that has just one portfolio is going to be kind of an affirmative action DAS, outside public diplomacy but inside the State Department folks will be very, very cynical about this being a sinecure for the senior officers and I already was one in USIA. I just thought this was a very bad idea and that it would undercut the PD office directors. My other fear, borne out by recent history when the incompetent Obama/Clinton Under Secretary Judith McHale created PD DAS positions in each regional bureau has come to pass -- that they being light-weight portfolios and redundant with senior PD FS office directors, would go to politicals. At one point recently 4 out of 6 so called PD DASs in the regional bureaus were political.

The argument for the DAS level positions was, and I don't totally reject that argument, was that for policy advocacy part of it rather than the exchanges part you have to have a seat at the policy table. Edward R. Murrow who was once the head of USIA once said, You have to be in on the takeoffs and as well as the hard landings. By that he meant

especially in an increasingly democratic world you have to look at the reaction to influential public opinion leaders might have to the various policy options on the table.

So typically, the U.S. has a problem and good thinkers come up with policy options. You've gotta look at how saleable those options are to affected or interested populations, either domestically or overseas and whose support we most need to make the policy a success. If you don't, you are setting yourself up for the proverbial hard landing. That is a simple way of putting it but I think his famous and immortal phrase says it well.

One of the things I thought would be better that would happen by moving the regional offices in USIA and integrating them into the regional bureaus at State is that where there was a good chemistry at least between the head of the office or the number two and the assistant secretary, you would have a seat at the table and that you didn't need a DAS that would be resented and not have his/her finger on the operational side of supporting PD at the regions embassies.

Q: Deputy assistant secretary.

KOVACH: So I resisted that and I won because most of my State colleagues backed me up but to my USIA colleagues I was sort of a bad guy in that instance.

Q: We have three Interns sitting here and Peter is addressing them in part too but what we are doing is explaining the bureaucracy. This oral history collection does pick up quite a bit of bureaucratic machinery, how it works and all. What you are saying Peter, I can see very easily how this has become, won't be a sinecure but it is a place to put someone who has one sole interest and that can be meddling as opposed to cooperating.

KOVACH: Now I believe they have just replaced a very unpopular political officer who had been a public diplomacy deputy assistant secretary in a regional bureau with a career person. So now there may be three or four career PD DASs but frankly, the people that are being chosen are people who manage up well. They are not the most creative people and I think this works well when you have a really creative public diplomacy director who is recognized by the assistant secretary, more for the brilliance of ideas, frankly, than his or her skill at bureaucratic maneuvering or even program, budget and personnel management.

That was something I championed and just now I feel very vindicated by history and a lot of my colleagues in the public diplomacy bureaus agree that it hasn't worked out well even in a couple of bureaus where there are career public diplomacy officers in those deputy assistant secretary positions.

The job I was in when I was doing these task forces was complex. I was the director of USIA's whole of government strategic communications coordination staff; the office that succeeded the former somewhat ominously named 'policy guidance' staff. This meant that when there is a crisis major enough to hit the radar screen simultaneously of almost all the U.S. government agencies that have some assets in communicating overseas, it

takes some coordination. You need a seat at the table when the policy options are looked at and you need very importantly two things; you need an NSC link up because the State Department

Q: National Security Council

KOVACH: You need that link up because you need to be tied to the White House. If you are just State Department, you don't have many assets and there is a lot of ambivalence about the State Department in the interagency community which basically comprises the foreign affairs agencies. That's the one thing you need.

The second thing you need an absolute integrated link in between the research capabilities of the overt agencies and the analytical intelligence capabilities of the covert agencies. It is essential to have that. And here is where one needs to be clear and avoid confusion -- it's essential to have that link to the research that underlies crafting communication strategies combining what comes from the intelligence community and what comes from open source analysts. But as essential is the imperative to separate overt, attributed U.S. government sourced information from any covert messaging activities. Seems simple but let me tell you an indicative story about how mangled the two can get.

Donald Rumsfeld as Secretary of Defense was persuaded in 2002 to combine the two in a short-lived Office of Strategic Influence. The idea of blurring that line between overt, attributed messaging efforts and covert communication raised such hackles in the press, on the Hill and within the government that a group of senior communicators -- me being the senior representative of the State Department -- had to convene a number of times over that summer of 2002 to artfully dismantle both the office and the concept and reaver the lines between attributed information campaigns and covert equivalents.

Charlotte Beers was dubbed 'the queen of Madison Avenue' and she became Bush's first Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy. She's the only person that has ever been the head of two of the top ten ad agencies in history. I liked Charlotte a lot. She wasn't popular in the building, maybe too straightforward, literally the daughter of a Texas oilman from Beaumont. Not a bureaucrat for sure. And quite frankly, she was a Bush person and I sensed that Secretary Powell resented her appointment.

Soon after 9/11 she got confirmed and I was in her daily meeting, sort of in her inner circle. One morning as her huddle broke up, she said, 'Peter, don't run away. She leaned forward across the table and said, "You mean to tell me that our public diplomacy is based on the ideas of an old guy like you who is learning some language in his mid-50s and goes out and thinks he or she is the master of the culture?"

I said, Madam Under Secretary, I am afraid you have hit the nail right on the head and so she in her short tenure did an awful lot to try to reach out to the research arms of the USG and combine them with the best private sector efforts without disrespecting what wisdom

came from the field in the form of anthropological perspectives of ‘old guys and gals’ like me.

The CIA had abolished the Foreign Broadcast Information System that we had used so extensively as a source to do term papers when I was an international relations grad student and had started the Open Source Center which in some ways was a much more robust overt research facility. The Voice of America has always had really good opinion research and still does. USAID will do research to enhance its development goals and amplify those goals, vis-a-vis, what they call development theory that I don’t believe in personally.

Putting that research together on key audiences that we needed to reach to advance policy was a big component each of the three times I was privileged to lead whole of government strategic communication bodies and those are the key link ups.

With USIA falling apart, with Jamie Metzl, my coconspirator in writing PDD 68 which Clinton signed that created the structure to do interagency work, I suddenly was offered a great job. I was the lowest ranked person ever to be offered the position as the Director of the Foreign Press Centers which were three at the time.

I tend to be more operational. I liked it. It was concrete work, etched in briefings, press tours, opening doors for journalists, keeping the PA bureau in balance between domestic and foreign audience considerations. The centers, as I knew too well, had fallen on hard times in USIA. Especially the Washington DC flagship operation had gotten really dumbed-down to where it only presented the State Department to the foreign press and frankly speaking, State Department’s relative role historically in diplomacy, and this goes for foreign ministries in other countries too, is diminishing because you’re in an age of Internet driven journalism, high tech military, high tech trade and commerce, high tech spy agencies, high tech Treasury Department and ministries of finance. Our slice of the pie as diplomats is diminishing and rapid Internet communications are even further eroding that.

We’d just moved over to State. I thought to myself, what an opportunity. I will be the first director working for the Bureau of Public Affairs. I am going to revivify this organization. In two years we did a lot of fun things. We got it going again, had some historical moments and had some real laughs. Then I walked away from it in two years which no one had ever done before; because it was such a coveted job people tend to extend.

I got called up to Shepherdstown, West Virginia where in the late spring or early summer of 2000 we were having Middle East talks in that quiet little hamlet in West Virginia. We had a filing center in town to accommodate the scores of foreign journalists in attendance. The Bureau of Public Affairs and I both thought it would be a good idea for me, I thought it would be a good idea for me to get out and see the set-up. I talked to Evelyn Lieberman too and she thought it would be good (more because she respected my time in the Middle East) for me to look in and see how we were dealing with the press

and nuancing our points of view about the negotiations. We had Middle East leaders there. I wanted to see Foreign Press Center operation because they were the ones on the ground making the filing center and press opportunities happen. It was great, got up there, got the tee-shirt and drank it all in.

Then I took The Foreign Press Center over, around June of 2000. We were about a month short of the Republican and the Democratic conventions in 2000, an important election because you weren't going to have an incumbent running for the first time in years; also important in that there were two strong candidates emerging and so forth.

I wrote up a proposal that we organize a major contingent of foreign journalists and accommodate them at both conventions. I got \$600,000 to do major set-ups at both conventions and so I had my LA crew and my Philadelphia crew. Philadelphia was first -- the Republican convention that nominated George W Bush and we got ourselves organized, got up there.

We were working for a Democratic administration and one thing you find when you work a political convention, you got some real advantages in the convention of the party that is in power. With the party that is out of power, you really gotta hustle to get people to take time out of their intense networking activities to brief the foreign press. I intuitively realized this so we started reaching back to people from Papa Bush's administration that were schedule C's or political appointees in USIA whom we thought would be sympathetic and get them to help us get the top, the sort of A list briefers. We weren't going to get the candidates but people just below them.

And then Roll Call which is one of the iconic Washington broadsheets mainly about the Hill, before a convention (I don't know if they still do this) but back in the day they would list every reception that was being held, every major reception, they'd list the guests had accepted. It was a little like a nineteenth century dance card. I was the senior State rep so that aggressive outreach to snag speakers fell to me. I would look at the Roll Call list every morning and say to myself, 'I want Rick Santorum' or the like. I'd go to that reception that Roll Call specified he would attend and I'd approach him cold. I am pretty good at that and I'd pitch the importance of reaching the world with the Republican message. I'd explain that we have 200 foreign journalists here covering the convention trying to understand American politics and trying to understand the Republican positions, if you would give them an hour and come and brief them on the record. We got an outstanding lineup of speakers for that Philadelphia convention. As my intro event in the big boss role at the Foreign Press Centers, I think I impressed on my civil service colleagues that my tenure would not be a sleepy time.

Logistics were not easy. We had gotten into the convention fray so late that we were staying at a motel on the stretch of the Delaware Pike near the famed shopping outlets, a good 30 miles out of Philly and in Delaware, not Pennsylvania. The closest we could get to Philadelphia was the motel just over the line in Delaware so we had a haul every morning. We'd have to get in there before rush hour so we'd leave at 5 in the morning. It was really intense but we did really well. We got great briefers. We got Blackwill, who

was ambassador to India and then I think very high in the NSC when he got pulled from India by the OIG for mismanagement. He was obviously a policy wonk from the terrific and responsive briefing he offered our journalists.

Q: He went to the NSC.

KOVACH: He was a disaster of a manager and an inspection team pulled him out of India there were so many complaints about this management style; a brilliant guy, but no manager.

Then we had Clyde Prestowitz who seemed to be the Republicans real think tank level brain on East Asia. I like his work. He is kind of a neocon but those Middle East issues don't play in East Asia. I liked him. The Bush crowd, the Bush junior crowd just didn't like him. Contrary to anticipation, he never got a position.

It was great. Everyday we'd have about two or three briefings and the journalists had the schedule and they had credentials so they could attend any open event, including the night when Bush was nominated.

Q: As we do these things do we rely on posts to look at the results of what's being reported and what do you do about it? I assume you would get the results back.

KOVACH: Yes, we'd get the results. Because we were so busy doing two conventions and there was more going on that summer, we asked them to give us clips in digestible form so it was pretty much a cut and paste to do a report.

Q: Did you worry that one candidate or another was getting bad press? I would guess that George Bush, junior compared to Al Gore, Al Gore was on the international scene and all that so he would be much more presentable to the press whereas this Texan who had gone south of the border and that was about it.

KOVACH: That wasn't our business. When we bring people here and this is essentially like an exchange in a way we show them America, warts and all, another Edward R. Murrow famous phrase.

There was a lot of skepticism about Bush. I think people felt more strongly about McCain and I don't think I am projecting too much here. It was, there was a lot of questioning about Bush. That said, the convention stayed within the general bonds of sanity.

One thing that was curious, historically and relevant to the State Department occurred a week before the convention; Bush announced that if he were president, Colin Powell would be his secretary of state. I was asking myself, where is that coming from? Powell had been mentioned in the election of 1996 as a candidate and he is African American so you check that box and he's a social progressive, fiscal conservative, and foreign policy pragmatist like Baker and Scowcroft, who had worked for the first President Bush, so you check that box. I am not sure that Bush was really any of those things. He certainly

wasn't a social progressive, except on the disastrous No Child Left Behind Act which has gummed up American public education. Bush was progressive on immigration, Bush and McCain both were, ironically that the Republicans could do so little on that issue. And with Cheney as Vice President and the power behind the throne, you had a combination of a foreign policy ideologue whose ultimate agenda was catering to special interests, a traitor in my view after the disastrous 2003 Iraq war.

Q: Colin Powell was a very positive figure.

KOVACH: He was a positive figure but then when Cheney who was running the vice presidential election committee selected himself, I was saying goodbye any influence that Powell would have because Cheney's foreign policy allegiances were already pretty well known.

Q: I think there was a joke at the time that Cheney and Powell had a meeting prior to the inauguration of George Bush and they agreed that there would be a place for George Bush within the government.

KOVACH: I think it was Cheney and Rumsfeld that actually had that meeting.

So then having done that, conquered Philadelphia so to speak, I got on a plane from Philly and flew right out to LA and I did LA -- lining up both substantive briefers and with my LA Foreign Press Center staff of two, lining up logistics. My deputy was in charge on the ground in Philly. I did those cold calls because I am better at that. In Philly, I did not have to deal with logistics at all.

I went up to LA partially because we still had a foreign press center there and it was my first sort of supervisory visit and as I mentioned they were doing the work on the ground. I needed to be there. It was a lot easier convention to work because it was the in party with advantages for recruiting briefers that I've mentioned. Once I got that money I started reaching out to the Schedule Cs that I knew, including Evelyn Lieberman and said look, I want A list briefers and for this convention we really got A list briefers. We got Joe Biden. Evelyn used to be his chief of staff. I got Kathleen Kennedy Townsend, the presumptive next governor of Maryland and Robert Kennedy's daughter through my own connections. It was really a great slate of briefers. I found that an old graduate school friend of mine was actually was one of the first large scale event planners to use the Internet as a major tool for planning; he did the convention. Once we found each other he started plugging my journalists in to interesting events that we never would have known about.

Q: Did you find on the West Coast a different mix, more Asian journalists and if so, was there a different cast?

KOVACH: We definitely had more Asian journalists and Latino journalists. That said, our foreign press corps here in Washington reflects that same demographic. I think that Koreans are the largest contingent and PRC is the second.

Q: It is sort of an unseen presence that we never realize how important the U.S. is to a lot of these countries.

KOVACH: The thing that is interesting about the LA native foreign press corps, if I can call them that, for a lot of them Hollywood is the main beat.

Q: You look at the Washington Post and Los Angeles Times and politics in Washington is the Post front page. Show biz is often the front page signature of the Los Angeles Times.

KOVACH: We had a great run at the convention.

One of the things I told my staff at both conventions and subsequent campaign events where we would bring journalists was this. I said, I have about six political positions under me that I controlled. So if you meet someone who is good at press work that you'd like to work with that seems to be comfortable around foreigners and even maybe has a language skill, take their name, e-mail and their phone. I want a Democrat list and I want a Republican list. I wanted to get preemptive which is very unusual in choosing these politicals because normally, it is a conceded to be the prerogative of the White House Personnel Office and they are putting people they owe into the jobs. I wanted a different dynamic so by the end of these two conventions I had these two fulsome lists. Very successful. After the Supreme Court declared Bush President, I marched into the State Department outpost of the White House Personnel Office and presented my Republican list. The young lady was astounded. She said, 'you know we have many more people we owe jobs to than we can ever accommodate, so we want the best.' I said, well that's exactly what my Republican list represents -- the Republican staff people we met in our work on the campaign trail that seemed most suited to do our kind of work. She got it and I got 5 of 6 of my schedule C positions filled from that list.

Another thing that was going on that summer is the foreign press center mother ship is in the National Press Building. It is not in the State Department. It is downtown at 14th and F next to the Marriott and across from the Willard. Our headquarters was under renovation when I came -- but the project was mired in conflict. My predecessors, I will not badmouth them by name were absolutely dysfunctional. The person that ran the foreign press centers had been named as ambassador to Yemen and basically just drooped out and started taking Arabic even though she already knew her Arabic was very good. Her deputy was a bright man but people don't like to work for him and he just commands no authority. He just has an arch manner and this construction project had gotten mired very badly between the building that obviously had some say in the renovation on their premises, the contractor and the State Department. To complicate things, the State Department had two interested parties: the Foreign Press Center and the Office of Broadcast Services who also had disagreements with one another. The project had ground to a halt by the time I came in. One of my mandates was to get this project moving. I basically had a head banging session and said we are going to move forward and I am going to make this work. It is an open door. Let me know what your complaints are. After about three meetings like that, this before the conventions, we came up with a

compromise that basically the building would give us a briefing room so all our TV stuff and public stuff was moved down on the mezzanine level where there was a Filenes Basement. It was really a kind of a neat place. You could go get a hot dog, pick up lunch and go for a briefing. But they could only give it to us for a certain length of time. That cleared the upstairs space for the contractors to work and then we compromised on a couple of things in the design that the building didn't like. We got that done. Then when we lost the room downstairs and they still hadn't finished our new room. At USAID, just down the block in the Reagan Building, I knew a senior press guy from three jobs back and this is the thing about the Foreign Service. You know people from way back and you kind of run into them or you could find out where they are and suddenly you look on the USAID flowchart. USIAID is just across Pennsylvania Avenue on 13th Street.

I phoned this guy. I knew he was in public affairs, and said, I understand you've got a briefing room over there.

He said, Yes, we have a press room.

I said, Could we use it for our briefings for about six weeks? If you do that, let's do a series of USAID briefings so that you can justify this.

We worked out a really intelligent set of AID briefings on the most interesting development topics. Foreign journalists are not necessarily here to cover development but we did get it as sexy as could be. Then I was able to use the room the rest of the time. It was at my beck and call so we got through that. We got the construction done.

The third thing is the foreign press centers had really gotten dumbed down and they were focused on State Department only. Which made them of marginal importance. First off, most foreign journalists could get into the daily briefings at Main State and, frankly, as I've said, the State Department is far from the hottest beat in covering U.S. international relations, to put it bluntly. One of the things after the election, it was very clear that Colin Powell, as I had suspected from that pronouncement before the convention, was kind of a token as a pragmatist and as an African-American. State under Powell did not have a seat at the policy table and journalists have a great nose for that kind of thing. They quickly saw Powell's State Department didn't have clout.

It became doubly imperative for me to reach out and kick in a broader set of doors for foreign press corps.

The other thing, my second level boss Assistant Secretary Richard Boucher was Assistant Secretary for public affairs and spokesman longer than any other human being in history. Richard does not like foreign journalists as it turns out. He was in his own kind of humorous but grumpy way pretty obvious about that.

I wanted to bring Powell over for a briefing. He had his NSC career, his military career. He was a public intellectual, if you want, even if his department didn't have much of a seat at the White House table. I got Rumsfeld to start coming over to brief from our

podium. What was happening was we would do the reports on our big briefing events, including the journalist feedback and we'd move them up to the Public Affairs Bureau. Boucher would never let them go to the Secretary. At one point, Boucher was on leave for a bit and his deputy who was my immediate boss, Phil Reeker, and I decided to make sure the report of my latest Rumsfeld briefing reached the Secretary's desk.

So predictably Powell's reaction was, 'what's Rumsfeld doing briefing in my foreign press center? Why am I not there?' I hate to set someone up like that but this maneuver led to our getting Powell over to brief, another coup for us.

Later we had Rumsfeld at an historical moment or rather he made a historical utterance from my podium. I was able to introduce although I didn't moderate that particular session. I had a colonel on my staff who I would always let moderate when we had a DOD person. The colonel moderated, I introduced. Rumsfeld uttered the phrase 'Old Europe'. Basically, he was talking about our inconstant allies that didn't like Iraq in particular, and were dragging their heels over the impending Iraq adventure; i.e., the Germans, Britains, Frances but the Eastern European countries, newly liberated from communism were stepping up to the plate and that was the 'new Europe' in Rumsfeld's articulation.

I have known Rumsfeld since the early 80s. Very bright, very mercurial, the guy has a Princeton education but he is a little like our current vice president. He will either come up with a turn of phrase that suddenly unexpectedly grabs headlines or put his foot deep in his mouth.

Rumsfeld played on this distinction between the Europes. Now I always got about a hundred journalists when he came. It was packed that day. At the end of the questions it was like a rugby scrum. They just come rushing for him. He is a good sport and after about five minutes of ad libbing with the press gaggle, I knew I had to get him out of there. I know he had a next appointment so I took him by the arm, making his excuses to the journalists, and got him to our secure elevator.

He said to me, 'Peter, Did I say something like that' (Old Europe)?

I said, Sir, you did and I am afraid you are going to have to live with this one for a while.

He said, Peter, I am afraid I am. He knew it.

The other thing I did, I pulled people in from other agencies too and people got interested especially in the economic briefings. We would start getting some of the European press more heavily concentrated on the East Coast and are more centered up in New York. They do culture and economics. They are cynical about government or perhaps they take stories more off the wires.

Q: Can you characterize or decharacterize the foreign press? Let's talk about the ones here in Washington. What was your impression?

KOVACH: I can answer this in counter point to Richard Boucher's cynicism about them. Richard didn't like them because, and this is the phrase he used, 'they tend to scratch their own itch.' By that he meant the Greeks will always ask loaded questions about the Turks and vice versa. Indians about Pakistanis and vice versa and Israelis about Arabs and vice versa, that they will just be looking for an angle to get the spokesperson to say something negative about their adversaries that will garner headlines at home, so they almost became journalist provocateurs.

In the case of one journalist I truly believed that he was a paid agent provocateur. A lot of us in government did because we connected with other spokespeople cross agencies from time to time. I had a spokesman's lunch that I convened and which Richard hosted. We were talking about this one person from a major country.

Q: Who's that?

KOVACH: He's still around. I will mention his name. His name is Goel and he writes for a major Indian paper. I am willing to bet he is a paid provocateur. I know this is an unfounded accusation about a friendly foreign government, and it may well be that he is not an agent of the Indian government but of a civil society body. On the other hand, I will readily admit he could just be a typical Indian huckster -- most of them selling spiritual balm of some sort.

Q: Why would someone be a provocateur? What was the point?

KOVACH: To run down Pakistan at every turn.

Q: How did you treat the beautiful, extremely well run election of 2000? We normally have parties at embassies and all that and wait to see the morning after we know who is going to be the president and then we get this

KOVACH: We felt our mandate was to aggressively get our foreign journalist clients out to rallies and the like; to give them a real grainy sense of our democratic process in its culminating contest. Election night we had a party at the Foreign Press Center and Ralph Nader who was a major third party candidate had his party at the National Press Club.

We got passes for all our 150 journalists at our party to go up there in groups of ten and experience a victory party with a candidate. In Nader's case, he got a larger vote than many expected and some have even argued that he cost Al Gore the election. So it was a celebratory event.

The election was stalemated. It went to court, to recount then to the Supreme Court. At that point we backed off. We were told to back off because once things get thrown to the judicial branch there is in our culture a very strong positivist view of law, that somehow legal functionaries, lawyers, judges, etcetera descend from on high to sort our petty squabbles out.

We went through all that and finally deus ex machina, the Supreme Court elected Bush by one vote.

About a week after Bush was chosen, the White House set up a personnel office in the State Department. That first day it was open, I came knocking on the door and this very nice lady received me. My pitch was that we have six political positions in the Foreign Press Center network and we need them filled quickly and I've got a list of good people from the Bush campaign that we think would work well in our structure. They are so used to us in the government being so passive aggressive at that moment, kind of OK. What are we going to have to take? Let's see what they send us. She was absolutely taken aback at my approach. 'How did you get this list?', she asked.

From the conventions on I had instructed my people saying that you are going to be interacting with a lot of people, campaign advance people, people who do essentially the ground work to facilitate press coverage that we at the Foreign Press Center do. I kept a list for both parties, the good ones, with exactly having a conversation like we are having in mind, whether with you or with your Democratic counterpart. I am leaving it with you. (I had also brought the Democratic list we compiled along to demonstrate my sincerity.)

She replied to the effect, 'This is novel, unexpected. You know we have thousands more people that we owe than we can ever give jobs to.'

I know. That's true every time. We are trying to help you give the good ones jobs that we know they'd be good at from watching them in action at Republican events.

In the end she was won over by my argument. Five out of my six jobs I filled off that list and in short order. The Bush transition was well run.

Q: What was your impression of the foreign press corps?

KOVACH: Richard felt they scratched their own itches as said. My feeling was that if I had a big name briefer like Rumsfeld, I filled the room. By filled the room in my mind's eye over 30 people plus the foreign wire services, international wire services was a good crowd. We allowed AP and Blumberg, AFP and a few others. So there was a quantitative aspect to it. There were real differences in the quality of journalists, press organs and even nationalities. There were about ten real press intellectuals. I cultivated them deliberately because they were the ones that put the lie to Richard's stereotype of foreign journalists scratching their own itch. These are the people that asked broad, thoughtful, conceptual questions. I privately urged them to sit up front and discretely promised to call on them. I challenged them too, 'I will count on you to ask challenging questions. I am counting on you. You ask great questions.' I am always going to call on you but I explained in polite terms that you have to understand there is an aversion in Washington to foreign journalists that scratch their own itch too much. It really worked.

The couple of times Richard came over for briefings I would have my, the best was from Itar Novosti, a Russian. He's still around; very bright, an international intellectual. He was great. There was a Japanese guy from a rather minor paper and I knew I could always get a great question from him too.

There was one Taiwanese journalist that wouldn't scratch the itch. I had two Turks I knew I could similarly trust. I certainly had northern Europeans. Most of them were based up in New York. They were very bright. I am not sure that any but the best of them would compare in quality to the types of American journalists I worked with overseas the early part of my career before they all started pulling back when news became a profit making, market driven industry rather than a kind of social obligation.

When I grew up in the 50s and 60s there was a totally different philosophy among the main news purveyors in this country. This is a public service the networks thought. We make our money on other programs and on a need, self-evident to the public, for that service.

In answer to your question about the quality of the foreign press corps, I would say in general, pretty good. There were people like my Indian friend who were just out of control.

Q: Did you have any problems with press people, foreign press people getting in trouble? Was that part of your job to get them out of trouble?

KOVACH: I am trying to think if there were any incidents where someone did get into trouble. I think there was one. It was a drunken driving incident, predictably. The culprit's organization had an office in our building. I think in this case the person was from a country where the embassy readily took responsibility. We directed it to the Office of Foreign Missions and they worked it out with the embassy. I was not running a consular bureau. We don't do consular work in the United States either.

Q: No, but sometimes to help?

KOVACH: One of the most contentious moments I dealt with in my two years had Madeleine Albright going to Pyongyang, North Korea. That was huge and the Korean press being the biggest foreign press contingent, tensions immediately exploded over who was going to get on her plane and where they were going to get on it. Were they going to get on it in Washington and get the background briefings over the Pacific or were they going to get on the plane in Seoul and just fly right up to Pyongyang. Koreans tell me, 'we are the Italians of North Asia. It is always like the last act of the opera with us.' This is the way they described themselves. And boy did that quality come out among the Korean press corps in the struggle to get near to the Albright visit.

Q: Like the Irish

KOVACH: They are passionate people and they wear their emotions on their sleeves unlike Japanese, in particular.

Q: I served three years as consul general in Seoul. You don't tell a Korean no unless you've got a door you can run out of very quickly.

KOVACH: It got so bad. But this was an instance of a useful contact pulling our chestnuts out of the fire. The minister counselor for press at the Korean embassy, I knew a bit. My East Asian desk officer type was great. He knew Korea really well. You need to get a Korean adult who they will listen to, he advised me, to sort out this mess.

I got Phil Reeker over. I got the Korean minister counselor to the meeting and I sat there and we pretty much laid down that there are going to be so many seats on this plane, so many seats on that plane. You guys sort it out. This is all there is going to be and this is the end of the discussion. We will do what we can for you. There will be backgrounders. We are going to make ourselves very available. We wanted a lot of publicity for this trip. It wasn't about keeping a low profile.

I don't know Korean culture well. I am a Japan hand. They calmed down like babies hearing my instructions in the voice of the Minister Counselor -- crisis over. This Korean minister counselor, we became dinner eating friends. Every two or three months we d go out with our wives.

When I later became head of public diplomacy for the East Asia and I went to Korea, he had become the head of the Korean agency that was equivalent to USIA. He was the head of their public diplomacy. We had some very good talks and got some project suggestions out there.

It just goes to show it is not only in your own government. You are overseas and serving or even in Washington and serving and you meet a foreign diplomat and suddenly two, three jobs later you are both in higher positions and suddenly you can call him up and then because there is personal relationship, things get done.

The last major thing of note I did during my FPC tenure was administrative. It just struck me we had the three State foreign press centers; Washington, New York and LA. Even though I am loath to admit it sometimes there is a lot of United States between Washington and New York and LA and I thought we needed some regional private sector offices to program journalists, to get our journalists out if there is a hot story in Cleveland like the Rock and Roll Museum or something like Lake Erie on fire.

I went over the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and asked them where do you have active chambers that really know there is a world out there who are disposed and organized to welcome the foreign correspondent that will write their city up and put it on the map for investors and so forth that are reading their papers or hearing their broadcasts or whatever overseas.

We got a pretty representative and well distributed geographic list. Cleveland was one. Houston and Dallas both had groups like this and we wanted only one in Texas and that became a little contentious. Denver and Seattle too.

I got the idea out there and started going out on trips to try to get working arrangements going with these people. We kind of got it going. It was a little hard. I was scheduled to go to Houston the weekend after 9/11 when there were no planes flying. That trip never happened.

That was something I set up and felt good about but then when that approach clearly had its limits because each of these groups was eccentric, there was no template. You have to work with each of them differently. I have the energy to do that but a lot of people are not as preemptive as I am. I could see there were limits.

I had an other arrow in my quiver of ideas in this vein. There is something called the National Council of International Visitors. It is a group that was formed in response to the massive launch of exchange programs after WW II that Stuart was talking about earlier. Their purpose was to program our international visitors in their respective cities. I was the branch chief at one point early in my career for the Middle East and South Asian IVLP program so all the visitors from Bangladesh to Mauritania would come through my office and the way we programmed them was through these hundred odd local affiliates. Some of them were connected to local chambers of commerce. Some of them were just local do-gooders that wanted an international breath of air. Some of them did this for free; some of them charged a minimal fee.

I went to the head of that organization, Dr. Sherry Mueller, someone I knew as I had gone to Fletcher with her. I asked whether the national office would support us asking these local affiliates to 'program' foreign journalists just as they did our exchange visitors. They are always looking for more business and validation so she was real happy to oblige -- my hunch had paid off. She sent out a message of introduction to the Foreign Press Centers and we started doing that.

So that was another fix that I put in.

9/11 was just crazy. Wherever you were on the East Coast, it was a bell clear late summer morning. It didn't look like the temperature was going to go much over the mid-70s, clear as a bell. I came in early that morning, I don't remember why. Now I am not much of a TV watcher but somehow I switched the TV on in my office and saw the video of the first plane hitting. I am thinking, wow. Clear day?

Then a colleague who is even more Eastern European than I am culturally phoned and said this is it. The terrorists have finally hit the homeland.

I said, Take a deep breath. There easily could be a problem with the radar over NYC. I can't believe how naïve I was. We continued talking as the second plane hit. I was still on

the phone with her. I said, OK, you're right. It was just amazing, my moments of utter denial.

Then we are all on tenterhooks and ready to hunker down and ready to either go into full action or send staff home and close up. We just didn't know what was going to happen. It was really kind of a hollow feeling for an hour.

Then the plane hit the Pentagon and we could feel that in even in the National Press Building at 14th and F NW. The whole building shook and I said to myself, 'Uh, oh.'

Then right around the time the plane hit the Pentagon around ten, there was a rumor that there had been an explosion by the State Department and the Department was promptly shut down.

That was the moment of inspiration amidst tragedy and trauma I was waiting for. I immediately called Richard Boucher and said, Richard, bring the press corps (that covers the Department and that have cubicles there) over to the foreign press center. Let them operate out of here. I knew we are going to be talking to these people probably 24 hours a day for the next few days. Bring them over here. We will give them desks and computers, surrender our desks and we will create a huge press work space. But I laced my offer with a condition. That any and all briefings are open to my foreign press journalists.

He said, Oh, yes, absolutely. They moved over, the whole Department based press corps over, the whole 'bullpen' as it's called and our newly outfitted briefing room became the Department briefing room for well over 36 hours, as I recall. Main State was shut down and we just moved them over. I mustered five major briefings between about noon and four or five the next morning. All of them were mobbed. It was really great, both the PA bureau and the press corps were so grateful.

There is no doubt in my mind that my actions in that 24 hour period are what got me promoted to MC in that evaluation cycle.

Q: Did you find the foreign press, were they looking at the same thing in varied form or was it pretty quickly determined this was an Islamic thing and all that?

KOVACH: I think even my people from the Arab world realized what it was, as painful as that must have been to admit.

If I can describe one overriding view among my foreign journalists during that 24 hour period, and I didn't leave until the subway started running again at 6 the next morning. I told my deputy who lived closer to go home and sleep and to return and spell me at sunrise or so. I knew he could walk if he had to. There was no transportation, sleep a few hours and I'd take it to dawn and then better he come in and take it to noon and I'd try to come back in. I assumed the METRO trains would be running again which they were.

The overwhelming view of the foreign press was a fear of American overreaction, no matter what part of the world they were from. I would say Bush's finest hours in some ways were in the weeks after that before this aberrant idea that we had to go to war against Iraq kind of bloomed. It was in those following weeks. He went to the mosque, first president since Eisenhower, who dedicated it, to go. He went to the mosque, the National Islamic Center on Mass. Avenue. Just all the visuals were good; everything he said about this is being an extreme act not representative of Islam. All religions have their extremes. He was great. I think it was the high point of his presidency. In a way in his last year when he realized how bamboozled he'd been by his cadre especially Dick Cheney and the VP staff, he realized how he had abnegated power but what good did it do at that point in time?

It was pretty dramatic and looking back we negotiated, we tried to negotiate with the Taliban to get them to close the camps and throw the foreign fighters out. I just think how much better off we would be today if the Taliban had done that but I think we made a mistake at the time in our diplomacy. These cultures, almost every other culture in the world, maybe not Europe so much, are shame cultures and by being very public about our demands, I think we made it absolutely impossible for the Taliban to even think of acceding to them. Whereas if had been quiet, they well might have. They might have done everything we asked them to. They might never have made a public statement about it but we could have moved on without getting mired in Afghanistan for eight years.

That's pretty much my time in the foreign press center.

That second year, despite the fact that 9/11 happened the second year, all the structural fixes I made were done. I was getting restless. I thought, 'Am I going to sit here and moderate big people giving press conferences for another year?' I felt like I wanted to move on.

Q: Was there a different cast to the personnel of the foreign media in New York and Washington?

KOVACH: Oh, yes. The New York corps far more European, far less Asian, very, very interested in the economics story. New York is kind of a cultural world, a cultural center which in a way parallels the LA press corps' interest in Hollywood, but a bit less so. The third element of the New York corps is accreditation to the UN. So economics, culture and the UN are the dominant interests and the corps, demographically, was far more European than our Asia dominated DC foreign press cadre.

Essentially what a foreign press center does is it opens doors or kicks in doors in a democracy where Americans are far more interested on some levels in media that Americans rather than foreigners follow. It is one of these good news, bad news dilemmas. Good news is in a democracy we elect our officials. That bad news is that a lot of our officials that are elected only feel that they only need to speak to Americans because no one else votes in our elections, so why should I be spending time on these foreigners? The people that read their papers; they don't vote in American elections.

Q: Did you find any American politicians saw any advantage in talking to the media and doing so?

KOVACH: Richard Lugar, I must have hosted him three times, the head of the Foreign Relations Committee, or the ranking minority leader, don't remember.

Ralph Nader, not only did he have his election 'victory' party upstairs but he actually is the only candidate in 2000 who did a briefing for me in our room. A mob showed up; I think it broke our records, over 100 journalists and he gave a good international perspective, he felt there was an international aspect to his views on the environment and things like that. He did a great job. He went on for an hour and a half. It was a great briefing.

Rumsfeld loved to come over and brief because he realized, DOD is a kind of a quagmire and the accredited corps too focused on minutia of budgets and weapons systems; not the larger strategic picture. Rumsfeld was a guy of considerable vision. His vision got swallowed up in Cheney's neocon machinations but he had great vision for reforming the Pentagon.

Q: He was doing some remarkable things, making the military more responsive.

KOVACH: This is why the army just hated him because he was the first, at least in my awareness, the first defense secretary who wasn't essentially trying to fight an ultramodern version of World War I, infantry led, air backed, trench warfare. He was talking about mobile strike forces and a whitewater navy to move in quickly. This is why the army got so crazy. Shinseki was a four star who spoke out against the change in planning and Powell was an army guy to the core and found a interesting way to validate General Shinseki in a not in your face manner. We have a Minority in Government Day at State. Usually the medal associated with the occasion is given to a State officer who has done something outstanding. Powell brought Shinseki over from the Pentagon and he gave him our top award. Boy, that drew press attention.

Q: Shinseki was a four

KOVACH: A four star army general

Q: Of Japanese ancestry

KOVACH: Yes. Basically, what he did was he stood up for his branch of the service which unfortunately is the way our military works. I don't respect what he did at all because he was resisting Rumsfeld's very sensible vision for modern warfare and Powell being a good army guy ultimately, despite the fact he made his career as a Washington policy hound, did his thing and his thing was to twit Rumsfeld. There is no doubt about it.

Q: How was Bush being treated by the foreign press? Were you getting instructions, hey, can't we do something about this? Was this a concern?

KOVACH: The other thing I saw when I inherited the foreign press centers was that the Washington Center had had nothing to do with the White House in anyone's memory. This is nutty. In fact the center in Washington had contracted its scope to mostly being a second outlet for the State Department to get its message out.

What happened when Condi was the NSC

Q: Condi Rice.

KOVACH: When Dr. Condi Rice our former, future secretary took over the NSC, she brought a couple of press people over from the State Department. I immediately glommed onto them and said we are going to give you a template for doing press before the president travels and we want you to consider using this and reaching out to the foreign press center to organize the sessions. We want you to turn to us when you want to talk to the foreign press. If you want, since it is the president, if you want a senior editor we will reach out to the embassy, to the public affairs section of the embassies, get their recommendation of who should come.

I wrote the template, my superb deputy, Jeff Brown, edited it and he wrote another part and I edited it and we put it out to Condi through our two colleagues. She loved it. I was summoned to a meeting with Condi and Karen Hughes, who was Bush's senior press advisor, a very smart woman and Ari Fleischer, his first spokesman.

They said, We really like this and thank you. What made you do this?

I explained quite forthrightly what had impelled us to prepare the template plan. What made me do this is that I inherited an institution that hadn't had any discernible contact with the White House in a generation. We do acknowledge that you guys run the executive branch. They made me very comfortable. I wanted to do this; a new chance for us and a new chance for you to do this right and to use the foreign press center and use our outreach to the embassy public affairs sections. (I did have A/S Boucher's support in advancing these suggestions.)

They accepted the template and Bush's first trip, I think was to the Balkans. We went with a formula as follows: from each country Bush would visit we'd get one senior editor into a one hour interview group interview around a table in the White House with the president. We basically, we would dicker between the heads of big bureaus in Washington and people that our embassies in the countries to be visited wanted but we would accept their choice ultimately unless there was a strong interest in a certain journalist. We would push back on a higher level.

One of the axioms or dogmas of public diplomacy is it is field driven which means that the ideas should come from people in embassies who know the language and are having interface with the culture. That's the idea.

The formula called for President Bush to do the sit down interview and then he would do TV stand-ups with one journalist, TV journalist from each country and the great thing is the State Department has a TV studio and, as a service to the people who are were too poor to send journalists or didn't have a bureau, we would basically do the footage of the interview with the President and pay to put it up on the satellite so it was a free service for poor countries.

I sat in on the first two or three and it worked really well but then about the fourth trip, there was a wrinkle. We imposed a press embargo on publishing the interview until the media at the table -- each and every one -- had published or broadcast. We told the White House press corps, the working stiffs that cover the White House day in and day out, that we would give them the transcript of the interview but not until those people in those countries could scoop it, get it out either in print or in media and then we'd let the wire services go with it and so forth.

Well, there was a lot of grouching from the White House press corps about this. I came in for the fourth one of these and there, not at the table with the President but sitting in a row of chairs along the wall behind the table in the President's line of sight suddenly five White House press corps members, I think all of them wire service except for one pool reporter sat. The president came into the room. He was as people know, a very affable sort. So President Bush shook hands around the selected editors at the table but then he quickly looked right through my selected foreign guests sitting at the table at the five people on the back bench whom he obviously knew well and by name; this because he made it his business to be on a first name basis with all the White House press corps. It is like he is looking through our honored guests and I am thinking oh, my god. This is really an insult.

He did the interview comporting himself most professionally throughout. The back benchers don't get to ask questions, by the way. And the embargo was still there but they were in the room so this was mostly to the good, even I could admit.

Afterwards, I said, Ari, can I have a few minutes? Did you see what I just saw? He replied, That was a bit awkward, wasn't it?

More than a bit. That was awful. I understand the pressure you are under to let the press pool from the White House corps in but for God's sake, could you sit them behind the president instead of in front of them so he is not looking through our foreign guests to them?

Ari Fleischer bought my fix, and the next time it worked.

He and his successors kept that template up through his whole presidency, long after I was gone to my next adventures.

Q: Is there anything else we should cover here?

KOVACH: No, I just got restless, decided it was time to move on, didn't know at that time I was going to be promoted. I wanted to get overseas. I had cancer and had gotten bounced from my last overseas tour which was my only first world tour, Japan and I was again good to go to most places. I had a class two clearance that required a country by country review to determine how much support I would have in case of a relapse.

And MED had turned me down to be DCM in Pakistan in 2000, they said due to the pressure of the job.

Public affairs minister counselor in Turkey, one of our biggest posts in the world, came open. I am a real Turkophile and family legend has it that I am 1/16th Turkish. I just grabbed at this. I just wanted to get out overseas again.

Q: How did you find the language?

KOVACH: I was the oldest student they had had in 15 years. At that point I was 57.

I had several advantages; one is that I spoke Japanese and even Hindi and Urdu, which I speak, have some of the same grammatical elements in the language structure. Japanese and Turkish are definitely related.

The other thing is that Turkish borrows a fairly extensive vocabulary from other languages; probably the legacy of recent empire. And I happen to know every language Turkish borrows from. I know; English, German, French, Arabic and Persian or Urdu, a cousin of Persian, so I had an incredible vocabulary jump start.

It is also a monotonous language and I grew up in a house with a very dominant mother who spoke, her native languages were German and Hungarian but her accent was Hungarian; and Hungarian too is monotonous.

I was doing really well but then a funny thing happened. I had my annual cancer checkup in those years in August, sort of an annual thing and as usual, I'd had a CAT scan as part of that exam. You get an iodine infusion when you get a CAT scan. When I had cancer and we had to return to Washington, I wanted a weekend place on the water, in case I was going out, I like water, I wanted to go out on the water so we bought a house for very little on the lower Potomac. That summer because I was in transition I had a lot of time off from work and spent a lot of time in Southern Maryland. When you eat lots of fish and crab, as I do when I'm down there, what do you accumulate in your body? Iodine.

So I got this infusion and I am fine, at least as far as the test itself was concerned. About ten days later school started. I am really happy. I am in Turkish; I've recovered from

cancer and I am going overseas into a great job in a country that is one of the most interesting for me in the world. I was, however, beginning to feel a little weird and have some really weird symptoms. My memory, my short term memory is hyper. In a language class when you are studying for seven or eight hours a day, that's a good thing. My middle term memory, however, was just about wiped out and my long term memory is good. And then I started to experience the same phenomenon visually.

One weekend day, I was walking on the C&O canal, lot of people walking up and down to Great Falls. It is a good place to sort of test your vision. My wife and I had taken a walk and were driving to the national park to walk out to see Great Falls. Suddenly I noticed that I am really seeing like every mole on the face of people walking towards me at close hand but if they were 20 feet away, they were a blur. But my long distance vision was good. This was really weird.

Then I started getting these sort of faint feelings. Being a male and a cancer survivor, do you think I am doing anything about it? No. I am doing nothing about it. I liked what I am doing. I don't want to let anything enter my mind that might imply that I was getting sick again. This goes on.

My close friend -- the former Fulbrighter from Yemen came East with his two daughters. They came down to Southern Maryland. His daughters had never been kayaking so we went out in our 3 kayaks, I took them out kayaking. They are clumsy. We are hardly moving so it was a low energy paddle. It was a cool, beautiful day, maybe 65 degrees, not heat. I fainted in the kayak.

I led them around in a circle and went back. I said I gotta take a nap. This was probably around mid-October. I persisted in ignoring my symptoms another month, through Veteran's day and onward. I believe it was the Friday before Thanksgiving, I said to my favorite Turkish teacher, I've just gotta see a doctor. I felt that much worse that morning.

She said, Can you come outside the room for a minute?

She sternly told me, We have been waiting for you to do something. We all know what you have because we all have it. Every woman on the staff had it and it is kind of a thyroid condition, my thyroid had crashed because of the iodine. But not only because of the iodine as I soon discovered because the first thing the doctor said to me was, Do you have any thyroid deficiency in your genes?

I asked my mother and she said, Oh, yes. I have been taking thyroid medicine for 30 years. You didn't know that? My sisters and practically every woman on my mother's side of the family have a thyroid deficiency. I never knew that. Worse I discovered that often in males it's not diagnosed. It's like breast cancer. About 20% of thyroid cases are male and I have subsequently known a few males who had it undiagnosed for 10 years and went into deep depression, got fatter than balloons. I was lucky. They told me this is what you have.

In January I went from hyper to hypo and it was pretty clear to the doctors that was going to happen. I went to MED. This would be terrible, waste a whole year studying Turkish and then not go. I went to the bureau and said what if MED does not let me go in the end. They said you better talk to MED because we don't want to suddenly find we have to put out minister counselor with no language at the end to replace you if MED yanks your clearance.

So I went to MED. MED talked to my endocrinologist who in turn informed MED that there is no way I can be sure this won't lead to a cancerous episode. It would be April before I will be able to declare him cancer free. So with EUR, we just agreed to pull the assignment. I was sad, high and dry in the dog days of winter.

It was January of 2003 and we were gearing up to have a little war in Iraq. Secretary Powell who had grave, grave doubts about the whole pro-war argument and the veracity of the intelligence behind it, was very hell-bent on putting a responsible plan on the president's desk for the after action, after the fighting which was expected not to last long and it didn't.

About 20 of us pulled together our thoughts in about six meetings and we had some writers that wrote up the discussion. I remember some really smart aspects of the discussion; talking about these people who were in a total thugocracy. So what are they going to miss when Saddam is removed, we asked? Security on the streets is paramount - that is the one steady expectation in such a dictatorship, so if there is any looting or any untoward rioting, we've lost the hearts and minds. That was the first thing we prescribed. A huge contingent of MPs to be deployed before the infantry withdraws.

The thing I was very adamant about came into my head because I am a student of Japanese history and there we did such a good job with the occupation. It is not an unparalleled situation where there is sort of an elite albeit not a political party like the Baath party or the communist party in ex-communist societies. And it was a little like the fall of communism too. What do you do? You don't want to lose all the skills of the middle class that pretty much had to be (Baath) party members to keep their jobs, to be professors, engineers, and teachers. You don't want to lose that skill set but you gotta have some justice because this was a really horrible regime and so what you do is you find the ten worst offenders, try them, even if the trial is not that pretty, try them and string them up. Those were my suggestions and inputs. We essentially did that in both post-Nazi Germany and in post-WW II Japan.

The report got done; it was really great. I felt proud to have been a small part of this group convened by the Secretary at such a crucial historical moment. Powell brought it to the Cabinet and the vice president essentially threw it back in his face. Never saw the light of day, never reached the President, the 'decider's' desk, and every point that we highlighted or tried to preempt or anticipate or whatever the word is was rejected in the first year under that fool Paul Bremer, a Foreign Service officer back in a political incarnation running the CPA. It was really hard for us who had a hand in putting the

report together to stomach, definitely my biggest professional disappointment in government.

Q: Rumsfeld basically rejected the State Department. The State Department had already built up a plan for Iraq which yours was a part of it. I won't say it was perfect but the point was

KOVACH: The so-called Future of Iraq report was pretty near perfect, I will say that.

Q: The problems that happened we had foreseen. We'd been through this. We had occupied other countries, particularly Germany and Japan. It wasn't the same thing but there were elements to it. It was almost as though we walked in and were making up the situation as we went when we already had answers for it.

KOVACH: What's more, the first team that went in before Bremer, Barbara Bodine came in as the deputy as I recall and they lasted what? Four or five weeks and we had so called DART teams that were basically interagency structures but which had a lot of USAID stuff and engineering skill to try to get the society up and running and functioning as quickly as possible. That whole concept was scrapped about four, five weeks into the occupation and then Bremer and the CPA came in. They did about everything wrong for about four years.

Then General Petraeus and his doctrine was one of the things that began to put it straight.

I still am of the opinion that Vice President Cheney should be brought up on treason charges for Iraq. He should not be allowed to slip peacefully into the night. But big oil and the Zionists on whose part he was acting would never let that happen.

That was sad, that was very sad and I was really down. It was midwinter. I was taking medicine. My thyroid was stabilizing so physically I wasn't so down but I was looking for another job. My Future of Iraq Report participation was in the context of standing up a pre-war Public Diplomacy staff for Iraq in anticipation of the war. This happened to be a crisis and I could fill in and I was asked to and it was one of those situations where I felt good to serve but more heavily crushed by the outcome than any other moment in my career.

Suddenly one blustery late winter day, I remember I was walking across the bridge over the between Main State and State Annex number one, Columbia Plaza and I got a call on my cell phone out of the blue from Don Keyser the EAP PDAS. He said, Peter, would you consider being the head of our public diplomacy office in the East Asia Bureau?

It was snowing, it was cold. I think I jumped three feet. I said, How soon can we talk?

How about right now? he replied.

How about I could be up there in four minutes? I zipped back and we sealed the deal. I had two and a half of the best years in my career.

Q: This was from when to when?

KOVACH: Late winter, 03 to late summer 05.

Q: (Speaking to interns) You do a job and you retire. You have been working all your life and for many of us, these aren't particularly shallow jobs. You have done things you can talk about. Nobody asks. I am talking to people who have had interesting work and two they are articulate and three, they understand have been doing interesting things. Nobody is ever going to ask you this in other forms. Your family half the time will hand over your transcript and they'll say is that what you did?

The other thing is it is a group that realizes that this has long legs. It will be useful a hundred years from now because the United States may subside into an ungoverned country or something but people will be interested during a period of installments. They will be more interested.

KOVACH: For me this interview going to be important because I am writing a personal essay which is not an autobiography but I think this will help me choose what episodes of my career I can choose to illustrate various points. It is more a spiritualist autobiography to illuminate my search for what has given my life meaning.

Public diplomacy is based on our sense of interaction with the local culture as individuals in our great American social mix. It's inherently anthropological. I would argue in the media age in particular that it needs to be based some on polling too. Madison Avenue would never uncork a communication campaign without mega polling.

We are getting better at that. One of the big issues in my whole of government strategic communication roles was combining the two. I have been able to convoke a lot of researchers with a lot of numbers and then we get the cultural gurus who have lived in the culture and interacted or we get the hyphenated Americans, the Diaspora that are comfortable in both cultures.

Extremely important and language skills in what I do are paramount. I would say USIA emphasized language skills more than State back in the day when both agencies existed.

Q: Intern: Is there any effort to go in the reverse? To take diplomacy or perspectives from other cultures and bring them back to the U.S.?

KOVACH: That's what our exchange programs really aim to do, not only to expose ourselves, warts and all but basically to help communities in America get a grasp of other narratives, other perspectives. We are a pretty isolated country, exchanges give us a breath of the world. That is a very important part of what we do.

We send, not only students on exchanges. We have professional exchanges. Among our diplomats who work in embassies, the professional exchanges are the most popular ones because they can more directly influence the social and political movers and shakers. The main professional exchange program is called the International Visitor Leadership Program. Why do our embassy colleagues prefer these? Because the payoff can be immediate. These are professionals that are more or less at the early peak in their career, ideally. They are chosen by our embassies for their relevance to the bilateral, regional or human issues we deem most important. They come here and they are here to represent not only their culture and their country, but oftentimes their government if they are movement officials. Yes, it is a two sided thing.

The foundation of public diplomacy all the standard definitions will generally have two parts and the first part will be to advocate for American policies, values and culture and to be a bridge between peoples. Any definition that doesn't have those two statements in some way, shape or form should be suspect.

Q: Intern: Is democracy promotion ever a goal of public diplomacy?

KOVACH: It almost always is, even where and this is one thing about the State Department, there is a real tension between the global issue bureaus, whether it is environment, sometimes business, sometimes democracy and human rights and the hard core pragmatic national interests and it is a rough tension to resolve in some cases. I personally subscribe a little bit more to the G. H. W. Bush school of foreign policy. I think Clinton in a way was more like that too; very pragmatist. Exerting ideals where you can or where you have to but in a realistic, pragmatic manner taking in cultural differences, not getting too preachy and mindful of not letting extraneous idealism cast too long a shadow over our core interests with a given partner country.

If I sound too hard nosed, I guess I'll boast that in Jordan I won a world wide award for a couple of particularly creative democracy programs to strengthen the revived parliament in the early 90s. As Director of the Office of International Religious Freedom, I had to assert religious freedom equities to the Egypt desk and the Pakistan desk where far more immediate and compelling interests in staunching terrorism, sustaining regional stability had the regional bureaus focused on very different things.

Q: A prime example, you can dispute me on this, Peter, is Saudi Arabia. If you had a vote today, a full vote in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia on democracy, what you would it appears this could change and end up with a very hardnosed religious, not happy toward America government. We talk about this. We like women to be able to drive and like democracy but not too much of the wrong kind of democracy. It is a problem.

KOVACH: It is a problem when you are the world super power and are a fairly clumsy operator as a world power -- which we are, to generalize a bit.

In Saudi Arabia if there were an election it probably would be a conservative government and it would probably be very resentful of the United States, I agree. I find Saudi Arabia

a particularly distasteful place. I think I am a pretty tolerant person and pretty much a cultural relativist. I think a lot of us are but that stops when I hit Saudi Arabia. I don't approve of the kingdom. I think the Holy places should be split off and put under the OIC, the Organization of Islamic Conference, 57 Muslim majority countries and just let the Saudis go back to their tents. Let the Shia run the oil because they are sitting on the oil in Eastern province. That's a country I really don't like.

Q: Intern: While we are on the topic of democracy, we kind of talked about setting democracy as a goal isn't necessarily always a positive aspect but how do you find that balance between the of democracy and what that brings but also not imposing that on a culture that doesn't necessarily want it?

KOVACH: It's hard. I think that U.S. interests are the missing factor in the way you may have put the question.

It is hard and I think that we Americans should comport ourselves with a certain degree of modesty. We are the oldest major democracy in the world but in some way our structure is the most clunky and dysfunctional. I am referring to the fact that most democracies are parliamentary democracies and have more integration between the executive function and the legislative function.

I think most of us realize that so I think there is a modesty about the type of democracy but sometimes too you are at a moment in a country where you are encouraging democracy and it is appropriate to encourage it top down. Jordan and the palace and all that may have been a good example of that. That instance may illustrate how important an anthropological perspective is in setting policies to underlie a bilateral relationship.

There are other times where freeing up civil society and civil society actors to have more voice and creating kind of a grassroots phenomena that will expand into the formal elements of democracy are the way to go.

Morocco is a great example of that when I was there 20 odd years ago there were all the elements of democracy but they had a king and an interior minister who basically ran the country. It was just a shell of a democracy and civil society was badly repressed. We were forcible in encouraging civil society on the one hand but some of that civil society, especially in the urban slum areas where people just moved in from the countryside, first generation literate were pretty Islamist. So there we had that dilemma.

We have a dilemma of a terrible international press that tends to borrow words they don't know how to use. It starts with a concept like Islamic fundamentalism and Salafism and Wahhabism. There is no understanding of the range of nuance under those labels from the Muslim world. They are used by our ignorant press in an evocative, almost a ritual manner to support inaccurate narratives marketed by mega-media organizations.

That's why when I wrote the talking points for the Djerejian speech, we focused on one man, one vote, one time. If there was a regime, let's say in the Arab world typically the

autocrats cannot shut the mosque out completely nor Muslim civil society because that would detract from their legitimacy because these are Muslim countries. Basically, when they finally decide to have a parliamentary election or limited parliamentary election, guess who is organized? Guess who is the sole organized party? It is obviously the Muslim Brotherhood or the like.

My reaction to that and I was able to write this into policy is that's fine as long as they understand if they don't do what the public wants, they can be voted out so not one man, one vote, one time. That was the phrase we put in this speech. I don't have any problem with people of faith. We are fairly religiously oriented culture, despite the First Amendment. I am comfortable with that to an extent.

Q: (Intern) My question actually has to do with the profession you were talking about. It seemed like it was very into maybe almost like a publicist role. You did a lot with press. How was the, did you do any censorship of these foreign press that you had working for you?

KOVACH: We were serving them. This was not a they are working for me relationship. This was the sort of an embellishment of the typical dance that goes on between government and the fourth estate in a democracy or overseas where you representing a democracy. You are the entertainment, no matter how earnestly you may be trying to convey a point of policy.

You want to advocate policy. You want to put forward a positive image of the United States and what it is doing in XYZ country but it is a game, a dance and there are rules and the rules are broken sometimes. Basically once you have said something, it's out there. You can't control it. The only leverage you have over a journalist once you have said something is if he or she needs to come back another day for more information. Then you can be sure that if you give a background briefing or deep background briefing, and you burn me by attributing what I said to me, or in the case of deep background even vaguely to a government spokesperson, I am unlikely to be available to take a call or do another interview with you. Briefing on deep background means no attribution at all. Steal this idea but absolutely no attribution.

I can tell you one woman who won a Pulitzer Prize for the Washington Post for analyses that in part she based on the ideas of a brilliant ambassador I worked for. And that was fine with us. We wanted the ideas out there but it would have been extremely detrimental to our relationship with that government and some neighbors if these ideas had been attributed to a senior American diplomat.

Background is attributable and you agree. It is like a contract. You can say a Western diplomat or a foreign observer. That's important if you have thoughtful journalists; especially ones like a resident press corps member that comes back again and again and needs you and you need them because you are trying to get your story out to the American people. We are talking about the Washington Post, CNN. You can develop a very nice relationship, a respectful relationship that has boundaries and you know what

they are. But they aren't working for you, no. You are essentially in a way, especially with a foreign press center, you are working for them. You are working for these foreign journalists who may not get much attention, especially in Washington, which is very government centered and where it is our electorate you as an official would be using the press to get at. Put another way, people that read foreign newspapers don't vote in our elections so why should I talk to them. So in DC largely through the Foreign Press Center which I ran for two years, we are kicking in doors for them. It is sort of a service but it is one we feel we will benefit from in the long term because we want our story told.

Some of the better briefers, Rumsfeld, for example, he had people always taking notes on the questions and kind of thinking about the nuance and the implications of nuance to policy. It is interesting that I am building this guy up who is going to go down in history as a villain. I do believe he had a lot going for him.

Q: Did you find the vice president during the Bush administration, did he play much of a role with the press?

KOVACH: No, but Scooter Libby, his chief of staff was very active. I had him over to the Foreign Press Center to brief quite a bit. Scooter was kind of devious and he was the one that went down in the Valerie Flame affair. By exposing the identity of a CIA operative, he should have been prosecuted.

One thing about Libby that I sort of appreciated however involved a man named Mark Rich. Mark Rich was an independent oil speculator and just kind of a stereotype of an international Jew and when Clinton was doing his pre-retirement pardons, Mark was under indictment and living in Switzerland. Someone close in his family was dying of cancer and his daughter got married and he couldn't come home because he would be arrested the minute he came into our borders. What was unfair was this -- the major oil companies were doing exactly what he did. It was a kind of commercial practice. I don't have the granularity but the Justice Department wanted to score points so went after the independent, letting corporate America off the hook in this instance. I think they very typically were going after the lone Jew. The guy, you can pinpoint as sort of a villain but not the oil companies who wield so much influence. Clinton realized this at the end and I think Denise, Mark Rich's wife, was a big contributor too and that probably helped.

What was interesting in this instance is that Cheney and Scooter Libby whose name by the way is Israel Scooter Libby, he persuaded Cheney to call Clinton on Mark Rich's behalf. It is unclear to this day who exonerated Mark Rich but it was very clear that Libby and Cheney supported it. It made me feel good, frankly because I felt this guy has been victimized because he was a freelancer and because of his religion and an unfortunate stereotype and double standard. So I felt very good about that. That was something I was aware was happening.

Q: (Intern) Back to the foreign public diplomacy you do abroad. Would it be correct to interpret that as promoting democracy bottom up by instilling democratic ideals and

something like American cultural ideals in populations before giving them hard political democracy?

KOVACH: That sounds a little didactic. It makes me uncomfortable.

It is more like empowering those organizations that you think are going to be the vanguard of civil society through exchange programs, through bringing experts out to consult with them. Sometimes taking, USAID that has a lot more money than State public diplomacy, putting a good idea to the ambassador, who takes the AID director, turns him or her upside down and shakes until the money falls out of the pocket. I have done that several times in my career with my apologies to the many competent USAID officers I worked with. Just making sure that these organizations are funded and through organic exchange, they get to see how we would do it and take what they like and leave what they don't like or take what is appropriate in their culture and leave what is inappropriate. It is not so much of a didactic exercise.

If they come and they say we would like you to put together a seminar on American democracy for us or send us a Fulbright professor, we can do that. We will do it. I think the whole idea is to do it in a culturally appropriate way and to understand where you have the leverage, whether it is a Jordan palace and you can have some running room to really help them create some national institutions top down or whether you are empowering civil society, bottom up.

A good example of promoting democracy by supporting civil society ; I served in Japan in the late 90s and Japan is not that different from Morocco. There is the shell of a democracy but Japan is not in many ways a very democratic culture. They do vote in elections in large numbers which puts us to shame, of course.

Civil society in Japan was very underdeveloped and activists had no clue about how to manage their organizations; clueless for instance on how to fund raise despite their relative affluence as a society. We'd send Japanese NGO managers to the States for training. We put training together for these Japanese groups.

Q: Did you ever feel the hands of governments directing their press? One of the issues that every once in awhile comes up is in cultural things is control of the press by the governments. Did that ever present a problem?

KOVACH: It often presents big problems. We may want to get a story line out and the local journalists, I am not talking here about CNN and the New York Times, might understand our line, informally but they could never put it out there without risking their personal freedom or even life and limb.

Remember my story about Bahrain and the Harvard educated admiral who went off to Kuwait shortly after coming to the Gulf? The Gulf is kind of an integrated press zone but in particular Kuwait and the Emirates tend to foster a little more open information environment. Their press is read up and down the coast and Bahrain which in some ways

is the most democratic, next to Kuwait, they had sort of a fluid kind of relationship to their people. Their press is heavily controlled because of the particular dynamic of being a Sunni minority ruling a Shia majority and there is a sense of vulnerability. It is a face and shame culture so our three to six ships that we float on the Persian Gulf were home ported in Bahrain but you could never breathe a word about it publicly and yet every person on the island could drive right up that road past where our little homeport is like a half a mile in. One could easily see the gray, huge battle ships. They're not the Bahraini navy, you know that. Everyone knew it but as long as it wasn't mentioned, it could be ignored.

So we got a new admiral who was actually a very bright guy with an Ivy rather than Naval Academy degree and the admiral is based in Bahrain along with the ships. So he starts on this tour of the Gulf. He goes to Kuwait and my very enterprising counterpart puts him together with Al Seyassah which is a relatively free paper in that relatively free country, the most open press in the region. The admiral speaks his mind. It is so great, this home porting arrangement with Bahrain, he says.

About two hours after that edition came out we got a call. The ambassador and I got summoned. Not to the minister of information who was very powerful in his own right but summoned with the information minister to the prime minister who was the most powerful individual in the country and still is, Sheikh Khalifa bin Salman. Did we get raked over the coals!! One more article like this and the home porting arrangement is over. It is all over between us, said the Prime Minister. You have to understand we are a different kind of culture. Those ships can be there in plain sight but as long as no one talks about them, it is like they are not there. He explained this, very articulate. He put it right out there.

My last interview with an international journalist in those three years was with David Lamb formerly of the New York Times. He not only writes books but he and his wife produced that wonderful film about the love affair between Pete Peterson, our first ambassador to Vietnam and the Australian Embassy Vietnamese origin management counselor.

Q: The ambassador had been a prisoner of war for many years in Vietnam.

KOVACH: He was the first U.S. Ambassador to Vietnam after relations were restored and he started dating this Vietnamese origin woman who is an Australian diplomat. They got married and the film was about their romance. It is one of these wonderful love stories. Lamb and his wife produced that film for PBS, I think. He is a great writer.

At any rate, he asked to see me and soon queried me about a gaggle of C-130 Hercules planes, a four engine prop plane, that he saw at Bahrain Airport.

The C-130 that we use to ferry troops and supplies. He asked me what are all these C-130s at the end of the runway at the airport with no discernable national markings?

I said, Oh, how interesting, David. Isn't Lockheed doing well? There are so many countries that Bahrain has relations to that bought C-130s from us. There are always C-130s at the airport. I knew damned well they were ours and they were carrying in some stuff that the Bahrainis wouldn't have wanted made public.

I think he was writing for The Times. There was a sarcastic paragraph about embassy spokesman talking about Lockheed sales.

Q: Today is the 6th of June, D Day, 2012 with Peter Kovach.

We are joined by three interns.

Peter, where are we now?

KOVACH: With me getting the phone call a bridge with Don Keyser asking me to be his public diplomacy director when he was P/DAS in the East Asia Bureau.

Q: What does that mean? What was the job?

KOVACH: The job basically was to run public diplomacy and public affairs for the East Asia Bureau with control over all public affairs sections in the embassies, 22 embassies with public affairs officers and seven without. It was to advise bureau leadership on the role of public opinion in reacting to policy options and to design communication strategies once a policy was determined.

Remembering when I was discussing the crosswalk as we called it from USIA to State. This is essentially the regional public affairs and public diplomacy office covering East Asia area in the Bureau of East Asia and Public Affairs at State.

It was really flattering. They sought me out and they chose me. It was a job I didn't even know was going to be open.

Q: You were doing that from when to when?

KOVACH: I did that from late February-early March, 03 till early August, 05.

Q: Do you want to break it down by country?

KOVACH: I was in charge of budget; I was in charge of serious money, picking central pockets for my posts for projects. I was in charge of all personnel hiring for all the public diplomacy jobs in the bureau. I once counted that I signed off on 135 jobs. Traditionally a deputy in an office tends to handle the personnel stuff but I had two deputies I worked with really well and I took a big interest in the personnel and recruiting work for our jobs. By that later stage in my career, I realized how key personalities are to foreign service success; far more than structure and at times, even more important than policy. I think the

central chemistry is a combination of personalities and most artfully working the opportunities the historical moment presents.

One of the things that I think has emerged even more clearly for me in doing this interview -- I really believe that personal relationships, despite all our efforts to make a sensible bureaucratic structure that is a train that can run on its own, but ultimately boils down to personal relationships. I was very painstaking about selecting my PAOs, in particular, and all staff.

Personnel and policy management. The good thing was Jim Kelly who was the political in our bureau and our Assistant Secretary, (John Kelly's brother, by the way who in the NEA equivalent job was a thin-skinned jerk) a wonderful man, really knew the region -- our leader. Jim unfortunately did not have a good relationship with Powell and Armitage. He was considered a Reaganite. There was some tension later from different camps in the party. That in part cost me 'my' ambassadorship.

It was a great job, I just loved the job. We talked about how public diplomacy is field driven but the backup you get from Washington also counts for a lot. I wanted to give the best I could. I am an activist and we had several things we did that were a little bit out of the box and some that were emblematic of the time.

Q: Let's talk about the gorilla at the table at the time, China.

KOVACH: Let's talk about China but I would say North Korea was the real gorilla at the table but let's talk about China.

The problem with China and Chinese policy at the time was that in Taiwan the people elected a president, not from the Kuomintang, the old Chinese Nationalist Party that also had this vision of being the legitimate rulers of all of China but from a Taiwanese independence party. This was really raising hackles in Beijing. They could handle the Kuomintang who in a sense espoused a one China policy and had a track record of at least a degree of quiet cooperation with Beijing. But Taiwanese independence from China was an entirely different proposition in Beijing's eyes. It was a tense time and frankly, Don Keyser, my boss who eventually went to jail over an incident related to his deep concern over the dangers, was deeply concerned about the situation across the Straits of Taiwan. After his patron, former Ambassador to China Stapleton Roy quit over the missing laptop in INR Don was more or less our reigning China expert in the Department.

Q: Did he go to jail or was he under investigation?

KOVACH: No, he went to jail for a year and a day, vindictive as could be was the judge, so Keyser could never vote again.

Don was our Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary, a brilliant man, and one of our two great China hands in that era, he had a background that is germane to this. Do you

remember the end of the Clinton administration when Madeleine Albright was Secretary there as a bit of a kerfuffle about a missing laptop in our intelligence bureau (INR), a laptop used for classified information?

The assistant secretary for INR, that's the name of the intelligence bureau, was Stapleton Roy who was our former ambassador to China, our senior China hand par excellence and interestingly enough, his deputy, his principal deputy secretary was Don Keyser. Don was a brilliant guy, a working class Baltimore kid with a real chip on his shoulder. He probably took the main blame for this missing machine because he was acerbic as hell with diplomatic security (DS). In any case he very vocally carried that grudge against DS.

He was my boss. He was our senior China hand in the bureau and he saw the train seriously in danger of jumping the tracks. This is my interpretation. I met with this guy three times a week and I had a very open door boss-director relationship and all that. He was worried because the political appointee that was the head of our AIT, American Institute in Taiwan which is our euphemism for an embassy, was a disgruntled Foreign Service officer who actually came in as a political appointee, a very dangerous breed, I have discovered in my career. So he was asleep at the wheel.

The ambassador in China, this is a good news, bad news thing; the good news is I in general will argue that Republicans have in my career experience installed better political appointees than the Democrats, better quality. The ambassador in China spoke Chinese, a political. He was a corporate lawyer in Hong Kong. He was one of Bush's roommates at Yale so there was a personal tie to the President that is often a factor in choosing Ambassadors for large, politically sensitive countries. The bad news: He was irascible. He was a terrible listener. He wanted me to be PAO in China and I turned him down. I didn't want to work for him from what I saw in my trips out as Public Diplomacy Office Director for the region.

Don just had the feeling he was unengaged despite his language and cultural skills. Don really felt this train was veering very close to the cliff and that there might be a war. Don undertook a bit of personal diplomacy. He had ties to Taiwanese intelligence. He went to Alexandria to have lunch with a couple of agents that were in the Taiwanese euphemism for embassy in Washington. He, at the end of the lunch handed them what we call a non paper. A non paper in diplomacy is basically points that you are making, not on letterhead, not signed, no name. It is just making the point in a couple of pages without attribution and he gave it to them and as he gave it to them, he was arrested by the FBI who had tailed him and that was the end of his tenure. This was at the end of my first year and a half. It showed you that China was a huge issue.

They couldn't get him on espionage. They did get him in the end; he had a lot of hubris. He would sit here in those thrice weekly meetings and he would always give us cookies and diet Coke and he'd sit there and vent about diplomatic security and vent about how the train was jumping the tracks with China and Taiwan. I really think he was trying to keep the train from jumping the tracks. There are people apparently who said when he was younger, people said he had what we call a 'zipper problem' and apparently the

agent he was having lunch with was a woman and there were allegations he was involved with her. I don't think he was. He had a new, younger wife. He was happy in his marriage. I don't think that was true. I think people who didn't like him just hung that label on him when he was already down for the count. They couldn't get him on anything.

Hubris was indeed one of his qualities. I think it was the FBI, but it might have been Diplomatic Security, got a warrant to search his house and they found two drawers of classified information. With absolute malice aforethought and a sense of vindication the Department went after him through a federal prosecutor and he got convicted for mishandling classified information or something like that. He spent a year and a day in jail, was essentially retired, probably dishonorably and he is now working for Condi Rice at the Hoover Institute.

Q: What sort of programs from the point of Washington

KOVACH: We had one of the largest Fulbright programs in the world going with China but we would not create a commission, fearing that it would not have the expected independence from the party and government. the Chinese wanted a commission. Mostly in big countries Fulbright is handled by a bilateral commission with usually four of them and four of us comprising a board of eight; with two government reps and two private sector reps on each side. We felt that private sector was a bit of fiction in China and that potential commissioners likely to be foisted on us as private sector probably wouldn't be. We didn't trust them because it is an omnipresent government and party structure and to this day we still run the program ourselves.

Q: With Russia?

KOVACH: I don't know.

Q: How about Vietnam?

KOVACH: Because of the Kerrys, both John and Bob and McCain? It is one of the biggest Fulbright programs in the world and what s more, Fulbright is running essentially the equivalent of Harvard Business School extension program with a lot of Harvard faculty in Ho Chi Min City. It is more or less the Fulbright pride of Asia. Management types from all the surrounding countries including Thailand want to attend that institute. It absolutely shows what happens when you get three senators, powerful that really want good things to happen for a country.

Q: Did they have a commission?

KOVACH: I believe they did which is an interesting anomaly.

Q: The Vietnamese have a different approach towards business and trying to get their students out and hands on.

KOVACH: In my later days in the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor the biggest problem we had with Vietnam was religious freedom -- this after a real earlier opening. They suddenly threw the doors open. They invited Thich Naht Hanh, one of the most respected Buddhist teachers in the world in this media age back and then suddenly went crazy and started shutting his particular establishment down. They threw his monks out of their monastery and then started hitting the mountain people who tended to be evangelicals converted by missionaries, they started getting the hammer again from the local governors. The government of Vietnam, the central government had been banging on local governors to stop persecuting minority religious sects, other Buddhist sects. It is like China culturally. There is a lot of mix and match so there are a lot of these little sects that are a little Buddhist, a little Christian a little of this, a little of that.

Cao Dai is a case in point. I was sent by the ambassador to give a message to the 'pope' and I went to their worship service and it looked a lot to me like Muslim prayer but there were Buddhist elements, Christian elements, very interesting.

Q: They were all sects that could be quite militant. Who sort of fought the Viet Cong to a standstill.

KOVACH: You are right, there was undoubtedly a fear of faith based civil society ingrained in the Party at that point from decades of conflict that the party had with religious groups.

My biggest problem with Vietnam was staffing. I just couldn't get a good PAO out there. Everyone I went after, and it was such an important post with so much invested because of the, largely because of the trio of senators, not getting competent leadership out was a source of endless frustration.

Korea was the other huge issue.

Q: What was happening?

KOVACH: Korea, six party talks. I was less involved in that. I gave them a lot of public affairs advice. I was very close to the head of the Korea desk. Jim Kelly kind of confided in me he wasn't happy with the direction and he had to string the talks along on the basis they were on. I don't remember the nuance. He wasn't comfortable with them because he had no traction with Powell and Armitage. Bolton was undercutting him. Bolton was the head of the, what we now call the T family of bureaus, the arms control verification bureaus. It was not a happy time.

Then we had a political, a man whom A/S Kelly actually liked who was our main negotiator. It was kind of a holding time but I think Kelly was really worried that we were just treading water and I think history has totally proved him correct.

I should interject here that the confidence A/S Kelly and the senior EAP leaders had in my guarantee that in this new State regional PD structure the good I had seen in consolidation four years earlier as a USIA officer would come home to roost. In so many of these delicate moments, especially in connection with the Six Party Talks and North Korean affairs as well as with increasing tensions cross-Taiwan straights I was regularly a part of the policy deliberations bringing a focus on how a given policy option or communications strategy would enhance or detract from our efforts in the eyes of key regional and international audiences. The animating mantra describing PD's potential: 'in on the policy take-offs as well as on the hard landings' (to paraphrase Edward R. Murrow) essentially defined my relationship to our front office in this job -- a job that in retrospect I view as the culmination of my career despite more senior and nominally prestigious work in the realm of whole of government strategic communications before and subsequently.

One of the main reasons I was hired, trust me, I am a Japan hand. We take Japan for granted a lot. I wasn't only hired because I was a Japan hand. It was convenient because there is something about the senior career people in that bureau. If you don't have a leg in one of the north Asia triad of giants, Japan, China and Korea, or you are absolutely one of these people that's been to Thailand or Indonesia, which are huge posts time after time in your career, like three or four postings there, you don't get very high in that bureau.

With the Japan experience it freed them to hire me because of my alleged expertise on the Muslim world. I know a lot about Islam. Most of my career has been around Muslims. I am a student of religion. That's how I got hired and it was very clear after 9/11 they wanted expertise in that realm.

Q: Were you considered part of the chrysanthemum club in a way?

KOVACH: That was the chapeau but the real reason they hired me Don and Jim were both very upfront about this is because they wanted someone who was comfortable around Muslim issues and that would be me.

The main action there with one glaring exception was just beefing up our infrastructure programs, especially in Indonesia.

Q: Looking at the big picture, had Japan sort of slipped to being its there, its huge, it is important but what the hell? Let s not devote too much time to it because it takes care of itself or something?

KOVACH: Part of the problem is that my credentials as a Japan hand came from when I was about your age (nodding at intern in her mid-20's) and I lived there for three years on my own. You would have to ask a real Japan hand, someone who had served there several times to get a good one or two line characterization of how we have sort of drifted away from the centrality of Japan in our Asian policy purview. Not away but we take them for granted.

Q: I think we do the same with Germany.

KOVACH: Yes and these are both posts with public diplomacy programs that in the last year have been downsized by a third in terms of resources, traditionally mega posts that have been right sized.

I was the senior cultural attaché in Japan for a year before I was curtailed for illness and had this background in Japan. I did a lot of Japanese history too in school.

Q: Indonesia is this huge country which no one paid much attention to it except those who live there.

KOVACH: In retrospect, it's almost bizarre that they couldn't find a senior Indonesia hand with whom to entrust the PD office, given their concern with sensitivity to Islamic culture and issues after 9/11.

This is what we did in Indonesia and I can talk about the infrastructure buildup.

One of the new hot new ideas in the post 9/11 world was what generically were called American Corners until the Obama crowd renamed them American Spaces. When I came into the East Asian Bureau PD office these American Corners were a bit like, think of a Christian Science reading room with three computers and a program space made available by a local host institution so, for instance, that if we have a lecturer that we'd like to present there that they would host it or that possibility would be part of the negotiation in creating an American Corner. These Corners were managed by people that belonged to the institution. There was no day to day American managerial presence. There was money for this. It was a hot thing. I felt I could get almost limitless money for it as I had a great rapport with the Acting Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, Patricia Harrison. That said I had a lot of doubts about the concept. I am a good bureaucrat. As my professor in grad school said to me bureaucracy is all about where the money flows and where you sit.

Following his maxim I picked Pat Harrison who was the acting under secretary's pocket for ten American Corners in Indonesia. My recollection is that in most Muslim countries we started calling them Lincoln Corners because Lincoln looked like a Muslim with the beard and his hallmark, at least in historical retrospect, was his sense of justice, a much praised value in most Muslim cultures and discourse.

A couple were in public libraries which is exactly where they should be. Most of them were in universities at the edge of town, gated, with guards at the door. That's where they shouldn't be. It is not a youth outreach tool. It's a general tool so we put them all over in Indonesia.

Another thing we did and I had sort of a creative hand in this with a team of three or four other people, we got money for an FM radio show that was based on American youth culture and rock and roll that would have Indonesian students that were on the Yes

Program, the high school exchange program or undergraduate Fulbrights as guest DJs with an American and playing the music they liked and talking about the music and talking about being young in America. This was very successful; the station director was in Surabaya in the eastern part of Java which is an important area from where to reach Solo which was a hotbed of conservative Islam.

Another imaginative thing we did through Fulbright at Gadjah Mada University, the largest Muslim university in the world still, I think, in Yogyakarta, they had a religious studies program department that wanted to beef up their world religion offerings so through Fulbright we sent them a series of American scholar practitioners from different faith traditions. There is a real trend now in religious studies to discredit people that are not of the faith but are scholars of the faith. As a Foreign Service officer, the people I liked to program in Muslim countries are American Muslims that are scholars of Islam in our institutions because it is a double sort of message; the freedom of Muslim life in America and the excellence of our studies, objective historical studies of religion.

Here domestically I am rather bothered by several incidents at universities I am familiar with. Most recently at the University of Arizona where my brother is a senior professor and where he was suddenly asked, because we are of this sort of mixed Hapsburg, partially Jewish mix in our family. He was asked to jump in as a professor part time of Judaic studies because his third wife is Jewish so I think he has become sort of a born again Jew. He goes to synagogue on rare occasions and he speaks a lot on German Jewish history which he is an expert on, for Jewish organizations. He was asked to be part of the new wave in that department when a really knowledgeable and scholarly Christian who had been the head of Hebraic studies for 20 years fell out with the board and it was just because a lot of the support or financial supporters who tended to be Jewish wanted more Jewish scholars in the mix. I never like to single out Judaism because it is so easy to be anti Semitic but apparently this is a trend in studies of other religions. So domestically I am for excellence in scholarship to prevail but programming American scholars overseas I really like scholar scholar-practitioners. Maybe a contradiction, I realize.

What we did through Fulbright we set up a series of lectures in seven traditions. With Muslims and Jews and Christians after 9/11 there is a real tendency for people that are trying to build bridges of mutual understanding to circle the Abrahamic wagons, in other words to just include the three of them. I will always badger my Muslim friends about this. The tolerance for the other two religions in Islam is absolutely unparalleled in Christianity and Judaism. I what I'd typically say to Muslim friends was something like this: these Jews and Christians they are riding the backs of the relative tolerance for others in the Holy Quran. But 80% of Muslims in this world wake up and they don't have to deal with Jews and Christians. They have to deal with Hindus and Buddhists and Confucians and Animists. Bring the latter into the conversation. I found in general Muslims are pretty receptive to that. There are all these verses in the Koran about non Abrahamic, non law giving prophets that could be Buddha, Confucius anyone you think is a prophet. The Ahmadiyas and Bahá'is think of themselves as sort of quasi Muslims and they feel their leaders can call themselves prophets because they are not law giving prophets. That is a very delicate membrane of debate now.

So they accepted the idea and we sent a series of people through there that were just great. Indonesians tend to be Sufi in high proportion, so I sent my close Wesleyan friend and fellow religion major Sheikh Kabir Helminski on this program. He is a major translator and scholar of the poet Rumi whose sect he teaches in. I really tried to the extent I could influence the selection of scholars for this program to go for mystics, whether they were Muslims, Christians or Jews or Buddhists or you know. It was a very influential program.

I think cross study of religion is a major bridge builder because people begin to step out of their own shoes. Max Mueller is one of the great scholars of comparative religion I had studied when I was at an undergraduate at Wesleyan. Mueller memorably stated, ‘ if you know just one religion, you know none.’ That quote is a hallmark of my own life path.

Q: When you were doing this you didn’t cross over to India, Pakistan?

KOVACH: No. The line is Burma; Bangladesh is the first country on the other side of the line between East Asia and India /Pakistan. It is notable as you may be wanting to point out to these people (interns present) that every major American Foreign Service bureaucracy draws the map in a different way so the military (PACOM) goes to India, I think, and CENTCOM starts with Pakistan. AID is separate and the Agency again is separate. Everyone has their own little map.

Q: What about Burma? Were you able to do anything there?

KOVACH: One of the things I liked about Burma was that we had, the public diplomacy program was about the only thing the mission had going. We had a remote center, away from the Embassy. We taught English. We had our own publication house which was a total throwback to Cold War public diplomacy in the 50s. We were writing our own books and leaflets. The public affairs section was the only part of the embassy that some of the time could see Aung San Suu Kyi and her people; on the good days. So we had a hot thing going and I had a really good PAO there -- a woman who is sort of abdicated career success for marriage and happiness. I have known her since she walked in the door. Her brother who is an officer is a P/DAS in a major bureau now and she could have been assistant secretary for public affairs. She walked out of the Bush White House. She was Condoleezza Rice’s senior press officer. She was the one that helped me get the foreign press in the door a few years back.

I remember when she was a junior officer. I was mentoring her in my role as the number three in the old USIA Near East Bureau. She said I love my career but I have always wanted to marry and have a family. I’ve got to find Mr. Right. She was selective. She wasn’t at all loose but she really wanted to find Mr. Right and she did. They are a really great pair and they have great kids. She has had a very steady rise through mid career. Sean McCormick who became the assistant secretary when Condi came over to State because she brought over people from the NSC, Mary Ellen totally outranked him and from what I saw, he was sort of a no count in that office. When he d come over to brief at

the foreign press center he was never prepared. I have to believe that she would have been Assistant Secretary had she not taken her life in a different direction.

Q: How did you find within public diplomacy the role of women officers and all? Do you think there was a different feel, different opportunities?

KOVACH: I think in public diplomacy we did a hell of a lot better than the State Department at large. It is a gross generalization, I'll admit. There are tons of exceptions. The women that get ahead tend at State tend to be very brassy, take no prisoners types and the men that get ahead are good bureaucrats that work up well and are real type Bs. I think that is a real glaring indictment of the State Department's culture. I have to be very honest with you. If I were a cultural anthropologist coming and looking at the Department, this divide would just jump out at me. The men that get ahead are type Bs, kind of kiss asses that are smart but know when to hold and know when to fold. If a kind of creative out of the box guy like me gets ahead, you pretty much know it's an exception. I think I am more of the personality type of the women that get ahead.

In the later part of my career I think I managed down probably better than I managed up. Earlier in my career I think it was the opposite.

I had a real change, by the way, of management philosophy. I had an epiphany.

Q: What caused it?

KOVACH: I think getting promoted really fast and realizing that while both my Americans and my foreign service nationals appreciated my loyalty to them because I am a very, very loyal boss, that smooth human relations are also part of an ideal package. I will help people with their own lives and with their getting ahead. However, in my first two or three posts I could be a bit of screamer. I had a temper and I could lose it. In the middle of the Jordan, assignment I just had this epiphany. It was the best staff I ever had and I think I realized that you get a lot more out of people when you calmed down and stop breathing so heavy. I had an American officer who worked for me when she came in the door in NEA/USIA, a brilliant woman. We did all right in Washington. She worked for me in the NEA Bureau and then she came out for her first overseas tour to Jordan and she and I just butted heads for a year and a half. I always had an open door as a manager. She'd come in and without closing the door would start screaming at me in form of the FSNs. She was usually right. She'd scream about me being an autocrat and so forth. After a while I drank the Kool Aid and our last year together we reconciled and worked well together, because our vision strategically was similar. She is a woman with great strategic vision. She has become a great friend.

We get evaluated once a year. Years later she remained a close friend. So here's a bit of a comic story. I've got this weekend house in southern Maryland on the water and my wife and I invite close friends down there. Kathy came down with her family and Penny likes Kathy a lot. I am in the next room getting dinner ready to put on the grill while the ladies were visiting with each other. Suddenly, I heard Kathy just howling with laughter. She's

got a big voice and a big laugh. She had nosed into the draft of my latest EER which I had carelessly left on a table. She exclaimed, 'His low key management style', a quote from the draft. She had the nerve to pick it up and read it. That's a very private document. Now, I shouldn't have left it on the table but it is my house. She was roaring about this line in this document.

I became a lot more low key and I found I got a lot better results and would say at this point toward the end of my career I was much better managing down than up whereas at the beginning I was probably better at up than down. It was an important change.

Q: I am now addressing the interns here. Management styles as you move into the ranks of whatever you are doing you will be noticing and there is this up and down style. One of the things I have noticed about the Foreign Service there is an awful lot of what I would say low key management where sometimes young officers don't understand will say, it would be nice if we could have a little more of this or that. That essentially is often an order but young officers don't always get orders because it seems to be left to your option when we are putting it in a nice way but damn it, we want something done.

KOVACH: Even in my born again, low key days I don't think I would manage with that kind of ambiguity. I would invite feedback if a disagreement existed. I would say hey, you look uncomfortable. Tell me upfront what is bothering you about this and I am persuadable. I am listening to you because management 101 says I should listen to you and then tell you what I decide.

I will tell you what I decide but you can change my mind. I think on all my staffs even back in the bad old days when I had that temper, I think people knew that they could change my mind.

Q: Did you have any personnel problems, particularly public affairs officers who didn't fit within the culture or within the embassy?

KOVACH: I had one I described in Morocco, just didn't fit. The ambassador wanted to throw him out. I was caught between protecting my guy and dealing with problems I knew existed.

I had another problem. In my one of my former perches, senior cultural attaché in Tokyo which was one of our biggest cultural programs in the world at the time, I had a guy probably one of the great Japan hands in public diplomacy the last 40 years. This was during my tenure as EAP Public Diplomacy Office Director. Deeply knowledgeable about Japan, he s the best. He manages up well. He is a brilliant strategic thinker but he is very driven and has very high expectations of himself and absolutely takes no prisoners managing down. Even in my bad days I was very upfront in taking criticism but his DCM, a personal friend who had gone through Japanese training with me years back reached back to me in Washington and said that folks at post are really having problems with this person. On your next trip out be sure and include Japan because I know he respects you.

I did. I was going out in two weeks and I added Japan to the trip. I spent a day counseling him. Then he came back on home leave. We were personal friends too, which makes things both easier and even harder. I took him out to dinner a couple of times, long, sake fueled conversations about life and human relations. I believe he changed. He came back to a domestic assignment where he was head of a team in IIP, Office of International Information Programs. It is bigger than half the bureaus in the Department but it is not quite a bureau and has its own nomenclature and has its own flattened structure.

One of the things Vice President Gore did when he was vice president -- he thought there was too much hierarchy and he flattened structures. That is something he did that I applaud. IIP was still pretty flat and my Japan hand with the rough edges was the head of major team. I had a friend on the team. How's he doing, I queried? They know exactly what you are asking, no matter who the boss is. He's great, was the reply. I am thinking maybe I have actually accomplished something because he is such a good officer and seems to have changed his stripes as a manager.

Q: Going back to China, during the time you were there, did you have one of these outbreaks of xenophobia? Every once in a while a plane crashes or

KOVACH: No P-3, we didn't have any of that.

The two things about the China relationship that I think are interesting and illustrative of the history; there were seven posts, Pacific Island EAP posts where I didn't have a PAO but we did have a small embassy. China was really beginning to extend its presence in the Pacific and it just struck me that we needed to do something about it.

If you talk to a lot of PD officers of my generation that came up in USIA, they have a very institutionally rigid view of a USIS office, now public Affairs section in the field. Remember Frank Scotton? He was one of these guys who was in the military in Vietnam and became a Vietnam hand later as a diplomat and he used to talk about how he walked around Saigon with his sidearm. Frank said, 'How can you have public diplomacy if there is no PAO? It's like having an air force and no airport.'

I am thinking Frank, I am sorry. We are integrated in the State Department, it is a generalist foreign service and I can create a structure that will give us limited public diplomacy presence in those islands without a PAO, PAOs for posts that small as I knew too well being way beyond the realm of possibility on several levels.

I created what a system I dubbed PD Partners, which pleased Jim Kelly working up and a staffer in my structure named Lynn Siever committed to implement the details. I put it together with Lynn, a woman I had known since the day I walked in the door of the Foreign Service in 1980. She retired as an O2. After a 30 year career it's not good to retire as an O2. I knew her and I knew what her talents were. I do play, even on my bad days, I do play to people's talents. I don't believe in staff conforming to some ideal I have. She

had a mind for this. I told her, 'I am going to put you in charge of fleshing out my concept.'

We got this model together where if a post, if one of these island posts would commit staff resources we would get them program money and mentoring in how to do programs. Our formula was they had to commit a Foreign Service national, a local employee half time to public diplomacy. They had to have an officer who, if I remember right, had to commit at least a third of his or her position description to shaping public diplomacy and the partnership aspect was that we got several of the big cultural sections in the region, Japan, Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia and Malaysia at one point to agree to partner each with a Pacific Island post and give them backup, be available by e-mail and telephone to advise on running an exchange program or program like a Fulbright or the like.

We got limited cultural diplomacy going at seven posts. The one where it really took off was Brunei because the ambassador totally got it. Brunei was an important partly because it is oil rich. It is one of the richest countries per capita in the world and it is also a place where some of the Indonesian and archipelago Islamic terrorists go to the mattresses. Where they sort of lay low. It was an important little post. We did a lot of counterterrorism stuff there, engaged people, and engaged people sort of in the Islamic madrassas and the establishment through exchange programs, through speakers. So that was a big success.

I nominated Lynn for a superior honor award - a big deal. She was moved to tears. It was a total surprise. She had never gotten an award in her 30 year career -- which is hard to believe. You usually do get an award. She didn't even get a group award.

The PD partner thing was a great triumph. And my understanding is that the concept endures in EAP to this day.

Let me talk about the Corners, the American Spaces. There was one formula that worked. That's when they were located in a central public library. The five best ones of the 53 created on my watch, I picked the under secretary's pocket for 53 Corners because it was the hot PD concept and it was a way to backdoor fund other initiatives. I didn't totally agree with the concept. I didn't agree with the slapdash way it was executed. It was generated post 9/11, in the let's do something, anything mode. We got five great ones, so ten percent were good. And some good ones in addition. The good ones were not in universities. They were in centrally located public libraries or youth centers. Two of these strong ones were in Indonesia. Two of them were in Okinawa where we have terrible problems because of the U.S. military presence. We put them in public libraries there. The Japanese are the most prolific readers in the world and interestingly enough, one of the slowest cultures to pick up the Internet in the world. The internet is too horizontal. It is too democratic in a way that flies in the face of Japan's traditional hierarchical culture. On a cultural level it gives them the heebie-jeebies.

Koreans are very easy with the Internet; in fact, in the early part of last decade when I had the EAP job, they were the most wired country in the world.

The jewel in the crown among the American Spaces my efforts spawned was in Ulaanbaatar, Outer Mongolia, one of my favorite countries in the world. The Corner was centrally located in the capital's main square. In this central, huge, modern Soviet built library, one of the great things about the Soviet Union was these incredible libraries with the emphasis on literacy. They of course restricted what you could read but they were very big on being able to read and this whole American Corner and now American Space idea comes from installations we did in the old Soviet Union but applied a little too broad brush in my view. The corner at the Ulaanbaatar library was the perfect throwback to the original model that had been spawned in the Soviet Union.

Q: Let's talk a little bit about Korea. South Korea was not a country where we could not absolutely assume that everybody will love us. We've got a problem. We've got perpetual problems there. What were we doing there?

KOVACH: We had a huge program, huge exchanges. We had two or three American Corners there in good places like in community centers so we had good American Corners there that average people could freely access, not in gated university communities, venues where we could put programs on.

The brush we were tarred with was that we cared more about our strategic interests and Korea's role in carrying them out than Korea itself and they pointed to our support for the dictatorial regimes of the past as evidence. One of the things that happened on my watch there deserves mention. Chris Hill was ambassador and he had the good sense and had a terrific public affairs officer there, Don Q. Washington. Don Q and the Ambassador perhaps together came up with the idea for a public event that would significantly flip that South Korean perception.

Q: On the anniversary of the massacre in Taigu, I believe that was in 1978, a massacre of democracy activists, where about 250 students were killed by troops, the embassy had a plan.

KOVACH: On the anniversary, Ambassador Hill went to Taigu. Donning white gloves as appropriate in that culture for cemetery rituals and he laid a wreath at the tomb of those students that were slain. It drew headline news coverage and led to a significant change in perceptions of the U.S.

We had a huge PD program and the military had a huge psychological operation outfit.

One of the advantages I had (as much of a weakness as it was for the most part) the only semi autonomous public affairs officer of any of the regional bureaus was ours in EAP but he and I had a very good working relationship. The terrific resource I had, unparalleled in any other regional bureau was this. I had a PD officer embedded in our regional military command along with two staffers. I had a person I supervised at

PACOM. I had two local Hawaiians and one American officer in that small but highly effective office.

At every stop before interagency teams were invented that complement public affairs sections I really insisted where there was a military presence in a country of strategic PD interest, that my PD section not only coordinate with the military special operations and psychological operations people but that we pick their pockets just like I like to pick the pockets of some of my AID colleagues because they tend to have more money. It was one of my little things. Maybe my 'off base' jazz tour that I concocted with General Wright was as good an example of the latter as any in my career.

I had good cooperation going. I had the support of the command. When I went out to Hawaii I would always call on the four star.

Q: CINCPAC.

KOVACH: Yes and we'd talk about it and then I'd talk to the two star that ran psychological operations/ information operations (SOCPAC). We had a good working rapport that no other working bureau had because of that linking up so that's a good structural thing to mention. I am very sorry to report that EAP has lost that office so rather than a contagion spreading to all bureaus, it's a dead concept in the sad mess that is today's public diplomacy at the State Department.

Q: What about the Philippines?

KOVACH: The main problem was the Muslim insurgency and our feeling that the central government wasn't doing enough to achieve Muslim /Catholic reconciliation. I had networked in Washington with a very influential female Muslim senator, Dr. Amina Rasul and I liked her. I met her at an academic conference at GW or SAIS, one of the two schools. I just decided she was good enough and she was good enough for prime time so I brought her over to the State Department to brief the Philippine desk and Jim Kelly eventually. Everyone just loved her and thought she was really wise and then I had her stop in Hawaii at her expense and talk to the two star.

A lot of our psy-op programs in the southern Philippines that were very successful came out of that relationship with Dr. Rasul, I believe. It was a real concern.

I went out to the Philippines on one of my regional visits as PD Director, I was expected to travel in this job. I told Don Keyser going in I don't like rushed trips. I don't like a lot of too long flights over the Pacific. I would rather do three trips a year for a month. I had good deputies. I could leave the office in good hands and I did that. I think I went to the Philippines twice and neither time did the embassy want to let me go down to the Muslim areas. They felt it was too dangerous.

Q: Did we have anything State Department sponsored down in the south?

KOVACH: No. It is mostly PACOM and the intelligence community.

Q: (Speaking to Interns) I was wondering if you all had any questions?

KOVACH: I have two more things to say about that episode.

One thing that happened is that mine was the first regional bureau to have an inspection after USIA/State 'consolidation' in 2003. Or it might have been the first regional bureau to be inspected since Ambassador Grossman took over as Director General. Marc Grossman who is now the Afghanistan Pakistan (Af-Pak) super ambassador had been friendly to me over the years but we don't agree sometimes; he was the Director General of the Foreign Service and he had an agenda.

One of the things we disagreed over, this is structural, when he was the assistant secretary for Europe, his public diplomacy office director at USIA, Ambassador Brian Carlson 'conned' him into letting that office move across to State a half a year before we were formally integrated on the condition that it stayed autonomous and intact. Marc is pretty plain spoken. He's a very laid back, Southern Californian, but very plain spoken. He said, 'Your buddy Brian Carlson took me to the cleaners because my vision of public diplomacy in my bureau was that the so called desk officers that covered, that looked after PD in two or three countries would be integrated with the desks that covered those same countries but Brian kept them separate. When Ambassador Grossman became the director general of the Foreign Service one of his absolute agendas was to get the regional public diplomacy officers better integrated in the bureaus. He came in and mine was the first bureau under Grossman to be inspected.

I realized that frankly for the big desks like China, Grossman's idea made a lot of sense and for the archipelago it made some sense. Japan and Korea were split. We had one officer covering both. In short, my vision was for partial embedding of PD country officers into the regional country, sub-regional desk structures.

Another factor was that the inspectors were, by utter coincidence, put in an office right across the hall from my office. The PD inspector, was an old USIA guy who was just retiring about the time I came in in 1980. I made a point of chatting him up. He confided to me that the agenda for this inspection included complete embedding of the PD officers into the country desk structure. I just thought partial integration made a lot of sense but with safeguards.

Again I went to Don Keyser and I gave him a draft non-paper I had written. My non-paper was essentially a plan to partially integrate my staff into their respective country offices. I told him that I wanted with his green light to give this paper to the inspectors but I want you to clear it even though no one's name would appear on it. He liked it and he gave to Kelly and Kelly liked it too and so one day I bumped into the PD inspector in the hall across from my office. I actually had asked my OMS to let me know when he walked out of the office; I had the paper folded in my pocket. I said, 'Hi, Dave' opened his jacket, stuck the paper in and said, 'Have a nice day.'

We got verbatim what I had written in the final report. I had looked at old inspection reports to make sure the length and tone and format was right. Grossman calmed down. Three or four years later he and I were having coffee and he said, 'At first I thought you had done a number on me but now I see that you were right.'

The safeguards I put in were they can sit physically in the regional office, the China office and the Southeast Asia office archipelago but they would be on our PD and PA mailing lists, be on the blast e-mail lists of both offices, that they would attend staff meetings in both offices and that I would be included in the evaluation process as the reviewer, that the office director would be the rater but I would be the reviewer so there was fear of the public diplomacy office director built into enough to keep them honest and responsive to my direction. A couple of the other bureaus that had succumbed to pressure from Grossman just said ok, goodbye, we'll embed everyone.

I understand that office still has somewhat the same structure so I am pretty pleased about that.

Another thing is the China story. I had several intense trips to China in that job. The first trip, just a couple of months after I started the job in winter of 2003, I went out to China. The Chinese foreign ministry people wanted to receive me for a formal dinner. They really study to prepare for such sessions. Even for a senior middle official they study so they requested my CV before I sat down with them. The nice thing about them is they are direct. They are so unlike the Japanese. They will tell you what they really think, whatever ones preconceptions about the Communist Party imposed restrictions on discourse. They can speak their minds and they drink.

We got to this first drunken dinner with a strange combination of officials they picked. They said, Oh, Mr. Kovach, we have read your biography with great interest. We'd like to talk about religion. So we had quite an evening. It was a very candid evening. They pointed out their interest in my thoughts about policies towards religious groups.

I said what religions do you want to talk about?

We want to talk about the Dalai Lama, about Falun Gong and the Uyghurs and Muslims.

OK, what's first? Maybe the Dalai Lama is the easiest.

It is because we probably agree with you and they did.

I said you are crazy not to cut a deal with this leader because he is for cultural and economic autonomy. He is not for independence but the government in exile, I know some of these people in my personal life, and the younger generation is just hell bent on independence. There is no compromise. Cut a deal with this Dalai Lama now or else you are going to have a tiger on your doorstep. If you look at Chinese dynastic history, you are now in the sort of burst out mobilization stage of Communist China. In 30 or 40 years

when things may begin to fall apart if they follow your dynastic patterns you will regret not having made peace with this amazing international figure when you had the chance. They didn't argue with that at all, you can either have the Tibetans as a sensibly integrated part of your country or you can have a rebellion on your hands among the 'western barbarians' and they agreed with me. But they said to me candidly that these decisions were above their pay grades. That's how that riff of conversation ended.

Falun Gong we totally disagreed on.

Q: You might explain what that was.

KOVACH: Falun Gong is a cultish group if you want to join Falun Gong where you are down here in Washington, I am sure they would love to have you. They are strong and evangelical as blazes. It is kind of a syncretist, sect that puts forward teachings based in part of Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism and Chinese Traditional Medicine. They were tolerated in China up until 1999, The Falun Gong got stirred up on some issue and on one or two days they mobilized 10,000 people to march around parliament in Beijing. That kind of thing, that lack of control, just freaks the regime out. They banned the group and started really persecuting them to the point where they now literally shoot the political prisoners from Falun Gong but they shoot them in a way that they don't die right away. They harvest their organs while they are still alive and throw the still living carcass out in a heap and let them die. This is documented.

In American Falun Gong is thriving. I personally think they are a bit crazy and I don't think their degree of syncretism makes much sense to me. I have friends in Falun Gong. I go to the big, annual show up at the Kennedy Center every year at their invitation.

While Falun Gong doesn't appeal to me, we let our crazies parade their wares in the public square and as long as they aren't intimidating people or persecuting people that want to leave, as long as there is religious freedom to practice, do no harm. If they do harm then it is like scientology and other sects that had that unfortunate tendency to harass apostates and there are some evangelicals sects that go after people too.

That's how I feel and we disagreed.

Then we talked about the Muslims. I opened that up by saying post 9/11 China is the second biggest Muslim country in Asia (by the way). It has a bigger Muslim population than Malaysia by two or three million so in Asia, it's Indonesia and then China. Their Muslim population is divided into two culturally and even racially distinct segments; Han Chinese, people who are ethnically Chinese that were converted by Yemeni Sufis about 5, 6, 700 years ago and then Uyghurs who are Turkic, Central Asians that are sort of Muslims from the era of Genghis Khan. They represent different ethnic, different linguistic traditions, different food, different everything.

By evening's end, we agreed that we were worried about our respective Muslims domestically. We are worried about the contagions of international terrorism and

radicalization. Maybe we can do something together and they responded, Great. Can we take you and invite on a tour of Muslim China maybe leaving in two days?

I said, No. I've got a set itinerary this trip but I do these trips out to Asia every three months or so. On my next trip I would love to accept your invitation and go out and visit the Muslims in China, so I did.

Two months later I came and the first place I went was Ningxia which is the northern settlement of Han Chinese; right on the border of Inner Mongolia. The southern group is in Wuhan. There in the weeks before my visit, a drunk public official had run over some Muslims at noon in the public square and they had riots. Our PRC hosts didn't want me anywhere near that.

I was in Ningxia right up on the border of Inner Mongolia, a beautiful area, mountains, very well integrated. I went to a convention of Muslim intellectuals who were looking ahead to the 600th anniversary of conversion to Islam. They wanted a foreign speaker or two for the anniversary.

I had an aside with the Ningxia government foreign office 'minder' who was 'looking after me' Informally between friends do to think the USG sending out a speaker or two would work? And he said, Yes, I think it would work

Then I got taken out to a huge village mosque. It looked like a pagoda. If you saw it and you'd say Confucian or Buddhist. The only external tell-tale was at the crown of the main gate structure where you'd expect to see Chinese characters, there was Arabic.

A good morning talk with elders of the mosque. I had a great translator, an American officer who just died two months ago.

Then we went to a rich peasant's house in the Muslim village for lunch. We're sitting around and it is kind of a funky room and we are talking and everyone is loose and the women are all hovering over us and serving us stuff. Our minder from the provincial foreign office was there, a kind of a humorless guy.

Q: Talking about minders from the security

KOVACH: From the foreigner watching apparatus of the security. The imam walked in after about half an hour and he clearly didn't like this guy. He just decided to light into him, but indirectly. This is the funniest thing that happened to me in a 30 year career.

The imam went into a diatribe about how women like circumcised men better. Most Chinese men are not circumcised but Muslims obviously are. The imam didn't take his foot off the pedal on this line for a good 15 minutes. The security 'watcher' is just turning red and then he's turning purple and I am thinking this guy is going to have a heart attack and die. The imam and everyone else are just loving it.

Darrell Jenks who just died and who was translating was laughing so hard he could hardly stand up and continue translating. Don Bishop, who was the PAO, a more straight laced evangelical catholic took over. He can hardly believe this conversation is happening. Don stepped in and tried to continue translating for my benefit.

The women are just roaring. They are just beside themselves they are laughing so hard. This went on from about 20 minutes. The guy would not take the pedal off the metal.

What happened is we were able to establish some programming for Chinese Muslims and for the Uyghurs

Q: Explain who the Uyghurs are.

KOVACH: The Turkic population. If you go to Ürümqi in western Xinjiang Province you initially see a modern post revolutionary Chinese city. You go around a corner into the Uyghur section of town and the smells and the music and the faces and the language make you feel like you are in eastern Turkey. It is like someone just throwing a switch. It is such a contrast.

I had a meal with Uyghurs and a couple of more interesting watchers. Then went down to Tourfan which is the second lowest place in the world next to the Dead Sea. It is out in the desert and it is all Uyghur and we attended the rehearsal of a cultural troop that the Chinese proudly travel internationally. After we had a Q & A with them, it was clear that they were not wildly pro American. You know what they got on me about? Can Michael Jackson get a fair trial as sort of a minority and a black man. I think they really identified with African Americans. We had a very interesting discussion about that. I talked about the role of the media. I said, You know, I think our courts work well but with a celebrity trial like that, you worry about the media in either direction. Is he going to get acquitted because of public pressure of some kind or is he going to get railroaded because the media is all over him? That was my answer.

Then we went to a Chinese new town out in the desert, to visit a new university, post revolution. It is all Han Chinese even though it is totally surrounded by Uyghurs many displaced at the time in the 1950's that the city was built. There is a diorama there; a room with a very PRC friendly historical narrative displayed and it reminded me of two other experiences like that I had.

When I was 15 years old and my family did the obligatory western trip we went out west to a museum that's still depicted the Native Americans as sort of these inconvenient shrubs that 'we' had gotten rid of. Now that would be so un-PC you could never get away with it.

The other place I saw a diorama like that was in the Golan Heights in Israel. It was the Israeli narrative about these nasty Syrians and Palestinians. All three equally offensive.

We established some low key programming. Some leaders came to the United States. We sent some lecturers out for the 600th anniversary. With the Uyghurs we weren't able to do as much. The Chinese were really interested in us reaching out and sending American Muslims that we trusted and were mainstreamed to visit their Han Chinese Muslims.

Q: (Speaking to Interns) Do you all have any questions?

Q: Intern: You mentioned how gender influences careers and I was wondering if you could tell us more about that.

KOVACH: I don't think it influences careers but if you look at the top people at the State Department it is just uncanny how many of the women at the top and there are a good number of women at the top, are brassy, tough, take no prisoner types, very type A and a lot of the men at the top are very type B, intellectual, conceptual who work up well and understand structure and kind of know how to play their cards; know when to hold and know when to fold as I said earlier.

It is a gross generalization. I will put it out there. I gotta say that's what I notice and I have heard other people say roughly the same without me instigating the conversation. Nor have I ever had pushback when I've said it around the Department. And we tend to argue and disagree in such discussions. People think about it and if they express a view, it's one of strong agreement.

Q: (Intern) Specifically about the work in the community centers and libraries in Indonesia, how did you stretch across the broad landscape of islands to have access for different audiences?

KOVACH: We rely on the post to decide where there are important audiences. One of the things we wanted to do we on my watch was a lot of outreach to pesantrens which are the equivalents of madrassas. We wanted to be in areas where there are a lot of pesantrens where the pesantren students and faculty could use the library. We had two or three around Jakarta. We had one or two in Sumatra. We had one in Surabaya. I don't think we had one in Bali. We had one in Jogjakarta. I think we are trying to get one in Solo, so there was a focus on important centers of Muslim culture.

Q: (Intern) I just got back from a semester in the UK where I was in an International relations class where I essentially heard this professor going on and on and on about the downfall of America is here. They are no longer going to be a super power. China is going to take the reins on all of this and I find it really interesting that you are talking about why the Chinese are faltering. Are there any specific aspects of their regime that you would say contribute to that the most?

KOVACH: I would say there is too much freedom to maintain the centralized control over thinking and information and as that loosens up I think it is going to accelerate dynastic decline because I don't think China has ever worked well politically not under central control, whether it was theirs or whether it was the Tibetans' control in the 7th

century. They do well under central control so I am not anti Chinese, despite some of the awful things I was pushing them on on religious freedom. I am just sensing inexorable change given the rhythms of that country its regionalism, its kind of iconoclasm, the fact that for the first time in history probably everyone is literate. I think there are some real wild cards there. This may be sort of a Chinese age in a sense but I don't think they are going to eclipse any of the other major powers.

Q: I think they've got a population problem which is huge. How to deal with it which is not a plus; it's a minus.

KOVACH: There is a lot of pressure to relieve the one child rule too.

Q: Coming into the age of computer literacy and all this. This doesn't work well for the central control. They've got more problems than we imagine.

KOVACH: They are very pragmatic people. Culturally as an American I really feel a kinship with them that I don't feel with Koreans and Japanese, even though I know Japanese culture ten times better. Same goes for Southeast Asians. I feel more akin to Chinese. There is a directness and pragmatism about them that I find quite refreshing in my American shoes.

For instance with the religious regime there is a bureaucracy called the State Administration of Religion that is a post revolutionary structure because they really feared religious backlash to the Revolution. The SAR now has become a powerhouse. It is very evident to a lot of people in the party that it is time to let more religion in under the tent. They haven't seen much negative from religion other than Falun Gong. They have these house churches that are illegal, that probably tens of millions of people belong to. Talk to your evangelicals friends; they'll start talking about 80 or a hundred million evangelicals. Take that with a grain of salt but there are a lot. There are a lot of Buddhist groups that are semi recognized and underground.

What they discovered during the Sichuan quake is that faith based civil society can really complement what the governments do in civic emergencies and can work well with government. They had Taiwanese groups in working too. I think that many in government and in the party wanted to phase out SAR but put a far richer mix of religious institutions under another bureaucracy. What we did was facilitated trips from that prospective bureaucracy that we thought might get the green light. They wanted to go to see the IRS to learn how 501C worked because they were thinking of the finances of the thing. They were looking at our tax free charitable contributions as something positive. They wanted control but in a much looser broader sense and a much more inclusive sense, not just the three patriotic churches or five patriotic churches. Basically the SAR trumped them. It didn't happen. To the detriment of both government control and religious freedom to my way of thinking.

Q: Today is the 8th of June, 2012 with Peter Kovach.

Peter, I will turn it over to you.

KOVACH: I think we were just finishing up the EAP public diplomacy director phase.

I am reasonably ambitious but I was never dying to be an ambassador. It wasn't my end all ambition but at the end of my second year in EAP Jim Kelly who was a big fan of mine put me up to be Ambassador to Brunei. I realized having not finished my PhD that having the title would be useful after retirement. Brunei was the shining city on the hill of the seven PD partner posts I had created. We did a lot for them. The ambassador was totally great guy, Gene Christy. A fan of mine. I think he and Kelly just decided I was the right successor. I was moving around, doing the calls on the people on the D committee sort of like a 19th century dance card kind of ritual.

Two forces bumped me off of that opportunity. The major one was EAP has never done terrible well in the senior assignments process, or so I was told. They get their people in the hard language, northeast Asian posts to the extent those don't go to politicals but in Thailand you will usually get someone who speaks Thai and in Indonesia you will usually get a career person who knows the country but otherwise EAP posts can be really up for grabs. Since language is not considered in Brunei, it was up for grabs.

What was happening in the Department, this is kind of informed hearsay, you hear the same thing from three or four sources, and it becomes a historical fact. Beth Jones was the assistant secretary for EUR in the day. I think EUR still had the 'Stans' but she was very concerned and she and Armitage were very tight. Armitage and Kelly had a bad relationship and Armitage, more than almost any Deputy in memory would blow off ambassadorial suggestions from the regional bureaus. He respected them less than almost anyone. Armitage likes me, the other wild card and I did call on him. We have known each other since the early 80s in Bahrain when he was a DAS/D and coming out to the Gulf regularly to talk about the tanker war.

Beth Jones had a real concern and that was that her DCMs in Western Europe who had worked for 'difficult' political ambassadors, really paid their dues but didn't have Russian and couldn't be shipped off to the 'Stans' for their first embassy, be taken care of. A colleague in that category who had been DCM in Italy to a very live wire political Ambassador had actually started out his career in Southeast Asia and had about a 1+ in Bahasa which was more than I did. That was sort of the pull factor.

The push factor was interesting. I was recovering from cancer as explained. I had been unable to go out to my first assignment after the cancer which was the minister counselor job in Turkey because of another physical problem so frankly, the senior Foreign Service is sort of like an extended village. It's not very big. There was a perception that I had physical problems. They didn't know about MED shooting me down when Ambassador Chamberlin asked me to be her DCM in Islamabad. That job would have definitely led to an embassy or two. What's more, the Ambassador that my non-arrival in Turkey had burnt was none other than the new Director General, Bob Pearson who readily

remembered that less than two years ago I had a health problem that precluded my going to Ankara.

My feeling about it, and being a little too lawyerly in some ways, I thought I would not be on this list if I hadn't gotten a medical clearance because you don't get on a list for senior assignments overseas unless you have medical clearance for that post. Since those years I had a Class II clearance, the clearance was literally only for that post. I had the clearance. So I figured I wouldn't say anything about my health in my 'door knocks'. I am outdoorsy, I exercise and I look younger than my biological age.

I had a fly on the wall; the executive secretary at the time, Karl Hoffman who was a close friend. He told me that it was a hard discussion; that I had my proponents in the room but that ultimately the reason that the Beth/ Armitage, Western European DCMs etcetera scenario won out was not that he had a little Bahasa, not that he had a little Southeast Asia experience. It was that people doubted my physical staying power.

So anyway, I didn't get it. I wasn't heartbroken.

Jim Kelly put me up to be CG in Melbourne. I lost that to someone who was propelled forward by yet another arbitrary personnel 'agenda', a non region person. That went down.

I started being put on as number two on a lot of ambassadorial lists. If you are number two you may as well be number 100. Greta Morris who is a great friend, she was ambassador to the Marshall Islands and she got a lot of public diplomacy stuff going there with the help of my PD partner initiative. That was the other really productive PD Partner post. She wanted me to succeed her. She really started banging the pots. I was a little ambivalent about that because on one hand I am all water sports, on the other hand, I was not convinced that dealing with the deleterious results of our nuclear tests a generation ago appealed to me much as an issue. I don't know. Palau grabbed me more than the Marshall Islands later on. I didn't push hard.

Then they asked me if I wanted to be number two on the list for Mongolia. I have been to Mongolia twice in my EAP days and I fell in love with Mongolia, a vibrant emerging democracy on China's northern border. Incredibly open and people an incredible moment in their history, open to influence, open to creativity. I thought what a gift.

The guy that replaced Don Keyser after his demise, Evans Revere was also a big fan of mine. We had both been office directors and I would say that among the office directors, he and I had been the closest. He was the Japan desk guy and he said give yourself one or two of the three big PD jobs in Asia. I thought about it and China, Ambassador Rand, Bush's roommate at Yale who is a China hand but kind of difficult to work with and had that reputation, he wanted me to succeed his PAO whom he liked a lot. I thought about it for two weeks. There was only one year of Chinese on offer (it's usually a two year language) and it was very clear he wanted me to be an in-house, to be the in house manager. I can do that but frankly, the joy of my cone is that you get out and you mix. I

didn't see myself doing that or working for him. Even his DCM who liked me too, mentioned in a candid moment or two how difficult this guy was.

Indonesia was an obvious one. This was the country I had most wanted to serve in when I came into the Foreign Service. I had never gotten close. I had been assigned there and then I got promoted the next day and I blew that off. Unfortunately or fortunately, a colleague, Mike Anderson who had his PhD in some kind of sociology of Indonesia, he applied. He was an MC and I am sorry. There is a discipline in this thing. I wouldn't do it. I could have taken it and I wouldn't take it from Mike who was infinitely more qualified than me.

So then I was OK, let's see what comes. I am not going to get overanxious. I have always had this feeling watching HR systems both in USIA and State that good things happen to those who wait.

Around January of the year I was supposed to have my bid list and all that, I get approached by a woman named Pat Butenis who was Ryan Crocker's DCM in Islamabad. She heard that even though I have never served in South Asia, I know a lot about South Asia. She asked me to be PAO and I kind of thought about it for a while and balanced it against China. It was one of those decisions in life where suddenly you wake up one morning and you know the right path. So I said yes.

So out to Pakistan that summer.

Q: You were in Pakistan from when to when?

KOVACH: In Pakistan from August, 05 to late July, 06.

Q: What was the situation in Pakistan?

KOVACH: It was very much in a post 9/11 mode. There were some real disconnects in the relationship at the time. Our main interest was counterterrorism. There was no doubt about it. There was a huge development emphasis that was ancillary to counterterrorism. The government in Pakistan in my estimation and ours in general was about as good as you could get. You had sort of a soft military dictatorship with a functioning national assembly, a functioning judiciary, relative freedom of the press, well exercised in editorial policy. You had an ex City Bank vice president as prime minister. The economy was the second fastest growing economy in Asia in 2005, next to China's.

Also there is an important history and I am well aware that basically we used Pakistan to fight the Soviets in the 80s. We allowed a lot of Saudi money in. We basically used the Taliban as our pawn and the Pakistan connections to the Taliban were hatched in that period. We set that up and then once the Soviets were out, we really abandoned Pakistan; so seduced and abandoned. We got very self righteous about their development of the bomb. We got very self righteous about a hell of a lot of stuff there and we basically

disengaged in a very significant way and that was perceived, we were perceived there, rightfully, as an inconstant and selfish ally.

Then post 9/11 our PD profile was really miserable. There was no coherent program, no rethinking of the program. Who do we need to communicate to, what are the themes? We closed the American Center in Islamabad which had been one of the biggest in the world. A whole generation of Pakistanis, including people like Husain Haqqani who was ambassador, their ambassador here and who was professor at AU and BU up in Boston. He had grown up in the library.

Q: Why did we close it?

KOVACH: Security. It was security in good measure but I think there was a contagion of center closings of some of the larger centers in Europe too where we felt these countries are standing on their feet and this idea of a large American center seemed a bit like a Cold War idea. They were very pricey to run, staff intensive. The Islamabad Center was a victim both of post 9/11 heebie-jeebies about security and the end of the Cold War.

We were really foundering. I got in there and I saw really all we had done post 9/11 was to plaster Band-Aids, one of these things you just see. No strategic depth. We had created 185 of what we call American discovery shelves, literally a bookshelf of books out in 185 institutions. No one on my staff could tell me what the rhyme or reason was of where we placed them. People just threw lists together very fast. There was no follow up with these institutions with very few exceptions. Maybe five or ten. That's just not good PD. The institutions ranged from universities to madrassas to community centers. There was no rhyme or reason to it at all.

I came in. Ambassador Crocker was on vacation when I arrived.

Q: Who was the DCM?

KOVACH: Pat Butenis, the woman who recruited me.

I gave Crocker a memo when he got back at the end of the second week and we had a good sit down and talked it about things. These are the things I feel we ought to be building. These are the audiences we need to reach and the general direction we ought to be going after. and he liked it. So we got off actually to a pretty good start.

One thing I found out about him. Pat asked me to put together a post 9/11 commemoration ceremony and I did one. I am very big on religious expression, engaging religious leadership and civil society especially where our growing Islamophobia and their being an Islamic state, founded around that identity. When I showed her my event outline, she said get the religion out. Ryan Crocker it seems is quite irreligious, militantly almost. So that was interesting.

In September I went down to Karachi with Ryan Crocker to hear probably the then most popular pop rock group in the country. 'Strings' performed pro bono in the consul general's yard. We had all our exchange student alumni and their family members in attendance. That was real important. It was a great night. Strings are used by Bollywood so there was a lot of crossover. There are a lot of Muslims in the arts in South Asia since the arts are really Indian subsidized. This group had done Bollywood films. They had also done part of the soundtrack for Spiderman II. The interesting thing is the head of the group, the lead singer and composer of a lot of the songs was American, a South Asian-American with one of these overbearing South Asian fathers that absolutely cuts across the Hindu-Muslim line. It is a cultural thing where the overbearing Dad in Houston just insisted he go into business despite his musical interests. He got into the University of Indiana, went to their business school. Ironically, Indiana has probably the best music conservatory in the country and he didn't take any music courses. At the end of a BA and MBA, he decided that it was time for his life. He got his father aboard with the argument as he related it to me; 'Dad, I've been studying a long time. I think I'd like to go home for few months, home meaning Karachi. He had a band that he jammed with there on past visits, he had it all set up and he went home and they got a record contract. They hit the airwaves and the rest is history. They are huge. The only business he has ever done is he manages, he is the manager of the band as well as the lead this and that. So that was a great event in Karachi.

I got back to Islamabad and then I went down to Lahore to see my operation there. We didn't have a PAO there. (Ironic as I am going, in five days from this conversation I am leaving for Lahore to fill in as cultural attaché. It is now a three officer post.)

While I was in Lahore we were planning to dedicate a project that the Ambassador s Fund for Cultural Preservation had funded, the restoration of an ancient Buddhist mural at Taxila, which was one of the ancient Kushana Empire cities. The Paks put a lot of emphasis on restoring these Buddhist sites as a way of reclaiming their Asian heritage -- a legacy that post partition Indian historical narrative has all but written them out of. Further militating against Pakistan celebrating that legacy, a scholarly tendency, fueled in part by fact and part by Hindu nationalist fantasy, is the tendency to treat Indus Civilization as distinct from Gangetic civilization. The Kushanas were one of the two great Buddhist Empires in South Asian history, before a jealous Brahmin caste slowly, over more than a millennium, squeezed the life out of Indian Buddhism. And unlike the earlier Mauryan Empire that was in the Gangetic Valley, the Kushanas were essentially an Indus based dynasty.

I, being a person interested in religion, I immediately became quite close with the deans of three of the Sharia schools and one of the things, there is a South Asian tendency to talk in clichés. This was true of discussion by these scholars in what I term the orange juice cocktail circuit of educated, informed Muslims (who avoid alcohol). You d hear legitimate griping in my view that Indians had absolutely high jacked South Asian historiography since independence and written the Mogul influence and a thousand years of Mogul history out of the equation. A corollary thought was that we (Pakistanis) made a

huge mistake -- we never should have called this country Pakistan; we should have called it the Islamic Republic of India.

There is in the Koran, there is a real differentiation between the Abrahamic prophets or the so-called law giving prophets and the far more plentiful prophets among different nations, different lands, different prophets at different times. Looking at the different nations, different lands, different prophets dictum from the Koran, these scholars were saying that 'we Pakistanis' need to rediscover our South Asian roots. By that they didn't mean recovering a kind of ribald Sufism. These festivals, I went to one of them against every rule in Islamabad. You could just get high smelling the hashish smoke. They meant reclaiming the Buddha and Mahavira, the founder of Jainism as part of the Pakistani spiritual legacy. They meant scholars like Ramanuja and philosophers like Shankara who elaborated on and initially laid out (respectively) the most purely monistic strain of Indian philosophy and talked about the God concept and the experience of pure consciousness attainable beyond subject and object and ego and all that stuff meshed. The Pakistani scholars wanted to reclaim that heritage.

They liked Confucius. This makes eminent sense. 80% of the Muslims in this world wake up each morning and they don't have to deal with Christians and Jews; they have to deal with Hindus, Buddhists, Confucianists etc. This was their thrust. So there is was a real emphasis on restoring those Kushana Empire Buddhist sites on Pakistani soil. The Kushana Empire was centered in the part of South Asia that is now Pakistan and it was probably next to Mauryan the most significant empire, Buddhist Empire in Indian history before the Brahmans began to systematically attack with the idea of eliminating Buddhism about 1500-1700 years ago.

The next day after I got back from Lahore we headed up to Taxila in a van with Ambassador Crocker. My cultural staff had set this dedication event at the mural in Taxila up so we were all in the van with the ambassador. He casually asked are we going to see the mural at the beginning or at the end of our meetings. My FSN who had set this event up, an unfortunate soul whom I believe was mildly psychotic, replied that we aren't going to see the mural. The local security people think it is too dangerous, she added. I was mad.

The ambassador and I both envisioned going out to see the mural as the high point of the trip. The security people, our Embassy people, that had advanced the visit, they determined it safe. But ultimately we in the embassy have no discretion over the security. The security is the responsibility of other people. The museum director felt it was unsafe. Well, we should have been told that and you should have worked all that out, I angrily told this FSN and the ineffectual cultural attaché. I was already chagrined that there was not a one page trip scenario in the Ambassador's and my hands.

So Crocker was just fit to be tied but he is not a screamer. He glowers and I am a kind of I am going to kill you sort of type A. I am sorry; we are going to have to talk about this. So we go through the motions of meetings and descriptions. We get a very good

archeologist led tour of the other aspects of the Taxila site but we never got to see the mural. Crocker blamed that on me.

That was not good for my year. I think from then on I didn't do too well with him until a remarkable exit conversation we had 10 months later.

The next week after that debacle, Crocker had at his beck and call one of these DAO Beechcraft turbo prop planes so he took his senior handful of senior people which included me and we flew over to India for four days, basically to talk to India's strategic think tanks to hear their perspective on Indo-Pak prospects because Musharraf and Manmohan Singh are doing very well in moving towards a greater normalization of ties. were near a high point of that set of initiatives between leaders, in my estimation. two level-headed, smart guys. It was time to do something like this to strengthen our perspective.

I respected Crocker a lot for doing this. It implicitly signaled a distrust of embassy political analysis -- all the more remarkable coming from a man who embodied the sangfroid approach of political officers.

By way of background, I got over to India with a lot of background including living in India two years not with the protective armor of diplomatic life. I have taken third class trains. I was a street-wise kid there. The first evening, I left the hotel and I got out on the street and I find I can indeed speak and understand the language. I had done an Urdu refresher at FSI for three weeks before I went out. My Urdu came back. I learned it when I was 20 years old. I get to Islamabad and the sad truth is that they don't speak Urdu, supposedly the official national language. It may be the national language but no one speaks it except for the so-called 'Mohajirs' that came over, these Muslims that came over from India during partition and they are a dying breed. The young ones are my age, 60 at the time. I was frustrated about the language thing because I put the effort into it. I was studying at home for a couple of months before I got the refresher. An aside on language -- Punjabi is the language of both Islamabad and Lahore. At best I can follow the drift of a conversation and make myself understood in Urdu to educated Pakistanis. On the streets of Delhi, I found myself quite fluently engaged in Urdu conversation. My inner note to self: Kovach, you are not senile. You can speak this language, most in Pakistan don't.

We had our New Delhi meetings. They were fairly interesting. Basically the Indians were so paranoid about Pakistan you would think Pakistan was the military super power. It was like a total inversion of reality. Pakistanis are not as focused on India and Indians as the Indians are on Pakistan.

This is when these Pakistani conspiracy theorists kind of get way off the mark that India really has designs on Pakistan. We have to back the Taliban because the Taliban is our pawn in the great game in the region and Afghanistan is a failed state or never been state and we need a pawn in the game and our pawn in the game is the Taliban. There are

Indian intelligence posts all over the place, may or may not be. Their premise is that India wants to encircle Pakistan with an impenetrable sphere of influence.

Q: Why in the hell would they?

KOVACH: Exactly. One of the things that became clear despite the paranoia about Pakistan but one of the main elements of it in the Indian mind ironically is ‘what if this state fails and we have to occupy it?’ 200 million more Muslims? They don’t want to be part of it. They aren’t going to give an inch on Kashmir, which is where I fault India. Pakistan is much more flexible on Kashmir because they know most of the Muslim residents now want to be independent. They hear that.

In the middle of this four day talkfest my mother died, 93, not a tragedy. Crocker heard of her death from one of our accompanying colleagues and kindly knocked on my door. He said, Do you want to just get on a plane back to the States tonight?

I said, No. We cremate in our family. There s no burial ritual or this or that. My brother is in Arizona. We are not of any faith tradition so like we did for my father, we sort of wrote the funeral service while we were waiting for him to die. Let me come back to Pakistan. I’ll then leave for the States for the funeral on the following Sunday.

So Saturday morning I woke up back in my wonderful house in Islamabad. I meditate. I was sitting by my desk upstairs meditating at about 8:45am. There was some construction in the neighborhood, sort of like Bethesda where they tear down old houses and build Mac mansions. There was a bit of that going on in my neighborhood. On Saturday? They don’t usually work on Saturdays. There is a huge rumble and then suddenly my house is visibly and violently shaking. Now as an aside, I have lived a third of my life in earthquake zones. I had never experienced this one like this. This is the great quake of October 8, 2005 and there is was. Should I run out? The whole house could collapse. I am on the second floor. Instead I went under my desk just in case the ceiling collapses. There was two minutes of steady, violent shake. It was incredible.

Immediately I called a meeting of my press staff to prepare them to cope in my absence. I relayed our country team estimate that it would take ten days to get significant quake relief on the ground. We had an EAC meeting. It is Saturday, just chock o block full of meetings despite the weekend. It was pretty clear we were going to come in in a big way for earthquake relief and we eventually became the pillar of the relief effort, frankly. We and the Pakistani army. It was pretty clear too we weren’t going to have anything prepared much on the ground in my absence for my Mom’s funeral but that we had to organize a major strategy to publicize the U.S. contribution to the relief effort.

I talked to the DAO because I knew they would have military PAOs. I anticipated that correctly. And talked to the AID director. She had two docs, directors of communication, whom I indirectly supervised. So we had a meeting.

I said I will be in e-mail contact. Let s just noodle on strategies while I am home. I will have a lot of down time.

I got home. My mother had already been cremated so we re looking at an urn of ashes. My brother and I, he in Arizona, are talking about the following Saturday of a week I with my wife and son would split between Boston for a celebration of a great life and a burial memorial service. The family all went up to Boston. We hung out in the hotel with me frantically doing earthquake relief publicity strategies amidst family dinners. It was a good service. It was a very rainy day. It was at the historical Mt. Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, MA where we have a cremation plot for our family. It is a wonderful place, just beautiful. My parents loved New England so when my father was dying I persuaded my mother and brother to buy a plot. It was expensive. Suspect my ashes will one day grace that same soil -- at least in part.

We had a nice, nice ceremony a lot better than the one we did for my father, I felt. Where my mother had been a professor of German, we did a lot of it around Schubert Lieder. My brother sang and my niece played. My mother was a real character. Some of her old students were there. It was a little bit of a roast because she was such a character. People spoke their mind and my son wrote a poem about her that he read. It was really very nice and, oh the music. Then we went out to the site of the grave where they flipped open the stone with these little cubicles for family urns underneath. Six people can have their ashes in there and we are now at three. I definitely want to be one of them. We were there and we put her little ash thing in the proper place. One of our close family friends, an old girlfriend of mine, started spontaneously singing Sweet Georgia Brown. My Mom was a frustrated jazz singer and yes, she would have loved one of her favorite songs. So Ellen started singing Sweet Georgia Brown and soon the whole group was singing Sweet Georgia Brown. It was really a nice thing. Pouring rain, we were all soaked to the bone.

Went back down to Washington. It was sort of a mess there. The house had been broken into and robbed. The perpetrator was kind of a friend of my son's who was in high school -- the daughter of a friend from both Embassy Tokyo and our neighborhood. My son was very self destructive. He kind of screwed up. He told his friend for some reason where we kept our hidden key. Our old computer was taken. Our Bose radio which I love which had been a present to me was gone. It was hard and I felt bad leaving because my son was kind of messed up over it and thought I might do a couple of days but then the Chinooks were beginning to come in to Islamabad. I needed to get back. I spent an intense several hours comforting my son and left feeling slightly better about his psychological state.

It is here amidst the chaos of the quake, its aftermath and my Mom's demise that one of my singular achievements, not related to any of these factors unfolded. And for a third time in my career, it involved a Fulbright challenge to address the post 9/11 educational development of the country. I inherited a double role (as CPAO and as the senior U.S. Government Commissioner) in a conversation launched by my predecessors -- to create a monster Fulbright student program for Pakistan to address her crying need for teachers, professors and expertise in a variety of fields key to both stability and national development.

Three donors had been approached -- ECA, USAID and the Pakistani Ministry of Higher Education using World Bank funds, I believe. Together, if I could coax enough overlap of goals and values and close the deal, we would have the largest student program in Fulbright's 50+ year history at \$157 million dollars for five years. The ironies of these negotiations which I single-handedly quarterbacked were writ large. My easiest funding partner was USAID. They knew the Pakistani Commissioners and government saw the massive program as a cornerstone of national development in a variety of fields, many technical and creating a cadre of U.S. graduates who could return and become senior professors in those key fields. The second was the Ministry with the international funds. They were adamant about the commission being able to select scholars based on Pakistan's needs, not some abstract Board of Foreign Scholars idea of fields most appropriate for exchanges.

The introductory trip to Lahore described above gave me a perfect chance to make my case to the latter potential funding partner. I noted in the lounge at the Rawalpindi Airport that the Minister of Higher Education was on my flight, a not very full flight. I pressed the ground crew to seat me next to him and to my pleasant surprise, they did. I had nearly an hour with him one on one and I all but closed the deal for that eight figure increment of the funding.

The immovable force standing in the way of closing the deal was the Department, ECA and the Board of Foreign Scholars. Again, as in Japan 7 years or so prior, I was up against some rigid and unrealistic ideas of what exchange meant and a bias towards liberal arts and social sciences -- criteria that ignored some of Pakistan's crying developmental needs in the educational sector. A macabre but happy ending to the story came with my trip home for my Mom's funeral. Ambassador Crocker and I, prior to the India trip, the quake and my Mom's demise had been talking about sending me home TDY for a few days to see if I could get some traction at State on these Fulbright issues.

I was able to get in to see both the Assistant Secretary for Educational and Cultural Affairs, the superb Patricia Harrison and the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Academic Exchanges charged with running Fulbright and liaising with the Board of Foreign Scholarship. The latter was a difficult individual of a breed I have found to be very dangerous at several points in my career, a former FSO reincarnated as a political appointee. Fortunately, to be quite blunt, I inhibited this gent whom I had had extensive dealings with during my tenure as EAP PD Office Director.

Assistant Secretary Harrison totally got the importance of Fulbright money being used to foster development, including educational goals across the board, in Pakistan -- a country on the front line of the War Against Terror so-called. I parted from a good meeting one on one with her with her saying -- now you'll have to persuade the DAS Tom Farrell and the Board of Foreign Scholars but you'll have my support. As I hinted, I sometimes have a sense that I really inhibit certain personalities and I had a recent history with DAS Farrell. I gave him the relevance and the national interest arguments, told him that USAID would embarrass us within the government if ECA refused to contribute its lion's

share of the package. I forcefully made the argument that the human benefits of study abroad in the U.S., the so-called human benefit of exchange held equally true if you were studying fertilizers and seeds or Shakespeare. I made the point that Pakistani scholars that the Board might nominate in technical fields would likely be exposed to a far wider range of human contacts in farm communities, agribusiness etc. than anyone studying in the liberal arts or social sciences.

Fortunately, for I only had the time that day with him, he agreed with a heave of a heavy sigh and committed to fronting our arguments with the Board of Foreign Scholars in the context of the War on Terrorism. We won.

Ironically, a final climactic moment came a week before Christmas, the same week of an unfortunate Crocker press conference I'll soon describe. Vice President Cheney was coming to observe the quake effort on behalf of the President. Literally getting on the Chinook with his advance team to fly up to the zone, I got a call on my flip phone from ECA. IIE, the Fulbright contract behemoth threatened not to process the massive group of scholars we had selected in marathon meetings in the midst of the quake efforts if we didn't have a formal signing ceremony for the new \$157 million agreement before the holiday. I quickly phoned the Ambassador who glowered, what is the minimum we have to do. I said a half an hour with the Board, a USAID educational sector rep and a rep from the Ministry of Higher Education, with a document to sign and a public declaration of the newly endowed scholarship program. We did it a day or two after we were clear of the VP visit. Success.

I got back to Islamabad and what ensued was probably probably the hardest working time in my career -- hundred hour weeks the norm. We did a real good job with the earthquake relief. I have a good sense of the Pakistani press and my press staff was good and we had all these military PAOs that could make anything happen. The USAID PAOs, not so much. The farther they stayed away from anything the better we all were they were so idiotic and incompetent this duo was but they were good at identifying the AID projects that were the most visually compelling. That was my assignment to them. I coordinated all this with a fairly iron hand.

Crocker, if you have ever talked to anyone else that worked for him is a total meeting junkie. He has three country team meeting a week, not one. After the earthquake for that first half year, two earthquake meetings a day, seven days a week. I was too busy. I had to make sure we were getting the right journalists on those helicopters going up to the projects, that we were going to the right projects, that everyone was clearheaded about it. And that the trips were properly advanced with articulate beneficiaries ready to brief the journalists on arrival. Frankly, I had two other agencies with officers who didn't necessarily report to me to coordinate it with. The AID people, in particular, needed talking down a lot.

We got off to a great start. In early November they had a pledging conference where they had a big meeting in Rawalpindi at the general headquarters and a slew of countries pledged. Later, when many of the rich Muslim countries were slow to put their money

where their mouths had been, I came up with a strategy to shame them that I will describe below. Also, about three weeks later it became increasingly clear that my team was succeeding at getting the right Pakistani journalists on the planes. There is a very active Nielson affiliate in Pakistan.

Q: Nielson?

KOVACH: Polling. Our numbers really began to rise.

I went into Ambassador Crocker one morning and said, Sir, this non-fulfillment of pledges on the part of people like the Saudis, that had pledged, richer Muslim countries in particular that put the words down but didn't put the money to back the words bothers me, I said, Why don't we begin to reach out to our embassies in those countries and get the PAS sections to select some journalists to come and cover the earthquake to sort of shame the governments or royal families to dish up the money they had pledged?

He thought that was a terrific idea. So we did that. I don't know how much that loosened the purses but Saudi money began to come and they actually set up some clinics. This after some journalists from pan-Arab media started coming in through my scheme and producing great footage and articles for Gulf media in particular.

The people that didn't need any shaming were the Iranians who did a terrific job. One of the great things to my mind about that whole earthquake relief thing was how we worked with countries we didn't have diplomatic relations with. They were major players. The two cases in point were Iran and Cuba.

I decided to publicize this because I thought it was such a good image. We were ferrying up a lot of the goods on U.S. Military Chinooks that the Iranians donated. We had 31 Chinooks at the height of the effort.

Q: Chinook being?

KOVACH: A large military helicopter.

There was one night I had the photo journalists out at 3 in the morning to document U.S. Navy guys unloading cargo from an Iranian plane.

The other thing the Cubans, I don't know if you know this about Cuba, one of their most compelling forms of foreign aid is they are very good at clinical and rural medicine. So they had a whole series of Cuban clinics in the displaced person camps.

The Pakistani caucus on the Hill; I don't know how many that constitutes but Congressman Burton from Indiana who was one of the chairs, came out with a rather large CODEL (congressional delegation). He is also Burton of the Helms Burton Act, which is the main piece of Cuban sanctions legislation. We took Congressman Burton and his entourage to one of the larger displaced persons camps in the quake zone. His

aide is a guy that worked for the Voice for a while. He knew public diplomacy well. And an individual I knew well from some foreign service past life. Whatever your lane is in government, there are always going to be a couple of staff aides that you know well, who know what you do and are kind of allies on the Hill. This guy is one of them. But He was a very nervous Nelly.

We are walking down a hill between two rows of tents on a gorgeous winter day, we are in Pakistan, sunny, mid 70s, not a cloud in the sky, camp is in good shape, tents everything.

Down slope, a clinic was flying a Cuban flag. We round the corner and the commandant who is giving us the tour, the army guy said to the congressmen, I want to show you this clinic.

Suddenly the aide who is walking with me sees the flag and he just erupts, he sputters, 'Is that flag what I think it is?' Pointing to Burton, he stammered 'that's Burton of Helms-Burton.'

I said, Sam, just take a deep breath and calm down. The congressman I am sure will make his own choice when they get to the tent.

The congressman to his credit got super interested in it. He is kind of a Cuba buff so he confidently entered the tent and then easily engaged the three Cuban medics who were there. They are very flattered that an American congressman would be interested. They have no idea who he is, of course. He spent about 20 minutes in that tent. They gave him a great tour of their work and their work is terrific. He walks out and in a way it became our victory. This guy is one of the greatest nemesis of their government has had a great tour of their facility leaving everyone validated; albeit in different ways.

Around December, about 12 weeks into the emergency, I advised the ambassador, 'you haven't done a press conference in my time. Our popularity is soaring. I think it is high time to sit down with 20 chief editors over a lunch I will host at my house.'

We got talking points ready for him. He says, 'Well, there is something major missing here.'

I say, 'What?'

I want to go public with my chagrin over the fact that the Pakistani government is letting some Kashmiri jihadi groups have a hand in the relief effort.

Sir, trust me. You don't want to go there publicly. Yes, that's a big issue. I understand our interests here but that is a diplomatic issue, not a public diplomatic issue. I will tell you what happens if you say even a word about it, it is going to grab the headline even if you talk for two hours praising democracy, American largess, the great friendship and people to people ties, our Diaspora community which has put a lot of money in. You can

talk about everything positive but if you say a word about that, it is suddenly going to completely flip the narrative from hey, maybe America is not so bad after all. All the millions in largess will be seen as ancillary to our American anti-terrorism obsessions not as the genuine humanitarian force in the world we want to be seen as. If you say that they are going to see even the earthquake relief effort is all about counterterrorism and America's selfish interests, not about largesse to Pakistan.

He blew me off and he talked about democracy and elections and how Musharraf has told him personally which is true that 'I don't want to be deposed. I don't want to die in office. I want to leave with my head held high to a democratically elected new president.' All that good stuff; an hour and 20 minutes of Ryan blah, blah, blah and then he goes into the Kashmiri jihad piece for maybe 3 minutes, 5 with the inevitable questions. You could see the brow of every editor at my table darken. Every headline, every headline from government media to hostile media is U.S. Demands Pakistan Government Bar Jihad Groups or Alleged Jihad Groups From Earthquake Relief Efforts.

That day our poll numbers turned South and they have never recovered since, as of this editing, nine years later it has been steady downhill. I feel like I tried to put my finger in the dike.

One of the problems with Ryan Crocker who was one of our superb Arabists, who understands the Middle East like very few senior officers do is that Pakistan was his first trip out of his own kind of bicultural skin. I think one of the problems he may have had with me and few others who had Urdu or were Pak hands that were coming back was we knew a lot more about the country than he did. I don't think he was used to that. He just didn't get Pakistan in some pretty significant ways in my view. That was the moment I think that was a really significant turning point in our bilateral relationship. I was right and he was wrong.

Q: When you were there were you able to do anything about the madrassas influence there? These were the Saudi imams that were preaching a pretty virulent form of Islam.

KOVACH: Maybe I should finish with the quake because that is one of the topics.

Q: OK.

KOVACH: There was like one more major episode with the quake.

I speak some Urdu and after a while when you are flying journalists up and I'd go up three times a week, the briefings become a bit repetitive. I always had an American staff member with the journalists on helo. We had journalists up every day. I would go up two, three times a week, maybe.

What happened after a while while they are getting the same briefing so I am digging to set up more briefings and just talking to people outside the briefing room or in the neighborhood, including some peasants that had been displaced from the villages. I

should point out that Kashmiri is much closer to Urdu than Punjabi so I actually am able to have a fluent conversation in Urdu. What became obvious was that there was no reliable public information system putting out the place and time where essential services like food, clinical care, cash for work, hut rebuilding help could be found. I met people who literally walked 40 miles on a rumor that there would be cash for work, food, clinical care, and etcetera. After a couple, three four days like this up there, I went down to the quake relief coordination cell at the prime minister's office where quake relief effort was for the most part very effectively being coordinated. There were two generals that were running it. One was a pompous ass, if you think of a Britified Pakistani general

Q: Colonel Blimp

KOVACH: Colonel Blimp, just a jerk.

The other one I liked a lot, very down to earth, very sensible, very personable so I knocked on his door and I said, Do you have five minutes?

Yes, yes, come in. He ordered me coffee and we sat down. What can I do for you?

Let me share a perception and I told him what I just said to you.

He replied, 'Peter, I have been waiting for someone to see this and to put it into words because I have the same sense of the situation but I am not a public information expert. I am not a PR guy; I am not a media guy. I am not a communications guy, even military communications is not one of my specialties. What do we do about this? Can you solve this?

I replied to the effect of, 'Well, I am glad you see it my way because I think it is a huge problem. I have some ideas about how we can organize to make this better but I work for Ryan Crocker. I have to go and ask him if I can expend the time to do it.

So I booked some time with the ambassador that afternoon. He is sort of sour on me at this point as he has been since the Taxila visit screw up and because I delegate subordinates from my press section, the military PAOs and the USAID DOCs to attend some of his meetings, especially the days I flew up into the quake zone. I walked in and the old Crocker scowl is there. I sort of lay my idea, supported by General Nadeem, out for him in two, three minutes.

He said, 'Well, I don't see the need for that. What is important is that we get credit for what we are doing.'

I said, 'Absolutely, but they aren't contradictory. I am working about 100 to 110 hours a week. If I for two weeks spend 20 to 30 hours doing this, helping them set up a system, I guarantee you in two to three weeks I will be totally pulled back and they will have a system. Trust me; public information is essential in a civic crisis like this.' It is essential in natural disasters. It is an essential part of any coordinated disaster or crisis relief.

He says, 'Well, you are the information expert. I will take your word for it but don't neglect your coordination role.' I think he realized even though I was blowing off meetings, I had always sent someone good and always made sure that they had my brief and they carried it. Frankly, with all the flying to the zone seven days a week, it was essential for coordinating the PR/PA efforts to have my team knowing the other players and the Ambassador's style and being known by them.

So I carefully worked with the Pakistanis to set up the system I had in mind. General Nadeem was effusively grateful. He and I really thought a lot alike. A bit on how I went about setting things up, there was this guy, a colonel from President Musharraf's public relations office who was more or less the Musharraf 'watcher' over the coordination cell. He was sort of like a spy. Everyone knew who he was. They tried to marginalize him. I liked him and often when I was waiting for journalists to muster and waiting for a ride to the airstrip for helo lift, he and I kind of bonded, often over watching cricket together. I learned a lot more about cricket.

I said to General Nadeem, 'I have to have a Pakistani officer to front for me. I will not, I do not want to embarrass you by fronting for this system as an American. You are doing a great job in the earthquake relief. Give me Colonel Bashar. Give him the power to convene meetings over here.'

He said, 'Great idea. Get Bashar doing something for a change.'

Colonel Bashar and I plunge into it. I laid out a strategic plan. The plan every day called for the five forward relief bases in the zone to have to send a report by 8 in the morning to the cell in the pm's office about activity in the zone; needs, problems, this and that.

General Nadeem and I got on a helicopter a few days later. We went up to all five forward bases in the quake zone that day and we requested that every morning as part of the required daily report to the Quake Cell in the PM's office, the base needs to include the two biggest pieces of misinformation, logistic misinformation that displaced persons are confused about in each zone.

So every morning, when the cell put these five inputs together, Colonel Bashar's job was to consolidate these reports into about three points of misperception that we would address through the media available to us. Generally they overlapped and to then put out the right information, two or three points, no more than three points a day and pump it up through this existing network of seven FM emergency stations, radio TV Pakistan, the Voice of America carried it, and BBC carried it in language. I think even the Chinese carried it. Then there were two other channels we used beyond radio and TV. The UN had a station too.

The second aspect of this was providing personal radios to people, especially those in the huge displaced persons camps. A lot of these people didn't have radios and some of the AID donors including the U.S. had pledged 10,000 of these hand crank radios with

compasses and flashlights. They are all made in China. I discovered that the British aid organization (DIFD) had pledged 20,000 radios.

I called the head of the British organization and said, David, how much do you pay for these radios?

He checked on it. He reported that the Brits pay about 8 or 9 dollars U.S. a piece.

That's crazy, I thought to myself. The Chinese who are major donors to Pakistan make these things and I bet it costs the PRC about a dollar or a dollar fifty a unit.

I coordinated with Colonel Bashar. I asked him to convene the Chinese ambassador, the PAO or the AID director or whatever, whoever is at the right decision level in the Chinese Embassy and to ask them for 200,000 radios. When you are in the meeting, please ask them casually how much one of those radios costs them.

They convene. I think the DCM came. He was really glad to be asked for the radios. Sure, we have millions of them. They are the best in the world and then Bashar asked them how much they cost.

We pay maybe \$1.50 U.S. dollars, maybe 100 rupees a radio, about a dollar fifty in those days. So the Chinese just flooded them with radios and the other donors quietly dropped their orders.

He had them there in a week. Every displaced person in camp was near one. We got them out on the tent blocks.

The last element was the human element. A lot of these people are illiterate; a lot of these people won't listen to radios. I was pessimistic about how long it would take to get the radios out.

We did another trip up. We talked to the imams' council and asked if after Friday prayers in the 'khutba' or sermon, they would be willing to make quake relief related announcements. They gladly signed on.

The last group of messengers were the Boy Scouts, an organization particularly strong in Pakistani Kashmir who tended to be middle class kids. They became sort of like runners in the displaced persons camps, kind of like town criers in old New England. So we had this great system and it took me less than two weeks to set it up with General Nadeem's support and Colonel Bashar's help.

The last week there were one or two more meetings, international meetings that General Nadeem and Colonel Nadeem and I thought should happen. I could actually sit in on these, without embarrassing the Pakistanis. The UN was impossible. The UN was such a disaster in that whole relief effort. Not enough bad can be said about them with the exception of UNICEF.

Q: What was the problem?

KOVACH: Corruption, cynicism. UN officials coming out, getting to post and being told don't rock the boat, just keep a low profile. Keep your suggestions to yourself. Do nothing, pretend to be busy. That is the mentality of the UN organizations on the ground. I had a couple of honest friends who were U.N. officials and had that inside perspective. They were really awful.

Trying to get them to carry the stuff on their FM station, their FM station was the weakest of the FM stations, including the seven emergency towers the Pak army put down. No one heard them outside Islamabad. I think there was only one displaced persons camp that even vaguely could get that station. It was a disgrace.

There are just a few other things from that engrossing and energy consuming year in Pakistan; these 185 American Discovery shelves, the majority of them were sent to madrassas. You have to understand there are 17,000 or 18,000 madrassas in Pakistan. Of that group there are probably 1 or 2% that are Saudi financed and that train young suicide bombers. You have to understand too that most of those suicide bombers, are really being trafficked, in other words, this buying of orphans is a slave trade. It is such a dark hole but you have to understand too it is just 1 or 2 % maximum institutionally that were so corrupt, morally bankrupt and violent.

There are five confederations of madrassas in Pakistan corresponding to the major religious groups, including Salafis and Wahhabis, that's one. Deobandis, which is the official fairly straightforward form of Islam have a confederation, Barelvis who are the Sufi inclined saint worshipers, the ribald hashish smoking and even whoring festival types they have a confederation. Add the Shia and there are five. Most of these people want the best for their kids. They are into educating kids. It is pathetic that some of the teachers are semi literate. They know more about the Koran than anything else but their Arabic is horrible. They don't understand Arabic. They can read it because Urdu is in the same script, but they don't understand a word they are reading. It is really, the knowledge of Islam in Pakistan, even among so called literate people, is abysmal. It is really abysmal. At least insofar as reading Arabic texts is concerned.

We have financed and then turned against and are now financing again several NGOs that are focused on curriculum reform and teacher training for the madrassas. One is the International Center for Religion and Diplomacy run by Dr. Doug Johnston, one of the smartest people in Washington, in my view, so we do a lot with them.

Then the argument on the ground gets very interesting. I got in the middle of this as sort of a super cultural attaché. The secular types in this argument were ministry of education officials. They were always saying to those of us in the mission who would listen, what do you have to do with these madrassas? It is a horrible system and people should enroll their kids in the public school system. The problem with their argument was that the public system in Pakistan is so rotten and corrupt. Why? Pakistan, unlike India never

broke up the large feudal estates like India did in 1955 under Nehru. These people want their peasants dumb, dirty and down on the farm. They literally paid teachers to stay away from school.

Q: I have heard people who served in Pakistan say that the politicians were taken out of villages that they owned.

KOVACH: Exactly and so the ministry of education is broken. Thank God for the madrassa system, thank God for it because otherwise the problems of illiteracy and ignorance in Pakistan would be humungous and without cure. Until they break up those estates, there is no cure.

At the half year anniversary of the quake, Crocker did a smart thing. I can't take any credit for this. He said it is time to start refocusing and get back to the relationship as it was before October 8th, the day of the quake. Let's have a press event and let's essentially declare victory and move on.

Our Chinooks were leaving. We'd given a lot. We'd gotten credit for it. I thought it was a smart thing to do. Selfishly speaking, I had visions for the country PD program and I wanted to work on them. I wanted to work on starting up a couple of these access English centers that are aimed at kids that are slum dwellers, first generation educated. I wanted to work on a couple of these American Corners that we had. We had a radio program that I got quite a bit of money for with programming based on American rock and roll but the DJs were Pakistani kids returned from exchange programs in the States talking about American youth culture and playing the music. I'd seen this as a very powerful tool in Indonesia during my EAP days, as I related earlier. I got the money to do it in Pakistan. The money ran out and it died and WENT away. There was some polling in the proposal so I guess it wasn't a success.

One day a young blogger, 24 years old, gave us a grant proposal to start a blog for rural educational NGO workers, to expose the corruption. They had no voice and these zamindars will kill people that stand up to them.

Q: Zamindars are the?

KOVACH: Zamindars are the land owners. A lot of the politicians are zamindars.

What he did was he taught them how to blog. Blogging is a kind of investigative reporting.

Q: Would you explain, this may be a term to go down and stay in history or it may just be ephemeral so would you explain what it is.

KOVACH: It is an Internet based platform that you can sign into, subscribe to where you are exchanging views, usually on one topic. There is usually someone that is managing

the blog, sort of blog master or an office that does that just to make sure it stays within the bounds of reason, propriety, and other agreed upon standards.

He was managing this thing and it really began to have an impact. Pakistan for a poor country is pretty wired. By the time May rolled around that year we heard that about a third of the national assembly was reading this blog. It was raising eyebrows.

I had \$600,000 in small grants to spend and I finally got to solicit proposals and pay attention to my program. One of the smallest grants we gave but one of the best, we gave this kid some several thousand dollars to do blog training for other NGO sectors that USAID would identify. I felt real good about that. I am in consultations at this moment to go out to Pakistan next week as a rehired annuitant and one of the things I am so pleased with is we are doing blog training now on a massive scale.

One of the other things I did in those few months after we declared victory, I went through Voice of America training division, which was strong at the time. It is kind of an up and down office in my history in the Foreign Service. They sent out three veteran investigative reporters and we did a retreat for 25 of the best young investigative journalists in Pakistan to refine their investigative reporting skills.

I have to say I did that with a lot of ambivalence because I realized being an investigative reporter in Pakistan can be a deadly profession.

Q: A deadly profession and also I would think it would threaten any government. It is much more threatening than in almost any other country you can think of.

KOVACH: I think it is and I think there are some statistics, kept by some of these journalist organizations, Pakistan is the most dangerous country in the world but it is in part because it has a relatively free press. I think people were criticizing the government with impunity. There were some people nosing around up in the northwestern frontier province where the drone attacks are that were disappeared. Some journalists disappeared but most of the journalists that got killed either got killed by urban warlords or zamindars, these rural potentates.

But the blog is the way around that. I think blogging is huge. Editorial opinion in Pakistan is remarkably free. In some ways I think it is freer and more independent than our own editorial opinion. I think the press is the broken sector here in 2012 in the United States.

Another thing that I did with my grant program: my sharia faculty buddies were all keen to enhance study of world religions. They wanted that in their curriculum so I gave a grant and I got Crocker to agree to let in senior American scholar practitioners of the major religious traditions, including non Abrahamic Asian traditions. The idea is the experts each go to at least half the sharia faculties, give a few lectures but they would cut a basic 45 minute DVD on their tradition. Each DVD would respond to a template of questions that we jointly developed, one partner and I and the grant had enough money to

make 150,000 boxes of these CD introductions and that we would send a box to every madrassa in the country and every public school and every university.

Unfortunately, that grant never happened because the money was pilfered and this is a real weakness of these one year tours. You cannot run a grant program like that. I hate to say it. Being a public diplomacy officer we live and die by our FSNs but in a situation like that, money is going to disappear.

Q: How does it disappear?

KOVACH: I don't know how it disappears. It just never gets to the project it is intended to get to. Someone takes it.

Q: I would think we would have control.

KOVACH: With one year tours you don't have those controls. We are set up for kind of a continuity cycle in the Foreign Service that is predicated on a two to four year tour. It just doesn't work. Implementation of grants is left to FSNs in a fairly corrupt society, one where they may take heat for working with us. As was my career-long practice, I left extensive notes for my successor including detailed descriptions of all the small grants we had decided to fund.

This one I was very interested in following up on because of some academic conversations I was in at UCLA the next year so I reached back. I will tell you I will not totally absolve my successor because I always leave very thorough notes and I definitely left him notes on the small grants we had done. I said whether you agree with these grants, they were formally voted on, approved and signed so please keep an eye on these. These need adult supervision so I have no idea if it was someone on my staff. I doubt my key staffer pilfered it but he didn't care about it, that's pretty clear because what can you do? You are on a one year tour. Leave careful notes for your successor.

Q: Why one year tours?

KOVACH: Because of the security situation there they are unaccompanied tours. The only way I could have brought my wife out was if she had a job and then I would have had to commit to two years. I was actually kind of glad to have a vacation from my family.

Q: I found when I was in Saigon during the Vietnamese War we had 18 month tours which gave us the continuity that the military which had one year tours and I found that 18 months again, I had historical perspective.

KOVACH: This whole thing was strange.

There was one more thing I did in Pakistan that I am quite proud of. It capitalized on something I intuitively launched at my first post in Yemen, 25 years earlier and repeated

throughout my career. Which was to do a talent inventory among the embassy community. I think it is something that can be done at other posts. In Islamabad, we had had a huge American Center. We regularly every year did an American studies course that we put on, we officers of the embassy put on. That had gone up in smoke. When we declared the earthquake emergency over and I was able to do what a PAO does, I went out to the university, to the American studies people. They said we had had this course in the days before the Center closed. It was so huge and we had several hundred students every year that took it and they got credit. Can you put it together again?

It was a challenge but I was determined to do it.

What I did is I sat down with this guy who had a PhD in American Studies and I said, Let's you and I do a curriculum.

We had a few disagreements. We came out with a ten lecture course. Then my IRC, the information resource center, what used to be the USIS library in the Center, these were librarians who knew their business but they did outreach to support local libraries. We didn't have a library anymore after the closing of the Center. I got them going. Crocker was big on this idea so in country team he basically ordered people to step forward. Anyone who has a civil war hobby or an expertise on the other 9 lecture topics the professor and I laid out or just reads a lot about a period of American history was sort of ordered to step forward and I offered them research back up. We actually put this thing together. We had 300 students. It was really great. I really feel good about that and it became a fixture and now they do it in Lahore.

Q: Pakistan is on the front page of the news every day. What about the tribal territories? Were these no-go areas?

KOVACH: I don't really want to talk about it. Some people got to go more than others. I went up to Peshawar quite a bit and in fact started a Lincoln Corner, an American Corner at the university there, not terribly successful.

We started an access English scholarship program and for that enterprise we had a great partner. It was St. Edwards College, one of these old British prep schools. Edwards agreed to host and staff the ACCESS program. What Edwards did in hosting it for these poor kids who could never afford to attend was use it as a conduit for their scholarship program. They committed to recruit their scholarship programs from among the best and brightest of those poor kids for whom we created ACCESS. Many other commercial and educational doors were opened for the students who couldn't get into Edwards or who didn't want to get into Edwards. It was a great setup.

No, I didn't get out to what is now called Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the former Northwest Frontier Province. The one time we got out a little ways was when Steve Hadley came through. He was the national security adviser at the time. We got out to some kind of dedication in a village. I had a lot of operational stuff to do because we had a big press contingent out there and then Hadley did a stand up press conference back in the

embassy. I was busy. I wasn't looking. It was about half way up to the Khyber Pass. These people got out there and I guess I'd say I was physically there but mentally fretting and texting my staff about the upcoming Hadley press conference in Islamabad the next day.

Q: How did our war in Afghanistan play in Pakistan when you were there?

KOVACH: It was in the interregnum between when we drove the Taliban out after they refused to close the terrorist camps and throw the foreign fighters out and the upswing in their activity. Pakistan has a little bit of an irredentist problem in that this very volatile tribal province is ethnically Pashto. They spoke Pashto. If Pakistan gets much more unstable, it could be they decide to throw their lot in with the Afghans where they would suddenly become the absolute majority. Now in Afghanistan they are about 40 to 50 % of the population. There is a real danger for Pakistan.

There was fighting. There was stuff going on and we were involved.

Again the assignments process; I basically had my reward lined up when I went to Pakistan and it was to become consul general in Ho Chi Min City with a year of Vietnamese. I found Ho Chi Min City one of the most dynamic places, far more important than Hanoi, in a booming relationship. About two weeks into my presence in Pakistan I get an e-mail from my former deputy in the EAP office saying you are no longer first on the list. I called him and asked what is going on? He told me he had been in the room when the decision was made. Ambassador Marine had come in, my former deputy alleged, and basically asked Chris Hill or Kathy Stephens, the P/DAS who was in line for Ho Chi Min City. Ambassadors are not supposed to have a say in the choice of consul generals. He got the short list; I was number one. Both me and the number three on the list would have been 62 when we hit the decks in Ho Chi Min City so in our last three years of service, because of mandatory retirement at 65; i.e., nothing left to lose.

The stories are legion in the Foreign Service about ambassadors not being able to control consul generals in large cities. The Ho Chi Min consulate at the time was at least as big as the embassy and more important. There had been a real history, in our short history of relations with Vietnam after the war, of conflict between Ho Chi Minh City CGs and their Ambassadors in Hanoi.

Marine wasn't even going to be there. He is just doing this as a good manager. He said, That's not acceptable. You can't have a 62 year old CG because then they have nothing to lose. The ambassador won't be able to control them.

So Chris and Cathy drank that Kool-Aid and suddenly I was number three and the other guy was number four. So that was a little depressing. All the same, I was really happy in Pakistan.

About a week later I get a call from EUR where I have never served a day in my life and they said, 'Would you be interested in being minister counselor for public affairs in Berlin?'

I was totally floored. I said, 'I have never served in Germany, never served in EUR.'

They said, 'We understand you have kind of a German background.'

'You might call it that but I am a black sheep. I am a guy that never showed much interest. I have a sense of German culture. I was raised around it. And I have a feel for German, both my parents' native language and one I had studied for 3 years in high school and college.'

They said, 'We like you. You have the reputation of being a good manager and an originator of out of the box programs,' they flattered me. They had another candidate who was really pushing for the job who on paper was really well qualified but who doesn't have a great reputation as a manager. 'We would really like to rescue this job,' they said.

I talked to my wife. She was similarly big on it. So I said yes. If you want me I will do it.

Then at the last day they said that apparently the other person got wind that they were, that there was a machination up and she said she would grieve it. And say she had been discriminated against as a woman. They felt she had a case. They talked to the EEO people and they said she has a case because on paper she is far better qualified than I am; served in Germany, has a PhD, had been an acting assistant secretary of a bureau, very good credentials. I like this person by the way. Any shadows on her reputation she has, they aren't in my mind.

So that went away, sadly, and then personnel began to fret about me. Peter, it is October of the year. It is a one year tour. You've got to look at the bid list and put bids in.

I didn't say this in anger. I said this more in humor and this was right before I got on the plane, like the Friday I got back from India with my Mom three days passed, I had this conversation. Whenever it was I told them, the essence was that I have just had enough. I am going to go with this theory of mine that good things happen to those who wait and I am not bidding and I am not looking at your bid list. You let me know when things come up. Then the quake happened and I hardened my attitude further. Working 100 hour weeks, I had no time to comb bid lists. Then I got another call from someone more senior in personnel who is a good friend of mine. Peter, you really need to give us a bid list.

The quake had happened. I said, Absolutely not. I am going to be working harder than I have ever worked in my life. I was promised a job. I didn't get it. I did a toe dance initiated by another bureau but I didn't get the job I would have gladly taken. They decided they didn't dare give it to me. I think this is all farcical so you make me offers and I will tell you if I am interested.

They just shut up. They let it go.

Even when I was on R&R in January, it was a medevac/R&R combination for an eye problem; I deliberately didn't go by personnel at all. The fact was I was looking at the lists a bit on that R&R but not contacting them because nothing jumped out at me.

Finally it was about a week before this really smart Crocker PR event declaring the drawdown of quake relief assets and declaring success, I got a call. They said, 'How would you like to be a diplomat in residence?'

I was a college professor before I got in. I said that I would love that. Where?

Duke or UCLA.

I love California. I am a graduate of the UC system. Duke would be perfect because I would be within a weekend drive of coming up and seeing the family. Both sound real good to me.

Finally I went for UCLA. I decided I want to go back to California.

Q: You did this from when to when?

KOVACH: I arrived at UCLA in mid August of 06 and I left the last week of May in 08.

Q: You want to describe your bit of the both what you were doing but let's talk about the system first as you saw it, not overall but your part of it in the California system at that time.

KOVACH: Let me give you my critique up front. I had not in my career been around a major U.S. research university much. I taught at U. Mass Boston when it was a fledging campus so I didn't have much exposure. I'd taught a bit at Goddard College which is sort of a hippie school up in Vermont with a work study program and I taught at my own alma mater, as small liberal arts school, for a year after I graduated. I had gone to Cal for five quarters, got my MA in five quarters. There was a real balance at that time in the early 70's between teaching excellence to stimulate young minds and doing the world's important research.

What I found when I got to UCLA was a system so horribly degraded and corrupt, I was appalled. I went up to Stanford to visit some Pakistanis who were Fulbrighters and whom I had had a strong hand in selecting. We went to visit Cal. We had some appointments actually. My impression of Cal was that it had become just like UCLA.

You've got this Proposition 13 in California

Q: Which has cut down on tax revenue.

KOVACH: Greatly and the system as a demographic of engaged voters, age, the system has really been degraded. They took a lot of money out of the system and I think that to their credit the state took more money out of the university system than the state college system and the community college system which were closer to the people in affecting more lives in the economy.

Smart, in a way, but what had happened was you've got these behemoth universities and when I was at UCLA there was a statistic I saw; 82% of the total revenue it took to fund the whole university, all activity; teaching, research, buildings, grounds, maintenance, 82% came from non government of California sources buying very specific streams of research. Some U.S. government but mostly private.

I was in the School of Public Affairs, largely a graduate school with an undergraduate minor. For all my professor colleagues, it was all about their research streams and they were very guarded, kind of looking sideways to make sure none of their colleagues were stealing their ideas and possibly their money flow, tenure, it was conceded had a lot to do with how much money you were bringing in. It was a very corrupt system.

One of the roles of a diplomat in residence is as an impresario so when a major State Department figure or let's say a foreign figure that the Department wants to get American exposure for is offered, you are supposed to put him on and as a PD officer that's second nature. You brought someone to UCLA and offered them, it was like the proverbial baseball outfielders that run away from the dropping fly ball rather than running toward it. Dysfunctional, absolutely dysfunctional.

Even grad students, I was appalled at the disconnects between the faculty and their grad students but UCLA treated me really well and it was a wonderful university with a couple of really great schools, the law school was a terrific school, business school was very good. Some of the departments were all right. Medical school was allegedly very good.

A terrible split between north campus which housed the humanities and social sciences and south campus which was engineering and the medical school. At a good school like Wesleyan University the science and social science have gotten together to form a really strong public policy studies program. My department public policy, public affairs department was where it all should have come together. It didn't. So real disappointment in UCLA but really some gems of experience and accomplishment down there.

Going into the history of the diplomats in residence program, apparently 1992 was a real watershed in that program, that the first 12 years I was in the service it went to really senior diplomats who were supposed to be just gray beards and not much was expected of them except to be resources for their university and the students.

After 1992 there was a real shift to an emphasis on recruiting. In the Clinton years that emphasis swung very heavily to minority recruiting. With the rise and funding of the Pickering and Rangel programs this emphasis had teeth and resources.

The formula of Pickering and Rangel is you take largely minority interns. Pickering a little bit more looking at economic minorities and a little less at ethnicity. Rangel, after Charles Rangel, almost 100% black and Hispanic.

There are undergraduate Pickerings so prospects get recruited their junior year at which point State is giving them a free ride and they are getting a good stipend too. It is like a scholarship with a living allowance, really great. There is some control over what they study but not much. Then they are doing internships every summer, alternatively one in the building here in Washington and one overseas at an embassy. Then at the end they automatically come into the Foreign Service on a kind of non-tenure agreement. They get their choice of cone which is very dysfunctional. They may have changed that. I, among others, was railing against that. Getting a free ride, getting our diversity but then to give them a choice of cone which then takes people coming in through the front door, and puts them in a second class position is really dysfunctional. It is unfair.

In Southern California with a rich minority population it was so much fun to get out and talk to high school classes on occasion. I did a job fair at UC Riverside every year. It was a wasteland in terms of recruitment but what was really interesting was one of the four Bureau of Indian Affairs of boarding schools nationwide was in Riverside. For some reason their annual career day coincided with the riverside job fair so both years I was at UCLA I actually spent a day at the school for Native Americans. I just loved talking to those Native American kids and just putting the idea of service in the wide world out there, representing their country, into their heads.

To describe the satisfaction this kind of improbable recruiting gave me, I'll describe an incredible experience I had in the State Department cafeteria. This would have been during one of my R&Rs from Pakistan. I was in the cafeteria and this really dapper African American kid approached me and profusely grabs my hand and begins thanking me. I owe you everything, he said. What? I have to ask you where I know you from, I asked with considerable embarrassment. He replied, You spoke to my high school class in an inner city school in Cleveland, Ohio about your career and I never stopped thinking about it and I just dedicated my life to the idea of becoming an FSO and here I am six years later.

One of the things I mentioned doing when I was at the foreign press center was developing these regional affiliates and I had a big space on my dance card in Cleveland between morning meetings and an evening gala at the Chamber of Commerce. I told the Public Liaison Office in the Bureau of Public Affairs that I would be available all afternoon for a speaking 'gig'. 'How about a minority high school?' they asked. I said, Bingo.

Apparently this kid had been in the audience.

After I returned from UCLA, a class of entry level officers invited me to their Flag Day at FSI -- the day they receive their first assignments in a ceremony presided over by a senior

official or two. On perusing the program, I found that I had recruited over 10% of that class. A lot of them were minorities too. I felt great about that; one of the proudest moments in my career.

One of the interesting things I found maybe, let me be regionalist (a bad case of East Coast-itis) and say that West Coast kids, even educated ones, were a little bit more naive about Washington and the bureaucracy than their East Coast equivalents at top schools. I'd go down to the old LA foreign press center which was a kilometer from my apartment. The next door neighbor to the press center and VOA suite was the FBI office and we ate at the same little café. There I got to know this really great FBI agent, Angela Wynn, just a pistol. She and I are having coffee one day. Someone introduced me to her because she is not only an agent who does busts and all that stuff but FBI recruits using agents which I think is very enlightened, by the way. And she was the head recruiter.

She and I were talking. These kids don't have a clue about what we do at State, what the agency does, USAID, FBI or DHS do. Those are the five. They are sort of national security careers. Should we be recruiting together? Shouldn't we think about it?

She said, Yes.

I met the CIA recruiter through a career counselor contact at one of my schools. I easily persuaded him and we agreed to just find who is recruiting for DHS. Let's think of a joint presentation. So we did a conference call, all four of us aboard with me representing USAID too. We did the first session at San Diego State, a school with a huge international relations program. The format we decided on which held right through my two years and about 7 or 8 of such sessions, was that each of us would give five to seven minutes max about the core function of our agency so people could separate doing foreign relations and development from espionage from police work and security, national and border security. Then we would take generic questions.

We joked about how naive the questions were. The first one was almost always: I smoked pot; can I get a security clearance? The last one I did I think one of us, made a joke; and now we will take your questions about marijuana smoking.

Then when the questions got too down in the weeds, what we would do is prearrange a separate space for each agency rep and the people that had been seduced by our seven minute presentation or their proclivity coming in, came to us and we did separate career sessions.

Q: While we are talking on this subject and students in general, what about the reputation of the oriental students being very good and almost driving the others out because they work so hard? We are talking about California.

KOVACH: You are aware of that stereotype. You see kind of a work ethic but I counseled many, not only Asians that might be described as 'grinds'. There are several I got into this building. With one or two of different origins that were really bright but

absolutely grinds, you know the stereotypes you are fighting. I'd counsel them bluntly, 'You need for both for richness of life and for us to look at you more favorably, you need to be well rounded,' I'd counsel. 'You need to develop some interest outside whether it be do-gooder interests or art interests, just do something. Get out of the library and take a deep breath.' Especially with the undergrads. The grad students are a little too mature to change but I have taken that tack in counseling with academic grind types of all races and ethnicities.

When I taught at UCLA, my deal with the university was that I had to take all the grad students that registered but undergrads I could be selective about. I insisted on interviewing my undergrads. One day my TA who is now a State Department officer said, Peter there is one you are going to have to take because she is section 508 handicapped. I said, I have no choice and turned out to be a Korean American woman, a real looker. With a beautiful soul too, very mellow, not so Korean in her nature but from the ghetto, speaks Korean at home and she had some serious physical problems. She just got an internship years later in our embassy in Seoul and she is now thinking of taking the exam.

I think because of the area I am in we tend to draw a broader based constituency but there was a stereotype. And in the incredible diversity of Southern California, I counseled students of many backgrounds on broadening their interests to be more competitive and to enrich their lives.

Q: It is not only a stereotype but these things run it seemed to me the equal opportunities and all when you got right down to it they talk about the broad sweep and all but what it boiled down to was African Americans.

KOVACH: In Southern California it boiled down to Hispanics, Native Americans and Asians.

Q: African Americans a significant number were coming from the competitive class anyway. Their parents had made it. It was basically based on last name or looks, dark skin. A lot of this was touched with a certain amount of racialness.

KOVACH: Frankly, I liked getting down in the 'hoods and going after people that were maybe first generation educated. That's my nature.

Q: That's great but that is often what I think can be lacking.

KOVACH: UCLA had very low minority numbers. As a matter of fact, the Department wanted to take the DIR position away from UCLA and I said no. I wrote a paper giving the reasons why not. First of all, I had to go up to UC Santa Barbara and San Bernardino and Riverside and all the San Diego schools. And it is close to USC, a truly great university with the best program in the world for the study of one of our five career cones, public diplomacy. UCLA is so well located and it is the flagship university in Southern California and you may not have minority numbers or percentages that the

Department would idealize like but I will tell you, we have the best minorities at UCLA and it is very easy to get to them. I recruited a lot of interns with minority backgrounds at UCLA.

There were some wonderful schools that I lectured and recruited at including UC Santa Barbara -- a formidable school. Everyone has the stereotype, oh, surfer/party school. Let me drop two names here; Marc Grossman and Barbara Bodine two of the stellar officers of my generation and both Santa Barbara graduates.

Q: Joe Wilson went to the University of Santa Barbara because he figured I've got both the surf and I ski.

KOVACH: Santa Barbara, terrific international and Middle Eastern studies, Islamic studies. One of the best programs in world religion -- in the world. The other great school in the UC system in my Southern California territory is UC San Diego. That was the shining city literally on the hill. Undergraduate life is organized like Yale in colleges based on interest groups. They have the research money, but people talk to each other. I put some events on there where people came into collaboration to realize success; the opposite of a fly ball image I used earlier to describe UCLA where the outfielder is running away from the fly ball. People would come together to catch it. That is a great university.

Cal State, San Bernardino. Why are you going out there, I was asked. A lot of minorities. More to the point, Cal State San Bernardino is the headquarters of a consortium funded entirely by the director of national intelligence (DNI) of ten schools that have national security studies where they promoting security studies and recruiting. Great Middle Eastern studies. That school was such a treasure trove and I'd get invited because of INR, the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research. I get invited as part of the consortium. We did a little job fair and did some panels and stuff. People just loved me, not because of my personality but because of my affiliation with State and INR which seems to enjoy an unparalleled reputation in the intelligence community and students preparing for careers in that domain.

USC, almost as big as UCLA, has a reputation of being a jock school. USC you bring them an event, three departments are willing to cosponsor. A great university.

Q: How did you find the State Department attracted as a place to go to?

KOVACH: I think people had unrealistic fantasies and very romantic ideas about being a diplomat. I generally counseled that the foreign service is a lifestyle choice. It is hard to get into but if you are here and you are in this university and we are talking to you are probably bright enough to be at least competitive. If you think you are going to Washington and you are going to shape national policy, you better go in as a political. In the Department at certain moments in a bilateral relationship you may do something that shapes a specific policy, that you feel proud of but it is very operational. It is something I'd stress again and again.

To some of my people that are coming in as PMFs, presidential management fellows, they actually have more of a chance if they rise because they come in at mid level. If they rise they have more of a chance to be policy influencers I think than the FSOs or at least a higher percentage.

There is this naiveté on the West Coast. You have to talk to them a lot more about what is out there, what the bureaucracy is like, what Washington is like.

Q: I went to San Francisco for three weeks. I had been with the board of examiners giving the exam and we d developed a routine and we d pass maybe one out of three people who came in. All of a sudden we are halfway through our time in San Francisco and we weren't passing anyone. We are thinking hey, wait. What s wrong?

KOVACH: California is a paradise. It is my favorite place on earth. People don't want to leave.

Q: There is a story; you lose one IQ point for every month you are in California and at a certain point you are no longer can find the airport to get out.

KOVACH: That explains a lot. (laughter)

I also did quite a bit of recruiting at the community colleges. There were a couple that had a high minority numbers and were real feeders into the top schools like Stanford and Cal and UCLA and UCSD. I had a good run at a couple of those. I picked them carefully.

Q: How did you find the attraction to the Foreign Service by Hispanics?

KOVACH: Very hard because of the value placed on proximity to 'la familia.' First of all, these are Mexican Americans. There were so few of any other stripe in my SoCal territory.

I haven't worked in the Hispanic world at all but one thing I have learned over the years growing up in New England around my Puerto Rican and Cuban friends and time in California is there are real differences between these countries and cultures. I really resonate with the Mexican community. I had such a good time with my Mexican and Mexican-American friends, such roots in the community at the end of my two years. I knew the mayor, I knew the head of the city council and I knew the janitor in my building. These were relationships. These are wonderful, wonderful people.

It doesn't mean to say that in different ways Guatemalans and Salvadorians around here or the Puerto Ricans or Cubans I grew up with up in the northeast don't have their virtues and qualities but personally, I really resonated with the Mexican-American community.

The one thing that really bollixed recruitment, even for civil service jobs because we were recruiting for civil service too was 'la familia'. They were ambitious, they were

bright, they were among the best students but they didn't want to leave home. It was partly California is paradise but it was more the value put on staying close to the family.

Q: Did you notice a growing influence of Indians/Pakistanis in California?

KOVACH: Not in Southern California but when I was at Cal with Yuba City and the Sikhs who had been there for a century I sure sensed it. And at Cal, I focussed on South Asian studies. My degree is from the center of South Asian studies.

Even then the influence, I am not sure it was an influence but a presence. In Orange County where I did some stuff, gave speeches down there to World Affairs councils I ran into an Orange County Republican Party boss, I fell in with Tariq Nasashibi. The Nasashibis and the Husseinis were the two aristo-Palestinian families in Jerusalem. He and I hit it off. He said come to the neighborhood. I speak Arabic. There is a mile in Anaheim full of Palestinian eateries and other shops informally dubbed the Gaza Strip in Anaheim. We had a terrific evening. We went restaurant hopping. My wife was out at that point. It was just great. Kind of Arabian hospitality and warmth and here I want to corrupt your youth. I want to get them to Washington. Arabic was the number one language we were recruiting for so this meeting Tariq was a bonanza. That was a great vein of contact too.

I would say the Chicano community and the Arab American community were the two major sub-communities I mixed with that represented ethnic rather than class or educational divisions.

Q: Since I have served twice, once in the military and once as a Foreign Service officer in Korea, how were the Koreans? Did you get any feel for them?

KOVACH: I had a lot of Korean-American students. As a matter of fact I think I recruited three Korean Americans that are here in the Department now. I didn't spend much time with the community there. I spent much more time with the Korean community here in Washington which is huge. I have impressions more based here. They don't integrate terribly well in either place but they are a very strong community, well educated and they don't have that sort of reticence nor sort of that pragmatism of Chinese. They tend to be more idealistic and at times ideological.

Q: When I was in the military I served with an outfit in Seoul. We were all enlisted men. We ate together. I liked the Koreans so when they offered the job in Seoul as consul general I said hell yes.

Did you get involved in professorial competition? I mean politics or

KOVACH: Not really. I came and my intention was whether you like it or not, teaching. On my second R&R from Pakistan my wife went to LA because I just accepted the job and it was lucky I did because I put my name in the hat for faculty housing. Never would have gotten it if I had arrived in August. It was a wonderful two bedroom apartment with

a view of the hills behind Westwood, right on campus. It was wonderful and a steal \$1500 a month.

We went out there and they said we want you to teach. Well, I wanted to teach public diplomacy, what I do. I sensed already that California kids were not so Foreign Service/ Washington oriented as their equivalents at top East Coast schools. Let me teach, take a step back and teach communicating public policy or sub title a public diplomacy course 'communicating public policy' because there is no real difference. You are in a multiethnic world. If an SPA student that I have goes to work for the LA government or city or county government or the state government, it is a lot like public diplomacy because of the rich weave of cultural differences on top of class and other narrative discrepancies.

I put together a great course. I had two very strong TAs.

Q: TA being teaching assistant.

KOVACH: And I insisted on that. Let s be blunt. I am here as an student resource and to recruit and I will teach and will teach gladly but I need help. So they hired me the assistants. Obviously, I was free. And being a 'Visiting Professor' in addition to the more obscure title of 'Diplomat in Residence' enhanced my prestige when more directly representing the Department in recruiting or general public speaking.

It took me time to put together the course. I couldn't teach from the get go in the fall because of time needed to prepare so I taught winter quarters both years which wouldn't interfere with the annual Washington conference I had to go to. It just worked really well.

I am trying to think how many of my students are in the Foreign Service. I think maybe seven. Not all in the PD cone I will say but seven students. It was a great privilege. They also named me a senior fellow which is a kind of a glorified mentor. In that capacity, I did some serious handholding for some very bright people, one of whom is in the Department today.

I had an office up on the sixth floor where all the retired chancellors, Charles Young, one of the iconic chancellors in American education sat. He was a hero to us because when I was at Cal he was the one that kicked the door in so Angela Davis could teach, this against a lot of opposition. He was kind of a folk hero in the 60's. He was my next door neighbor and we became good friends.

The other one was a world famous physicist, also an ex-UCLA chancellor, but also one of these scientists that stepped across the aisle and did public policy. He realized if you are a top scientist your real influence is going to be what you do for sensible public policy to protect the environment, to advance science, all this good stuff.

It was a great floor. I had an office that looked out on the LA basin. Life was sweet. I spent a lot of time in that office and always had an open door. That was very rare in that

faculty. At my retirement, the School of Public Affairs flattered me with a reception in honor of my departure in a big faculty lounge and everyone is there.

One of my colleagues, a friend from way, way back in Massachusetts and a fairly well known American was Mike Dukakis. He is very passionate and he can be very tactless and plain spoken. He stood up with his Boston accent and with his deep sententious voice with his little body, then bent a bit with age, and exclaimed to the assembled crowd, ‘ Well, it is really tragic that Peter is leaving this faculty. Now there are only two of us who always had their doors open to students, he said pointedly to all my colleagues whose first priority was research and publication. There was a third colleague, a journalist named Tom Plate who is a well known among Americans and English readers following the East Asian scene. The three of us always had our doors open to the students here and our presence there was aimed at the students. That’s more than anyone else in the room could say.

That was embarrassing to me. I was collegial. I worked with a committee on trying to get more international internships for our students. I did faculty work. I was a little embarrassed but that’s Mike Dukakis.

The other thing I did through my career -- I have been teaching meditation since 1969. In the career I did it with a small circle of friends. We would sit together once a week. At UCLA I decided I was going to do it with underserved populations. I ended up at the VA hospital which is a mile from campus. It was really nice. I had insisted on ‘mixed’ classes including both patients and caregivers and I gave several classes on what you would call mediation based stress reduction to caregivers. I felt very good about that. Something I have continued. I became the State Department s first MED sponsored meditation teacher eventually. That was in 2008 when MED decided based in part on an offer I made to sponsor meditation classes on a systematic basis.

It was a great two years. I loved LA. I did a lot of body surfing. I had my whitewater kayak down there. I did some wave surfing with a kayak. And in my early 60’s body, had the bruises to show for it. I had a wonderful time.

Q: What did you do after?

KOVACH: I came back to DC with a senior OIG assignment in the offing.

Q: OIG being?

KOVACH: Office of Inspector General. I was highly ambivalent about the assignment because frankly organizations I worked with domestically and overseas had been inspected seven times and I would say only two of those seven inspections did I feel positive about. Except for the inspection in EAP I’ve described where my office was ‘targeted’ for reorganization by the DG, I had never been the target. I have never been in the cross hairs. I was ambivalent about the idea of an organization inspecting itself without a serious degree of corruption based on conflict of interest. As one friend crudely

put it, 'Be cautious that the ass you kick today might not be the ass you need to kiss in a year or two'. I think that is very succinct.

I came back and initially in the summer of 2008 served as the PD officer on the threshold panel that considers people at the mid level that are now called 01s for promotion to OC level, the first level of the senior Foreign Service and that was a great experience. That's why I came back before the end of the quarter. I came back to serve on the panel.

Q: It is an interesting process.

KOVACH: It sure is and one I feel pretty good about.

Q: I was on a panel for OC to MC. I was surprised at how close we came together. We came from disparate consular representative and we'd take these files and then we would come together and most the blandest thing you'd ever read. We learned to read between the lines.

KOVACH: I felt good about the process, good about our dynamic as a group and we were very different. I can't even think of major, major disagreements. I think we had some inter-conal promotions that we were charged with doing. There was an argument about which cone to favor. HR did something they weren't supposed to. They told us how many slots there were in each cone so then we decided we were going to favor the political cone because we heard, perhaps inappropriately, that there wouldn't be many political slots. PD had the most. They really deferred to me a lot on the PD promotions, especially when we got down to the lower end. A couple of protégés of mine got promoted. I gotta tell you, we were so close as a panel on the people at the top end that I didn't even have to open my mouth but some people lower down on the list there was doubt and confusion about. They let me shape the bottom end of the PD list and I appreciated that. A great process.

I did a lot of outreach for HR the next year talking about my experience on the panel as part of the effort trying to get people to write better EERs, either for themselves on the new 5055 Form or the rating officers or reviewing officer's part. It was a great experience. I wish I had done it earlier in my career, I don't think it would have benefited me terribly but I wish I had done it years earlier. It might have benefited some of the people I rated. It was a great experience. I cannot say enough good about it.

Our panel, we had the most files. I think we had to look at something like 650 files. That is a lot of reading. Some of them weren't eligible for promotion, hadn't opened their windows but we still had to had to rank them. It was really something.

Low ranking, that was an interesting thing. Two people, one a protégé of mine was up for being reprimanded due to a poorly written EER. This is a very odd thing. You write letters of praise for people that wrote a particularly good EER and then you write a letter of reprimand for someone who wrote just an off the wall one. Making it all a bit stranger, the protégé officer in question we had already written two positive letters for; but then he

had an EER that was so badly written and so bizarre, they wanted to write him a letter. I told them I would hold back and support the group's decision as BOTH the rater and the person rated were very close friends of mine, as random as that may have been.

I was sort of a mentor for the rater when he came in the building. He is a DCM now at a pretty major post. I said, if you don't write the letter or vote to write the letter, I promise you I will counsel him on the telephone and I did. He was weird on the phone and it turned out in a bit of a personal crisis as I discovered later.

I told him, You are going to be getting some good news from the panel. No one got more than one letter of praise, you got three letters but I got to talk to you about this one EER you wrote. It was totally bizarre. You overwrote it; you seemed to be totally enamored with your own prose and it was inconsistent. He got very huffy about it. I thought this is irrational and all that. But I had acquitted my promise to the panel to counsel him in lieu of putting a negative letter in his file.

A year later he totally tanked, he was an alcoholic which I didn't know. He is still in; he's an MC, one of the most talented people in the Foreign Service in my view. He is kind of picking up the pieces of his life. He is on the wagon and picking up all sorts of pieces.

I was about a week from going over to OIG. I was sitting in the cafeteria one day and suddenly, I was approached by two people, both of whom had worked for me. Peter, we need to have a talk with you. I am thinking this felt a little like fraternity rushing in a strange way. They said, Jim Glassman, the new undersecretary for public diplomacy, he needs a strategic communication whole of government strategic communication head. One of them had worked for me back in the late Clinton days when I ran the similar structure twice. This has come a long way since your days running it as an international public information secretariat, that friend explained.

I said I am going to a job and it is a great pre-retirement job because I can just segue into doing this as a WAE, just that extra income I need to add to my pension. I will just travel and life will be good.

Out of loyalty to them both, however, and curiosity about the well-known former columnist, I went to talk to Jim Glassman. I totally drank the Kool aid; the vision, the energy, some of the Foreign Service people he had already surrounded himself with, people I really respect so I surprised myself and I said yes.

That was between that August, 2008 and January 20, 2009 when Glassman left the building because of the change of the administration. Short as it was, it represented another peak professionally in my life.

Q: Today is the 17th of September, 2012 with Peter Kovach and Peter is back from a long vacation lolling on the beaches of Afghanistan.

KOVACH: Pakistan. Lahore, more like the swimming holes along the urban canal system than beaches.

Q: We left you, a couple of your friends recruited you for a new job at the State Department. What was that?

KOVACH: That job for the third time in my late career was to be whole of government strategic communications coordinator. There are a number of federal agencies that attempt, pretend or do communicate with foreign audiences. Again, based on my convening such a group on the tail of the 1991 Gulf War because I was appalled at the lack of coordination, 'deconfliction', I gladly took this work on because I believed that lacking coordination, we would be strategically dysfunctional and as in Hungary in 1956 and with the Shia in Southern Iraq in 1991, commit downright immoral acts of incitement.

As a Hungarian ethnic I feel particularly strongly about this because this is exactly what happened in 1956 where our radio blandishments were way ahead of our strategic intentions. The Hungarians thought we would be right over the hill and defending them if they rose up against the Soviets. It just made the revolution a much bloodier affair than it had to be with far higher casualty rates.

Q: OK, dates?

KOVACH: It was the summer of 2008. It was in August. I had just gotten off being a member of the threshold panel, that's the panel that considers people from upper level, O1 level to OC, the lowest level of the senior Foreign Service -- a long arduous but very satisfying process.

I was ready to go to the OIG office, the Office of the Inspector General for my last two years in the Foreign Service with a lot of ambivalence. Two gentlemen approached me in the cafeteria. One, I don't think we'd ever worked together directly but he had been as a retiree kind of a stalwart in a number of these strategic communication structures that kind of stood up and then stood down to coordinate across federal agencies strategic communications directed at foreign audiences. The other had been my deputy when I ran the diplomacy office in the East Asia Bureau.

They said you will love Jim Glassman who was the new undersecretary for the last few months of the Bush administration, a brilliant man, a columnist, everyone knows his name. I said I have already picked my desk and my office. They said just go up and meet him for 45 minutes. It is not going to hurt you. I have to say the curiosity about sitting with a public intellectual celebrity overcame me. I decided to meet him and let him pitch me on the job; or see that I was not the right person for it.

Mr. Glassman and I both decided in the affirmative. Now Jim had sort of a brain trust of political advisors, two schedule B politicals and civil servant. I got along fabulously with them. A lot of my Foreign Service colleagues in the R structure resented them deeply. It

was interesting. One was Adnan Kifayat who is a Pakistani American just off the NSC and on loan from Treasury. Another was Farah Pandith who is now the special envoy for outreach to Muslim communities, one of these special envoy titles. The third one was Jared Cohen who may have launched and definitely heads up Google Ideas. So you had two Muslims and a Jew. They were in the 'interview' and we had a great conversation going on for an hour and Jim asked me if I would do the job. I said yes. I saw the light at the end of the tunnel. I had done this work before.

You've got to have a high tolerance for ambiguity to work as the whole of government strategic communications coordinator. You got to be sure the NSC is behind you. While the State Department is the lead foreign affairs agency, a lot of the other players don't particularly like the State Department. They have different work cultures and they don't tend to play terribly nicely. And they have infinitely more resources than State.

Q: The other thing is politicians avoid it like the plague. Once they get into positions of authority, foreign policy is just like, it is addictive. It drags people in and departments even the Department of Agriculture or any department you can think of people get involved in foreign affairs. They can't help it. It is just too much fun.

KOVACH: The Department of Defense, the intelligence community, AID and VOA are pretty much the main players.

Q: And Treasury.

KOVACH: And Treasury, yes. The interesting thing is, Adnan whom I mentioned, the adviser, his billet is at treasury. He went from treasury, to NSC to State back to Treasury, and now he's back at state as Farah's assistant.

Jim's nomination had been held up by a senator, the imbecilic Tom Coburn of Oklahoma, from his own party, on some spurious grounds. He lost the benefit of having almost a year in office to give his wonderful, ebullient touch to our countering violent extremism and other strategic communication endeavors and so we only had him from June to January.

This was the third time in my career I had done this. The first time I was the head of the USIA's director's policy office. The staff was comprised of all USIA officers and in crises we would try to convene tables and try to get a hand on who was doing what with no one really behind us. I really depended on how strong the director of USIA was and Joe Duffey was not a strong director of USIA. That was not great.

In the Kosovo 'air campaign' as we euphemistically called it, it worked because people cared. That was a war essentially and people cared how we looked.

What I realized early on, I instinctively realized the NSC support needed to be stronger because Joe didn't have a seat at the table. I went over there and Richard Clarke who is well known as the voice in the wilderness warning about 9/11 type of events before they

happened had a protégé, a White House fellow named Jamie Metzl. Jamie and I were really in synch on so many of the key process issues. Jamie is so type A; he makes me look type B and that's really hard. We just decided we really needed to give this kind of structure some backbone. It was pretty clear that USIA was going to end so the perch of the director's policy office was going to disappear.

We wrote up a seven page charter for a permanent whole of government strategic communications structure and we got President Clinton to sign it as a PDD, presidential decision directive on April 30, 1999, his last year in office. In drafting this we took a lot of help from a cabal of people in psychological operations who were working for SAIC and on their payroll.

Q: SAIC is?

KOVACH: Beltway bandits, I don't even know what it stands for.

They had a good group of people and one of their consultants was Bud McFarland who had been President Reagan's last chief of staff and he had tried at the end of the Reagan administration to pull together a structure like this. He was terrific. He was like an uncle to us and went over our drafts line by line and helped us really line our ducks up and think straight.

We created the structure and Jamie Metzl was tabbed by the first Department of State Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy, Evelyn Lieberman to run it. USIA was in its last four or five months and so nothing much happened and then. When the new Under Secretary, Evelyn Lieberman came aboard, the first under secretary of public diplomacy at State, she wanted Jamie to run this thing. Jamie's enthusiasm and type A-ness was so off putting to the other agencies that we had to have at the table, so after about three months of treading water; having an increasingly hard time convening a table to deal with the issues of the day and I had already lined up a great next job for myself, this is very typical of the Foreign Service. November, December, you know where you are moving the next summer but she nonetheless asked me to take it on and we had a great run. Jamie became my senior adviser.

We got some very significant coordination done especially around the overthrow of Milosevic in Serbia. Even some academic accounts of that process give a lot of credit to the allied communication campaign. We convened the table and everyone did what they had to.

Q: What basically was the idea of this?

KOVACH: The two words that were the key words in that charter which I still would argue hold true in any of this are coordination and deconfliction.

Q: That explains what it is. Now would you explain what you are explaining?

KOVACH: In the 91 Gulf War we had radio broadcasts with the VOA. Language services, Persian English and Arabic sending out conflicting messages. We had clandestine radios from DOD, sending out a whole other set of messages. It really was a mess and at the time I got my boss to convene the people from Fort Bragg, the psychological operations arm as I explained earlier. It was really a rough go.

This time what we did we asked for NSC support because I had always seen that that was the key ingredient. As NSC point of contact, we were assigned an officer detailed from the intelligence community, a low-key, smart man. While at first I feared we had been sloughed off; I was dead wrong. He put it together for us. He had the authority to basically to get recalcitrant players playing. And he provided the research component key to any strategic communications campaign.

What he did was we got a daily report on what the leadership, Milosevic and his gang were thinking, what their messages were going to be and how they were reacting to our messages. That intelligence was frankly the backbone of the effort.

Q: Milosevic, certainly by the time you were dealing with him, was considered a really bad guy. Where would you have disputes? You mentioned you were getting bodies on board. Where would they be coming from and why?

KOVACH: The disputes were over bureaucratic agency resources and the attitude some had that 'we want to do it our way and screw you guys.'

Q: It was of that nature rather than a basic policy nature.

KOVACH: Yes. It was very much that kind of thing but that's real.

Q: That's the real world.

KOVACH: What we had in the end if I could just summarize it -- we were coordinating messages. We had a ring of FM stations around Serbia that we got the navy to install with programming that we got VOA to produce; often working with Serbian dissident journalists whom they trained. We rented a million watt, medium wave antenna in Hungary somewhere that was as powerful as that old, remember that station in Buffalo, NY? It was so powerful that at night AM signals carried a good way down the East Coast. It was like that.

We had the psyopers dropping leaflets from planes, from bombers.

Q: You've got this ring of stations. Were they playing music and then putting message out or where they just putting a message out all day long?

KOVACH: Both music and message.

Q: They were being operated through someone listening to the would be considered them to be a commercial program?

KOVACH: No, no. It was overt. There probably was a catchy title which I don't remember.

At State we were pumping literature through fax machines that was being mimeographed and distributed.

AID was doing media training for the journalists, the Serbian journalists that VOA people were guiding in production. It wasn't VOA people doing the production. It all got done and it all got synced.

Q: There was a well known, almost amateurish radio station in Belgrade that was making headlines, I remember.

KOVACH: It was quite a feeling of satisfaction.

Other problems that we dealt with in my time were we tried to come up with a communications program for Sierra Leone which was in the first stage of its civil war. And we tried to come up with a deradicalization program, what we would now call deradicalization message, to keep whole villages from flipping over to Charles Taylor and his puppet show of rebels operating in Sierra Leone. All the money fueled by blood diamonds. It was an interesting plan; hardly any of it got done.

What was interesting about the process, however, was that I was able to convene the European quartet of countries that were supporting whatever we were doing in Sierra Leone and I got the UN to come in. I am trying to think what agency it was. We got the UN to a couple of meetings. That was a good model, but in the end it didn't lead to much, unfortunately.

The other thing I worked on some was is when you have these multilateral negotiations, we public diplomacy types tended to drop the ball on consistent messaging through different vehicles and timing. There is a discernable sequence to these international conferences. First of all, sometimes before it starts there is what they call a Sherpa meeting where the drafters of the final resolutions get together to figure out what the ideal outcome would be and getting it on paper for their superiors to negotiate.

The press typically comes in to cover the conference and for a week there is nothing to cover. There are just all these closed door sessions, nothing newsworthy is happening. That is a good time to be briefing people, to be offering position papers and so forth.

The real crucial part and this is where we would always drop the ball is when the ministers would come in to close the deal, so to speak. These are the people that actually carry the water and finalize the negotiation. Usually these were marathon sessions. They didn't have much time. Some of them go through the night. Some people used the

technique of not letting people even get up and go to the bathroom to speed things through. The stories of these all night sessions are legion.

Our PA/PD crews would typically get lazy and fail to staff the talks through the night so that sometimes the ministers would reach agreement at 2 or 3 in the morning and whoever had someone awake and spinning the result got the news slant and we generally would miss the boat. I put out a template for how to do press for international conferences and one of the ingredients was you will have at least one public affairs officer on duty all night and a whole crew on call; this to have people on call that can mobilize in ten or fifteen minutes and speakers lined up quickly from among our principals to spin the result our way.

By the way the names of all these whole of government structures have changed every couple of years and with every iteration. The structure that President Clinton created signing our draft into a PDD was the International Public Information Secretariat -- IPI. Then the structure sort of disappeared in the bowels of IIP, the office of International Informational Programs which is pretty low down on the bureaucratic totem pole even to this day as important as the work they do is.

With the Bush administration it kind of emerged, especially with Karen Hughes who was attached at the hip to the president suddenly being the undersecretary for public diplomacy and being a news woman and coming from that side of public diplomacy press culture. They put together a structure, I think the first one. What was really unique about it and the structure that I inherited was that it had staff from all the agencies. It was housed at State but we actually had people that came to work us from without. We had people from SOCOM, special operations command in Tampa, people from the agency. We had people from AID, Justice, the NCTC and VOA who we could call in for meetings or call in for consultation. They were sort of go to people in those agencies. This was a very different kind of structure.

One of the tricks of working in an interagency structure is, as a Foreign Service officer, we are expected to be cross-cultural operators and be able to operate with people who are running on very different fundamental assumptions than we do. Frankly, that also holds true in inter bureaucratic affairs, I discovered. I think one of my strengths at doing this kind of work is that I maybe because I came from another agency (USIA) that had a fairly distinct bureaucratic culture, I was sort of a cultural relativist when it came to bureaucracy. I could understand different constraints and authority structures and so forth.

When I came into that structure that was renamed to herald my arrival, GSEC, Global Strategic Engagement Center. I had this great array of people from around the government and I said to them the first day, OK, we are in the structure together. We come from different bureaucracies. In this structure we have to be both the anthropologist and the villagers because we are studying each other and we are being studied. One of the great takeaways of this structure is, even if we get absolutely nothing done, is that we are

going to have a kind of cadre of people that understand how one another works among USG structures that communicate internationally. That's very important.

The main things we were concerned about were the war on terror, counter extremism. Jim Glassman turned that to 'the war of ideas.' A more noble and neutral sounding rubric.

In the few months we had Jim I think a lot of his interest was in counter radicalization theory which was really hot in the day. Everyone, Georgetown, CSIS all of the think tanks were focused on how a kid under certain circumstances is far more likely to become radicalized. The theory wasn't monolithic but there was a real emphasis on the so-called radicalization cycle and how to find persuasive media that could get into kids heads right at the crucial moment where they might be tempted by a radical preacher or a gang; at the moment that their dark impulses would become socialized with a gang or terrorist group.

The whole endeavor at times was absurdly Islamocentric which so easily drifted into a very counter-productive Islamophobia. I felt it was one of my tasks was to kind of get people to understand that this phenomenon was not new or unique to Muslim kids in broken societies. It wasn't something that was an offshoot of aberrant Islam but in fact, in one speech I gave or a variation of speeches I gave even at UCLA I would point to how probably in my lifetime every major religion in the world has had an aberrant offshoot that led to some kind of genocidal consequence.

Then we had media products and one of them was the one I was referring to before. There was a Pakistani American woman, Sophie, that we came into contact with who was New York based. A lot of the people we were talking to were in Hollywood and she had a really polished prototype of a show called the Magic Tent. The Magic Tent was aimed at South Asian audiences. The demographic, Sophie told me, was between four and six year s old but I brought this pilot to the National Security Council. I showed it to a number of NSC staffers and some section heads and they loved it and I loved it.

What was amazing about Sophie s model is that it had a full business plan. It wasn't just something that would operate on the U.S. government dole but she needed a rather heavy initial input. She was asking us for the money for the whole first year of production. Jim loved it too. We just tried and tried and tried but State doesn't have that kind of money; six million dollars. State doesn't have that kind of money to seed a project so we were going with the military more than anyone else. We were hoping special ops would cover it.

Eventually with the transition impending to the Obama administration, we put together 120 million dollar wish list for AF-PAC the Afghanistan-Pakistan communication structure, including too a series of soap operas in Afghanistan that would underline the important role of women in professional life. But Magic Tent had as its object to teach critical reasoning and every episode was centered around a problem. There was one human character, and everyone else was a puppet. Each episode was centered around a dilemma and the human character would run a classroom drawing out each little puppet's

vision of how to solve the problem and then led the group in reconciling the various inputs and arriving at a solution. Every episode was like this. It sounds a little boring but it was really good.

That is very typical of the sort of thing we supported.

I had a producer in Hollywood who was somewhat wired to State and she came in and I became her handler. She would design a set of really awful soaps that AID was sponsoring in Egypt, again aimed at younger audiences to try to get them off radical ideas. The same in Afghanistan so this is the sort of thing we were doing.

A lot of it was process. The NCTC, the National Counterterrorism Center is out off Rte 123 towards Tyson s Corner. It is like a city. Their staff is a combination of people from, about a half or a third are from the intelligence community. They wanted their own in-house reach into the community and the rest of the people are various information operators. In a way it was like a big version of what we pulled together, smaller scale working at State under the NSC. We worked very closely with them and got some stuff done. It was pretty high level stuff and some of it I can't talk about it.

Then we had the election.

Q: This was the election of 2008?

KOVACH: Yes and one amazing day Jim Glassman who is very close to George Bush in fact

Q: Which George Bush?

KOVACH: George W., the younger, Jim Glassman is now the head of his library. He got Bush to come over to State to be briefed on our structures and the various sort of program leads we had started. The President agreed to come over for a morning to the State Department to hear us in the principals conference room up on the seventh floor. After getting an initial 'yes' from the White House, Glassman went traveling. He was off in Saudi Arabia. Condi knows me well because, I think I talked about the press conferences in Crawford when Bush hosted foreign leaders and I'd bring the foreign press down. She also knew me from the days I insinuated the press template for presidential travel from my perch as head of the Foreign Press Centers. Condi was such a great player and knew me.

One day I got a call from the Secretary's secretary saying that 'she would like to see you.' Now direct contact with the Secretary is above my pay grade. I shot right up to her suite. She gave me a kind of mock stern look and said, 'Peter, you can tell your boss he is not going to bring the President of the United States into this building to only hear from him. We actually bargained over the percentage of the President's time he would hear from Jim Glassman and his team. In the end, Secretary Rice agreed 'I am going to give you 60% of the time but I want the President to hear from three other people.'

There was no great choice here. I called Jim Glassman in Saudi Arabia and relayed the conversation and message I'd gotten from the Secretary. He readily accepted her diktat, of course and teased me about retaining 60% of the President's time with us. So the great day arrived and we are well rehearsed and in the Principal's conference room. The President walked in with quite an entourage; he had Cheney, Josh Bolton who was the chief of staff. He had Juan Zarate who was the counterterrorism expert. He had Mark Pfeifle, a communications guy. It was really quite a morning.

The president had a casual but very engaging style and he was a lot brighter than people gave him credit for. I saw that throughout his presidency here and there. He had read his brief. He came in and was sitting at the head of the table.

Q: His hands behind his head.

KOVACH: Yes and sort of leaning back. I believe he was wearing cowboy boots and sort of like me, gray slacks and a blue blazer and shirt and tie.

We had the first 60% of the time, as the Secretary had promised me after my bargaining ploy, and Jim is a great briefer. The President's body language is going from leaning back with his hands behind his head to sort of leaning forward with his elbows on the table and really listening. At the end he was really loaded for bear. First of all, he wouldn't let Cheney get a word in edgewise, which was a real eye-opener, we could all see it. The body language was so clear. We had heard that Cheney was on the outs but to see it so viscerally was amazing. I believe that he realized that Cheney had not been an asset for his presidency. You could just see it.

He hardly let anyone get a question in edgewise and he was really good.

The other briefings as I recall were from Paula Dobriansky who headed up four bureaus, dealt with global issues, democracy, human rights and labor, populations refugees, migration.

There are two others.

One was the guy that was running the former arms control and disarmament agency turned into the T family of bureaus. They changed so often that I wouldn't attempt to tell you who he was, maybe Bob Einhorn.

Then David Welch who is a friend of mine from grad school who was the assistant secretary for the Near East. That's where it got real interesting.

The President leaned forward looking at Welch whom he clearly had been briefed by before and said in his patented frat boy style, 'OK Welchie, what have you got for me?'

David, who has a fairly rigid formal style prattled on a bit. David is an interesting guy. He's complex. He can be a clown. I remember him and I heaving spitballs in a boring grad school class. At the same time he can be formal, almost pompous. He spoke of his view of Middle East Arab-Israeli negotiations in the past year or two.

Bush then asked well, what will your advice to the new president be? Bush, implicitly predicting Obama would win, then said, 'we are going to have a new President and likely a new party in power, what are you going to tell him?' (The date of this briefing was October 17, 2008, less than three weeks before the general election)

Welch said let him settle in for several months and get his staff named and confirmed.

The President slapping the table said, 'The first minute.' He went on to tell A/S Welch My biggest mistake was not pursuing the Middle East peace process from the get-go. While President Bush didn't say it in so many words but you may be aware, the Republican view, especially with Papa Bush and his more sort of real politic type people was that we should never be offering what we call a bridging solution in a negotiation. We should bring the sides together and help them discover where their interests overlap and let them come up with solutions.

The Democrats tended to favor quite explicitly a more aggressive diplomacy where, when two sides are stalemated, we offer some kind of bridge and Bush at least implicitly seemed persuaded that the inherited wisdom from his father's administration was wrong and he made that pretty clear.

It was a pretty exciting day. He was with us for two and a half or three hours. It seemed like we were up there all morning. That day was just a great cap to that period.

Then came the inauguration day. I had one year and a half left in my career because of the 65 year mandatory retirement for Foreign Service.

I decided that I would stick for a couple of months and help the new Under Secretary Judith McHale, former CEO of Discovery Channel.

She was slow to get interested and very insecure and kept a couple of advisers that she brought in between us and her. It was very hard to deal with her and I had no reason to believe she was going to keep me. In fact, one of the advisers had been Madeleine Albright's image minder back when Madeleine Albright had been secretary. She and I had had a couple of major run ins, sort of scream fests with her screaming and saying this is how it's going to be. I figured that there was no way this main gatekeeper was going to allow me to stay.

Interestingly enough, they started firing all us Foreign Service and civil service people in the strategic communication structure and they kept me on. We got her through her hearings. I wrote a lot of the papers.

I was just sort of looking for something interesting.

Have I mentioned that for the last two years of my career I was the Department's; that is to say MED's, meditation teacher? People just assumed I was a religion guy which I am in an unorthodox way. Someone reached out to gauge my interest in becoming the director of the Office of International Religious Freedom. The history of that office is a little bit sordid. It was an ungodly coming together of the neocons, which is the polite word for the Jewish lobby and the Evangelical right that supports Israel, in common cause. The right's issues were to protect missionaries' rights to proselytize and people's right to discriminate even in public accommodation if serving certain publics violated their personal beliefs, and Israel's issue was to protect Israel on very right wing model.

Mike Posner, who was the new assistant secretary in DRL was interesting in meeting me and I wanted to talk to him before I said yes. So we had a long talk. He hadn't been confirmed yet so I went and saw Mike in this little office in the transition corridor on the first floor of Main State, about half the size of this room, no window. We had a good long talk. I said, I am all behind religious freedom as long as it does not serve as an excuse to curb rights to public accommodation so painfully nailed down in the civil rights era. I am basically poly religious. I have good feeling for many religions, what their issues are. I am a Foreign Service officer. I have seen a lot of the friction points. I am willing to do this but I will tell you that my issue is not going to be the rights of foreign missionaries to proselytize overseas. Their converts right to carry on with their own beliefs in their own country, that's a different thing. I made that very clear that I was not going to be, I would not run an office that was about the right to proselytize overseas or focused on that, no matter what pressures came from the Hill. There is sort of a religious freedom cabal on the Hill. Some of them are people I really grew to have respect for because I eventually was up there briefing more than a little.

So I took the job. First of all it is a State Department office that runs on a congressional mandate based on the 1998 Religious Freedom Act. There is another bureaucratic creature called the United States Commission for International Religious Freedom known as USCIRF that exists, created by the same act of Congress. Very well funded by the Congress. They are not part of the Congress and they aren't part of the executive branch. They are like the Greek gods, sort of hovering above the fray in a nice office building behind Union Station. They have no constraints. They call it like they see it and they often have very fairly extreme and conservative takes on religious freedom. And their issues tend to be notional and ideologically driven, not based on an objective exercise like our International Religious Freedom Award.

We, in the State Department must factor in our human rights concerns with the concerns of real politick of bilateral diplomacy, of regional diplomacy, of strategic planning. To get our way with the regional bureaus we have a lot of filters and frankly, our greatest tool is we do an annual International religious freedom report and occasionally when there is the political will, we designate some countries as being of particular concern. Then sometimes we have a watch list of countries that are near the precipice and we use

that to sort of leverage it to get our diplomats to go out and talk about our issues and so forth. We use the bully pulpit.

USCIRF does a parallel thing. They have their own report but it is much less constrained by a template and not comprehensive; and they get very obsessive. Our State report reflects the professionalism of the political cone who of course do the reporting on the ground in each country where we have a mission. USCIRF are very obsessive. It is a not a representative organization. They appoint people; the president gets to appoint the people from different faith communities. They aren't representative. They are notional. They tend to emerge from situations where one senator makes a lot of noise. I've got an imam that is just great. He should be your Muslim representative. That's the way it goes.

My office, there was a cadre of civil servants in that office that has pretty much dissipated. I think I was the icebreaker. Some were evangelicals or Anglicans who didn't like the progressive social policies of the Episcopal Church. These two groups became a kind of conservative cabal within the office. They were very much for missionaries rights, very anti gay rights, very out of step with the Obama administration and with me and my priorities and with Mike Posner.

The year turned into a clash between GS and FS bureaucratic cultures. Then we got, to add to the fun, a special envoy to monitor and combat anti-Semitism who turned out to be a terrific and wise individual Hannah Rosenthal who is about to go back to Milwaukee which is where she is from. She is terrific and we supported her. But there was no Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom. In a real sense, I shouldered much of that load and Hannah was amazingly helpful on a far wider variety of issues than just anti-Semitism.

It was a strange year; it was a very strange year.

The most negative memory I have, it was over a strategic plan on gay rights and it was at a time when in Uganda, the Anglican Church was not only banning gays from communion, from several pulpits pastors were calling on people to go out and kill gays. To me this was very, very serious religious freedom concern and it just polarized the office. It galvanized us as a bureau because we are doing this strategy and the woman that was coordinating the strategy was gay, a very capable woman.

I have to admit, there were some liberals on my staff that were as pro gay rights as I am. It was one of those moments where you see sort of this how intolerant people on the left can be. My conservatives who were mostly lawyers by training by coincidence started drafting these fairly thoughtful papers on the subject. I didn't agree with them but they were very responsible in the way they carried their side of the debate. Representing values I totally disagreed with but then the people I agreed with were just hysterical and screaming and accusing me of being sort of an Uncle Tom, I guess. It was very unpleasant. The front office people agreed with my analysis of the office dynamics which was quite a relief. They disagreed with but respected the views of my conservatives and agreed with but abhorred the heavy breathing of my liberals, like me. Even with their

backing, the thing left an unpleasant taste in my mouth. The intolerant liberals never backed down or admitted that their tone was uncollegial, disrespectful and absolutely uncondusive to dialogue

When Hannah came aboard we started convening public round tables. One of the things about Hannah, she was one of the founders of the J Street lobby, the kind of alternative Jewish lobby. It is for Israel s continuation as a Zionist state but they are for a Palestinian state and they are very pro Palestinian rights. She never could have gotten confirmed if these special envoys were subject to confirmation because the lobby would have screamed. Every time the Anti Defamation League or one of these other AIPAC affiliated groups came into Washington, they'd want a briefing. We would convene them. She was great. Especially to the ADL

Q: Jewish Defense League.

KOVACH: No, Anti Defamation League. In the 50s when the civil rights movement heated up they were the backbone of white support for Dr. King. They absolutely saw Jewish civil rights as American citizens were contingent on everyone in the society getting their civil rights. What was just amazing about them is that she would give these, she was a trained rabbi by the way, so she d say the last thing I have to say and this is the bottom line Jewish rights in this country and Jewish freedom in this country are contingent on fighting Islamophobia and advocating for Muslim rights. That was another thing.

Reverend Moon, the Korean leader, some would say cult leader, very rich movement, allegedly if you read the press, K-CIA money behind it. They founded the Washington Times, as I recall. I don't think they own it anymore but the Reverend Moon's daughter and her husband, the latter a very polished Harvard law school graduate and she boasted a Harvard divinity certificate or degree. They came in. They had several evangelical ministers on their payroll, including Walter Fauntroy. He is in his 80s, is an ordained minister and he is clearly on their payroll. The problem with him is because he was also in the old structure, I believe he preceded Eleanor Holmes Norton on the Hill but in a slightly lesser status; he gets the courtesies of a former congressman. If you think high church ritual or high synagogue ritual or high mosque ritual is arcane, high congressional ritual trumps it all. As the congressman I briefed told me, if Walter Fauntroy comes knocking, we have to receive him. He will always be received and even if he is on the payroll of what some might dub a cult, we have to receive him.

Ms. Moon and her husband called on me in high dungeon about alleged actions of the Japanese government in respect to their followers.

Harmony is very highly valued in Japanese culture so when in this media age the sons and daughters typically of the newly urbanized Japanese join cults, which is kind of a temptation because it is such a conformist society and suddenly there is this new word and message, there is also a thriving industry of Japanese deprogrammers. Their modus is

sometimes to kidnap the cultist at the behest of the family and run them through, basically brainwash them and return them to standard Japanese values and their families.

The Moonies were claiming to me, this was their brief, that this was happening on a mass scale and with government support and complicity. Referring back to the most recent International Religious Freedom report, written by the political section of each embassy annually, there was at most one line on this deprogramming phenomena in the Japan report.

But we in my office saw it as our job to really ferret these allegations of scale out. I received Ms. Moon and spouse for two and a half hours and they had PowerPoint and my staff and I saw that there were just terrible flaws in the logic of the narrative. They had a couple of cases they'd keep harping on but then they'd project a slide with these horrendous numbers and allegations and the pictures even in the slides specifically depicting several alleged cases, they showed the same building over and over again. My staff agreed with my evaluation that we were just not seeing a problem of any scale demonstrated, we were polite as could be but it just wasn't there. There was no there there.

About a week later I get a summons from Congressman McGovern of Massachusetts, who is a very progressive, representative from south-central Massachusetts. His district runs from Worcester, my birthplace to Cape Cod. This wasn't a formal hearing but I persuaded my bureau front office that we should talk to them, so adamant were we about our doubts after sitting through their presentation. McGovern further was going to have people from the Lantos Commission (on human rights) there so I had to rehearse and go through a murder board where your colleagues pose kind of hostile questions to test your mettle under pressure.

I arrived on the Hill. Congressman McGovern wanted to see me personally without anyone else. In to his office I went. He said, 'What do you really think of these people? Forget your brief.'

We don't believe their brief.

Thank god. If you had come up here and supported them, it would have put me in a terrible position because we don't believe them either. We have to see them because of Walter Fauntroy. I am so relieved. So now let's go and talk to these people.

So I talked to McGovern and members and staff associated with the Lantos Commission for two hours and it was pretty clear almost no one was drinking the Moonie Kool Aid.

The last part of this chapter occurred in recent weeks. I got back from my retirement fill-in TDY in Pakistan August 17th (2012) and after three days of riotous celebration between the Muslim Eid and my birthday and the twins across the streets birthday and crazy socializing, the Kovach family piled in the car and went up to New England. I always go up the last ten days of August. I am in a parking lot of a Whole Foods about a

mile and a half from Harvard Square and we are stocking up to go up to this cottage I still own and I get to use for ten days a year. My wife kind of darts in to the store and I hang back in the car to make a few calls and I am sitting there making calls and in the car next to me appear Reverend Moon's daughter and husband. Two days later the Reverend died. It was so strange. The last people I wanted to say hi to was them. And I didn't.

Q: I got involved a little when I was consul general in Seoul in the late 70s just after the Jonestown business where cult people had killed themselves. Apparently, the Reverend Moon's wife probably got a visa based on false premise that she was a professional cook but she wasn't but had graduated. INS is in looking at it. There was too much political pressure and nothing particularly happened but there was quite a flurry at one point.

KOVACH: In that era they were sponsoring a lot of very responsible conferences on the environment and I had some friends who were International intellectuals that would regularly, they were on their circuit, one, a Yemeni who went to Fletcher with me and became a very close friend. He would go off to their conferences all the time. He was an amazing guy. He wrote Yemen's five year economic plans with regularity. As village headman he was in the parliament and then he'd go to these Moonie conferences and that was sort of his International platform. He is brilliant guy. I'd ask him, Who goes to these? He said, A lot of Fletcher people, a lot of people from the top grad schools.

Do you feel like a brain for hire?

He said, 'It gives me exposure.' It was the end of discussion so I asked no more questions.

Q: Peter, in this thing, what role did the evangelicals play? They represent it seems like a core of people with a core belief which goes beyond religion.

KOVACH: They were at the time I had this job, which was 2009 to 2010, a bit decimated because almost 30% of them voted for Obama. Not all of them were African Americans; people like Richard Cizik who is a major, I would say, soft evangelical intellectual leader. I suspect my friend, Chris Seiple who runs the Institute for Global Engagement and does all these incredible programs and exchanges with Muslim clerics up in Banu what is now called Khyber Pakhtunkhwa might have supported Obama too, from a remark he let slip in a casual conversation. In my time service in Pakistan and decades previous, it was called the Northwest Frontier province.

Another thing that was going on that year Chris and a Muslim leader either from the dawah or the tabligh which are the two Muslim equivalents of evangelicals, the people who organize to proselytize engaged in a strange conversation on a Georgetown University platform. They spoke as conservatives who proselytize; they had convened a table at Georgetown. I think it is still going on. The subject -- the ethics of proselytizing. I am not a great stalwart on those rights as said but I am thinking ethics in proselytizing? What is driving this and why are there only Christians and Muslims at this table? Others proselytize.

My suspicion is that this conversation is driven in reaction to Hindutva which is the ideological militancy of Hindus in the current day, not only in India but internationally. Adherents assert their rights to keep India free of proselytizing -- a practice that dates back centuries in India's active spiritual marketplace. In particular, they decry the depredations of Christians and Muslims and Buddhists (in that order) who dare to treat their untouchables as human beings and offer them incentives to convert like treating them as human beings, offering clinical health care and education.

In India where nothing is nailed down, the ultimate huckster society, in my view, and Indian intellectual friends of mine agree the third caste, the merchant caste has pretty much totally appropriated mainstream culture. I call it the banyanization of India. (Banyan is the standard rubric for that third, merchant caste.)

Frankly, I think they are driving this dialogue and they should be at the table. Talk about proselytizing. It is proselytizing with a price tag but it is the same thing. They should be at the table.

Q: They used to call them in China rice Christians.

How did you treat Mormonism? It s got certain elements, it s changed a bit but of intolerance, heavy proselytizing.

KOVACH: And shunning, if you leave.

We had no major issues with them. We could have, I suppose. I had a couple of Mormon staffers. I saw two elders of the church in my office during my tenure. They actually are quite supportive of a lot of religious freedom agenda, not just where when they are interested.

Where this evangelical thing really came to a head on my watch, was in Morocco, I had served in Morocco for four years. There were American evangelicals that were running schools and running orphanages. They all had social work visas but Morocco, under this king, had passed a fairly strong anti proselytization law. They decided to start enforcing the law. What the Moroccans did was this. When these people would go home to the States for Christmas or to visit family or whatever, the Moroccans wouldn't let them back in the country.

Again this split my office right down the middle between people that saw this as a freedom of religion issue. And those that didn't and I was one of the latter. This is not a freedom of religion issue. The Moroccans have every right to ban proselytizing in my view. It is an internal law; these people were there under false pretenses. They are the same people that were there in the late 80s during my tour there. Nothing changed. To me this was a lack of due process issue. These people were thrown out without a hearing. After all these people did educate and did run orphanages and did some stuff for the common good and to be unceremoniously thrown out was unconscionable. Worse, some

of their adoptive kids were not allowed to leave with the people that had raised them. That's gut wrenching.

I felt for them because of the way they had been thrown out after all those years but at the same time, I did not see this as a kind of religious freedom issue. My Assistant Secretary, Mike Posner, totally saw this my way. We summoned Moroccan Ambassador Mekouar, a great guy who is no longer in Washington, the Moroccan ambassador. We explained that these people have been thrown out of their, what had been a home in some cases over 25 years, with no due process. It has broken up families of adopted kids. This is no way to do business. Mekouar agreed and forwarded our complaints about lack of due process to his government. Meanwhile, my evangelicals were just seething because we weren't standing up for 'religious freedom.'

I always told that crowd in my office to wait. When it comes to the rights of people that have been converted or that are minority religions, we stand up for them. About two months later in the northeast of Morocco we had a report on a group of Christians. I have no idea how long they had been Moroccan Christians but it really did not matter in principle. The local governor was banging on them. We called Ambassador Mekouar in again and he said I know nothing about it but agreed with my assessment which my DRL front office supported that this was indeed a serious violation of the rights of a religious community. Serious. He was sort of in Mike's and my mindset. He agreed that was a problem and he took it up with the Palace. And strange to say, my Evangelical cadre could not see why I was so worked up over the violation of their rights as a religious minority. In their eyes, the American 'missionaries' posing as social workers in a country that forbade proselytizing was an issue, and the rights of existing ethnic Moroccan Christians seemed of little interest to them.

Q: I was consul general in Athens in the 70s and the Greeks were bad proselytizing.

KOVACH: Who was proselytizing? Evangelicals?

Q: Yes. I remember because a couple of Mormon elders came through and they were making the point they were not going to proselytize but they wanted to be able to have their people go to church which was fine as far as the Greeks were concerned but do not proselytize. So you didn't see the young guys going around on their bikes and doing this.

Right now we are going through a very difficult time in the Islamic world. There was a rather stupid sort of a movie which is designed to inflame, I guess but we've got mobs storming our embassies and ambassador to Tunisia and three of the staff members

KOVACH: Libya

Q: Libya were killed. I have explanations of why this. I have to say that I am somewhat out of this. I am quite willing to stand corrected. I have seen arguments that well, because of the greatness of the Islamic world, science, art, literature, the whole thing was there and today's youth seeing its past no longer accounting for much. I find the past

being a factor seems pretty remote for unemployed youths. What is causing this? The clergy, as I feel for very selfish reasons, can inflame mobs and get them to go and really put their lives and other people's lives in jeopardy to go out there on very, very flimsy excuses. Is it naiveté, is it the lack of maturity, what is it?

KOVACH: How would Christians react if someone made a film that depicted Jesus in the same way as this film?

Q: We had exhibits with Jesus soaked in urine. These things happen and they are minor things and it usually ends up in a protest meeting.

KOVACH: The prophet of Islam is a key figure and a human figure to Muslims. He is not the Son of God. He is no more divinity than anyone in this room. It is sensitive. I think where there is a naiveté is that many foreigners don't understand the freedom of Muslims or other folks of different stripes in this country is predicated on freedom of expression. I think the Obama administration has made a bloody mess of sticking up for that equity and saying the freedoms that you admire in America have the price of crazies getting into the media. This doesn't mean the government supports it. It doesn't mean the American people support it. There hasn't been a clear statement.

When the Danish cartoons came out, President Bush, W., made a clear and succinct statement. I was serving in Pakistan at the time and his wise and timely statement probably saved us from mobs surrounding the embassy. In contrast, the Government of Pakistan had to block off the neighborhood that hosted the three Scandinavian embassies for about three months.

I think there is a lot of historical baggage here. The Sunni Muslim world back on its heels for 5 or 600 years now since that golden age you referred to. The Shia world which is basically centered on Iran with large minorities in a few countries is beleaguered by the United States and Israel. We're fighting wars that make no sense, two of them in the last decade in the Muslim world. From a Muslim point of view I could see that there is a latent feeling that although they all want visas to come here, not all but many do, there is a feeling the United States is against them. When something like this happens, it is like putting a match to gas.

What distresses me is I haven't seen we take strong stands for freedom of expression. Part of our freedom package here in America is freedom of expression and occasionally that means that hurtful and offensive and insulting expression gets aired which does not mean it is condoned by the government or by the American people.

If the president would get out and say that, that would be great but this president seems to have a real little hole under the rock when anything controversial happens, he goes and hides. Then you have this awful controversy with Romney over what eventually emerged as the truth after the tragedy in Benghazi. The controversial film had aired in Libya literally the night before the Benghazi tragedy via an Egyptian satellite channel and in fact seems to have been the spark that pushed the hostile militias over the brink to attack

our under defended facility -- the latter circumstance the ultimate responsibility of people like Under Secretary Pat Kennedy and not Secretary Clinton. The way the Republicans including Romney gamed that, telling bare faced lies besmirched the tragic deaths of Chris and his colleagues. It is just disgraceful, the level of political discourse and the spinelessness of the current president.

Q: This little aside here points out the fact that all these issues are certainly not gone. One that is with us right now very heavily as of today s discussion and issues of similar nature, come up again and again.

KOVACH: The Catholic Church has taken up a lot of the air space in the last year.

Q: Why?

KOVACH: They have cast this Obamacare, as it is called and its alleged mandate to provide contraception insurance that would give women full services, in a negative light. They have made it a major issue because the Catholic Church probably employs several million people at all their hospitals, universities, etcetera and they don't feel as an institution they should be forced to provide insurance that covers a practice that is an anathema to the faith. They are casting this as a religious freedom issue.

I feel, yes, it is but they are sort of debunking religious freedom by making it such a hysterical issue. I believe there is a prevailing religious freedom issue here and it is the right of the individual woman, if we are going to have some kind of insurance mandate, to have full reproductive services covered. Even if an objecting ecclesiastic employer does not provide coverage.

It was very interesting because I am on the board of the Interfaith Conference of Greater Washington and the anguish over getting a statement out on this fell on me and a handful of my other colleagues on the board. The guy that is the Vatican representative, the only legitimate representative on the whole board of the Interfaith Conference because he is the only one appointed by his church, is all right. He is sort of a hard liner. He got my point; he absolutely got my point, that there is another religious freedom issue there but the Catholics collectively, got hysterical. Several other faiths were very sullen about it, I think including the LDS, the Mormons. In the final statement, something I didn't like at all, they said there is a religious freedom issue for the church here but there is a social justice issue for women and their right to have equal access to contraceptive services. I agreed with the substance of the statement but would have preferred that the individual woman's right to choose on contraception is on the ethical level a parallel religious freedom equity -- not just a 'social justice' issue. The Board rejected supporting the statement at any rate, dubbing it as too political.

I said I am sorry. The Catholic Church has defined this as a religious freedom issue. It is a religious freedom issue across the board, including the rights of each woman in the society to make her own choice and be able to draw on the program, so we had a little falling out with them. I am probably going to quit that board anyway.

Q: As soon as you get into religion or foreign policy, it can go on forever.

We have two students here, part of the American University, Washington Semester attending this.

KOVACH: Anyway, that was a very exciting year. It was like a rodeo and being on the bucking bronco, not quite knowing how to ride the horse. I am very, very happy I took that last job, as perverse as that may seem.

Q: So then you retired after that?

KOVACH: I retired after that. I took the job search program which is the golden handshake of the State Department. Because I decided to stay with the, I committed to a year with the religious freedom office, I couldn't get the second month where you essentially get paid to network and plan your life out. I could do all the activities, I just wasn't getting paid.

The search program is a very, very enlightened program, in my view. It covers psychological issues, transition issues, lifestyle, finances and it helps you get your resume together and sort of decide what you want to do. Do you even want to work? Do you want to be, which I have been doing part time at State, a rehired annuitant? Do you want to do nothing resembling work the rest of your life? There really are some interesting choices at this stage of life and I thought the course did a superb job.

Q: What course did you take?

KOVACH: I took the easy road. I rewrote my basic resume; I rewrote my academic resume because I did apply for academic jobs. Before I retired they'd wanted me to go out to Kazakhstan as the acting PAO because they had an ambassador there that was kind of in above her head. I said to SCA, no but please put me on your role. Bureaus have to ask you to come back and be on their role as a rehired annuitant so I accepted that not knowing if I would ever do it.

With full time work? I have been doing full time work for 30 years though I have to say as a young adult I had a good taste of being a freelancer. I had no full time work until I was 35 when I joined the Foreign Service. I'd taught school, was on TV, did a lot of interesting stuff, laid flagstone patios, waited on tables, picked grapes, mowed fields, shoveled snow. I worked on the docks in San Francisco as a stevedore. But I had no career until I was 35.

Basically I would say I have applied in the two years, for eight full time jobs, very selectively. Academic jobs, being the head of International education at this and that school. There was a chaired professorship, a professorship at Simmons College in Boston that had my name written on it and I am convinced they were interested in me. They liked the stuff I put forward. If I had either been an ambassador and had the title or had

finished my PhD which I stupidly did not do, I would have been hired for that. They just needed that little bobble. I probably would have uprooted to my home town, Boston but not sold my property in DC, just to keep my options open.

I was one of two finalists to be the head of the Fulbright commission in Romania which is one of the places I did go as a 'while actually employed', rehired annuitant. In the end at the last Skype interview, I hinted that I didn't think I was the best fit for the job. They took the hint.

The DRL religious freedom job was great. While I have studied Buddhism as a personal path for 46 years, I don't convert. Conversion is not in my vocabulary. I kind of embrace different truths. If I am invited to worship with welcoming human beings, I will take an interest in their rituals and the myths that underlie them and their ethics and so forth. I am poly religious. I am also there is a great potential in religion to build bridges rather than erect barriers. I have gotten involved in these organizations within the great faith communities that do that. As the great 19th Century German Indologist, Max Muller said, 'If you only know one religion, you know none.'

Now at GMU I am going to be teaching second semester.

Q: George Mason University.

KOVACH: I am a senior adviser for the Center for World Religion, Diplomacy and Conflict Resolution, led by a brilliant scholar Marc Gopin whose theory, theoretical framework is really smart. He is open-minded. I am feeling really good about that.

Q: What were you doing in Pakistan?

KOVACH: I was in Lahore which is the jewel of South Asia. If you like South Asian food, it is like Mecca or Rome or Boston. It is the foodie capital of the region and it is a beautiful green city with beautiful Mogul gardens, incredible Anglo Mogul architecture and kind of real solid middle class and upper middle class, and a little decadent. But they also have terrorists and terrorist cells there. One of the problems with Pakistan when I was the Counselor for public affairs, Pakistanis would in a very conventional and ritual manner say, oh, Peter, those crazies in Northwest Frontier Province are ruining the country. We knew, however, that they had what we would call terrorist training cells and centers in Lahore and Punjab which is the majority state and that much of the establishment is in denial on that score.

Q: What were you doing?

KOVACH: I was the cultural attaché.

Q: What did the cultural attaché do there?

KOVACH: Ran incredibly well funded programs, made connections.

One of the things I was brought out to do was kind of get an interfaith table going because Pakistan did not do well in my old office's report at all this year and it is conceivable they would be designated a country of particular concern without substantial improvement. USCIRF who doesn't have to pull punches has so designated them so there is a lot of pressure programmatically for the consulate in Lahore and the embassy to sort of support people in convening an interfaith table so I basically helped pull this together, tweaked people in my contact networks to bring them together. We ran huge exchange programs, International Visitor Leadership programs, youth exchange programs, the largest student Fulbright program in the world (which I had negotiated into existence as the PAO 7 years prior).

Q: How did the fact that Pakistan has practically been put on our extreme care list or whatever you want to call it regarding terrorism, deal with exchanges? I mean, the Pakistan is from most accounts riddled with people that would like to blow us up.

KOVACH: I don't think it is riddled with people like that. I think there is a lot of anti Americanism. Our popularity base is about 8% now and falling. There are people with nuanced views. That's the majority. They understand we stand for some things they would like to see in their own country.

I think the 'Foreign Policy' blog right after I got there ran a really good piece called, 'Don't Forget Pakistan's Liberals'. There is a middle class and it is a strong middle class and there is an upper middle class that are pretty pro Western in their values. They all hate drone attacks, however. Drone attacks aren't winning us any great friends.

And almost everyone would gladly accept a visa and one way ticket to live in the U.S. So we're dealing with complex ambivalence here, not unmitigated hate.

Q: These are unmanned airplanes that are flying over the northwest provinces and targeting houses where there are alleged or for the most part are people who are running Taliban and al Qaeda attacks against American troops in Afghanistan.

KOVACH: Yes.

Also we are bringing a lot of musical groups through with American musicians jamming with Pakistani musicians and so forth.

What has been alarming the last half year is that people that cooperate with our cultural programs are being harassed, including some people coming back from the exchange programs, by the ISI.

Q: This is the intelligence service which is considered to be the Pakistani army intelligence service, which is considered to be not a friendly power.

KOVACH: They basically hew to the maxim that the Taliban is Pakistan's pawn on the chess board of the great game of the region and counter Indian and Iranian influence on the northwestern flank that includes Afghanistan but with due paranoia about Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Baluchistan.

There is a whole generation of psy-op and other American influencers both overt and covert who basically cut their teeth on the alliance that we bought and paid for in the 80s to rout the Soviets out of Afghanistan. Adding insult to injury, we enticed the Saudis to pay for much of that effort giving them a channel to export their hateful Wahabi doctrine to a large network of madrassas throughout the country to this day.

Pakistanis don't let us forget that. They also don't let us forget the self righteous finger wagging that the Clinton administration particularly engaged in. India got nuclear weapons and it didn't seem we missed too many beats in that relationship. Pakistan did and we practically cut them off. We have not done well by Pakistan by any objective measure. Now things are getting bad so you are getting in the blogosphere in the last couple of weeks in particular, more and more cries for basically cutting Pakistan, cutting aid across the board and cutting programs and just keeping up strategic cooperation. It is a very complex and troubled relationship.

Q: Peter, are there other things you want to talk about?

KOVACH: Before Pakistan there was Turkey where I filled in as acting PAO as a WAE-rehired annuitant. I love Istanbul and to me it was a great indulgence to live in Istanbul on your taxpayer dollar and to serve as acting public affairs officer. Professionally, it wasn't terribly satisfying, I have to say. My presence was based around providing a full staff complement for two impending big visits. One was an AF-PAK conference that the Secretary was supposed to attend but then her mother died the eve of the conference so she didn't attend. It all worked well and our public diplomacy section did a good job.

Where things got a little screwy was during the second big visit. Vice President Biden came out. He came to kick off one of Secretary Clinton's patented entrepreneurial summits. One of the hallmarks of Clinton diplomacy is understanding that business can transcend barriers and business can also be, if there is room for young entrepreneurs or very poor people with an idea to sort of capitalize it and grow it, this is going to lead to stability and more peace and less radicalization. For a democratic administration, Romney and Ryan ought to pay a little attention to that because it seems to be right out of their playbook. It has really worked well so this was a conference that entrepreneurs from the whole Mediterranean basin, Eastern Europe, Middle East, North Africa, Turkey, the host came together. There were even Israelis and Iranians.

VP Biden came to kick the event off but all did not go well. The State Department now for big visits sends out what I call a green eyeshade type, kind of an accountant type to monitor staff deployment in support of big visits. The person they sent out, I don't blame him at all, I just blame the whole function, seemed to have instructions to really restrict the overtime expended and the advance team for the vice president, these are often

political types, people who worked on the campaign and aren't working in government who come out just for per diem and free travel to enjoy glamorous as Istanbul -- oh yes and to work the visit at their convenience. During the day they don't want to have meetings. They want to tour and shop. The meetings with the Turks have to be during the day because of a normal bureaucratic work schedule. But the countdown meetings in house are at night and they don't want to pay for overtime so what happens is our FSNs, our foreign service nationals, our locally engaged staff are just so out of sync because they aren't in on all the meetings, we aren't getting their advice. Or their well established network connections with the Turkish security people.

What happened in the end was this. The Vice President kicked off the Summit in a huge convention center in Istanbul. The main hall the venue of the vice president's speech seats 3,000. As we discovered to our mutual horror with the Turks after the event, there was no armed security present because in the end the Turks thought the U.S. Secret Service was covering it and we thought they were doing it. There was security in the building, the normal building security but there was no VIP package, essentially. The vice president had his detail but there was no coordination and they weren't armed at the event.

It went well. The most inspiring part of the whole show was a youth summit. You had these young entrepreneurs with little exhibits. I found that so moving. I spent two hours with them once my part of the event was launched.

The other thing that was frustrating was it fell to me to arrange interviews of the entourage of State Department special envoys which have really proliferated in this administration and a lot of them just weren't up on their brief. They had no talking points. They wanted to say things the journalists had no interest in hearing. We had given them a pre brief and it just seemed to go in one ear and out the other. It was distressing. The event overall went well despite the flirtations with disaster on these two scores.

The vice president very typically and this was on the eve of an election year, spent a lot of time with the Greek patriarch who is one of the most special holy men in the world, I will say. He is known as the 'green' patriarch and he was talking green before any other major clerical leader of any faith was talking green.

I want to make a point about the relationship between consul general cities where we have large consulates where the consulate city in many ways is far more important in the country than the capital. Turkey is probably the best example in the world, Vietnam being a close second.

That consulate general is under such pressure. It is like having New York and LA kind of married and combined and coming at you all the time with opportunities, with demands and opportunities. Our FSNs in Istanbul have a bit of a bad reputation. I don't think it is deserved. To just be working in the blast of a fire hose all those weeks a year, it just never stops.

Luckily, we have a great ambassador there, Frank Ricciardone who is one of my favorites who operates at a fire hose pace and he is able very quickly to separate the wheat from the chaff and he is very responsive to our attempts to do so in Istanbul. It is a fairly troubled embassy/consulate relationship structurally. Let me leave Turkey at that.

My previous gig, my longest was in Romania as cultural attaché. It is a real corrupt, former Soviet society. They had a referendum this summer; I never found out what happened. I suspect the president got enough people in his party not to vote. The referendum wasn't binding unless 50% voted. It is a very sad and corrupt place. Wonderful people, creative, artistic with wonderful national mythology, claim to be descendents of the Dacians who were some kind of an offshoot of the Roman Empire and then you've got a lot of Hapsburg, German, Hungarian Catholic, Protestant, Jewish mix in there. I have roots there so to me it was just the most delightful place. It was after a whole career in the Middle East and East Asia kind of dancing my own waltz without a sense of personal roots. I had a wonderful time.

One of the many wonderful cultural events, we had a Fulbrighter in Romania, a Jewish guy up in Iasi where the worst massacre perpetrated by the Iron Guard had taken place during the war and there was a Moldovan Fulbrighter too. Both were studying Klezmer and so they put on a Klezmer festival in Bucharest. That evening was so much fun.

Q: (Speaking to the students) Do you ladies know what Klezmer is? It is Jewish Central European music. And heavy on clarinets. There is a bit of gypsy mixed in there. Get some records; Klezmer.

KOVACH: If you go to New York on the radio they play it a lot. Fiddler on the Roof had sort of a Klezmer sound track. It is kind of semi pop, actually. Ethnic pop.

I found my grandfather's grave. For the three cousins in my generation that grew up in Timisoara, he was their favorite uncle when they were growing up. I never knew this man. No one knew where he died. There were all these theories. He died in the 50s because I remember my father sending him care packages, tobacco, toiletries, when I was in the toddler to early grade school years. I found his grave and it was really great. It was a very happy moment for me. On another level, as exciting; I was going to Timisoara to do some public speaking and visit our American Corner there.

American Corners are these new sort of Christian Science reading room size installations where we put a basic collection of Americana out. We dedicate four or five computers with connections to LexisNexis with other American data bases and we get the hosting institution to provide a program space to host speakers that we bring by.

In Timisoara I was giving some lectures at the university on inter faith relations and conflict resolution. I went to call on the government official that managed the larger library that also hosts the Corner. For the first time in my career a new thing happened. He whipped out a bottle of scotch and pours me a scotch. I had never been offered a

scotch in a business meeting, and at mid-day no less; I've probably spent too much time in the Muslim world.

So we down our scotch and have a very cordial talk. At the conclusion, he handed me an envelope. He said, 'These are your tickets for tomorrow night.'

I said, 'What s happening tomorrow night?'

'You don't know?' he replied.

One of the things when I came to Romania, I asked the embassy, I said, 'Look, I will certainly talk about my ties to the country.' I am proud of them but two of my Romanian cousins are the only famous people in my family. One is a Hollywood director whom I talked about earlier. The more famous one was the director of the Vienna opera for 20 years. For a guy who identifies publicly and deliberately as a Jew who came from nowhere to have this job is notable. The New York Times did a huge write up on him a couple of years after he dug in there, around 1994 if I recall correctly, and he basically has kicked the doors in for every Romanian opera star that is anywhere in Western Europe. He is a local hero. His Romanian is better than his German. They were having a tribute to him. He was coming home. I had no idea. And while I'd met his Mom, my aunt, I'd never met Ioan Holender. So I suddenly receive this ticket to this gala. I was seated with a slew of these local people who knew my family. It was amazing.

It is very warm; the cardinal of the Church was there and the governor of the province, Banat, was there too. There is music and his kids played some. I had about ten minutes with him afterwards. He is sort of a jerk, an egotistical jerk. For me it was quite an evening.

Then the next day I actually found my grandfather's grave -- thanks to communist record keeping and computers. My relatives were all saying he died somewhere in Hungary in a town called Tata where we seemed to have had family at one point. I later found out that that family had been deported and presumably exterminated by the Nazi killing machine. My memories dating back to early primary school years was of my father talking about his father in Timisoara. That was just amazing.

Romania was like a romance, sort of a narcissistic romance. It was almost like going back to Boston. My wife and son are so sick of coming back to Boston and enduring my stories of past action on every corner of the town.

We had a very good political ambassador, a guy who had been Biden s chief of staff in the Senate. I will say one thing about Joe Biden; whatever you think about him politically or you think about his personality, he surrounds himself with bright people whom he listens to. I have to say, having been in public life, that's a rare quality. This guy was just so good at being ambassador. He had roots in Jewish Romania too. It was just a joy to work with him.

He did the most spectacular July 4th party you will ever see. Huge backyard in his residence and he believed in doing the party around a theme so every year it was a favorite state. 'My' year, the theme was Hawaii so he had, the GSO actually built a volcano in the back yard. It spewed streamers and colored smoke on manipulating different controls. We had McDonald s, Burger King, and Kentucky Fried contributing by dispensing American junk food at booths in the garden. We had a rock band led by a charismatic Romanian American Romanian lawyer. He was part of a bunch of Romanian American professionals that have come back to Bucharest and married Romanian women. 2,500 guests. The President and the Prime Minister, no great political allies, both came. This was pretty amazing.

Then we had a communicator in the embassy whose wife was Polynesian and whose kids knew hula so they did a genuine hula, not a lousy imitation of a grade B film. The whole thing was amazing.

We had great projects going. We were about to move to a new chancery. Thank God I didn't see that move. The public affairs section and the embassy were located in this old Bucharest neighborhood in a classy old mansion. So beautiful. I left in it's last weeks of long existence as our cultural center.

Q: Was there any mention made there of adoption of children? I know early on when Romania first opened up there was a tremendous surge of all sorts of problems but also there was a great need for adoptions. Ceausescu had practically forced women to have children and then kind of left them.

KOVACH: That was still going on. As a matter of fact a couple of people in the embassy had Romanian kids. We are sensitive to that because our son is adopted. It was going on. It was under control, it wasn't rampant. There weren't people end running the rules and we were I think, the consulate was being a good supportive player balancing the rules against human interest.

One of the things I felt I had to explore was the hype versus the reality of the historical Count Dracula. The Romanians play up the Bram Stoker myth as a way to draw tourists. I really got into it. I visited his birth house in Sighisoara. I visited Brashov, which is this incredibly beautiful Germanic city. It is by a cliff, maybe 100 kilometers north of Bucharest. It is where apparently Vlad the Impaler (Count Dracula) strung up 40 German businessmen, impaled them and put on a steak dinner while he and his guests watched them slowly die. I should point out that the Saxons that built Brashov did not allow ethnic Romanians inside the walls for a long time. Vlad was in historical fact, a great Romanian patriot. He was equally harsh with other groups that crossed ethnic Romanians including the Ottomans-remarkable because he studied in Istanbul and spoke Turkish.

Do you know anything about impaling?

Q: It is one of those specialties of particularly Central Europe.

KOVACH: You die slowly. It wasn't like he was the only one impaling -- it was an accepted 'art form' so to speak, but he apparently really enjoyed it.

First of all, Dracula means I think the dragon and his father was this kind of German knight. He was Romanian but he had been knighted by the Saxons and that's where the title came from, Count Dracula. Vlad as said was educated in Istanbul, spoke Turkish. Romanians are now are less besieged by Turks or other Muslims -- so that's a bit of a dissipated narrative. The Ottoman Empire on the eastern flank, Germans coming in, Hungarians on the north were dominant in his day and the Romanians were the peasantry. He is celebrated in the beautiful but vastly over-commercialized Bran Castle not too far from Brashov, despite historical evidence that seems to demonstrate that he spent one or two nights of his life at the most there.

The exhibits are great, partially tongue in cheek. With a very good room on the filmography of Dracula. They missed the great Verner Herzog rendition in the exhibit which I found a bit strange.

The Romanians are playing songs to Dracula with gypsy violins because it brings them tourism.

Q: I went there during Communist times when I was in Yugoslavia to a village, a tourist village but where all the different styles of peasant life were portrayed.

KOVACH: Romania, at the time I was there in 2011 was in the throes of post-Communist reality. I have never served in a post Soviet country but both Romania and Tajikistan which were my first gigs as a rehired annuitant were post Soviet societies. What happens is you get a lot of ex apparatchiks and so forth that take over in these semi democratic societies. Basically it is all about the rules. There is no guiding principle assuming you accept that Marxism is a guiding principle that has some integrity and so you have rules and you have people using rules as a hammer over everyone else's head to sort of extract bribes. It is so unimaginably corrupt. I felt naive.

Tajikistan, my first such tour -- oh what a magic central Asian world. I had written in Berkley when I was a grad intern a 50 page paper on the dissemination of Buddhism on the Silk Road and how economics in support of an unproductive monastic order kind of went hand and hand and determined the geographic trajectory of the spread. I never dreamed I would get to Central Asia. It was like a fairytale.

Tajikistan, first of all, is the most mountainous country in the world, more mountainous than Switzerland. There was a Swiss geographer in town doing some kind of academic work that assured me that was true. Just a magic world. Dreadfully poor on one hand. I was right by, a cafe were the young drug dealers hung out and I saw models of Mercedes and BMWs I had never seen or imagined they were so new just parked and this in turn was a block from the presidential palace.

We're there. We are major donors. There are about five major donors, not including the Aga Kahn Foundation and one of the nice things is we had sector meetings so people donating in the health sector would get together and we would show each other grant proposals. It was partially to make sure the same Tajiks weren't picking our pockets for the same projects. What this practice generated on the downside was an awful kind of group think. We were giving donations to NGOs run by the old Soviet apparatchiks, who won the civil war. They had a civil war in the period after the Soviet Union ended and basically the people concentrated in the southwest of the country won over more northern, more conservative tribal areas. The civil war is not over. Right now there is a prosperity coasting on very thin ice kind fueled by drugs going out of Afghanistan, guns going into Afghanistan. The Afghan war is just a huge overspill with great benefits for criminality and government officials on the take. It's going to end.

We have American Corners all over the country. You have in the east the Pamir Mountains the Ismaili, the people that follow the Aga Kahn, progressive, educated, public spirited. These people are a real advertisement for Islam. In the rest of the country you have these sort of southern towns, fairly secular and the northern Fergana Valley running through the northern part of the country and the northeast western part that are I would say Islamist but the prevailing authorities are more inclined to see religion as a threat even though it is a Muslim country.

There is a new emerging middle class. There are people that are first generation educated and these are the people I know through our Corners; Corners that were doing great outreach to them. None of our grants were going to these kids, however. In the Dushanbe Corner I lectured three or four times on things I supposedly know something about. I would see these more conservative kids, women who covered, guys with beards and I would go out of my way to talk to them. Glad for the attention, they would tell me that no one pays attention to us. They laid it right out in a series of conversations. We don't have the grant writing skills. We cannot compete but you have got to pay attention to us because we are the reality here; we are emerging, we are educated now.

I promised the ambassador I would write him a memo at the end of my tenure and I did. He got a lot more than he bargained for. I said our programs are misguided, mistargeted, that you don't want to completely throw away the elites but there is a new class emerging and you need to do grant writing workshops for them. You need to be studying their civil society infrastructure and granting those organizations money even if the rest of the donors community don't go along with us.

Our locally engaged staff, I think the last three people we hired were Ismaili because they are so well educated and modern in outlook. It is sort of like in Jordan. We had such a disproportionate portion of Christian staff in a 92% Muslim country.

There was one young political officer who was really so smart and he totally got it and he and I became co conspirators. He spoke Russian. I understand some Persian. The Tajik language is a kissing cousin of Persian. It is the only one of those Stans that doesn't speak a Turkic language. Their historical narratives are so absurd because according to their

neighbors in Iran, none of it happened. There is a lot of Uzbek population in Dushanbe. The Iranians just laugh at their myths. These are myths that go back a 1,000 years. It is such a sad place but what a wonderful society.

On weekends we'd get these groups together and we'd do a lot of hiking. They were mixed groups of Tajiks, mostly from these good families, internationals of different kinds. I had Iranian friends there too, including one of my two closet friends.

About three quarters through my stay we had a talk about religion. She intimated to me that she was Catholic. I knew she was the daughter of a general. I wanted to go to mass to drink in the scene and she took me to mass. There were 5 or 6 converts there, including an organ player, it was so bizarre.

We had these incredible hikes and this wonderful Swiss guy, geographer, architect was part of the mix of friends on these hikes. He designed structures to withstand earthquakes; that was his kind of bag. He was Swiss but he was a bagpiper. He would hike up these mountains, incredible trails. The valley floor was maybe 7,000 feet. The air was pretty thin and at the top of the mountain he would regale us with his bagpipes. He married my Iranian friend.

Then these cafes in Dushanbe and oh, the drinking. Drinking Georgian red wine, which if you are a red wine drinker, is to die for. Having these delicious Central Asian foods for practically nothing. It was like a fairytale. The main street, this is a society that loves its poets, named it's tree lined center strip main boulevard after Rudaki who was an iconic Tajik poet.

I have had wonderful adventures. What a career. Centered around making human connection, and making it a smaller world while absolutely celebrating the differences and uniqueness of each place and people at the same time.

Q: I think this is a good place to stop.

KOVACH: Yes.

End of interview