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AMBASSADOR JOHN LIMBERT

*Interviewed by: Mark Tauber
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INTERVIEW

Q: Okay. Today is September 13, 2022, and this is our interview with John Limbert, Ambassador John Limbert, on his experience with the American Foreign Service Association.

John, just as a quick background, when did you join the Foreign Service?

LIMBERT: I joined, Mark, in 1973.

Q: Okay.

LIMBERT: I think I joined AFSA either then or very shortly afterwards. I have been a member for a very long time.

Q: I always ask my interviewees how did you first hear about AFSA and what were your initial thoughts about it?

LIMBERT: I honestly don't remember, but I remember hearing about it when I came into the Foreign Service. I don't remember there being one of our famous recruiting lunches, although I must say a lot of what happened in the A-100 class was a blur at that time. So much was being thrown at us, though there must have been something about AFSA. I don't know when the recruiting lunches started, but we did these not for not only the new State officers but for specialists and people from the brother agencies. But I can't remember having anything like that when I was going through A-100.

Q: Sure. Now, organizationally of course, the American Foreign Service Association went through many changes prior to your arrival following the Foreign Service Act of 1980, and ultimately becoming not just a professional association but also a union that represented initially Foreign Service officers from State, but eventually bringing in all of the other foreign affairs agencies, USAID (United States Agency for International Development), Foreign Commercial Service, Foreign Agricultural Service. I hope I'm not missing any.

LIMBERT: Agricultural Service.

Q: Right, right.

LIMBERT: You know, U.S. Voice of America, USIA (United States Information Agency). And I think even part of the Public Health Service.

Q: Oh, interesting, I hadn't, yeah, I hadn't seen that.

LIMBERT: And very small components, but they were there.

Q: Mm-hm. And of course, over time USIA becomes integrated into State Department and, you know, the other agencies change as well over time. But I just wanted to sort of set that context as we approach your time as a leader in the American Foreign Service Association. Prior to you becoming president in 2003, were you a representative of AFSA at any of the foreign posts?

LIMBERT: I don't think so. I may have been briefly in Saudi Arabia in the late seventies, but the memory is vague, and I can't remember having a very active chapter there.

Q: Sure.

LIMBERT: But other than that no.

Q: And then, of course, as the years go by, do you recall specific milestones that kind of got your attention that AFSA accomplished?

LIMBERT: You know, it's interesting. Before I became president, I had not been terribly active in AFSA. I'd been a long-term member. They had helped me with some personnel issues, and they had done that very professionally. But no, I mean, just following. And as I, how can I say this, as I progressed through the Foreign Service it became clear just how important these activities were. I mean, when you're at the bottom it's one thing, in the middle another, and then when you start to get into serious management and you're responsible for the lives and safety and health of people, what AFSA does becomes not just nice but vital to our mission.

Q: Well, then all right, moving along to the runup to your election as president, who convinced you to run, or what convinced you to run?

LIMBERT: (Laughs) Again, I think it goes back to my leaving an overseas post. I wanted to come back to Washington and just temperamentally I'm not very suited to many of the jobs at main State. It just isn't me. I've had a very nice career avoiding those kinds of jobs. Before, when I was in Washington, I had worked at FSI (Foreign Service Institute). And with my own academic background sat with that very well.

But talking to people who worked there, seeing what they did, I said that didn't—you know, being a deputy assistant secretary for somebody or an office director somewhere and working until 8:30 every night on unsolvable problems didn't appeal, not after having had some tough assignments overseas, including a few months in Iraq back in 2003. And as I mentioned, what AFSA was doing was becoming more and more important in the service. It very much corresponded to what Colin Powell, the secretary at the time, wanted to do in terms of, "support the troops". I mean, he represented the best of what the military had to offer -- how do you support the troops and what could we do in that area. In that arena, in my experience the State Department had never done very well, never distinguished itself. And part of it is our own culture. Nobody imposes this on us. It's us, the enemy is us, and it's our own culture, and I certainly found that out when I was president of AFSA. The Foreign Service doesn't put much importance on the need for community and collective action and mutual assistance. And AFSA seemed to be the way to go. So, coming back I said, Okay, let me try this. The president before me was John Naland.

Q: Yes, and Louise Crane, I believe, because you couldn't arrive at the time that you were supposed to take office because you were—you had that brief, temporary duty in Iraq.

LIMBERT: That's right. I'd been to Iraq, then I had to go back, went back to my assignment, to Mauritania, finished up there just in time for there to be a coup. And so it took a while to get out of there. But I think John had been president and then Louise was vice president for State. She had been acting in that interim.

Q: Yeah. Now, one last question of preparation before we go into your presidency, as you look back, what were the most important skills and talents you acquired? And I say this because some people who became president or vice president for one of the agencies had background in negotiation, some even had been labor officers and sort of knew what the dynamics were of dealing with management.

LIMBERT: I'm sorry, could you repeat the question?

Q: Okay, yeah. So, as you look back immediately prior to your presidency, what skills or talents do you think were the most important for you to be an effective AFSA president?

LIMBERT: I did not have a specific background in negotiation beyond having taken the famous Harvard negotiation class with Roger Fisher back in the nineties. And obviously our work representing our country is negotiating all the time. I did not have the specifics, such as labor- management negotiation, or the legal training which some people have. Those would be very useful. What I did have, and something that had become ingrained and had gotten much stronger over my last couple of assignments was this sense of responsibility for taking care of our people.

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

LIMBERT: And that's what really attracted me to AFSA. That is what I saw as the big mission.

Q: Right. So, you arrive in the fall of 2003 to take up your responsibilities, and before we get into the actual activities and accomplishments, I wanted to start with the different kinds of outreach that you did. Because it seems like so much of the foundation of how you accomplished various achievements. In your previous discussions in your oral history and so on, you mention that as you arrived the American Foreign Service Association was at its highest membership in its history with roughly 75 percent of all Foreign Service officers, members, and of course, adding to that retirees, some 13,000 people in the organization. And I wanted to just mention that as context because you're going in at a moment that's a bit of a highwater mark for the membership. Now, the other thing is, also as you go in, the Foreign Service Association, American Foreign Service Association came out with a new edition of the book that describes what happens in an embassy and so on, and I wanted to ask you what you thought of that, how effective it was, you know, what you heard from people about that element of outreach.

LIMBERT: I think that account was an initiative that goes way back. We used that, I remember, when I was head of orientation at FSI back in the early nineties. We used that book in our training programs to show people, both specialists and officers, what they were getting into. It wasn't perfect. There were some stereotypes in there that rubbed a lot of people the wrong way, maybe because they were true. (Both laugh)

Q: Well, one other thing about the—

LIMBERT: I can remember particularly one about many communications people, I forget what we call them now, being married to Asian ladies. Somebody forced us to take that out. (Laughing) But you know, the fact that it was true, didn't matter. And of course the political officer was portrayed as something of a self-satisfied jerk. (Both laugh) But other than that, you know, *Day in the Life*, I think it was called, gave people an idea what they were in for.

Q: Yeah, correct.

LIMBERT: I think it now called *Inside an Embassy*. It's very useful. And for those who think that this is a glamorous career and that you're doing nothing but attending high toned cocktail parties and opera openings, it's an eye opener. It's also an eye-opener for people who think that they're going to be doing high policy all the time, and advising the secretary of state about, for example, what he should do about the Middle East or Latin America.

Q: Right.

LIMBERT: It's an eye opener, so very helpful. Yeah, no, it's a great piece of work. I think Shawn Dorman has picked it up.

Q: Yes, exactly.

LIMBERT: And kept it going and all tributes to her.

Q: Yeah. You mentioned that there were a couple of flaws in it. A revised version came out in 2005 just as you were leaving office, and I—of course, between 2003 and 2005, one of the biggest changes they needed to reflect was Iraq and Afghanistan, and what is now going on in embassies in conflict areas.

LIMBERT: That's right. I mean, nobody predicted what would happen there. What's the old Monty Python skit about nobody expecting the Spanish Inquisition?

Q: Right.

LIMBERT: Nobody expected Iraq. I was there at the beginning, and it was a screw up from the beginning and went from a screw up to a worse screw up. And our people, I must say, I respect our people. made the best of it, which is one of the strongest Foreign Service traditions. You're asked or ordered to go into situations that are dangerous, difficult, and impossible without any resources, and ninety-nine out of a hundred times people salute, and they do it.

Q: Right, right.

LIMBERT: And I say you're asked, but in our culture, when you're asked to do something, it's not a question.

Q: Right, right.

LIMBERT: Unlike the military—it's our biggest difference from the military. We're a little bit more polite than the military.

Q: Right, right. I mentioned the 2005 revision because I wondered if they called on you to edit or provide any advice or insights as they were getting ready for publishing.

LIMBERT: I don't think so. At the end of my service at AFSA I got pulled away again to do a stint in Sudan as temporary chargé affairs, so the timing might not have been fright. When I came back in September 2005, I went right to my next assignment.

Q: All right. Let's then follow you in. At the beginning of your tenure, you did speak to a number of congressional staff. I'm recalling now one who was aide to Senator Frist, now retired, who went into (crosstalk/indiscernible) and do you recall that?

LIMBERT: Oh, I still do. I recall that very vividly, that son of a bitch. (Laughs)

Q: And I ask you because—

LIMBERT: He started telling me about how we Foreign Service people had such a cushy life.

Q: Yeah, yeah. And you responded at least with your experience, which was anything but cushy.

LIMBERT: Well, exactly, exactly.

Q: Including, you know, as you mentioned, concluding a tour as ambassador to Mauritania just as a coup was about to happen.

LIMBERT: Well, the coup did happen at the end. But I don't think there were many posts or assignments I had that would qualify as cushy.

Q: Sure.

LIMBERT: And when some jerk says this, you know, some staffer or somebody says that, maybe I took offense too easily, but I did take that personally, I confess.

Q: You know, and the thing that astonished me, you mentioned this one in particular as standing out, but the thing that astonished me is that, you know, these youngish congressional staffers didn't even take account of the fact that you were one of the hostages in Iran.

LIMBERT: No, no. That was yesterday's news, I guess, or these guys never read history. I mean, nobody studies history anymore.

Q: Right.

LIMBERT: So, they put that aside. But I mean, in fairness a lot of the people we dealt with were very good, and a lot of the congressional people, both members and staff people, were very helpful. But this guy, this one particular one stands out. Some people had the theory, although I don't have any evidence of this, that some of these staffers were people who had failed the Foreign Service exam and were carrying grudges.

Q: Yeah, yeah, interesting.

LIMBERT: But what do I know?

Q: In your presidential statements that go into the Foreign Service Journal each month, one thing I saw was your generosity of compliment and holding up all the different people, all the different aspects of the Foreign Service as important and the contributions they provided. Nevertheless, you also referred to your first year as the year of the scapegoat, and I wondered if you could elaborate on that.

LIMBERT: You know, I do remember that vaguely, but what were we talking—do you remember the reference?

Q: Yeah, it was as State Department had to begin filling positions in Iraq—

LIMBERT: Ah, okay.

Q: —and people, and some officers were hesitant or, you know, the bureaucracy, State Department bureaucracy itself was relatively slow in being able to quickly ramp up because you know, as a small organization they have to manage the float, they have to look at where they can take people away, the old expression the Iraq tax, you know, posts all over the world were told you're going to have to part with someone in your section and send them to Iraq. And you know, it was a relatively slow start by the State Department and right-wing media and eventually even centrist media began impugning the Foreign Service for being weak kneed or fearful of taking a serious assignment and so on, and within that year you had used that expression "the year of the scapegoat."

LIMBERT: Okay, yeah, I do remember that, and there were a couple of things that stood out. One was that things were not going well in Iraq. I mean, this imaginary road paved with roses was simply not happening. So, of course, there had to be a scapegoat for that.

Q: I see, mm-hm, yeah, yeah.

LIMBERT: The State Department was deliberately cut out of most of the planning and the execution. Colin Powell was just treated horribly. Cheney and Rumsfeld deliberately humiliated him. When we went in, we went in with nothing, and supposedly we were to help rebuild a country that had been looted while the U.S. military stood by and did nothing. I think, was it Rumsfeld or Cheney who said, Well, stuff happens. The idea that we made Foreign Service the scapegoat to me was just outrageous. And people were going.

Q: Yeah.

LIMBERT: And people were getting killed.

Q: Yeah, yeah.

LIMBERT: And shot at. And then, to turn around and make them the scapegoat.

There was another one. I don't remember if this came up in any of the things you read. It was Pat Robertson's comment about nuking the State Department.

Q: Yes.

LIMBERT: Now, that's sort of an odd category by itself, but that's the kind of thing you would encounter. And as I said, maybe I shouldn't have, but I sometimes took that personally.

Q: Yeah, no, of course. And you mentioned in your various statements and your full oral history, you know, Heritage Foundation, AEI (American Enterprise Institute), various others who are on the right of the political spectrum just began quoting each other until eventually newspapers like New York Times, Washington Post even began floating the remarks they made. Yeah, you definitely noted all of that.

LIMBERT: Well, I think of us like NATO, you know, an attack on one is an attack on all.

Q: Right, mm-hm.

LIMBERT: And for example, when they did a—when *Frontline* did a hatchet job on Barbara Bodine.

Q: Yeah.

LIMBERT: Again, I took that personally, because that's an attack on all of us.

Q: Sure.

LIMBERT: And the fact that the State Department would not stand up for her more strongly to me was more outrageous. I mean, idiots will do what idiots will do and that's what idiots do. But you can't blame an idiot for being an idiot. But for the people who were supposed to know better, to sit and do nothing, to me that was a dereliction of duty.

Q: Yeah, yeah. On the other hand, immediately before you arrived AFSA through a couple of very talented people created AFSA PAC, which was essentially the lobbying arm of the American Foreign Service Association. So, as you come into office how did you use that or how did your colleagues use that again, as part of outreach?

LIMBERT: I had to be careful with that because we had to build a firewall between that and the rest of AFSA because of Hatch Act considerations and other things. But I mean, it worked. We did have friends and people we could talk to, as I mentioned earlier. A lot of people we talked to were very good, on both sides of the aisle. I mean, poor Senator Lugar, he was trying to get some attention (laughs/indiscernible) in his own party.

Q: And of course, that's—

LIMBERT: We did what we could to help, you know, to support him, but he was fighting a pretty lonely battle in those days.

Q: And of course, at that point the majority leader of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee had moved from him to Jesse Helms, who's famous for his hostility to the Foreign Service.

LIMBERT: That was a whole other thing.

Q: But now, to move to some of the accomplishments that occurred during your tenure, one thing was in legislation bringing tax relief to Foreign Service officers consistent with what the military had in terms of when they sell their house not taxing the gains on the sale.

LIMBERT: Exactly. I think we got much more done when we worked together with other unions and organizations which were much bigger than we were and carried a lot more clout than we did. That was a good one. Again, I can't claim that we did this on our own or we pushed it, but by making alliances we got things like this done. And that was good. You know, once in a while you accomplish something. In the Foreign Service you learn results are few and far between.

Q: Right.

LIMBERT: And some used to joke that if you saw a result, you'd never know it unless it bit you in the ankle.

Q: One fortunate aspect of your tenure was you were dealing at least until 2004 with Colin Powell, who did take an interest in the size and health and recruitment and retention aspects of the Foreign Service. One of the things you did accomplish was finally getting a childcare center at the Foreign Service Institute. How did you view that at the time? What did you need to do in order to get that done?

LIMBERT: I don't remember being involved in that. It's symptomatic of our system that it required the personal effort of the secretary of state to get this done.

Q: Right.

LIMBERT: I mean, what you run into is kind of a line, bureaucratic obstinacy where simply nothing happens.

Q: Yeah.

LIMBERT: And the only way that can get taken care of was when the secretary himself personally took an interest. There are, always somewhere in the system lawyers and others who make it their business to ensure that nothing gets done.

Q: Right, sure. One other relatively, relatively easy accomplishment was getting approval from USAA, which had opposed it for some time, to allow membership from all of the foreign affairs agencies, not just State Department.

LIMBERT: I don't think we ever got that done in my time.

Q: Okay. It may have been—

LIMBERT: We were fighting that. And it was very interesting with some very interesting exchanges. Apparently, there was a change of leadership at USAA and whoever was the new president or head of it made this decision on his own that for some reasons we're going—and none of us could understand any reason for this because as a business decision it seemed awful. You're eliminating a pool of very good risks for your insurance company. If you run an insurance company, it would seem to me that Foreign Service officers, whatever agency they worked for, are probably damned good risks. I mean, we could have our scoundrels too, but I think they're pretty good risks. So, when we found this obstinacy, this resistance, it was very hard to understand and deal with. I remember talking to Larry Wilkinson, who was then Colin Powell's chief-of-staff, and he says, "Oh, I know this guy. You'll never change his mind. He's a complete jerk." (Both laugh) And that's what it was. And he resisted. I think there were letters from the secretary, and letters from the secretary of Commerce. I mean, this was hard to do.

Q: Yeah, yeah.

LIMBERT: This was Colin Powell's doing. That was his view. He was responsible for his people.

Q: Yeah, yeah.

LIMBERT: Including the people who worked for the other foreign affairs agencies. So, he got these letters and the head of USAA told him to take a flying leap.

Q: Right, right.

LIMBERT: So, what can you do? You know, at a certain point, what can you do?

Q: Yeah. Just one last question on this. As you made the fight, now as you encouraged top administration officials in the State Department to take up the fight for you, what was the benefit of getting this USAA insurance? Why did people outside of State want it?

LIMBERT: It's a very good company. And people had it. There were people who had been eligible and then all of a sudden new people were told, No, if you're not with State, you're not eligible.

Q: Right, right.

LIMBERT: And you know, our USAID rep, you know, pushed me on this and it was a good thing he did. Our USAID and Commerce reps pushed me. But you know, it's a very good company. I don't know if you've ever dealt with AllState, but you know, when we

lived in Virginia, we had USAA in our house and our neighbor had AllState, and he had horror stories.

Q: Right, yeah. I also took advantage of joining USAA and I've never turned back. It is a top-quality organization.

LIMBERT: They are excellent. And so, you know, again, as AFSA we're responsible for all of our people, the whole Foreign Service—this was a point that we made over and over again. The Foreign Service is not just the State Department.

Q: Yeah, sure.

Now, I do want to discuss the very difficult, very thorny issue of securing locality pay.

LIMBERT: Ah, yes.

Q: Yeah. But there's one other thing I just wanted to mention to see if you have recollections about it. Colin Powell finally agreed to recruit above attrition because for the entire decade leading up to Colin Powell's secretary of state tenure the Foreign Service had attrition that slowly ended up causing the service to not increase in any size for ten years even though the requirements and the demands made on it did increase. So, to what extent were you involved in that decision to begin hiring above attrition?

LIMBERT: I don't think so. That was, I think, that was very much Colin Powell's initiative. We were cheerleaders, obviously.

Q: Sure.

LIMBERT: Because we had seen what had happened. I had seen firsthand what had happened to officers going out to the newly independent states after the collapse of the Soviet Union in the nineties. And I mean, it was horrible what these people were expected to do and how they were not supported. And having worked in African posts where, to put it mildly the staffing was thin, I mean, at one point, I remember this in Mauritania half of our staff – and our desk officer – were temporary duty people. People need to take leave and you can't do without a regional security officer, you can't.

Q: Right.

LIMBERT: So, they sent us a retiree as regional security officer. They sent us a retiree as admin officer. And our desk back in the department was a retiree. I've never had such a good relationship with a desk officer.

Q: Wow.

LIMBERT: But that was the way it was patching and filling. And you had junior officers in way over their head doing—especially on the administrative side, in which they were

completely inexperienced. I mean, you had these people who were trained to be president of General Motors and they were running the spare parts department at a used car lot. That's basically what they were doing. And the results were, as you could imagine. Colin Powell's view, his mentality, his ethos was the first thing you do is you take care of your people.

Q: Right, mm-hm.

LIMBERT: The troops eat first kind of thing. And when he said that, he really meant that. We've had good secretaries of state, but we've had very few who've taken that ethos seriously.

Q: Yeah, yeah. And of course, you're mentioning that newly entered officers who go to an African post and are suddenly hit with every kind of management requirement. If they make a mistake they can go to jail.

LIMBERT: That's true. They can go to jail when post funds are lost, post funds are stolen, or things are misdirected. I mean, this is not related to my tenure, but if you read Marie Yovanovitch's book—

Q: Sure.

LIMBERT: —about her first assignment as GSO (General Services Officer) in Mogadishu. I mean, can you imagine?

Q: Right.

LIMBERT: And they treated her like garbage for another thing.

Q: Yeah, yeah.

LIMBERT: In addition to having an impossible job. But here's this well qualified person running after people stealing fuel and being ignored by her own management.

Q: Yeah.

LIMBERT: I mean, that was the thing we were, you know, and that's just not—it's not right, it's not fair. It's not fair again. It's the kind of thing that AFSA—I believe always that AFSA should be doing, take care, make sure that these kinds of things don't happen, or if they do happen, they're dealt with. I mean, one thing I did was, I don't know if I mentioned this in any of my histories, but there was a junior officer conference for the Africa region.

Q: Yeah. This is the one that took place in Namibia.

LIMBERT: It took place in Namibia. It was expensive, but important. I flew there and basically, sat there all day, and I said, “If you have an issue, come to me.” And you know, I heard horror stories, including some from others—about other agencies. And I came back with a notebook full of things and went to the director general or the deputy director general, who was not all that happy to see me, but because we’re a union, they had to.

Q: Yeah.

LIMBERT: That was the thing that I learned, and I’ve become a big, even bigger supporter of unions. Had we not been a union they could have just blown us off—

Q: Right.

LIMBERT: —(indiscernible) wanted, but because we were a union, they had to meet with us, and they had to talk to us and they had to listen to our concerns. So, I came back with this laundry list of outrages that were going on in some of these posts. This was my own view of what AFSA should be doing.

Q: Sure. Now, let’s go ahead and turn to this very thorny issue of locality pay.

LIMBERT: Ah, yeah. Okay.

Q: Can you take a moment to explain what that was because it went on from your predecessors in AFSA to your successors in AFSA.

LIMBERT: It’s a never ending story. As I understood—my explanation is probably not going to be authoritative, but as I understand it, this is an issue to adjust federal salaries to conditions in different locations, and it applies in most cases to the United States. So, you know, if a civil servant is assigned to San Francisco or assigned to Bismarck, North Dakota, costs are different, and they are given locality pay in order to make up this difference. It’s not strictly a cost-of-living allowance, but I think that’s a component of it. Washington had its own locality pay.

Q: Sure.

LIMBERT: So, if you were assigned to Washington you received, in those days it was 15 percent locality pay., when State Department people were sent overseas that was cut.

Q: Right, right.

LIMBERT: And so, you could go to Baghdad and your salary would be cut. And that affected things like TSP (thrift savings plan) retirement contributions, which was a big one. I mean, we did a calculation, and, over time, with compound interest, the difference was quite a bit of money.

Q: Yeah, yeah.

LIMBERT: As the locality pay went up and as the compound interest grew, people were losing a lot of money, particularly if you had successive overseas assignments. The biggest injustice was that for our colleagues in some other agencies this didn't apply. They kept their Washington locality pay when they went overseas. I give credit to our State VP, Louise Crane, who really made a big push on this. She had been dealing with this before I arrived at AFSA, and she convinced me to speak up a lot more on it and I did. And it became the Carthāgō *dēlenda est* (Carthage Must Be Destroyed) of AFSA, so that when the secretary would have a town meeting and I would get up to speak and that was my, that was my issue. Carthage Must Be Destroyed. We must have locality pay. And my recollection is that we didn't, we didn't get very far until State Department management took it up.

Yeah, State Department management finally took the matter seriously and figured out a way to do this. I don't know the ins and outs of it. But it brings up another point, which was one of the things that made my tenure much easier. We had excellent relations with two director generals, one Marc Grossman and the other Bob Pearson.

Q: Mm-hm, mm-hm.

LIMBERT: Both of whom are professionals, Foreign Service officers, AFSA members. We didn't have to convince them on a lot of these issues, although some decisions weren't in their hands. And in particular with Bob Pearson, I remember we had the issue of the dysfunctional retirement branch.

Q: Right, mm-hm.

LIMBERT: And the way it was dealing with retirees. And he took that very seriously. A lot of times we were pushing on an open door. That was not always the case with the rest of the office. I think it was PER, Personnel, and then it became HR (Human Resources) and now God knows what it is, Worldwide something, Talent Management I think or something.

Q: Right, Worldwide something, yeah.

LIMBERT: Global—God knows what it is. But anyway, in those days, PER. In that bureau, below the director-general it was heavily heavily Civil Service.

Q: Yeah, yeah.

LIMBERT: And sometimes not everyone there was sympathetic to our cause.

Q: You mentioned how difficult it is sometimes to get anything through the bureaucracy, even if the top management agrees to do it. One example that you cited was the buyback of years for the part-time interim employees. These were usually spouses of Foreign Service officers who worked in the consular office or maybe as a management assistant,

and they earned money but the money that they earned was prevented from going into anything related to retirement and other benefits. Eventually Congress votes to allow that to happen and OPM (United States Office of Personnel Management) opposed it. Go back to that story.

LIMBERT: Yes. Well in the interest of full disclosure, I had a personal interest in this because my wife was one of their cases. She had done this kind of work back in the eighties and nineties and had received no retirement credit for it. We were coming up on retirement age. Congress had passed this legislation. State didn't oppose it, and never did. The amounts of money were trivial.

Q: Right.

LIMBERT: It was nothing. And then we kept hearing that OPM wouldn't act. When President Bush signed the law he made a signing statement saying that he opposed this particular provision. God knows why. Some lawyer must have wrote it for him. I don't know. I'm sure he could have cared less. But it was in the signing statement. So we're getting nowhere, and we finally arranged a meeting with the head of OMP. So, we go into this meeting with OPM and this woman, a political appointee, a Bush appointee, and she comes in and she's wearing this big necklace with an elephant on it, you know, in case you have any doubt about where her sympathies lie. And this, you know, this is a clear violation of the Hatch Act, but I wasn't going to point that out to her. And she starts talking about, well, the president opposed this in his signing statement. And I could argue that's still the law. But that didn't make any impression at all. Basically, her attitude was, I don't like it; I'm not going to do it and you can't make me.

Q: Right, yeah, yeah.

LIMBERT: You know. And you know, how the hell are we going to do that? And I think once again State itself to its credit stepped in. This may have been after my time. But there's a postscript to this, Marc, which you'll appreciate. When my wife did retire and—this was after the payment had been approved, she had one hell of a time getting that credit out of the State retirement branch, which was, of course, still dysfunctional.

Q: Yeah, yeah.

LIMBERT: Despite the best efforts of everybody to fix that, nothing ever gets fixed, if it does it breaks again a month later. But she had to argue and argue and argue, and to this day she insists, and I think she's right, that she has been cheated out of a couple of years of retirement benefits because of the actions of the retirement branch. But there's nobody who's going to step in and say, No, this isn't right. Fix it.

Q: Yeah, yeah.

One other aspect, another overall aspect of benefits for the Foreign Service was the question of whether the funding of the service should be moved from Commerce, State

and Justice into National Security Agency Funding, DOD, I assume CIA and a few other, you know, more military side of the funding flow, and you had concerns about that because although it might mean a little bit more budget or a little bit more money going to the State Department, it could also mean decertification of AFSA.

LIMBERT: Exactly. This was, you know, the question, I mean the issue was that we hadn't had an authorization since the Wilson Administration. e. And we were pushing the majority leader of the Senate because he controls what gets to the floor and what doesn't. And he wouldn't let this come to the floor. If it had come to the floor, it probably would have passed. But no one was really against it. But how to pass it. We pushed very hard along with other agencies involved.

Q: It was Commerce and Justice. Commerce and Justice.

LIMBERT: Commerce, Justice, right. And the idea was to take it out of that group, put us into the—what was it, National Security envelope, which would have included Defense and maybe some others, because those authorizations pass easily. But the question was, if that happened, at some point someone could step in and decertify us. Because in that area you can decertify unions.

Q: Right, mm-hm.

LIMBERT: Someone could have said, "you're a security agency, you can't have a union."

Q: Right.

LIMBERT: And that was the danger. I think this whole debate probably continues until today, as far as I know.

Q: Interesting.

LIMBERT: There was no resolution to it. We never got our authorization. But neither did we go into the other group of agencies.

Q: Yeah. All of this indicates, you know, you had some successes, you had some not successes. One thing you mentioned in previous interviews is that every Foreign Service officer had three boxes on their desk; their in-box, their out-box, and their too-hard-to-do-box. And I wondered if you recall that and what it meant.

LIMBERT: I think that might have been borrowed from Louise, Louise Crane's used to tell that to the new classes when we did our recruiting lunch. It wasn't the Foreign Service officer who had this, but the support staff.

Q: Ah.

LIMBERT: And things like getting your salary right, getting your allowances right, getting your travel done, often it wasn't that somebody was evil or was trying to undermine you, it was just too hard to do.

Q: Mmm. Mm-hm, yeah.

LIMBERT: And AFSA's job was to move that somehow, and occasionally—I've seen cases where AFSA had to step in and do it themselves in an issue of allowance, because the people there couldn't figure it out. And so there were some AFSA people who would sit down and say, Okay, do this, this, this, this. They said, Okay. But this was a recruiting tool that Louise would use in her speech to get the people to sign up, "You will encounter things like this in the bureaucracy, and often it's not out of evil intent, it's just inertia."

Q: Yeah. Although I did not hear that expression in box-out, box-too-hard-to-do-box, what I did realize is parking was a—was my strategy. And here I don't mean parking my car, I mean parking my butt in somebody's office.

LIMBERT: Oh, really, yeah.

Q: Until they recognized me. And then, walking them through what they needed to do for me.

LIMBERT: Exactly, exactly. That's very true. (Laughs) The attitude is very often, "well, if you're willing to do this, if you're willing to do the work, then go ahead"

Q: Yeah. You basically have to schedule that into your day knowing that sometimes you don't need to do it, but more often than not, you need to do it.

LIMBERT: Yeah.

Q: So, now, let's also turn, I mean, you began your tenure with a brief tour in Iraq at the very beginning of the post-war aspects or the post-active military campaign, but you also had another break in service as you mentioned, to go to Khartoum as a chargé. Did that affect your tenure as president of AFSA?

LIMBERT: I think it did. I went to Khartoum after I left AFSA. I may have left AFSA a little bit early, but when I came back, I did not go back there.

Q: Ah, I see.

LIMBERT: I sent straight into my next assignment. It was from late June until early September. You'd appreciate this, Mark as a Foreign Service person. I was coming back to be dean of the language school, FSI. I have a very good assignment. And they said, "Will you stay? We'd like you to stay in Sudan longer as chargé." And I said, "Oh, hell. Are you offering me something instead of FSI?" "Just stay in Sudan, in Khartoum longer?" In other words, we don't want to have to find somebody else.

Q: Right.

LIMBERT: Save us the trouble. (Laughs) So, I say, “Okay. You know, I’m listening, but are you offering something afterwards?” And they sort of said, Well, humma-humma-humma-humma, which came out as “not exactly”, or “we’ll see about that”, or “we’ll do the best we can”. So, I said, “No thank you, my son and daughter-in-law are having their first child, I’m coming back.” Saying no in the Foreign Service is a delight, as you know.

Q: Right, right.

LIMBERT: The ability to say no. Use it rarely, but when you do, it’s very powerful. The time in Iraq certainly affected the way I viewed things. This whole business about denigrating the Foreign Service, denigrating its contribution. I also did, in the middle of my AFSA term, did a short tour in Iraq in 2004, one that I still can’t talk about

Q: Okay, I had forgotten that, yeah. It was in—

LIMBERT: Out at—

Q: I’m sorry, go ahead, yeah.

LIMBERT: I led a team out in the desert for a couple of months. But again, people were willing to go out there, live in tents in awful heat, eat crappy food, ride around in helicopters, get shot at. I mean, this is the best of our service.

Q: Yeah, yeah. There’s one other accomplishment you mention in, you know, several of your—of the earlier background, and that’s the renovation of the AFSA office, you know, the one that was purchased ten years earlier than your tenure, and really had never been renovated for the post-2000 era. Was that accomplished strictly with AFSA funds or were you able to also, once again, use your outreach to get donations?

LIMBERT: No, as I remember—first of all, the office was a dump.

Q: Right.

LIMBERT: Great piece of real estate. I mean, you can’t get better than that, 21st and E Street. I mean, what could be better? But it was a dump, the building was a dump. It was not safe. It didn’t meet ADA (Americans With Disabilities Act) standards, and didn’t meet a lot of other standards. I think we had vermin. I’m sure we had some creatures living around in it. When I was there, in my tenure we had different proposals, but we never broke any ground. We did look at a proposal to add residential units on top because the housing market in Washington was really hot at this time. We got a consultant to look at it, and the reality of it didn’t work out. Part of the issue was parking.

Q: Ah, I get you, of course. Right.

LIMBERT: It seemed like a good idea at the time, but the actual renovation came after my term(audio glitch).

Q: Ah, I see.

LIMBERT: For a couple of years AFSA had to move out.

Q: Yeah, right.

Well, that takes me to, basically, the end of the questions I had, based on all the background research I did. But I do want to ask, as you're looking back on your tenure and also subsequent developments in AFSA, would you give them any recommendations or suggestions on how to better represent or how to better reach out to other partners and so on to continue their work?

LIMBERT: Not really. I had it easier than a lot of subsequent presidents. I think some of the subsequent presidents had really tough times. Of course, I won't even talk about the last administration, but even in other areas. I was fortunate in that we had good relations with the director general. Our relations with the other agencies were a little more iffy. The head of AID at the time basically hated unions and hated the whole idea of unions. But AID's personnel policies make State's look benevolent by comparison. I'm not really in a position to say much because I think our current people have had some much tougher issues to deal with, including almost the very survival of the Foreign Service. In my day nobody came up with a Schedule F proposed, for example. That was out there. But it seems to me that the people who have come after have done a tremendous job in terms of putting the priority on taking care of the people, including fairness. One of the big issues for our State constituency was the assignments system.

Q: I was—

LIMBERT: I give credit to Louise here. She had very good antennae about some of the practices that were going on. She found cases of dubious assignments, favoritism, unqualified people, cronyism, this sort of thing going on. And that's an ongoing problem, and I think our people have always dealt well with that. But again, it's a problem that's not going to go away. Very few of these problems ever go away.

Q: Yeah, right.

LIMBERT: But I've been very impressed with what Barbara Stephenson, Eric Rubin, and others have been doing. They continued this idea of you just take care of your people. As the saying goes, "No problem too small."

Q: Yeah.

LIMBERT: You know, I include this—did I include this story about dealing with security?

Q: No, you didn't, and I had read about that, but you mentioned it very briefly in your previous oral history. So, please go ahead and elaborate on that.

LIMBERT: This was symptomatic. A lot of our cases, grievance cases and other cases, came out of the Bureau of Diplomatic Security. And at one point, I remember going with our general counsel, Sharon Papp, our counsel, to meet with people at Diplomatic Security. The first thing they said was, "Why are you advocating on behalf of this jerk?". We reminded them, "Excuse me, but we advocate on behalf of our members. We don't just advocate for nice people, you know."

Q: Right.

LIMBERT: Even jerks have rights. (Both laugh) But that was symptomatic of a very special culture, and it's a difficult one. It created—and it continues to create -- a lot of work for AFSA.

Q: Yeah. Certainly, I have met, now that I've retired, I've met several officers who have had their security clearance suspended and just wait years for their cases to be resolved.

LIMBERT: Exactly, exactly. Basically, it's a law unto itself.

Q: Yeah, yeah.

LIMBERT: It doesn't appreciate people asking questions.

Q: Precisely.

LIMBERT: Just parenthetically, I saw this a few years ago when I was on the grievance board when AFSA nominated me. I was on the grievance board until Secretary Pompeo got upset at something I had written, and he threw me off. (Laughs)

Q: Wow.

LIMBERT: AFSA was seeing a disproportionate number of problems coming from DS. But the interesting thing about DS was that the rate of union membership among DS people was somewhere around 98, 99 percent, much higher than among the rest of the Foreign Service, because these people were involved in law enforcement.

Q: Sure, sure.

LIMBERT: And you know, for better or worse. Now, the New York police union is not a shining example. (Laughs) I think it was Kerik and his group. I can barely consider them a union. I consider them like a benevolent association, they're a benevolent association,

or a guild. But it wasn't a union. But they understood the benefits of unionization, and we didn't have any trouble recruiting people in DS.

Q: Ah-ha. Interesting.

There is one thing I forgot to ask you and that is I think every AFSA president certainly from the late nineties on had to also deal with communities of interest within the department, communities of interest that had goals that were not necessarily inconsistent with AFSA's, but ones that they often pursued without necessarily consulting with AFSA. How would you look back on that? Was that a difficulty? Did you care? What would you say about that?

LIMBERT: I remember dealing particularly with GLIFAA (Gays and Lesbians in Foreign Affairs Agencies). I don't know if this organization still has the same name now?

Q: Yes. I don't know that they use it for the same exact word, sort of the way AARP no longer, you know, uses the American Association for Retired Persons. They must keep the acronym and continue with the work they do. I think the same thing is true of GLIFAA because over time, of course, sexual minorities and the description of them have changed and molded tighter, yeah.

LIMBERT: At the time that wasn't a big issue. I do recall meeting with GLIFAA, and relations were cordial. We did have some issues with MED (Bureau of Medical Services), and as I remember, within the board there were differences. There was no consensus on how we should deal with MED. The only consensus was that MED was difficult to deal with and not transparent. It was two after DS in terms of being hard to deal with. But there were issues about different kinds of clearances and, worldwide availability,, there are a number of people within the Foreign Service who feel very strongly about the issue of worldwide availability.

Q: Right.

LIMBERT: Yeah, this goes back and forth. But again, I say I was fortunate in those times. These were not big issues, but I think that my successors had to deal with them, and they're not easy.

Q: Yeah, yeah, certainly. All right.

Are there any other anecdotes about working either with the AFSA management or the membership or State Department management that still stick out in your mind as salient about AFSA's work?

LIMBERT: The interesting aspect of it for me was that because we were a union, people in State had to meet with us. Now, there were some who were already on our side. We didn't have to convince them. We were working for the same goals. I mean, in a sense

we're an anomaly as a union because that management person you're talking to is a member of the union.

Q: Right.

LIMBERT: And he or she would benefit from what you were doing. But there were others whose hostility was barely concealed.

Q: Yeah.

LIMBERT: They were marginally polite about it. But they would just as soon we vanished down a hole and would never be seen again.

Again, it was a great assignment and a great lesson in human nature. You see all sorts of things. It's like being a deputy chief of mission overseas. But I do remember one case, I don't remember if I mentioned in my oral history where we had to argue against the assignment of a junior person as deputy assistant secretary in one of the bureaus.

Q: I don't remember that. Yeah.

LIMBERT: Okay. Yeah. This was when an assistant secretary brought in a crony, who was somebody who had worked on the National Security Council and I'm sure had done very well, and was very smart. The assistant secretary brought him in as a deputy assistant secretary, a DAS, and I think he was like, an O2 grade officer.—

Q: Wow.

LIMBERT: —This was known as the case of the baby DAS.

Q: Yeah. Mm-hm.

LIMBERT: And apparently, this was done despite the opposition of the director general at the time because the assistant secretary got the secretary to intervene and approve this assignment. So, the director general it's out of my hands. So, we went, and we met with the assistant secretary and the hostility toward us as the union representatives was just obvious. He had nothing but contempt for us and what we were doing. And I made the point, I can be shameless about this, and I said, "Look. When our embassy in Tehran was attacked, we wanted to make sure that when we had to call Washington at 2:00 in the morning, and we spoke to a deputy assistant secretary for our bureau, we wanted to make sure that person knew what he was doing and had experience."

Q: Right. Mm-hm.

LIMBERT: That made no impression, none whatsoever. So, what is it, we met the enemy, and it was us.

Q: Yeah, yeah.

LIMBERT: It was people who bought into a different Foreign Service culture.

Q: Yeah, yeah. Sure.

LIMBERT: Which meant cronyism, favoritism, skirting the system, going around the system, who can you get on your side, this kind of thing was the value. And so, they saw no value in what you would call, the guardrails that existed.

Q: Yeah.

LIMBERT: And I am told that this particular assistant secretary at one point later told someone privately, "Well, I really stuck it to those AFSA people." I remember something else he said, "Well, you know, the promotion system really doesn't work very well anyway and doesn't promote the best people." And I'm thinking, you son of a bitch. It promoted you. What about you? "I an MC at the time, Louise was an MC, and he was an MC himself, "

Q: Right.

LIMBERT: So these are battles you're not going to win.

Q: Sure, yeah.

LIMBERT: It's that kind of thing that leaves you shaking your head. It's one thing if a Republican political appointee at OPM's being a jerk or some staffer screwing you over, but when it's one of our own, that's harder.

Q: Yeah, absolutely. Well, after you left the AFSA presidency, you obviously came out with a great deal of knowledge and connections, networks and so on. Were you able to use any of that, of the skills or the connections and so on in subsequent, in your subsequent professional life?

LIMBERT: Well, I'd like to say yes, but I'm not quite sure how because I went from there to Khartoum for a few months.

Q: Right, mm-hm.

LIMBERT: I knew enough about the personnel system to say no when they wanted me to stay on indefinitely. They thought "let's keep him out there. It's easier to do that than find somebody else. So, after that I went on to FSI, which was a great assignment. We were training people for new languages, a very different kind of job. But I was there for no more than a year and then figured, enough is enough. And I had a chance to go and teach at the Naval Academy, and I wasn't going to turn that down. I didn't really like the idea

of going overseas again, I'd had enough of that. What I experienced at AFSA really didn't come up directly until back in 2017, 2018, when I served on the grievance board.

Q: Right, right, mm-hm.

LIMBERT: And I did serve on the AFSA board for a couple of years as a retiree rep.

Q: Aah.

LIMBERT: And that was fun. But again, you have different interests, they want different things, and you don't want to stand in their way. You don't want to become one of the old farts. But on the grievance board there was just a lot of the same stuff that I had seen with AFSA, and it was still going on.

Q: Yeah.

LIMBERT: Problems obviously had not been fixed. And that was interesting because a lot of the people on the grievance board are lawyers.

Q: Yeah, mm-hm.

LIMBERT: You know. mediators, litigators. And they're great. They are very good at what they do. I learned a lot from them. But they don't have the Foreign Service experience.

Q: Yeah, yeah. Yeah. They know the regulations and how they work and whether someone has brought a case that is justiciable, but yeah, they don't know the day-to-day life and how some of those decisions affect people.

LIMBERT: They have a point because sometimes their cases are going to end up in a court in front of a judge.

Q: Yeah, yeah. Sure.

LIMBERT: And they have to make sure that that makes sense. But what they didn't understand was the Foreign Service --, how our evaluation system works, how our assignment system works, what damage a negative evaluation can do to a person's career. I mean, it was a great experience. I think I could bring some of my AFSA experience to the work., AFSA could represent the grievant, could talk to them and say, "Hey, what about this, what about that? Something's missing something here."

I'll just give you an anecdote.

Q: Sure.

LIMBERT: This happened about ten years after I finished at AFSA, and about ten years after retiring. I came across some grievance cases where the State Department lawyers, the people working for HR, had written their rebuttals in a very snarky, nasty tone, belittling the grievant. And I said, ““This doesn’t seem right to me. This is supposed to be a collegial organization. There’s no call for this kind of thing.”

Q: Right.

LIMBERT: It was nasty, with the tone of “as any fool can plainly see.” And I went, you know, I went to AFSA and to grievance board colleagues on this, and I said, “Look, in the Foreign Service such writing about a colleague is not acceptable. If we saw it in an employee’s efficiency report, we would call out the writer. new should stop this. .” And AFSA said, “Not really. This is what they do.” (Laughs) And then I went to the lawyers at the grievance board, and they said, ” this is what we do as lawyers.”

Q: Ah.

LIMBERT: I said, “Yeah, but the grievants are not lawyers. They are Foreign Service, and we do not do this to each other.”

Q: Sure, sure. Yeah.

LIMBERT: I asked, “Can we preserve a modicum of mutual respect?” And the answer was no. And some of this response was coming out of AFSA, where we build very strongly on this idea of collegiality.

Q: Right.

LIMBERT: We may not act on it all the time, but we’re not supposed to. We’re not supposed to belittle each other openly.

Q: Yeah

LIMBERT: It was very sad. But you learn, I mean, Mark, you learn. And I can tell you, I mean, you were an FSO, so I suppose these things I’m talking about must be familiar to you.

Q: Right, right. I was looking at my career; I never felt a need to grieve anything, but I certainly know many people who did.

LIMBERT: Yeah. Well, we used to tell people, you may not think so, but in the course of your career, strange things are going to happen. And there were—we didn’t mention by name -- but there were some very senior people who had, at one point or another had had difficulties with “the system”

Q: Yeah, sure

LIMBERT: Sometimes it just happens. For some people it doesn't, and that's great.

Q: Yeah, and it can be any number of things from salary and benefits to potential prejudice of some kind, even the suspension of security clearance when there's no evidence given or the evidence is spotty and you know, you want to know what exactly is the reason for, you know, having my security clearance suspended. I'm not even sure you've given me a good explanation. Just all sorts of things.

LIMBERT: What I found at AFSA was that a lot of times certain parts of the department did not appreciate questions—

Q: Right, mm-hm.

LIMBERT: —about what they were doing. They didn't appreciate having to explain what they were doing.

Q: Yeah, yeah. And that, sure, and that, you know, it goes back to the in-box, the out-box, and the unable-to-do-box.

LIMBERT: Exactly, exactly.

Q: Yeah, yeah. Well, all right. I am happy if there are any other anecdotes like this that you recall, or we can pause the interview here and talk about next steps.

LIMBERT: Fine. So, what happens?

Q: All right. Well, let me go and pause for just a moment.

End of interview

