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

AMBASSADOR WILLIAM B. MACOMBER, JR.

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INTERVIEW

Q: This is the 30th of September 1989. I am Roger Ernst and I am here with Bill Macomber on Monomoy Rd., Nantucket. We are going to have a hand at one of the Foreign Affairs oral history interviews pursuant to several discussions I have had with Stu Kennedy of Georgetown University. He and his associates have conducted an extensive number of interviews. The last list I had included almost 175 interviews with men and women who had served America in the Foreign Service as ambassador, assistant secretaries of state and other leading positions.

In discussing this interview with Stuart he asked me to keep in mind just who our customers would be, for the most part they are researchers in diplomatic history, specializing in one area or another of policy or country studies. Few, if any of them have experience as diplomats, although there will be an occasional fellow show up who has been at Fletcher or places like that. We are not going to be terribly interested in a plain recitation of our careers, even though we think our careers were very exciting. He also wanted to be sure that we avoid two pitfalls, one what he calls the country briefing. We are all very good at describing the situation in, for example, Taiwan in 1962, or Jordan when you were there, and the other is the amusing dinner table story which deals with our relationship with the Crown Prince or the Prime Minister's wife, which illustrates a problem in the country. He suggests that our readers will be interested in what we did in practical terms and how the Foreign Service was constructed and how we were able to respond, what our responsibilities were, something about the relationships that existed between you, for example, as the ambassador and the higher authorities in Washington, not just the Department and between you and your senior associates and your subordinates, illustrated, of course by stories, amusing and otherwise from your experiences.

One way to start the process is to ask, how you acquired an interest in foreign affairs? Were you thrust into it by external forces?

MACOMBER: I was always interested in American history so I think that is where my interest began.

Q: That would go back to high school. When did you become a direct participant in foreign affairs?

MACOMBER: I suppose being in World War II was a form of being in foreign affairs. That was my first government service and involvement with other countries. Then, like others, I wanted to see if we could prevent another such war from happening. So from then on my interest in foreign relations was pretty intense.

I went back to graduate school. I had been in OSS during the war and when the CIA was starting I came back into that during the Korean War. I was stationed in Washington where I planned to write a Ph.D. thesis. I expected to be there a couple of years, and I stayed twenty- five years. It is a common story.

It was interesting the way I got my job in the State Department. A very able State Department official, Henry Owen, later a distinguished head of the Policy Planning Staff, was being badgered to take a job in the front office of State's intelligence division. He did not want to do it. In those days the way to avoid taking a job you did not want was to recruit somebody else who did want it and to get your boss to agree that that somebody else would be a reasonably adequate replacement. Henry Owen and I got to know each other and he recommended me for that job to save himself from having to take it.

Nowadays the budget system is so tight that this kind of thing would not happen. I don't remember that there was any budget problem at that time. Things changed shortly after I came in, but up to that point hiring was not that complicated. There did not appear to be rigid personnel ceilings that were soon to come. The RIF (Reduction in Force) started right after the Eisenhower administration came in in January 1953. One of the first things they did was institute a government-wide reduction in force. It was based on seniority and I had the least seniority in the State Department.

So I was vulnerable. I had a wonderful first boss in the Department whose name was Park Armstrong. He called me in one day and said, "I want you to know that there are two of you who, in the face of these reductions, I am particularly interested in keeping. You are one of the two, but you are the second of the two. The other person," Park said, "and the one to whom I give the highest priority is our messenger." The latter was a fine black person (and sadly, messenger jobs were about the only jobs black people had in the State Department in those days). "If I can only save two of the many whose jobs are threatened, I will save you both. If I only can save one, I will have to save him. You have a better chance of getting another job than he does." In the end we were both saved. Many years later the messenger ended up being the messenger for the Secretary of State and I had become the Department's overall personnel chief. Every time I would go by his desk outside the Secretary's office he would tell me to see to it that there were no more reductions in force like the one we had suffered through together many years before.

Q: You described the other fellow as a messenger, how would you describe yourself? What were you doing?

MACOMBER: I was a special assistant to Park Armstrong who was head of the Intelligence Division of the State Department with the rank of an Assistant Secretary. There were four of us in the front office: Park; Fisher Howe who was his deputy; Bill Trueheart, later an ambassador, and then the senior special assistant; and the junior special assistant, which was the job I held. I worked mostly for Fisher Howe, but both he and Park were fine people to work for.

Q: Was this an internal job within the Department or were you involved with external coordination?

MACOMBER: Park and Fisher were constantly sitting on committees involving other government departments and I used to represent them on some occasions; but fundamentally I was an in-house staff officer.

Then I left and got a job on the Hill as administrative assistant to a senator, John Sherman Cooper, which was in effect being his chief of staff. I got that job through Charley Bartlett, a mutual friend, and also because Senator Cooper was running against Alben Barkley, and as Senator Cooper's chances were not very good, not many people were after the job. Cooper was a wonderful man and it was a great experience working on the Hill. Senator Cooper put up a good fight but lost. No one in those days could beat Alben Barkley, just as a few years later, and after Barkley had died, no one in Kentucky could beat John Sherman Cooper. In any event Senator Cooper having lost this election in 1954 was sent off in early 1955 as ambassador to India and I was brought back into the Department as a special assistant to the Under Secretary who was Herbert Hoover, Jr. I worked for Mr. Hoover for about a year when the job of the Special Assistant became vacant in the Secretary's office. I had an interview with the Secretary of State. I was scared half to death, and I did not do a very good job on the interview, but to my great surprise it ended with his saying, "If you will take a chance on me, I will take a chance on you."

Q: That was Mr. Dulles.

MACOMBER: He was a very gracious man, and I hope history will one day judge him far more favorably and fairly than it now does. I stayed with him from 1955 until 1958 when I became Assistant Secretary for Congressional Relations.

Q: Was that in part because of your experience you had with John Sherman Cooper?

MACOMBER: Yes, I think that was part of it, an important part of it. Also the fact that I worked so closely with the Secretary of State, and a powerful Secretary of State who, in close partnership with the President, was calling all the shots in the foreign policy field. So I had the advantage of being known as being close to the Secretary, and as someone

who could get to him very quickly to get answers to questions that were constantly coming up on the Hill.

Q: I have the impression that the approach of administrations from the early post-war period for ten or a dozen years was an attempt to be much more collegial and establish a bipartisan approach or non-partisan approach to foreign policy issues than may have been the practice in later or more recent stage. Was that perception correct?

MACOMBER: Absolutely. We came out of the war with a tradition of the two parties working together and that practice continued on for a number of years in a very active way. It is a key reason why we were so successful and incidentally a reason why I, a Republican, when Kennedy came in was sent to be ambassador to Jordan. It was part of that same tradition of bipartisanship. Which ever party was in power had a few ambassadorships and high officials from the opposite party. John Foster Dulles, a Republican, negotiated the Japanese peace treaty under Secretary Acheson in the Truman administration. President Eisenhower appointed David Bruce and Ellsworth Bunker to important ambassadorships. Very good people served both parties and I was sorry to see this tradition fade in recent years. There was still the feeling that partisan politics stopped at the water front. It is not that there should not be discussion or disagreement, but it should not be polarized with one party on one side and one on the other. The discussion was over what was the right thing to do, not that the Democrats said this and the Republicans said that.

Bipartisanship was difficult for the party in power because it gave a veto, or at least a very large voice, to the party that is not in power. On the other hand it was not only good for the country but politically beneficial for the party that was in power to have a successful bipartisan foreign policy. The payback to the American people is to have a stable foreign policy that does not shift around. When Eisenhower left office and Kennedy came in, nobody thought that there would be any fundamental changes in American foreign policy. That was because the Democrats felt it was just as much their foreign policy as the Republicans. In fact they had been "present at the creation" in the 1940s when they were in power and they had Republican support and then they in turn supported the Republicans in the 1950s. So there was predictability and stability in our foreign policy--a very important factor for world peace.

Q: I can remember, I was in the Defense Department. I can remember sitting on a joint State- Defense working party headed by one of your illustrious colleagues, arguing for a Defense Department position and being reminded that our job was to find the national interest and not just to support the position of the Department. So the same issue applies in the inter-departmental side. Do you have any experiences that would be like that theme of how General Eisenhower was very strong on coordination within the government? You must have been involved.

MACOMBER: Yes. It is an extremely difficult subject and by no means resolved. In the days we are talking about, the Eisenhower administration, we were experiencing the

second of two extremely strong secretaries of state, Mr. Acheson and Mr. Dulles. They spoke definitively for the executive branch through their own stature and strength in the executive branch and the implacable support they had from their presidents. At the same time you had a series of three very powerful senators, Connally (Texas), George (Georgia) and Vandenberg (Michigan) serving as chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. These men, each in his time, could keep congress from going off in ten different directions. So that there were two very strong coordinating poles at each end of Pennsylvania Avenue. The executive branch, the president and the secretary of state, basically the secretary of state, with the president's full knowledge and concurrence pulled together their point of view, hammering out their position and then negotiating it with, and selling it to, whichever of those three men was then chairmen in the Senate. Once it was sold, such was the stature of these three leaders, the executive branch could pretty much count on the whole Congress going along. Well, that was artificial, it was tidy on the surface, but it was not a natural way of proceeding. There were too many interests of other departments and other parts of Congress being suppressed.

To this day coordination of our foreign policy efforts remain a problem. For example, unlike earlier times, every cabinet department, and a great many subsections of these departments, have a wide spectrum of different and occasionally conflicting interest abroad. And a surprising number have people abroad as well. When I was in Turkey, only 15% of the personnel assigned to the embassy were from the State Department so that coordination of all our activities was a big part of my job.

Q: You represented the president. What kind of disciplinary and directive responsibility did you have?

MACOMBER: I had complete authority to coordinate and direct the embassy. All American ambassadors carried a letter from President Kennedy which in effect said, "I hold you responsible for the overall performance of the embassy, if someone is not performing to your liking, you may send him or her home. I hope you will use this authority sparingly, but you have it if you want to use it." We still have not mastered how to coordinate our interests very well in Washington. The National Security Council is a step in the right direction, but it can only cover a small portion of the total problem. Abroad a strong ambassador can coordinate. He must constantly fight the problem that seventy percent of his embassy's effort is concentrated on only about thirty percent of its objective. So it is a management job, to marshal his resources in appropriate proportion to his overall objectives.

Q: You mentioned your services in Turkey as ambassador. That was not your first ambassadorial post.

MACOMBER: First I was in Jordan.

Q: How did that come about? That sounds intriguing. Here you were with a change of administration and a brand new president with a whole lot of new rhetoric about the world and his outlook?

MACOMBER: Well, I got to know him when I was managing the State Department's congressional relations. He was on the Foreign Relations Committee and he was a very able fellow on that committee. When he was elected President, he wanted to make a few bipartisan (Republican) appointments. I had enjoyed working with him and admired him a lot. Interestingly enough, when I first took that job [Assistant Secretary for Congressional Relations], I went up to the Hill to call on the Vice President as a matter of protocol but also to get some advice as to how to do the job. The vice president, Richard Nixon, gave me some very good advice, and I remember the last thing he said to me was, "Get to know young Jack Kennedy", whose offices were across the corridor from the vice president's in the Senate Building. "He is a Democrat, but he is a pretty good man and has a lot of influence with the younger people in the Senate, and if you can convince him of the correctness of the Department's course, that is likely to have influence with the other younger members." It was very good advice. Interestingly, when I was dealing in the early days with Senator Kennedy on a foreign policy issue, he asked at least on one occasion, "What does Dick think?" As 1960 drew nearer, that question never was asked.

Q: When you were asked to go to Jordan, did you have any particular background or interest in Middle Eastern affairs?

MACOMBER: I had a background in Jordan, quite a bit of it fortunately. Jordan had been on the front pages of the New York Times for years because it had been a center of the cauldron out there, it nearly went under a couple of times. It was a matter of great congressional interest and I was immersed in briefings about Jordan for the previous several years. (One morning Secretary Dulles said to me, "By the end of the day Jordan may well not exist. If it should make it through the day it will be because of its strong leadership"--referring to its young king and its prime minister, Samir Refai.) In congressional relations you went where the action was, that is where public and congressional attention was focused. Because Jordan was on the center stage for so long I was relatively well informed.

Q: You went out in 1961 after the change of administrations. You were involved with the dilemma of America's emotional support of Israel and in juxtaposition with our dependence, then and now, with Middle Eastern oil, in Saudi Arabia and other interests too.

MACOMBER: Jordan has no oil. Jordan in those days was sort of the centerpiece of the whole Arab-Israeli business. The disappearance of Jordan would create a political vacuum. No other country particularly wanted Jordan, but they did not want anybody else to have it. Hence, stability in Jordan was very important to keep the peace out there. Also King Hussein represented moderate, decent leadership, the kind of leader we could support with some enthusiasm. So that was a fascinating experience. In Turkey the job

was quite different. It was like being ambassador to the United States in that if you were trying to get a policy supported you had to deal with the president, the prime minister and the parliament, and the press, and with public opinion. In Jordan it was just one person. King Hussein was the center of the whole country. It was a small country too, which made it easier. Unfortunately, it wasn't a democracy, it was not ready for that, but the King was trying to do a good job for his people.

Jordan was very fragile but it had strong leadership and that can make a difference in the tough days. The U.S. supported Jordan generously from the economic and military equipment point of view. There were difficult and scary days, but exciting. While I was there Jordan did not collapse, the King was not killed though he was very much a target of the radical Arabs, and serious fighting did not break out between the Israelis and the Arabs and had not for a number of years. I thought if that uneasy peace could somehow be kept for say 15 or 20 more years, the Israelis and the Arabs just might learn to live with, and grudgingly learn to accept, the status quo. A number of my Arab friends would say to me, very privately, that the present situation was getting them nowhere, that Arab land was not going to be returned, compensation for that land and rights to visit were practical alternatives--not desirable, but better than what they had now. And there was general recognition that peace could bring considerable prosperity for both sides. There was even some talk of this in less private conversations. As one very prominent Jordanian leader said to me, "Someday someone has got to have the guts to make peace." Unfortunately, the '67 war put an end to my hopes of a gradual peace, first between Israel and Jordan, and eventually between Israel and all its immediate neighbors.

Q: Your instructions came basically from the president to keep the peace? Everything was derivative to that one goal?

MACOMBER: To keep the peace and to keep Jordan in existence. That was our objective and it was the British government's objective also. In those days there was no practical successor to Hussein. We wanted Hussein to survive so the country would survive. Also we felt that Jordan under King Hussein could serve as an example of what could be done with moderate and courageous leadership. Of course we knew that Hussein would put his and Jordan's interest first, but in those days those interests coincided with ours. And I think almost everyone who dealt with him in the U.S. government liked him. We referred to him as the "BYK", the Brave Young King.

Q: Did you and your counterparts, the U.S. ambassadors across the borders, operate on pretty much a common wavelength?

MACOMBER: Yes. Wally Barbour was the ambassador in Israel. He took me around Israel, which was a useful experience, and gave us a chance to discuss our common problems. People in Israel would ask me about places in Jordan they had visited in earlier times, and when I got back to Jordan people there, of course, asked about places in Israel.

Q: There were no particular problems about the attitudes of people on the Hill, in the U.S. Congress? It seems so divided now.

MACOMBER: No. The Israeli lobby, while hardly admirers of Jordan and its leader, recognized that King Hussein represented a moderate point of view in the midst of far more radical Arab neighbors. That changed after my time, and as a result of Jordan's actions in the 1967 war.

Q: I guess the Jordanians had problems with their other borders too?

MACOMBER: Yes, the Jordanian government generally felt that the Israelis could be counted on to act logically in response to their own best interests. They were never quite sure what their Arab neighbors would do.

Q: You were in Jordan about three years?

MACOMBER: Yes. I was asked to come back to take over the Near East and South Asia region of the AID agency, I succeeded Bill Gaud who was moving up to be the deputy head of the agency. He and I had some real battles; I never thought he gave enough aid to Jordan, and he thought he did. When I found out that I was his choice to succeed him, I recalled that he and I had spent most of our time fighting and asked why he wanted me to take his place. He said, "The person in this job has to fight everybody, the State Department, American ambassadors, foreign ambassadors of the countries assigned to Washington. Everybody is trying to get more money out of you than they should." I enjoyed that time in AID, it was a broader scope, all the countries I had been dealing with in connection with the Jordanian job were in my area and also many others. In those days they defined the Near East and South Asia as from Greece and Egypt out to Nepal and Ceylon--and all countries in between.

Q: You had the subcontinent and North Africa--all the way across?

MACOMBER: North Africa stopped at Egypt. In those days India and Pakistan were the largest users of aid. I found it a fascinating job. It was the heyday of the AID agency. Dave Bell was a marvelous director and Bill Gaud was a great deputy. The assistant administrators who had the rank and pay of Assistant Secretaries and who had charge of these various regions were almost all very strong figures. It was a very interesting and useful experience.

Q: You mentioned that Bill Gaud said that in the job you were going to have to fight everybody, the State Department, the ambassadors, the country ambassadors in Washington, and so on. Did you find that true, going back to your earlier comments about the era of coordination and the attempts at internal governmental concerting of forces? Were you fighting everybody in that period, including the State Department?

MACOMBER: Oh, yeah. I sure was. Many were my good friends. Everybody sees things from their vantage point from where they are coming from. In dealing with interagency disputes you need two things--first you need a full understanding of the other person's point of view--you can't be just parochial in your approach. Second, you have to have a very strong boss. People will fight longer in interdepartmental battles if they know they will be backed.

Q: I suppose that your prior experiences in the Department conduced to relieve some of that infighting. You knew how things worked, you knew people, you had a broader view than that of a particular agency to which you happened to be assigned.

MACOMBER: You are absolutely correct. One of the great pluses was that when I was assistant to the Secretary of State I saw the telegrams that came in, and I saw which ones were effective and which ones weren't. I remember the Secretary saying about one telegram, "The ambassador is trying harder to be amusing than he is to be accurate." It is nice to be both, but if he can't be both he had better be accurate. Intemperateness is also very non-productive, in fact very counter-productive. When I would get messages when I was ambassador which bothered me or that I felt gave the wrong answer, I used to sit down and see how I could draft a calm message that would persuade them back in the Department that they were wrong. It is amazing how often you can't do that. Then you start thinking, well if I can't come up with a logical persuasive rebuttal maybe they have a point. Occasionally you can, and sometimes that will get the Department to change its mind. If you just fume back, that will not get you anywhere. And you have to remember that ambassadors cannot have the final word. You can't have over 150 different ambassadors with over 150 different foreign policies. Somebody has to reconcile them. In the first instance that is the assistant secretary for the area. I always had an understanding I thought was a fair one. If the answer to my request was no, it had to be signed off by the assistant secretary. I did not want a desk officer doing it. Key recommendations from embassies are made by the ambassadors and in the Department they are sometimes not decided on at that high a level. You sometimes had junior officers overriding ambassadors, and that is wrong. It is equally wrong to just give ambassadors their heads and do whatever they say. When I was ambassador to Turkey, there were important U.S. interests in Greece, and it would have been irresponsible for the State Department to just pay attention to what the ambassador to Turkey was saying and ignore the ambassador to Greece. The same with the ambassador to Jordan and the ambassador to Israel. Somebody has got to reconcile them but it should be done at the assistant secretary level or higher.

Q: Are there examples that come to mind of critical questions, such as AID levels, political positions?

MACOMBER: I remember one that comes to mind. There was a dust- up in Jordan and it looked like it might lead to a radical Arab revolution against King Hussein. The King handled the crisis very well and after a few days the threat was gone. Then, after the threat was gone, the Sixth Fleet started charging towards the eastern Mediterranean in a show of support for Hussein. I took the view that Hussein had handled this nicely and it

was not good to leave the impression that he needed Big Brother's support. But there was no stopping the fleet, it kept coming after the crisis was over. The world has survived and I have not thought of that incident for many years. It did not have as much a negative effect as I thought it might, but I was basically right. The charge against King Hussein was that he was a puppet of the West. He had handled the crisis very well. Why give fuel to his enemies by making it look like he was dependent on us in a situation where he was not.

Q: Does that illustrate a whole range of problems with the Defense Department? You mentioned your problems as ambassador with the then assistant administrator of AID who did not accept your recommendations on economic assistance. Were there equally severe problems with the Defense Department?

MACOMBER: In Turkey at first I had problems of primary concern to the Pentagon rather than the State Department, although the opium poppy growing was certainly a State problem. That was overtaken by a much more serious problem in which the State Department and Defense Department were both very much together on, and that was the fighting in Cyprus and the subsequent military assistance embargo imposed against Turkey by the U.S. Congress.

I always said that an ambassador had to be very good at dealing with two bureaucracies, with those of his host country and his own. He should recognize that sometimes the harder part of his two jobs was dealing with his own bureaucracy. It is part of the job. You can't let your frustrations creep into the tone of your messages; it just weakens your messages. You have to keep sending telegrams that reflect your understanding of why they're going down the road they are going, but why you think it is the wrong road.

Q: You went back out to the field, to Turkey, after your stint with the Agency for International Development?

MACOMBER: No, I went back as Assistant Secretary for Congressional Relations for a second time. Ten years after I held it the first time. The first time was with President Eisenhower, the second time was with President Johnson. I stayed in that job for quite a while. Then I was a deputy under secretary, a rank that does not exist anymore, but in those days you had a secretary, two under secretaries and two deputy under secretaries, and then the assistant secretaries. Now you have an under secretary for just about everything, and the two deputy under secretaries which were honored ranks, have disappeared. I was the chief administrative officer in the Department, the chief housekeeper. The Secretary of State is literally too busy to run the State Department administratively, and he should not be poring over budgets or worrying about communications, security, recruiting, promoting and all the other of the Department's housekeeping functions. So these were turned over to his deputy under secretary for administration. I was in that job for over four years. It was a very difficult time. Everybody was suing me. Those were very, very tough days.

We tried to get a reform program going on the administrative side. We made some progress on that. My view was that the State Department had been studied to death. We had had the Hoover Commission, the Murphy Study, the Wriston Study, a number of other studies. What we needed was not more studies but more implementation of the excellent recommendations that had come out of these studies. So I set up an effort, which was in-house, and staffed it with career officers and some political appointees, and asked them to read these reports and prepare their own study, basically drawing from these earlier collective reports as refined by their own experience, and see if we could implement some of these things. Up to now these reports had been by outsiders and the Foreign Service tended to reject them. We felt that the Foreign Service people would come to the same conclusion, which in many cases they did. So we had another report, it was really a distillation of these earlier reports. I have to say that in my day the Foreign Service was not very interested or helpful in solving administrative problems and, with some shining individual exceptions, it tended to wait for someone else to come up with the solutions and then, whatever they were, jump all over them. But in this case we had solutions which a large group of highly respected Foreign Service officers had put forward, and that made it easier to implement. Not everything was implemented, and much will always be left to be done, but I think it was a useful process, and I would like to see it done again from time to time.

Q: What imperatives moved toward reform? Was it the emergence of what are now called the transnational issues that did not fall into the neat geographic baskets, environmental, Antarctica, pollution, law of the sea, all these issues that do not have a country label on them?

MACOMBER: I think it was frustration, dealing with a huge organization that had not modernized.

Q: You mean word processors, data management things, communications?

MACOMBER: That in part. As a friend of mine used to say, the State Department in those days, was run like a country store. Another friend used to say it was filled with first rate people operating in a third rate system. It was also a frustrating time at the State Department because the NSC staff seemed to be taking over many of its functions.

Q: This was in the Johnson and Nixon times?

MACOMBER: The Nixon times particularly when Dr. Kissinger led the NSC. In order to be more competitive and regain a certain place in the hierarchy in Washington, bright, young aggressive kids were set on replacing the sleeping, old-fashioned system and modernizing it. So it was a good time to be working on it. But it is a long drawn process which in itself can be frustrating. It is like working for peace, you don't achieve peace in some finite way. Rather, it is an ongoing process. The same is true for modernizing the State Department. Personnel was under my office and the director general of the Foreign Service reported to me. He and I felt very badly about a number of our friends and

colleagues who were very competent career Foreign Service officers and who should have been made ambassadors, and were not. There were no openings for them. They never mentioned it, they never came up and said, "My performance clearly merits it. Why don't you make me an ambassador?" But you knew they were thinking that. For me it was the hardest part of that job. You hate to see deserving people get shoved aside. It is one of the things that made me so angry with the excessive number of politically appointed ambassadors who took places away from the career men and women who were really trained for the job. It is outrageous. We were still in the bought commissions era of the Charge of the Light Brigade. We did send, of course, a few very able non-career ambassadors who were chosen for their particular qualities as related to their particular posts.

Q: How would you characterize yourself in that context? You were sort of in both camps, both career in the sense of staying in the career service, but you had not come up through the ranks.

MACOMBER: One of the greatest compliments I ever received was in the opening sentence of the inspectors report on the embassy in Ankara. "This post," it said, "is led by an experienced career Foreign Service officer." But, of course, I was not one. By great good fortune I was sort of a "career" non-career appointee. For 20 years I served at the assistant secretary or ambassadorial level under five straight Presidents, both Democrats and Republican, and under five Secretaries of State. I have a theory about how both parties should develop their non-career ambassadors which is based in part on my own experience. I don't think you should have more than five or ten percent who are not from the career Foreign Service, anyway a small percentage. The Secretary of State, the under secretaries, the assistant secretaries, the deputy assistant secretaries and the special assistants who serve in their offices. There should be career people in this group but this is where the legitimate role for political people should be. Bright young Democrats or Republicans should be brought in as special assistants to the Secretary or under secretary or to an assistant secretary or if they are a little older, as deputy assistant secretaries or even assistant secretaries or under secretaries. It is these people who should bear the brunt of the political flak that is one of the givens in the politically charged Washington scene. Furthermore, the Secretary will not put up with an under secretary who is not any good; he is going to be gone pretty fast. The Secretary and the under secretaries are not going to keep around assistant secretaries who do not measure up. The assistant secretaries are not going to put up with incompetent deputy assistant secretaries, and none of these officials will keep around weak special assistants. But with those who are successful you are developing people who can come back again in later administrations prepared to handle the top jobs. On the other hand, an ambassador is far away; you don't get on to it if he is doing a bad job as quickly as you do in Washington. It can take a longer time and for some reason we are more tolerant about ambassador performance than we are with political appointees back in the State Department. My theory is that political ambassadors should not, unless they are very unusual people, be appointed directly from private life. They should be brought first into the caldron in Washington to test their capacities and get experience and then go out to the field, but not in large numbers.

Q: Hasn't there been a marked change in the role of ambassadors with high speed aircraft and communications, and special emissaries, or is that just a perception one has from the newspapers?

MACOMBER: It is a logical conclusion, but it is also worth remembering that since the invention of the telegraph everybody said that the ambassador is going to be obsolete. But it did not work out that way. When the airplane came along they said it again. Ambassadors are still the ones that coordinate and lead the embassy and after he has been there a while he should really know more about the host country than anyone in our government.

[end, side one]

...The ambassador did not before and does not now have the final word on U.S. policy where he serves, but he has the right to be consulted and should be constantly. What the State Department should never do is make a key move without involving the relevant ambassadors in the decisions. It is a very important voice and should be listened to, but it is not controlling. To maintain that right the ambassador must gain and keep the confidence of the Secretary and his assistant secretary. In other words, that right has to continue to be earned.

Q: How much of that do you ascribe to the individual ambassador and how much to the competence of the Foreign Service staff? When you were dealing with internal management problems in the Department you were talking about the effectiveness and ineffectiveness of management, but we have not brought up much about the professional capabilities of the staff. For example, those that you had in Turkey or Jordan, or those that you met when you traveled to all these different posts. Have you seen tremendous changes in that over the years? Has the democratization of the Service, a much less elite corps, had an effect?

MACOMBER: About a hundred people enter each year out of 10,000 who take the exam, which means that the Foreign Service is a very rigorously selected, and is a very able group. I never had an incompetent staff. On the contrary I was always supported by outstanding, dedicated people, who are very much underappreciated by the public. The stereotype of the pinstriped diplomat is misleading and unfair. I simply have the highest opinion of them. I think that they are rightly frustrated by so many ambassadors being appointed from outside the Service. There is the allegation that they all come from the eastern seaboard or Stanford, but that is not true. The only serious criticism I have of the Service, and I don't think that it is as true as it was, is that--rich or poor, from the east, the west, north or south--they tend to be the same kind of people. It is like trying to run a football team with everybody a good left end. They almost all have a liberal arts, history, social sciences background. So I think they were too much one kind of person, but I am speaking in educational, not social, geographic or ethnic terms. The Foreign Service should have more women, of course, but that is a situation that is improving.

Q: Do you think there has been an adequate response to the new range of problems, in terms of staffing, that has come up? The non-country problems, the ones across borders, acid rain with Canada, the South Pacific tuna rights which involves a dozen countries, the internationalization of Antarctica, the UN focus, all of these things as opposed to the geographic baskets that have been so traditional in the Service. Are we still behind in that area?

MACOMBER: I suspect we are, but I don't know. I did not fully understand the dimensions of this until after I left, but I imagine that with the budget cuts they are suffering, they are under staffed. I am also sorry to see them close consulates and this is also a budget matter. Consulates are important branch offices of an embassy.

Q: Some people suggested that "understaffed" is not the right word, but there has been mild distribution of resources and distribution of responsibility which has made for multiple layers of supervisors and an individual is not given a major problem, a major area to be responsible for. Now that they have cut things in fragments and with a reclustering of responsibilities you should be able to get along with fewer people, or with the present number.

MACOMBER: I think that you have to go that direction. You cannot endlessly add personnel. Another thing, there will be new programs added and you have to set your priorities, you can't take on every problem. We have to be more cold-blooded about what areas that are critical to us and see what areas are not.

Q: After you finished your difficult assignment as deputy under secretary for management, what happened next?

MACOMBER: I went to Turkey as ambassador.

Q: You were there during the Cyprus business?

MACOMBER: Yes. Two NATO countries, a very sad event. Fortunately the Greeks and Turks never got to fighting each other directly. The Turks fought the Cypriot Greeks. A very sad time. A chilling time, seeing a rational state, and Turkey is a rational state, seeing a war momentum build in that country and reach a point where there was no turning back.

Q: This is [July] 1974.

MACOMBER: Yes, 1974, and watching that momentum build I could not help thinking that this is the way that one day the big war will start. I hope not, but as I say, it was a chilling time. I also had the narcotics problem which was fortunately resolved. Turkey handled it very well. It has caused a lot of problems between our two countries, and we were very pleased with the way the problem was resolved. The Cyprus problem, however,

developed almost immediately afterwards so we did not have much time to sit around and be happy about one thing before we were hit by another.

Q: And then from Turkey you came back again to Washington?

MACOMBER: Turkey was my last appointment, in an unusual string of twenty-five years of bipartisan appointments. That string ran out when I got a telegram from the Department saying, "Name the earliest date you can leave." Not very gracious, but the truth is that new administrations have very often been terrible about their treatment of incumbents who are to be changed. When Eisenhower came in, rude messages went to some outstanding public servants. The same was true in the case of later administrations. I remember when I was chief administrative officer that one of the things I was going to do, but I never got around to doing it, was to rewrite those form messages, leaving samples for the use of later administrations, still making the point that ones resignation is being accepted, but also expressing thanks for past services. What happens in the early days of a new administration is that the combativeness of the campaigns, the combative spirit is still there. Before too long that spirit fades somewhat, and relations between the incoming and the outgoing become more gracious.

Q: Then you came home?

MACOMBER: Yes, and happily I became president of the Metropolitan Museum of Art where I stayed for 8 years, until I was 65, the longest time I ever spent in one job. I am also happy to say that a career Foreign Service officer succeeded me in it when I left. At the Met they have dual systems, a president and director, the director runs all the art matters, and the president runs the administrative side.

As I said, I stayed longer in that job than any other, which highlights one of the characteristics about the diplomatic world you and I have been talking about, which is that you do not stay in one assignment very long--which has its advantages and disadvantages.

Q: But you had a lot of continuity from the way you described your jobs and the focus of many of the people from your days from special assistant on.

MACOMBER: Yes, I was continuing down the same road, only changing vehicles.

Q: Do you have any overall views about the latest excitements or disappointments, or the things that gave you the greatest pleasure about looking back at all the assignments that you had? Obviously you had the opportunity to meet your bride, which you have not mentioned.

MACOMBER: That was number one. She was Mr. Dulles' principal secretary when I came to the office as special assistant. We were married some years later. We have been

married twenty-five years. If nothing else came out of my time with the State Department, this made it all worth it.

I think it is fair to say that the embassy helped keep the peace during the time I was in Jordan. The congressional relations experience was an interesting one. I had it twice, once under a Republican president, and once under a Democratic president. The spirit of cooperation in the Eisenhower period was there, but when I came back under President Johnson, Vietnam had torn the country apart. It was interesting to see the change; it was also sad.

I was in the AID agency when it had its golden period. That was interesting. As for Turkey, we did something about the opium poppies and our close and useful relationship managed to survive the embargo of assistance to Turkey and other fall-out from the Cyprus crisis. In management our "program of the '70s" did some good, I hope. Of course in many ways the most exciting thing was carrying a controversial but outstanding Secretary of State's briefcase and being involved in almost everything he was. And finally there was the privilege and pleasure of working with a lot of wonderful people along the way.

Q: Thank you for your cooperation with this project.

End of interview