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

AMBASSADOR RONALD K. McMULLEN

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy
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INTERVIEW

Q: OK. Today is August the 1st, 2012.

Q: An interview with Ronald Keith McMullen, being done on behalf of the Association for Diplomatic Studies and I'm Charles Stuart Kennedy.

Q: OK Ron, let's start at the beginning. When and where were you born?

McMULLEN: I was born in Cedar Falls, Iowa on October 18, 1955. My dad, Jack McMullen, was a veteran finishing his college degree at what's now the University of Northern Iowa in Cedar Falls. We lived in one of the corrugated tin Quonset hut-like buildings built for the influx of GIs coming back to school after the Korean War. I was born in a college town when my dad got back from serving in the Air Force during the Korean War.

Q: OK. Well, let's talk a bit about your family. Where did the McMullens come from and what was your father doing?

McMULLEN: My dad was a high school teacher. He taught physical education, drivers' education, and social studies and was the school's athletic director. His father ran a grocery store in Burt, Iowa. The McMullens immigrated to the U.S. in 1855 from Canada, originally being from Northern Ireland and Scotland. My mother's family, the Keiths -- my middle name is my

mother's maiden name -- the Keiths are farmers from Iowa. My mom, Jane Keith McMullen, grew up on a farm near Burt, Iowa and went to a one-room country schoolhouse through 8th Grade. On snowy days the neighborhood kids went to school in a neighbor's horse-drawn sleigh. When she was a girl during World War Two, local farmers could hire German POWs (prisoner of war) from the large POW camp in Algona to work on their farms. My mom tells stories of walking to country school, imagining that there might be escaped German prisoners lurking about. The German POWs in Algona constructed a 72-piece half life-size nativity scene, which is still on display in Algona. It attracts tourists, including former POWs and their families, and symbolizes the common bonds of Christianity that linked the POWs and their captors.

Q: A crèche, yeah.

McMULLEN: Indeed. My roots are small town, rural Iowa. I had my dad as a physical education teacher all through school – and never got an A in gym. My mom was a home economics major in college and taught for a few semesters when I was young. Later she was a 4H leader and judge.

Q: Your father graduated from college?

McMULLEN: Yes, from what's now the University of Northern Iowa. Then it was basically a teachers' school.

Q: And your mother?

McMULLEN: She graduated from Iowa State University in Ames, Iowa.

Q: All right. Well now, as a kid where did you grow up?

McMULLEN: I went from kindergarten through high school in Northwood, Iowa. When I graduated from high school in 1974, of the 74 graduates, 59 of us had started kindergarten together.

Q: Yeah.

McMULLEN: Northwood was a county seat town and provided services to surrounding farms. Some of my classmates are farming or married to farmers now. When I go back it seems Northwood hasn't changed all that much, although the downtown is drying up and the population is shrinking and aging, similar to demographics across the rural Midwest.

Q: OK. Well, why don't you describe the town as you knew it as a kid?

McMULLEN: It was a town of about 2,000 people. Farmers would come to town, particularly on Saturdays, to do their shopping and to socialize. The farms produced mainly corn, soybeans, cattle, and hogs. The town was largely Norwegian Lutheran and the grandparents of my classmates would sometimes sit on store steps on Saturday afternoons speaking Norwegian to

each other. Almost none of my classmates spoke Norwegian, even though some of their grandparents did. These old Norwegian-Americans wanted their children to be "real" Americans and have the best opportunities. As a result, they didn't encourage their children or grandchildren to keep up with Norwegian and their language heritage has largely been lost. The Lutheran churches in the area, particularly the country churches, would host lutefisk and lefse dinners on Lutheran and Norwegian holidays. Growing up as a Scottish Methodist I felt somewhat like a minority, not being a member of Luther League or participating in other Norwegian Lutheran events.

Q: How about politically? How was the town?

McMULLEN: The town was almost too polite to be very political. You didn't talk about politics really. When Iowa started to have the country's first caucuses, we got rather spoiled by having lots of attention from candidates. I remember meeting an unknown candidate from Georgia named Jimmy Carter. He was so eager to talk to young Iowans that he spoke in a chemistry lab when I was in college. Local politics were often personal. The town barber became the county recorder because everybody knew him. Local and state politics were not corrupt and there was an expectation of honesty. Northwood's mayor was typically a retired teacher or somebody of some standing who did it to help the town. Northwood had its own volunteer fire department, one of the best in Iowa. It received no government support or funding, but almost every business and civic organization contributed. When the whistle blew, everybody dropped everything and ran to help. It seemed normal at the time, but in retrospect I see that it was somewhat unusual.

Q: How were winters there?

McMULLEN: Cold. But I enjoyed winter. It was basketball season. In high school I lettered in four varsity sports. My dad as athletic director gave me lots of encouragement. As kids we enjoyed sledding and tobogganing. In the fall and winter I went pheasant hunting in the snow. Before I was old enough to hold regular jobs I made pocket money by trapping muskrats in the river on the edge of town. So I enjoyed winter. The change of season meant a new sport and winter meant basketball. In our school the town kids played basketball and many country kids were wrestlers. We had a good wrestling program. Maybe because the country kids grew up bailing hay and working with their dads on the farms they were strong and didn't have the time to shoot baskets uptown at the tennis courts like the boys who lived in town.

Q: Yeah. Were you much of a reader?

McMULLEN: Oh, constantly. When I was in kindergarten, we got World Book Encyclopedias, which opened the door to the world for me. About that time, a favorite uncle went to what's now The Gambia as a Fulbright teacher. When we'd get a postcard from Uncle Joe of a hippo or something, my mom would pull out the H encyclopedia, and we'd lie on the floor of the living room and look up hippos. That helped me begin to realize there was more to life than just Iowa.

Q: What about just plain -- what sort of reading were you doing? Did you have a library nearby?

McMULLEN: There was a good town library and in the summer it would have a reading program where kids would sign up to read 10 or 15 or 20 books before school started in the fall. I went through phases, but was always interested in history. A friend who lived next door, Fred Scheibe, got me interested in Civil War history, so as kids we read lots of books about the Civil War. I also was interested in pioneers -- Daniel Boone, Davy Crockett, and the mountain men. Books on American and military history were among my favorites.

Q: Do you recall any of the books that particularly impressed you as a kid that you read?

McMULLEN: In junior high I read a book by James Michener called The Bridge at Andau, which unlike Michener's thousand-page, multi-generational novels, was a relatively short non-fiction book about the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. The bridge was between Hungary and Austria and apparently James Michener stood there interviewing refugees fleeing the failed uprising against the Soviets in Hungary.

Q: This is '56.

McMULLEN: Right. The Bridge at Andau was a poignant story that Michener told so vividly that it really impressed and outraged me. It helped form my political and ideological views, especially about the evil Soviet Union oppressing people in the world. It reminded me of how lucky we are to live in America. Another favorite book in my junior high years was Cheaper by the Dozen, about a big family at the turn of the last century.

Q: Oh yeah.

McMULLEN: What impressed me about it was the father's motion and efficiency studies --

Q: I recall that the mother and the father both were --

McMULLEN: Indeed, both were efficiency experts in motion study. I also was impressed by a novel called The Terrible Game about an independent, medieval country completely surrounded by Soviet territory and the ingenious defenses the plucky inhabitants used to keep the Soviets at bay.

Q: How about movies?

McMULLEN: After the theater in Northwood closed, we sometimes went to Mason City to see a movie. Mason City was Meredith Wilson's hometown and is the prototype for River City, Iowa in "The Music Man."

Q: There's trouble in River City.

McMULLEN: Indeed. "Swiss Family Robinson" was another childhood favorite. "Around the World in 80 Days" is the first movie I remember seeing.

Q: Ah.

McMULLEN: As a former diplomat, I guess that's appropriate. About ten miles east of Northwood was a drive-in movie theater that also had a little airstrip. It was called the "Fly-In Drive-In." Quite a number of people in northern Iowa had private single-engine airplanes and every little town had a grass airstrip. It seemed at that time, the early to mid-1960s, that transportation by small plane would become the norm.

Q: Yeah.

McMULLEN: You might fly a small plane to see your relatives or go shopping in a nearby town, etc. Given the number of private small aircraft in the area, a theater operator near Saint Ansgar thought he could cash in on the craze for drive-in movie theaters by having a fly-in drive-in. You could fly your plane over to this theater and pull up to speakers that fit in an airplane window. You could hop out of your plane, go buy popcorn or pop at the concession stand, and sit in your airplane watching a movie. The mother of my friend Dan Robb was an aviator and I always thought it would be fun to go to the movies in her airplane, but never did.

Q: Well, as small kids, did you have sort of a gang of kids you hung out with?

McMULLEN: We lived in a neighborhood that was just chock-full of kids. This was the height of the baby boom and the neighborhood in which we lived was full of families with kids. There was always a game of baseball or touch football going on at the neighborhood playground. We flew kites, played army, rode bikes, shot slingshots, and sometimes at night we'd play kick the can. We played outside all the time with very little adult supervision or organization. As elementary school students there were very few distinctions or divisions, but in high school students of similar interests hung out together. Almost everybody was white, Christian, and English-speaking so there were few racial or ethnic divisions.

Q: How'd you find the teachers? Let's take elementary school.

McMULLEN: My kindergarten teacher, Mrs. Jaeger, kept a terrarium with a horned toad that we got to feed. She also taught us how to whistle with a blade of grass between our thumbs.

Q: Oh yeah. Get a very shrill sound.

McMULLEN: Yep. I've always appreciated learning that skill in kindergarten. She also drilled us in songbird identification. The Des Moines Register was the dominant state newspaper.

Q: Good paper.

McMULLEN: Every spring it printed an insert of the songbirds of Iowa. We were all required to bring it to class. Mrs. Jaeger pinned this foldout of the birds of Iowa on an easel. The class was divided into two lines, with the two front students holding yardsticks. Mrs. Jaeger would call out "Meadowlark!" and the first kid to touch the meadowlark with his or her yardstick got to play again, while the loser went to the back of the line. So if you were fastest in identifying the

birds, the longer you got to play. Because of the vigor of trying to be the first to touch the bird, it wasn't long before the foldout of the birds was shredded and the teacher had to pin up a new one. This helped instill an awareness of wildlife and I've remained fairly interested in birds and wildlife as a result.

Q: Did the outside world intrude much? I mean television, newspapers, and developments in other parts of the world?

McMULLEN: When I was in second grade, President Kennedy was killed. My teacher, Mrs. Berg, walked in, ashen-faced, and said, "Boys and girls, I'm sorry to tell you that President Kennedy has been shot."

The boy sitting behind me asked, "Is he dead?"

Sobbing, she said, "Yes," and ran out of the room.

We didn't know how to react. That short exchange has stayed with me, vividly, ever since, in part because I had never seen a teacher cry before. Clearly this was grave news, as it caused our teacher to cry and run out of the room -- quite atypical behavior for any teacher.

As my dad was a teacher, my folks' social circle consisted largely of other teachers. So my older sister Cheryl and I, like other teachers' kids, were always under the spotlight of teachers and the community, both at school and outside of school. We went to church with other teachers and our parents played cards, went fishing, and drank coffee with other teachers and their spouses. So we were always observed. Everything we did was potentially reportable to our parents. There was no hiding, everything was very transparent.

Q: Well, also I assume that the neighbors that saw the kid misbehaving, they'd tell 'em they were misbehaving no matter --

McMULLEN: Yes. That's exactly right. There was kind of a community enforcement of expected behavior and morals. There were kids who behaved better than others, and every kid had a little devilment in him or her, but generally the community was --

Q: They sort of kept an eye on 'em.

McMULLEN: Yeah. When I hear Garrison Keillor talk about Lake Wobegone, it resonates with me and reminds me of where I grew up.

Q: That's a very popular radio program.

McMULLEN: Indeed, yes.

Q: As you got a little bit older -- by the way, did you have brothers, sisters?

McMULLEN: My sister Cheryl was two years ahead of me in school. Cheryl was a talented musician. She played saxophone in the band, sang in the choir, and was in school plays and musicals. We took piano lessons from a strict older lady, Mrs. Fallgatter. My piano lessons were Monday morning before school — what a way to start the week. Cheryl was much better at piano than I was.

Q: How about outside, other than -- well, I mean obviously the assassination. But were there discussions about what was happening in Europe or Asia or something at the table, or?

McMULLEN: When the Vietnam War shifted into high gear in the 1960s and young men of our town began to go off to war, there was both quiet pride and concern. The American Legion and VFW (Veterans of Foreign Wars) were active in Northwood. I was in Boy Scouts and on Memorial Day we marched in a parade to the cemetery. The VFW, American Legion, Boy Scouts, and other people marched. We honored veterans for serving America. As more soldiers died or returned wounded, concern for the wellbeing of the troops grew, but we shared a sense of patriotism. In terms of local protest or opposition to the war, I wasn't aware of any. I can remember as an elementary school student hearing Walter Cronkite reporting that American forces had killed 16 guerillas in Vietnam. My immediate thought was, "Why are they killing gorillas?"

Q: Ah yes.

McMULLEN: I was naïve and fairly isolated at that time. I saw the communists as the bad guys, my anti-communism stemming in part from James Michener's The Bridge at Andau and The Terrible Game. So as a kid, I was not opposed to the Vietnam War -- we were trying to stop communism from taking over another country.

Q: Did your father speak about Korea?

McMULLEN: My dad was in the Air Force during the Korean War years and fixed propellers on B-29s and other large aircraft. He was stationed in the U.S. and went on some short training deployments abroad to Morocco and the Azores. When coaxed, he'd share stories about life as a GI and some of the hijinks he was involved in. He was a Republican, but was not overly interested in politics.

My maternal grandfather, Wayne Keith, was political, perhaps the most political of my close relatives. Wayne Keith had been a state champion sprinter and a football star in high school and later became a Master Farmer in Iowa, Vice President of the Farm Bureau, and when I was in junior high, he was elected to the State Senate. My Grandpa Keith's notion of government was that it was there to provide for the common good, but not to order people around or spend a lot of taxpayers' money. He was defeated for re-election by an opponent who, reputedly underhandedly, sent each resident of the district's nursing homes a flower on their birthday. My grandfather thought that was an over-the-top campaign ploy.

Q: Oh boy.

McMULLEN: My paternal grandfather, George Howard McMullen, owned a general store in Burt, Iowa and later worked for the town bank. Grandpa Mac valued thrift and extolled saving. He walked me through my first income tax return, after I earned money from a summer job during high school. He had me first round off all the figures to the closest dollar. When we were done, he announced, “Now, we’re going to do it again using dollars and cents to see if it makes a difference.” So we did it again and the tax due came out to be two dollars less.

I grumpily said, “It was only two dollars.”

He noted, “It took us 20 minutes to do this a second time. That would be equal to six dollars an hour. Do you make that much on your job?”

“No,” I admitted.

He continued, “So it was worthwhile, wasn’t it?”

I said, “Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

Q: How did coming from small town America carry over in your later career? Were you expecting people to be straightforward?

McMULLEN: Yes. Corruption and conspicuous consumption seemed wrong. Growing up I was taught to value hard work, sharing, helping others, and being modest. You were expected to do the right thing. As a first-tour consular officer in Santo Domingo, I was shocked at the blatant lying I faced each day from desperate visa applicants. In Gabon President Bongo’s extravagance seemed just plain wrong, as did the overbearing cruelty of the Isaias regime in Eritrea.

Q: How did you fit with the rest of the kids? In other words, you know, I mean were you a loner, were you a leader? Were you this or that, or what?

McMULLEN: I had a lot of friends, as we had a sociable class. I was a good student, a jock, sang in the choir, was in a play, and participated in speech competitions. My parents encouraged me to participate in lots of different activities and I wasn't pigeonholed as part of just one group. My dad said that there’s a direct correlation between participation in extracurricular activities and success in life. So I had lots of encouragement from home and the small size of our school made it easy to take part in many different activities. The smartest four or five kids in my class moved away from town for some reason, so I ended up being the valedictorian kind of by default. I was an Eagle Scout, sang in the church choir, lettered in four sports, worked in the summers and after school, and had a pretty active and trouble-free youth.

Q: Being an Eagle Scout, this is quite an achievement. How did you find scouting?

McMULLEN: I enjoyed scouting a lot. My dad, for a time, was scoutmaster, so again I had encouragement from my parents. I enjoyed hiking, camping, and canoeing. The reward for getting my Eagle Scout award was a trip to Philmont Scout Ranch in New Mexico, a two-week hiking and camping adventure that was one of the highlights of my high school years. Two other

Scouts from our troop, Jeff Vansteenburg and Dan Robb, also went to Philmont that summer, as did my dad and the assistant scoutmaster. It was a great time. The Rocky Mountains in northern New Mexico were gorgeous. It was physically taxing, but a wonderful experience.

Q: What about summer jobs or winter jobs or anything?

McMULLEN: Several summers I worked at B&K Lumber, stacking lumber and working in the lumberyard. One summer I worked in B&K's rafter shop with a Vietnam War veteran, kind of a dodgy character who, because of problems with drink, had lost his driver's license. He was on a medication called "beer sick" that caused nausea if he drank alcohol. He was from elsewhere and was not like the normal good citizens of Northwood that I knew. He also dipped snus, had a little pinch of Copenhagen between his cheek and gum, as smoking was prohibited in the lumberyard. He told me lots of colorful stories about being a grunt in Vietnam, half of which I think he made up just to entertain us during the long work day.

Q: Yeah. You never know.

McMULLEN: It was one of those motivational jobs, as it motivated me to go to college so I could have a career. But it was quite an interesting view of life from a real blue collar perspective. I didn't smoke or drink in high school, but once when my co-worker opened a new little round tin of snus, I said it smelled kind of good. He said, "Have you ever had a," --

Q: It was flavored, wasn't it?

McMULLEN: It could be, yeah.

Q: This is Copenhagen.

McMULLEN: Copenhagen and Skoal were brand names. Folks called it snus, which might have Scandinavian roots.

Q: Like snuff?

McMULLEN: But you didn't put it in your nose. You put it under your tongue or just a pinch between your cheek and gum as the advertisement went. So I tried some while we were working in the rafter shop. At first it smelled good and tasted all right. But pretty soon my head started to spin, my stomach started to flop, and my eyes started to water. I had to sit down in a hurry. It was very powerful stuff and went right into my bloodstream. That was my first and last experience with smokeless tobacco.

The summer of 1978 I worked on a construction crew building a tall grain elevator in Northwood. Once you started slipping the concrete, pouring this tall grain elevator, you had to pour round the clock, 24 hours a day. I was on the night crew. The pay was OK, but I'd never worked at night before and the disruption to my normal daily rhythm really threw me for a loop. The night shift had about 35 guys, only two or three of whom were local. The rest of the crew were itinerant construction hands who followed grain elevator construction projects up and down

the Great Plains. They were a tough bunch. Many of them drove motorcycles, most had been in jail, and they all sported tattoos. It was hard work and was another one of those motivational summer jobs.

Q: Yeah.

McMULLEN: I thought, "I've made a thousand dollars this summer to help pay college expenses, but overall this has been a miserable job. At least in a generation if I come back with kids, they can see this towering grain elevator that stands stories above everything else. It can be seen for miles around." But three years later it blew up, completely blew up in a corn dust explosion.

Q: I'm told those things happen.

McMULLEN: Yep, completely leveled. So no trace remains of the grain elevator that I labored so hard to build that summer. During my senior year in high school I worked in Fallgatter's Grocery Store, making $1.65 an hour as a transportation and placement engineer. We transported goods, placed them on the shelves, and did carryout. My dad grumbled, "Your primary job is to be a student and a student athlete. If your grades or sports performance suffer, then you'll have to quit your job."

And I said, "Fair enough." I managed to work after school and on weekends, study as needed, and start on the football, basketball, track, and baseball teams.

Q: What was the influence of your mother?

McMULLEN: My mom was a homemaker who had gone to Iowa State and majored in home economics, which she taught for a few years. She was an excellent cook and seamstress. "Store-bought" was sort of a pejorative term around our house, whether it referred to clothing or food. We had a garden and my mom canned and froze vegetables and made jam and pickles. Her dad, as I mentioned, was a farmer and sometimes gave each of his four kids a half side of beef. And we had a big freezer in which we kept meat wrapped in butcher paper from my Grandpa Keith or that we'd gotten from the locker uptown, run by my friend Travis Pollock's dad. Sometimes my mom and dad butchered chickens at my grandpa's farm.

My mom was a 4H judge and went to county fairs to judge 4H projects or demonstrations on cooking, sewing, or other life skills. She was efficient and my dad always said if she had been in the military she would have been a general, she was so well organized. She tried to keep me organized as well, although it was a constant chore. She was educated to be a home economics teacher, but decided raising two kids was a priority. She occasionally substituted, but was mostly at home for us. She went to every one of my home and most of my away sporting events during my high school years. My mom made sure that I didn't get a big head. She was not overly effusive or emotional, and just expected you to do a good job. If you did, that was only to be expected. She set the standards high, and we tried to live up to them.

Q: Was there much in the way of discussions of Iowa, the world, around the dinner table or not?

McMULLEN: Iowans have a quiet pride in community and their state and are appalled at the corruption in placed like Chicago and Washington, D.C. There were almost no racial or ethnic minorities in my hometown, so there was little understanding or discussion of people of other races or religions. I think there were two Catholics in high school with me. When President Kennedy was elected in 1960, I remember comments like, "He's a Catholic, you know," which was a concern for some people. My home town was kind of insular. In 1979, after having been a State Department intern in Khartoum, Sudan, I visited Northwood and met some classmates at a tavern uptown.

One asked, "Now, where have you been, Ron?"

"I've been in Sudan," was my reply.

"Oh," she said, "I thought you were in Africa."

Q: Yeah.

McMULLEN: When I was in high school my family hosted an exchange student from Brazil. My sister Cheryl signed us up as a host family without asking my parents. Ronaldo was quite an exotic character in our little town. His English was really bad, so he ended up taking a lot of math and science classes. We didn't have a soccer team, of course, so Ronaldo went out for track. My senior year our class had an exchange student from Sweden named Dan Stocks, but since he was Scandinavian he didn't seem very foreign.

In the 1960s northern Iowa still had a number of sugar beet farms. Sometimes the farmers would hire Mexican migrant workers to hoe and harvest the sugar beets. So occasionally we would get Mexican or Mexican-American kids, children of migrant workers, who would come to school for four or five months and then be gone. In physical education class, if you could climb the rope to the top of the gymnasium using only your arms, you got an A. Few kids could do it (I couldn't), but Robert Zamora, one of the transient Mexican students, could. So, with very few exceptions, I rarely interacted with people from different backgrounds or beliefs. I had never talked to an African-American until college. I grew up in a homogenous, plain vanilla small town.

Q: During this time, the Civil Rights Movement was really hot. Did people around you have any feelings about it?

McMULLEN: The news coverage from The Des Moines Register emphasized the violence, rioting, and civil unrest more than the causes or objectives of the civil rights movement. Our little town hadn't oppressed anyone and we didn't have any minorities to segregate, so the focus was largely on the looting and disruptions that arose out of the unrest of the 1960s. Likewise, the focus during the spring of 1970, when campuses were aflame after the U.S. invasion of Cambodia, was the interruption of the education system. So it was a rather status quo upbringing, one where emotions were to be expressed quietly, if at all. Opinions were your opinions and not to be forced on others. Northwood was a rather apolitical, status quo,

conservative, and close-knit community. So as a kid growing up I felt largely unaffected by the outside world. Until going to college -- that was a real eye-opening experience for me.

Q: How about in high school? First place, what subjects sort of grabbed you and what ones didn't?

McMULLEN: I liked social studies, history, government, and psychology. I was not very good in math. As a kid, I had been a rock collector and enjoyed the outdoors, but the hard sciences were going to be tough because I wasn't very good in math. I took the required amount of math and no more, but would always look for electives in social studies and history. We had excellent teachers. In fact, our school was rated in the top 2% nationally in standardized test scores. We had a well-educated, dedicated group of teachers including Bob and Lorna Weselmann, Bob Perry, and Maynard Midtgaard, who was our basketball coach and guidance counselor. We had outstanding teachers who were good people. We got a first-rate education.

Q: Yeah.

McMULLEN: If I'd been good at math I might have been a geologist or something, but because I wasn't, I ended up as a diplomat.

Q: How important at the high school level was basketball? You know, one reads about in many places, particularly in the Midwest, that this is sort of the religion of the country or something.

McMULLEN: Yes, indeed. Basketball was probably the most popular sport in our town. I lettered in four sports. On our football team I played quarterback and safety. In basketball I was a forward, in track a hurdler and high jumper, and in baseball I pitched and played infield. But for basketball, the gym was packed. We were conference co-champs my senior year. The basketball players were minor celebrities. We'd go into the bowling alley or a café up town and the grown-ups would comment on either the past or upcoming game. It was an important activity and identity for the community. Many people traveled to away games to support us. The town's identity, entertainment, and community pride were expressed through the high school basketball team. We had a good team and all of the starters were about the same size, about 6'2".

Q: You're rather tall.

McMULLEN: We were all about 6'2". We didn't have a tall center or a short guard. We ran a zone press and used fast break a lot. We were athletic. The team and the town were disappointed that we didn't make it to the state basketball tournament that year. We lost in the district championship to a team that we could have beaten. But it was fun. It was part of my identity. Sports are things you don't have to do, but they provided discipline, camaraderie, and teamwork. In basketball, no matter how good you are, the outcome depends on the team. As a diplomat, in many of the posts the country team really was, or could have been -- should have been -- a team where we supported each other, built on strengths, and helped cover weaknesses. The discipline and teamwork I learned in high school sports was important in my diplomatic career, particularly at small posts, where you really did need to function as a team.

Q: What about dating girls and all that sort of stuff in high school?

McMULLEN: I was rather awkward and geeky but did have dates for the junior and senior proms, in part because my mom said, “Every girl should have a date for prom. Just find some girl you wouldn’t mind going to the prom with, and go.” When I was in junior high, the physical education instructor, Mr. Tope, volunteered to be a chaperone at one of the sock hops.

Q: This is where you can dance on the gym floor, but you have to take your shoes off.

McMULLEN: That’s it.

Q: So you won’t scuff it.

McMULLEN: Yeah. The basketball coach wouldn’t allow his basketball floor to be scuffed up.

Q: So it was known as a sock hop.

McMULLEN: Bobbi Perry was a neighbor whose dad was a teacher and a friend of my dad’s. So we carpooled to the sock hop in Kensett, the neighboring town where the junior high was located. Bobbi Perry was a friend, not a girlfriend. Bobbi, looking the handsome young gym teacher, Mr. Tope, and his attractive wife, said, “The next song I’m going to ask Mr. Tope to dance, and I dare you to ask Mrs. Tope.”

I gasped, “You wouldn’t.”

She blustered, “I’m going to. And you have to ask Mrs. Tope.”

The music ended and there was a break between songs. Bobbi went over and asked Mr. Tope if she could dance with him. I couldn’t back down on a dare, so I went over and asked Mrs. Tope if I could have the next dance. She laughed and said OK. Well, the next number was “Hey Jude” by the Beatles, which was a slow song.

Q: Oh yeah.

McMULLEN: And a slow dance. So suddenly I had this attractive, grown woman in my arms, slow dancing to “Hey Jude.” Quite a memorable, sweat-inducing experience for a gangly seventh-grader. When I hear “Hey Jude,” I still sometimes think of Mrs. Tope.

Q: Oh (laughs).

McMULLEN: I usually had a date for the prom, homecoming, and the Hay Seeders Ball, which was the FFA’s (Future Farmers of America) spring dance. But more often we would do things in groups, go to Mason City to get a pizza or something. I didn’t have a high school sweetheart per se.

Q: Yeah. I always think of Iowa as -- was there a corn palace, is that --

McMULLEN: We had state fairs and county fairs, which were big deals. And since Norwood was the county seat, the Worth County Fair was in our town.

Q: Talk a little about it. I mean I think of the Rogers and Heart thing or something.-

McMULLEN: Rogers and Hammerstein's "State Fair."

Q: State fair, yes.

McMULLEN: …which was about the Iowa state fair, yes. The county fair was a big deal for the FFA kids who had raised --

Q: Future Farmers?

McMULLEN: Future Farmers of America was a club of boys and girls interested in becoming farmers. They raised sheep, cattle, or hogs to show at the fair, with the best in each category winning a ribbon and prize money. The girls in 4H worked on their projects. I wasn't in 4H or FFA, so sometimes I'd enter a model airplane and would occasionally get three or four dollars as prize money. But I enjoyed the midway the most. There was a carnival with a Ferris wheel and other rides. I would go for fun, but also to look for money. Because if you were on the loop-o-plane or another ride on which you were --

Q: (laughs)

McMULLEN: …periodically upside down, occasionally you'd lose quarters or dimes in the grass below and I'd find them. I'd often make a profit at the county fair. There was usually a headline act or singing group in the grandstand. The Grass Roots sang at the Worth County Fair, as did the Oak Ridge Boys. So the county fair was something to look forward to, hanging out with your buddies, enjoying rides at the midway, and eating food that probably wasn't healthy and that your mom didn't make.

Q: (laughs)

McMULLEN: Corndogs, cotton candy, that sort of stuff.

Q: Yeah. I was just wondering, were there special events of like hayrides and things like this?

McMULLEN: Yep. A hayride was a social event, particularly for church youth groups or birthday parties. For a hayride, a farmer with a tractor stacked bails of straw typically, rather than hay, on a flatbed trailer, maybe with loose straw or hay on top. The kids would sit, often on a cold autumn evening, on the hay and ride around dark country roads. The fun of it was, because it was cold, boys and girls sat together in close proximity in a dark environment. As it was often a church youth group activity, there was always a chaperone so things didn't get out of hand. But a hayride was a fun activity, especially for those too young to have a driver's license.

Q: All right. Well, at high school you said you wound up as valedictorian?

McMULLEN: I did, largely because there were about three or four kids in my class who were smarter than me who moved away for various reasons. Anthony Leo's dad was a dentist. He moved away. Fred Scheibe's dad was the school superintendent. He moved away, as did three or four other bright kids. So -- yeah, I was valedictorian. A guy named Sidney Swensrud grew up in Northwood, went on to become chairman of Gulf Oil, and left a pile of money to be used as college scholarships for graduates of Northwood-Kensett. Every year at high school graduation the four or five scholarship recipients were announced -- they weren't always the smartest students, but they were bright kids who were also good citizens, who had promise. Nobody knew who was on the Swensrud Committee and the identity of the recipients was a secret until the commencement ceremony. I had a dual-track college plan -- I'd go to a more affordable state university unless I got a Swensrud Scholarship, in which case I'd attend Drake, a private university that was more expensive. I was lucky enough to get a Swensrud Scholarship and went off to Drake University in the fall of 1974.

Q: OK, you went to Drake. And where's Drake and what was it like at that time?

McMULLEN: Drake University is in Des Moines, Iowa. It's a private university of about 5,000 students. When I was in 8th Grade Drake made it to the Final Four in the NCAA (National Collegiate Athletic Association) basketball tournament. So Drake had kind of a high profile in basketball then, in addition to hosting the world-class Drake Relays. Drake was the location of the annual Iowa high school state track meet, as it had an all-weather synthetic track. Northwood's track was made of cinders that my dad salvaged from a cement plant in Mason City, and they weren't a very good track surface. As a hurdler in high school I qualified for the state track meet in Des Moines, which was held at Drake's track. I thought, "This is wonderful. If went to Drake I could run on this track whenever I wanted to." So that's how I chose a college, because of the quality of Drake's track and the largess of Sidney Swensrud.

Q: How big was your class at Drake?

McMULLEN: There were about 900 freshmen that year. About a third were from Iowa, a third were from the Chicago area, and a third were from other parts of the U.S. This was my first experience with cosmopolitan, big city kids, young men and women who were not from small towns. It was a stimulating, eye-opening, expansive time for me, socially as well as intellectually. It helped make me who I am today.

Q: I assume it's co-educational.

McMULLEN: Absolutely.

Q: Yeah. And how about African-Americans?

McMULLEN: Across the hall lived Alanzo "Buck" Anderson, a black student from the south side of Chicago who was at Drake on a basketball scholarship. This was the era when students

danced frequently at dorm parties, dance halls, and discotheques. I hadn't danced much in high school. When Buck saw me dancing at a dorm mixer, he burst out laughing and asked, "Where did you learn to dance?"

"I never did," was my reply.

"That's obvious," Buck said. "I'll show you some moves, but you can't ever tell anyone about this." Later, he put on an Earth, Wind, and Fire record and gave me some tips on how to avoid embarrassing myself on the dance floor.

I had a friend from Hawaii named Debbie Chang, not a girlfriend, just a friend. I asked her, "Next weekend would you like to go to Northwood with me and see small town Iowa?"

She agreed. We traveled up to Northwood on a snowy, cold Friday and went straight to the high school gym to catch the basketball game. The referee didn't blow the whistle and stop the game when Debbie Chang and I walked into the packed gym. But almost. Everyone turned to look and there was a just-audible mass gasp, or so I imagined. It was eye-opening experience for Debbie Chang to see what a small, insular place I had come from. The next day, despite being 20 below zero, we went out for a snowmobile ride. She hated it. She hated the cold weather, transferred to the University of Southern California the next year, and later became a swimwear model. It was a broadening experience for me to meet sophisticated kids from Chicago, Hawaii, and elsewhere. There were lots of Jewish students at Drake. I'd never met anyone of the Jewish faith. My roommate, Bill Eversman and a good buddy, Dale Glanzman, were Catholic, and occasionally I attended mass with them.

Q: Yeah, a variety of people, it seems.

McMULLEN: A friend, Scott Shreve, and I took a religion class together. He happened to be a Methodist and asked me, "Why are you a Methodist?"

I said, "Because my parents were. That's how I grew up."

He replied, "Yeah, me too. Hey, let's go to as many different church services as possible to see other denominations in action."

So we did. It was quite enlightening. Scott went on to become a Methodist minister and officiated when Jane and I got married. College was time to explore, to meet people of different backgrounds, faiths, and world views.

Q: Drake is in Des Moines?

McMULLEN: In Des Moines, yes.

Q: How did you find -- this was a big city, wasn't it?

McMULLEN: Yes, I can remember going to downtown Des Moines and walking around, staring like a rube up at the tall buildings, just being amazed at the skyscrapers in Des Moines.

Q: How did you find campus life?

McMULLEN: Oh, I enjoyed it. My parents are teetotalers, and I'd never had anything to drink before going to college. At that time the drinking age was 18. Most dorm or other parties included a beer keg in the corner. I learned how to drink responsibly, probably after going over the limit a time or two and paying for it the next morning. We came to know our limits and learned not to exceed them regularly, as we'd seen kids drop out who couldn't manage.

One night after a Drake basketball game some friends from my dorm and I went to a seedy local tavern. We were standing at the bar watching the TV when two guys, one with a shotgun and the other with a pistol, walked in and started yelling, "This is a robbery. Give us your wallets and jewelry." But no one was paying any attention to them -- they were just being ignored.

Finally, a friend said, "Look, we're being robbed." As we turned around, the guy with the pistol had a bag into which some Drake law students were dropping wallets and rings. I reached in my pocket and found a nickel and a parking token. As the robbers came down the row of us standing at the bar, I dropped the parking token into the bag. That was all they got from me.

They ran out the door and round the corner. It had been snowing, and I went out and began to follow their tracks in the snow. After going a ways, I thought, "What the heck am I doing? What if I catch up with them?" During the robbery I wasn't scared, but the next day I thought, "That could have been a bad situation."

Q: Absolutely, yeah.

McMULLEN: Later life I also came into harm's way a time or two. It often seemed more concerning afterwards than when you're going through it.

Q: Did you go out for sports at Drake?

McMULLEN: I had planned to be a walk-on high jumper but was disappointed to find that Drake had offered scholarships that year to a couple of champion high jumpers from other states. So I didn't go out for track, but enjoyed participating in a variety of intramural sports.

Q: Did you major in -- did you have to major there?

McMULLEN: Political science was my major, probably the result of my high school interest in government, history, and social studies. As a senior graduating from high school the Northwood Anchor asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up.

I said, "I'd like to go into international relations or maybe banking."

This was when Henry Kissinger was secretary of state and was kind of a high-profile character. I didn't really know much about him, but it was something to tell the local newspaper and the nosey old ladies in town. So I studied international relations and political science at Drake. One of my professors, Francis Wilhoit, had reputedly been Henry Kissinger's apartment-mate at Harvard. Doctor Wilhoit, a brilliant guy and a great teacher, really inspired me to aim high. The fact that my professor at Drake had shared an apartment with Henry Kissinger at Harvard expanded my notion of the possible.

Q: Well, how stood political science as a disciple in those days? Because political science has gone through a number of permutations. When I took it, it was comparative government. But then it, you know, got quantitative.

McMULLEN: Yes.

Q: And I think sort of lost its bearings. But that's my personal impression. But had the quantitative mafia taken over at this point?

McMULLEN: Not at Drake. Again, we studied political philosophy, comparative politics, and the government and politics of various regions and countries. It was an intellectual exploration of the world's politics, economies, cultures, thought, and geography. I took several geography classes and one summer helped a geography professor move house. He was going through a divorce. I stayed in his spare bedroom for the rest of the summer and got to know him as just another regular guy.

Q: Well, did international affairs come into your orbit at this point?

McMULLEN: Yes. 1976 was America's bicentennial, an Olympic year, and an election year. That spring semester a pack of Democratic candidates came campaigning through Drake and I got to meet Sergeant Shriver, Morris Udall, Bruce Babbitt, and Jimmy Carter.

I went to the Montreal Olympics with friends Dave Bell, John Six, and Scott Shreve in my family's old beat-up car. We stayed in a youth hostel full of New Zealanders. One night we got lost in Montreal and the Norwegian rowing team helped us get back to where we needed to go. It was an eye-opening experience, particularly staying with all those crazy New Zealanders and trying to understand Quebecois French in Montreal.

That year my summer job was as an orientation counselor at Drake. On the night of July Fourth, I went down to the lobby of the dormitory where the incoming students and their parents were staying to buy a can of pop from the pop machine. I ran into the father of an incoming student and begin to visit with him. It turned out that as a young man he had been a Hungarian freedom fighter.

Q: Huh!

McMULLEN: I thought back to James Michener's The Bridge at Andau. This man, Mr. Svec, had fought against Soviet tanks with Molotov cocktails in the streets of Budapest. He was

eventually forced to flee and came as a refugee to the United States. He spoke movingly about America's freedoms and how he so hoped that his compatriots could one day enjoy them in Hungary. That really made the bicentennial for me -- it was better than fireworks or hearing "Stars and Stripes Forever." Standing beside a pop machine in the dorm lobby listening to Mr. Spec talk about how he had fought in Hungary for the freedoms we often take for granted in America was the highlight of the bicentennial for me.

Q: Well, any extracurricular activities?

McMULLEN: I headed Drake's International Relations Organization. We went to St. Louis for a Model UN (United Nations) competition and got the Outstanding Delegation Award. As a senior I spent a semester abroad studying at the Royal Commonwealth Society in London on a program that I learned about through Doctor Wilhoit. It was the first time I had been outside the U.S. for more than a day. We had briefly nipped across the border into Canada and Mexico on family trips, but I had never traveled overseas or on a big airplane. In Iowa whatever The Des Moines Register printed was taken as the unvarnished truth, it was just the news. When I got to London there was a kiosk selling 19 newspapers, one of them with a big headline reading, "President Shot!" I thought, "Holy cow, I've missed the news." I went over and picked up the paper, only to find it was the President of Yemen who had been assassinated. Seeing 19 different headlines on the same day made me realize that there's more than one truth.

Q: Yeah.

McMULLEN: Seeing media spin and different perspectives helped me become more worldly and less blindly accepting of the written word.

Q: Did you run into anybody from the Foreign Service or think about it during the time you were in college?

McMULLEN: Yes, in fact when I was in London I took the Foreign Service written exam for the first time. I hadn't done any homework and didn't know much about it. I thought there was going to be a lot more cultural questions on it than there in fact were. So I spent time preparing by going to art museums in London and trying to recognize great paintings and sculptures. I took the written Foreign Service exam in the lunchroom at Embassy London. I failed. Over the years, I took it four times. I think they eventually got tired of seeing me show up and just let me in. My first real experience with an embassy was taking the Foreign Service written exam at Embassy London.

Q: What inspired you to take the exam?

McMULLEN: My motivation sprang in part from my uncle who had been a Fulbright teacher in Gambia when I was a little kid, the courses that I'd taken at Drake, and the people I'd met. I was interested in the world, perhaps because I came from such an insular background. At Drake I enjoyed meeting people from different backgrounds and ways of life. I was also patriotic and thought I would be a good representative for America. When I was a freshman in college I had a draft number, but by the time I was a sophomore the draft had ended. I wasn't keen on

volunteering for the military, although I've always held the military in high regard. The Foreign Service dovetailed with my service orientation. I was attracted by the notion that I could represent America, see the world, and get paid while doing so.

Q: Did the Peace Corps cross your radar?

McMULLEN: Indeed. When I was a senior at Drake my academic advisor, Richard Pattenaude, asked, "What are you going to do after graduation? Finding a job's not always easy for political science majors."

I said, "Geez, I don't know. Any suggestions?"

He said, "Well, the Peace Corps is a good way to see the world and get some experience. You also need a Plan B in case the Peace Corps doesn't work out for whatever reason." He added, "The Humphrey Institute at the University of Minnesota has a good faculty and quite a lot of fellowship money." He said, "Why don't you think about the Peace Corps and, as a backup, apply to the Humphrey Institute at the University of Minnesota?"

So I looked into the Peace Corps programs in Nepal and Afghanistan, applied, and was accepted as a Volunteer Trainee in the Afghanistan program. I planned to head to Afghanistan shortly after graduation. The same week I got my Afghan visa there was a communist coup in Kabul, where the Kremlin recognized the new communist government two hours before the coup started. It was a bad sign. A few days later some Europeans were killed in rural Afghanistan after being mistaken for Soviets. The Peace Corps then closed its program in Afghanistan. They told me, "We don't have another immediate vacancy that you can fill." That same week, besides the coup in Afghanistan and getting my Afghan visa, I got a full fellowship offer from the University of Minnesota. So I unpacked my sandals, packed my snowshoes, and off to Minnesota I went.

Q: Ah.

McMULLEN: I've always regretted not becoming a Peace Corps Volunteer and have held the Peace Corps in high esteem. As a diplomat I enjoyed interacting with both Peace Corps Volunteers and staff. The 1978 communist coup in Afghanistan foiled my attempts to become a Peace Corps Volunteer.

Q: OK. So you were at graduate school from when-to-when?

McMULLEN: I graduated from Drake in May of 1978 and began a master's program at the University of Minnesota that fall.

Q: That must have been, I won't say a shock, but going from Drake to Minnesota was --

McMULLEN: Minnesota's a huge school with over 40,000 students. Even as a graduate student I felt a little intimidated by its size.

Q: Yeah.

McMULLEN: I enjoyed my two years at Minnesota, but it was too big, in my view.

Q: What was campus life like?

McMULLEN: I lived in a dorm, on a floor of mostly graduate students. It was in some ways a continuation of undergraduate life. I'm not a good cook, so didn't mind eating in cafeterias. The academics were challenging as we grappled with the big issues of public policy. The Humphrey Institute was quite political, as many of the faculty and students were members of Minnesota's Democratic-Farm-Labor Party. The program at the Humphrey Institute was clearly more vocationally oriented than Drake's undergraduate political science major. The Hump, as we called the school, required masters candidates to do an internship. Thanks to Stephen Low, the American diplomat…

Q: Who is the founder of the Association of Diplomat Studies and Training.

McMULLEN: And the library at the Foreign Service Institute…

Q: Yeah.

McMULLEN: -- is named after him. Stephen Low allowed me to apply for a State Department internship even though the application period had closed. I think I met him when he was visiting the University of Minnesota. I mentioned my interest in an internship while riding in an elevator with him afterwards. He said, "The application period is closed, but if you get your application in quickly I'll see that it's considered." I followed his advice and a few months later was delighted to hear I'd been accepted and assigned to Khartoum.

Being a student intern at Embassy Khartoum was one of the most influential experiences of my life. The internship program was not well coordinated between Washington and post. I got to Khartoum before the embassy was informed that it was receiving an intern. I flew to Khartoum. When I arrived, there was nobody at the airport to meet me. My luggage had gone to Abu Dhabi. I arrived in Khartoum with my carry-on bag, no suitcase, and nobody from the embassy to meet me. I spent the first night sleeping on the concrete floor of the airport in 110 degree weather. The next morning there was still nobody from the embassy. I found a taxi. The taxi driver spoke no English. I spoke no Arabic, and we began to drive rather aimlessly through Khartoum until I saw an American flag on a magazine cover at a newsstand. I got all excited, pointed at the American flag, and the driver then realized I was an American. He took me to the American embassy. I said to the Marine Security Guard at post one, "Hi, I'm Ron McMullen, the new intern."

He said, "What intern? I don't know anything about an intern."

That was the rather rocky start of my internship. Ambassador Donald Bergus and his wife had a relative, a son perhaps, in college about my age and took me under their wing. There was a guest cottage at the ambassador's residence and because there'd been no housing reserved for me, the

ambassador said, "You can stay in the guesthouse until other arrangements are made." Shortly thereafter, Mrs. Bergus had some medical complications and they went back to the U.S. for the rest of the summer, leaving me to oversee the residence.

In the morning, I'd wake up and find the household staff waiting for their assignments. I'd say, "You five guys can have the day off, you three have to work until noon, and you two are on all day. And we'll rotate tomorrow." I worked with the personnel officer at post, doing a local wage survey to see how much the UN, hospitals, banks, and other embassies paid various workers. The FSNs (Foreign Service Nationals) got a big raise, which made me popular. I also got to travel around Sudan a bit, which was very interesting, as I'd never been to Africa or the Middle East before.

Sudanese were very friendly, even when they were rioting. I happened to be in Wad Medani once during a student riot against tuition increases or something. I got talking to a group of young men, high school or college-aged students who were interested in America. They asked, "Do you play soccer? How will you find a wife? What kind of music do you listen to?"

Then a security vehicle would come past and they'd stop talking with me, pick up rocks and bottles, throw them at the vehicle, and duck behind a low wall when the police would fire into the air. Eventually it got more dangerous and they said, "We need to run away." I have to say, being in a riot was exciting. These young men were pumped up, but very polite to me. This was during the Numeri regime, when political Islam was on the rise, and I later witnessed a mass demonstration for "Islamia Jumhūriyyah" (Islamic Republic).

We thought that the Sudanese civil war had ended, when in fact 1979 turned out to just to be a brief lull. An American defense contractor said, "We'll let you ride on one of our big transport planes on a support flight down south, if you can talk your way into the military airport." Several times I made it into the military airport, hoping to hitchhike on a C-130 to a remote part of southern or western Sudan, but failed. I went by train and bus to areas I could reach.

One day at a country team meeting I looked around and thought, "You know, these people have a really interesting job. And I don't think they're all that much smarter than I am. I think I could do this." I took the Foreign Service written exam again at Embassy Khartoum and passed.

I also worked with USAID (United States Agency for International Development) in Khartoum for three months for a guy named Jerry Weaver who was later instrumental in helping run the Falasha airlift.

Q: Oh yes.

McMULLEN: Airlifting the Ethiopian Jews to Israel.

Q: It was rather remarkable.

McMULLEN: Indeed. Being an intern at Embassy Khartoum was the most formative aspect of my graduate school years.

Q: Well, did you get the feeling that -- obviously it became pronounced later -- the difference between the North and the South of Sudan?

McMULLEN: Yes. I was fascinated by the physical appearance of Southerners. Northern Sudanese are Muslims who speak Arabic and wear long robes and floppy turbans. Some Southerners had tribal scars on their foreheads or had their teeth modified in ways that identified them as being of a particular ethnic group. Many were tall, statuesque people with unusual tribal markings and almost blue-black skin. I played basketball at the American Club against a Catholic Club team. The Catholic Club team consisted of Southerners who were refugees in Khartoum. We lost by a bunch, but I enjoyed visiting with these guys afterwards. I felt a lot of sympathy for the South and appreciated the interactions I had with Southerners in Khartoum.

Q: Well, when you went back to Minnesota, did this change your focus of studies, or not?

McMULLEN: It did. My attitudes on race, ethnicity, and culture changed after seeing what cultural constructs race and ethnicity can be. Northerners and Southerners in Sudan considered themselves to be quite different, where we might have seen both groups as simply black. Because of different language, religious, and regional backgrounds, the distinctions they drew between themselves were great. And among Southerners, the Nuer, Dinka, Shilluk divide is largely a cultural, political construct. That made me think, yeah, we're all just people and draw these lines between us for various reasons when in fact we're all part of the same family.

Q: At our embassy, was there any carryover discussion about the assassination of our ambassador and chargé?

McMULLEN: Yeah. Ambassador Cleo Noel was kidnapped in 1973 at a reception at the Saudi Embassy during a sandstorm and was subsequently murdered by the Palestinian group Black September. There were bullet holes in the façade of the U.S. embassy but they were unrelated to Ambassador Noel's assassination.

One Saturday when I was staying in the ambassador's guest cottage, I took a nap prior to going to a British diplomat's house for dinner that evening. When I awoke it was pitch black and I thought, "Oh my gosh, I've overslept. It's nighttime and I've missed dinner." When I became fully awake, it became apparent that Khartoum was experiencing a haboob, an intense dust storm that blackens the sky and causes sand to drift under doorsills and in the streets. It had been during a haboob in 1973 that the Palestinians struck at the Saudi residence and killed Ambassador Noel.

So I got up and began scurrying around to close up the guesthouse. I stepped out on the back porch in the raging sandstorm to close the main door. There were two Sudanese on the porch with guns, which they leveled at me. My reaction was to reach back and pull the slatted screen door closed, which locked behind me. So here I was, out in this raging sandstorm, in my underwear, with the door locked behind me, and two Sudanese guys with rifles pointed at me. I immediately turned around and kicked in the slatted door, slammed and locked the inside metal

security door, got on the radio, and raised post one. I said, “There are two armed intruders at the Chief of Mission’s residence. Send help right away.”

The Marine Security Guard on duty said, “The local guards are not responding to the radio call. Maybe they left because of the haboob. We’ll send somebody over as soon as the storm blows over.”

I thought, “Well, thanks a bunch.” Ambassador Noel had been killed during a haboob, I recalled, and wondered if the gunmen inside the compound were after the ambassador, and if they would know the difference between an ambassador and an intern.

Q: Yeah.

McMULLEN: Luckily, they did not attempt to force their way into the guesthouse. When the sandstorm broke, the Marines in gear came over, swept the compound, and found no trace of the two armed intruders. To this day I don’t know who they were or what they were doing. It was a good reminder that American diplomats are sometimes targeted, and that we have security procedures and personnel for a reason.

Q: Well, when you got back to Minnesota, I mean were you a different person?

McMULLEN: I was really intent on getting into the Foreign Service at that point, but it was a long, drawn out process. I took the Foreign Service oral assessment in Minneapolis and passed. As I waited on the register, I decided to look into Ph.D. programs. That year, the spring of 1980, the University of Iowa made it to the Final Four of the NCAA basketball tournament, and I found myself cheering madly for the Hawkeyes. Indiana University and the University of Iowa had both accepted me, and Indiana made a more generous fellowship offer. But, because I’m from Iowa and the Hawkeyes were in the Final Four in that March, I decided to go to the University of Iowa.

In 1980 I moved from Minneapolis to Iowa City and in two years finished the coursework for a doctorate in political science. In September of 1982 I was busy working on my dissertation when I got a call from the State Department saying, “If you can be at the Foreign Service Institute by noon tomorrow, you’ve got a job.” It was the very end of the fiscal year and apparently the Foreign Service had scraped up enough money for one more A-100 class. So I had 22 hours notice to drop everything in my life and get to Washington to start a new job.

I told my girlfriend Jane (later my wife), “Here’s the key to my car and here’s the key to my apartment. You have all my stuff. Drive out to visit me in October.” I called my parents. My dad was still teaching but he took a personal day. My folks drove down to Iowa City and helped me pack out. Twenty-two hours later I was at the A-100 reception at FSI (Foreign Service Institute).

Q: When did you enter the Foreign Service?

McMULLEN: The end of September, 1982.

Q: All right. Did you start out in an A-100 course?

McMULLEN: Yes. I believe the Department found extra money to bring in one more A-100 class just before the end of the fiscal year. So I had 22 hours to get from graduate school at the University of Iowa to A-100.

Q: Welcome to the Foreign Service.

McMULLEN: Indeed *(laughs).* I dropped everything and left my car and my apartment key with my girlfriend, Jane Eckhardt, who married me a year later when she found out where my first assignment was. I think she waited to find that out until she agreed to marry me.

Q: Smart girl. Smart girl (laughs).

McMULLEN: *(laughs)* I flew off to Washington and stayed in a soulless hotel in the concrete jungles of Rosslyn that first week. My A-100 class, the 12th since the Foreign Service Act of 1980, had 35 or 38 members. We were a very sociable group. We had a wonderful bonding experience and got some helpful orientation and training. Kathy Peterson, who later served as ambassador in Lesotho, was the outgoing and sociable deputy director of A-100. We had a number of off-sites and character-building experiences in A-100. We also managed to get into a little bit of trouble.

One day Fanchon Silberstein was scheduled to lecture us on diplomatic social usage right after lunch. One of my classmates said, “Over lunch, why don’t we rent canoes from the Georgetown canoe rental shack and paddle down to Teddy Roosevelt Island to see the Roosevelt Monument. We can easily be back in time for the session on diplomatic social usage.” So we ran across Key Bridge over to the Georgetown, rented a couple of canoes, and paddled furiously down the Potomac to Teddy Roosevelt Island. As our canoes touched the edge of the island, we jumped out and sank up to our thighs in muck. We struggled out of the mud, raced over for a glimpse of the Teddy Roosevelt Monument, got back to the canoes, and paddled upriver to the Georgetown canoe rental place. By the time we got back to the FSI building in Rosslyn, we were covered in mud and had missed Fanchon Silberstein’s lecture on diplomatic social usage.

Q: (laughs)

McMULLEN: We were in the bathroom trying to wash off the mud and get back into our new A-100 suits, when one of the international correspondents from CNN came in and saw us looking like field hands changing at the end of the day. He was not very impressed, I have to say. I’ve always been a bit confused about diplomatic social usage, having missed Ms. Silberstein’s presentation.

Q: Could you describe the composition of the class?

McMULLEN: We may have been an affirmative action class. I think we had 11 white Anglo males out of a group of 38, which was fairly unusual for the early 1980s. Our class included

three or four mid-career professionals, as the State Department still had a mid-level entry program. The class star was Nick Burns, who went on to become a two-time ambassador and undersecretary for political affairs. Mike McKinley also became a two-time ambassador. Tom Countryman currently serves as assistant secretary for international security and nonproliferation. The 12th Class also produced a gaggle of DCMs (Deputy Chief of Mission), deputy assistant secretaries, and principal officers.

We were a very sociable group, perhaps because A-100 was then nine or 10 weeks long and allowed time for bonding. After A-100 Paul Fitzgerald, who's currently consul general in Tokyo, and I coordinated a newsletter to keep the class in touch — this was before email.

The A-100 cohort served as a peer support group. You could judge the progress of your career by comparing it to that of your A-100 classmates. The networking provided by the A-100 class was invaluable later in our careers, and helped in terms of assignments, references, and emotional support.

The A-100 experience was constructive and fun. After living for a few days in a hotel in Rosslyn, I began renting a room from Wendy Chamberlain, a mid-level Foreign Service Officer. Wendy gave me helpful tips and insights about diplomatic life. The day the A-100 bid list was to be distributed, Tom Countryman came to class early with a fake bid list full of assignments to places where we didn't even have embassies, like Tehran and Tirana. He'd seen a previous bid list, so his looked authentic. We were all just dumbfounded as we looked at this bizarre list of potential assignments. Tom really pulled a fast one on us. When the official bid list came out later that morning, we all breathed a sigh of relief.

Q: Ah. Well, what had you been looking at? I mean where did you want to go?

McMULLEN: I had seen a movie with some A-100 classmates called "The Year of Living Dangerously," starring Mel Gibson as a journalist in Indonesia with Sigourney Weaver playing a British diplomat. It was a good movie and sparked my imagination. As Jakarta was on the list and I was unmarried at the time, I thought, "Hmm, diplomats, Sigourney Weaver, Jakarta…" It was kind of a joke, but Indonesia was far off and exotic, so that was my first choice. La Paz, Bolivia was second on my list, and Santo Domingo was third. We tried to guess who would be assigned to what post based on bidding preference, background, and qualifications. I was almost positive I was going to La Paz. I had read the post report, looked at maps, and was psychologically prepared for Bolivia. So when they announced our assignments and said, "Ron McMullen, going to Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, as consular officer and general services officer," I hadn't even read the post report. Our attempts to guess our posts off assignment didn't work out very well. But Santo Domingo was a good first assignment for me. The A-100 training was really a bonding experience that provided career-long contacts and friends in the Foreign Service. It was a good way to start.

Q: Did you get any feel then or maybe a little later, but still the early days, that you all were a special breed? I don't necessarily mean elitist, but you had a different outlook than a great number of your people, more interested in what you're going to do than in money or the role of the United States and all? Did you pick up anything in this?

McMULLEN: One of the reasons I enjoyed A-100 so much was because many of my classmates shared a deep fascination with the world, with foreign policy, and America's role in the world. The world in 1982 was the depths of the Cold War. We had a sense of duty and patriotism, but nobody really wore it on their sleeves. The U.S. economy in 1982 was in a recession with high unemployment, so we were grateful to be employed. It was much better than being an impoverished graduate student. Our classmates came from varied backgrounds and from across the U.S.A. Dorothy Nash had been an attorney in Nevada, Tom Countryman came from the state of Washington, and Nick Burns was from Massachusetts. It was fun to interact with other young people who had such an intense interest in the world.

Q: Well, OK. You were off -- you were in Santo Domingo from when to when?

McMULLEN: After A-100 I went to Spanish language training at the Foreign Service Institute and then to ConGen (consulate general) Rosslyn to learn how to be a consular officer. Jane and I got married in the spring and went to the Dominican Republic in the summer of 1983.

Q: How did you find the consular training?

McMULLEN: The consular training had to cover everything from A to Z, and 95% of our work in the Dominican Republic, in terms of adjudicating U.S. immigration law, was very narrow and specific. FSI had to train us in the whole range of consular work, as some of us were going to one-person consular operations. Only a small portion of my FSI consular training was applicable to my very narrow responsibilities in the consular section in Santo Domingo.

Q: OK, in the early '80s, what was the situation in Santo Domingo?

McMULLEN: Before getting to Santo Domingo, I observed immigration officers for a day or two in Puerto Rico. As we flew into San Juan, I remember saying to Jane, "Wow. Look, palm trees!" The U.S. had intervened militarily in the DR (Dominican Republic) 18 years previously to forestall a potential communist takeover.   There was a certain resilient leftist tendency that saw us as the imperialists. It was the depths of the Cold War -- there were Sandinistas in Nicaragua, communist guerrillas fought in El Salvador, Cuba was still defiant, and Fidel Castro was seeking to export the revolution.

Q: Yeah.

McMULLEN: Dominican society was pretty macho. A co-worker quipped, "Every *Dominicano*, to be a real man, needs a pistol, a mistress, and a multiple entry visa to the United States." Of course, that wasn't true, but U.S. visas were valued items and many Dominicans wanted to emigrate. As most weren't qualified under our immigration laws, fraud was endemic and pressure on consular officers was constant. Many Dominicans tried cross the Mona Passage to Puerto Rico, but those waters were treacherous and we'd regularly hear of small boats sinking with 18 or 30 people lost. Impoverished Dominicans were desperate to get to the U.S. by hook or by crook. Consular officers were under great pressure from every Dominican they met. Even if the Dominican already had an indefinite visa, he was apt to have a niece, nephew, cousin, or mistress who needed a visa to visit "Disney *Mundo*." Every contact with a Dominican resulted

in somebody asking you for a visa. This applied to almost every embassy employee as well. Embassy employees outside the consular section had networks of helpful Dominican contacts. But, what these contacts wanted more than anything else in return for being helpful, was access to U.S. visas for themselves, their friends, business associates, and family members. Even co-workers elsewhere in the embassy pressured us to issue visas to their contacts.

For those of us in the consular section, it was us against the world, almost a "M*A*S*H" mentality, where we faced an impossible situation but made the most of it. The group of consular officers I served with that first year in Santo Domingo remained career-long friends. My year as a consular officer in Santo Domingo was probably the hardest of my Foreign Service career. Thank goodness I never had to do another consular tour.

As you may remember, in 1983 President Reagan launched the Caribbean Basin Initiative to promote trade between the United States and the countries of the Caribbean, to wean them from Cuban influence. The day after President Reagan announced the *Cuenca del Caribe*, the Caribbean Basin Initiative, an old guy stepped up to my visa window. He had a burlap sack slung over his shoulder like Santa Claus, and didn't look like a potentially successful visa applicant. He appeared to be a poor farmer or laborer who didn't have a big stake in the Dominican Republic. He stepped up to my window, smiled, and said in Spanish, "Last night I heard President Reagan on the radio saying he wanted to increase trade between the islands of the Caribbean and the United States." I nodded and he continued, "On my farm I have petrified wood and a workshop to polish it. I'm volunteering to help President Reagan with the Caribbean Basin Initiative, and I want to go to Miami to sell my petrified wood."

I laughed out loud and said, "OK, I'll give you a visa and good luck."

Q: There was fraud, I'd imagine.

McMULLEN: We had many cases of attempted fraud and pressure. We were warned about fake priests and nuns. The next week I had a fellow in priestly attire step up to my window, saying he wanted to go to a conference at Notre Dame or some place. I said, "Name the first five books of the Bible."

He kind of hemmed and hawed, and finally said, "Well, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus." He paused, mumbled something to himself, and then blurted out, "We Catholics aren't so big on the Old Testament. I just can't remember."

Q: (laughs)

McMULLEN: I laughed and then gave him a visa as well. Another day, I looked up and found a tall, attractive young woman at my interview window. She was wearing a man's vest as a blouse. She was a model who was hoping to go to Puerto Rico for some sort of fashion shoot. She had no high school education, hadn't worked very much in the DR, and was not qualified. As I was explaining that she didn't qualify, somehow the buttons on her vest came undone and soon her vest was completely open. She had nothing on underneath it. Perhaps she hoped that

this alluring sight would change my visa ruling. It didn't. I said, "Please button up," and called the guard over to escort her out.

Q: That must have tried you sorely.

McMULLEN: Yes *(laughs)*. I remember a particularly tragic case. Consul General Dudley Sipprelle warned us that medical insurance fraud by Dominicans was a serious problem, so we needed to tighten up on applicants seeking medical care. All applicants had to possess ties to the DR strong enough to ensure their return after travel to the U.S. So, my next applicant was a young mother with a four-year-old daughter. Her daughter was a "blue baby" with a heart defect. Some Lions Club in the U.S. had collected money to send the girl and her mother to the Cleveland Heart Clinic to have her heart fixed. The woman was unemployed, had no husband, and was basically destitute. The Lion's Club in the U.S. was going to cover their travel expenses and the girl's operation at the Cleveland Heart Clinic. But the mother had no strong ties to the DR, no reason to return after her daughter's operation. I had to deny her. She said, "You've condemned my daughter to death."

I said, "I'm sorry."

That was really hard. That was probably the hardest case I've ever had. If we'd not just been told by our boss to tighten up on medical travelers… I really felt bad about that one.

Another interesting case was an applicant from Haiti who wanted to go to Miami to do consulting. I said, "What kind of consulting?"

He said, "Oh, I consult on family issues, jobs, money issues, and affairs of the heart."

Thumbing through his Haitian passport, I asked, "How long have you been in the Dominican Republic?"

"Oh, six or seven years."

I said, "I don't see a work permit in your passport."

He admitted that he didn't have one.

I said, "So you've been working here in the DR illegally for eight years and now you want me to give you a visa to go to Miami? I'm not sure this is going to work out."

As I was reaching for my "denied" stamp, he said, "Wait, look at this," and handed me a piece of paper that was all folded up.

"As you may have guessed, I'm a voodoo priest and I'm going to Miami to consult with the Haitian community there."

I began to unfold the sheet of paper and things begin to fall out of it, like a feather, some dust, and a small object that looked like a rat's claw. He said, "This is a voodoo curse. If you deny me, I'll put this curse on you."

I said, "Get this crap out of here," as I pushed it back across my desk. "Do your worst," I said, and stamped his passport "denied." Apparently I have been laboring under a voodoo curse ever since. It must have been one of those slow-acting voodoo curses. It may get me some day, but it hasn't thus far.

Q: Did you get any feel for the political situation in the Dominican Republic at the time?

McMULLEN: Rafael Trujillo, the DR's long-term dictator who was assassinated in 1961, still cast a long shadow. Dominican society was still highly stratified, with a small number of very rich, a growing middle class, and masses of very poor. The poor still feared Trujillo or his legend, even though he had been dead for over 20 years, supposedly assassinated by a hit squad assisted by the United States. I don't know that for a fact, but that was the rumor in the Dominican Republic. Every Friday Trujillo would travel to a residence on the edge of town called *Casa Caoba*, or Mahogany House, where he would meet a mistress. The feared dictator was assassinated on his Friday trip out to *Casa Caoba*.

Many Dominicans believe the *Casa Caoba* is haunted by Trujillo's ghost and it's been left largely untouched. A couple of times, I have to admit, junior officers from the embassy hopped the fence and gave ourselves self-guided tours. The mahogany house was still furnished and looked just like it did the day Trujillo was killed. Trujillo's ruthless legacy still cast a shadow.

The DR had an active leftist movement, despite (or because of?) our intervention in 1965. In 1984, the IMF (International Monetary Fund) tightened loan requirements and ended some food subsidies, which led to riots throughout the country. My in-laws, Richard and Catherine Eckhardt, were visiting at the time. As they drove through a rioting village, someone threw a brick at the car. Luckily, the brick passed through the open front passenger window and hit the backseat next to my mother-in-law's head. Had the window been up, the glass probably would have shattered. There were a number of people injured during the food riots, but my in-laws were not among them.

In October of 1983, as you may remember, Hezbollah blew up the marine barracks in Beirut and killed a number of --

Q: Killed about 240 Marines.

McMULLEN: Yes. President Reagan's response was to invade Grenada, which had recently experienced a coup d'état that installed a vaguely Marxist government.

Q: The New Jewel Movement.

McMULLEN: That's right. Some of the Caribbean island countries helped gin up a request for intervention and provided a handful of troops to go in with the U.S. We worked with the Dominican government to calm any leftist reaction and to win support for the invasion.

Jeane Kirkpatrick was our ambassador at the United Nations. She came down after the invasion of Grenada to help shore up political support in the region. I was working as assistant GSO (General Services Officer) and helped with her visit. As we were getting her settled in the hotel in Santo Domingo, the head of her security detail asked, "Would there be any Haitians working in this hotel?

I said, "Yes, probably. Why?"

He replied, "Well, you know, would it be safe for Ambassador Kirkpatrick to stay here, given that Haitians are carriers of AIDS?" This was just after HIV/AIDS appeared on the U.S. radar screen. We weren't sure how AIDS was spread. Haitians, hemophiliacs, homosexuals, and drug users were among the groups considered to be high risk for HIV/AIDS. The security officer didn't want Ambassador Kirkpatrick staying in a hotel that might have Haitian employees spreading AIDS. It was a completely unfounded, spurious correlation between Haitian immigrants in the U.S. and HIV/AIDS, but we didn't know it at that time. As it turned out, many Haitians who had HIV/AIDS in Miami were homosexuals forced out of Haiti. Thus, it was because they gay, not because they were Haitian, that led to the correlation with HIV/AIDS.

I also took Ambassador Kirkpatrick shopping for rattan furniture during her visit. I was trailing behind while her security detail hovered nearby. She finally turned around and said, "Would all of you men please wait in the car? I can't shop with you looking over my shoulder." I went back later and bought the same rattan furniture she did. It was good stuff.

Q: Did you get involved with any congressional visits?

McMULLEN: Embassy Santo Domingo had a big CODEL (congressional delegation) led by Representative Dan Rostenkowski from Illinois, who later was arrested for corruption. He had come to the DR to inspect the Caribbean Basin Initiative in action. It was a complete boondoggle and I was thoroughly disgusted. They talked with businessmen and officials in the capital for part of one day, then spent the rest of the visit at a very high-end golf resort. We were expected to cater to their every whim. I had a little motor pool of 14 golf carts the congressmen could use to putter over to a restaurant or drive down to the beach. Steve Del Rosso, a friend from the embassy, was in charge of the resort's tennis courts. What a boondoggle. I was thoroughly disgusted with Rostenkowski and as an American taxpayer I wanted to complain publicly. But Rostenkowski was a powerful guy on the Hill and the State Department needed good relations with members of congress. So I bit my tongue, swallowed hard, and didn't say anything. I danced a little jig when Rostenkowski was later convicted of mail fraud.

Q: Don't they play baseball in the Dominican Republic?

McMULLEN: Dominican baseball was making big inroads into the United States at this time. One of the fun days at the consulate was when all the minor league baseball players came in for

their visas. These young guys were excited about going off to play pro ball in the U.S. They'd bring along their parents, their high school teammates, and their girlfriends. Usually someone brought in a stereo and would crank up merengue music, so it was a festive occasion.

My wife and I lived near the professional baseball stadium in Santo Domingo and we suffered through frequent power outages. We eventually realized that home night games meant the authorities had to cut power to the surrounding neighborhoods to get enough juice to fire up the lights for the baseball game. We had an embassy-provided generator, but it sounded like a semi-truck. Of course, none of the neighbors had generators, and if we started ours up, we felt like ugly Americans. We looked at the baseball schedule to see when the power would be out, and sometimes planned quiet candle-lit evenings at home.

Q: Incidentally, what was the background of your wife?

McMULLEN: My wife, Jane, is from Iowa City. We met in graduate school at the University of Iowa. She knew some political science graduate students, including Pat Kenney and Frank Gilliam, and we met when she stopped by the graduate student office to say high. In 1982, when I left Iowa City in a hurry to join A-100, Jane was working on her doctorate in French. She relocated to Washington and considered accompanying me on my first assignment without being married. Then we learned that a single FSO gets 300 pounds of airfreight, while a couple gets 750 pounds, so I proposed for logistical reasons. Jane agreed to marry me after I received my assignment to the Dominican Republic. For 30 years she accompanied me around the world and now we're back in her hometown, Iowa City. My office at the University of Iowa, where I'm currently teaching, is in the same building where we met 32 years ago.

Q: How did her parents react to getting bricks thrown at them and this new life in the Foreign Service for their daughter?

McMULLEN: They were good sports about it, I have to say. Jane's dad, Richard Eckhardt, was a physician who taught at the University of Iowa medical school and worked in the VA Hospital. He'd been a naval officer just after World War II and had done medical research in Japan. The Eckhardts liked me and were pleased to have a diplomat in the family, I think. They came to visit us in the Dominican Republic and South Africa. We tried to spend some of our annual and home leave with them in Iowa City. They were supportive, good parents-in-law. When we had kids, I'm sure it was hard on them to have Jane and our boys so far away.

Q: Who was the Ambassador when you were in Santo Domingo?

McMULLEN: His name was Robert Anderson, a gruff career ambassador and a good guy. As assistant GSO, I often went to the airport to help with his arrivals and departures. Once I had to do an inventory of the silverware at the residence. This hadn't been done for a long time, for some reason. We came up $3,000 worth of silverware short.

Q: Ewwll.

McMULLEN: A Dominican friend said, “Oh, don’t you know about spoons at the Ambassador’s residence?”

I said, “What?”

“How every Dominican invited to dinner at the ambassador’s residence takes home a silver spoon as a souvenir?”

That seemed to explain why we had 90 forks, 87 knives, and only about 28 spoons. People seem to have been pocketing souvenir spoons from the ambassador’s residence, which was odd.

Our second DCM, Joe McLaughlin, had just arrived from Mogadishu, Somalia. He and his wife had been with the Foreign Service for more than 30 years. As Mogadishu had no moving companies, they packed out themselves, carefully wrapping 30 years of Foreign Service treasures. Their household effects were loaded on a ship that sailed out of Mogadishu and sank off Madagascar. They lost everything. The McLaughlins arrived in Santo Domingo with nothing but a great attitude. They said, “It was only stuff. We can always get more stuff. What really counts is people.” Material things can be replaced and people are what matter. That was a healthy Foreign Service lesson from our DCM in Santo Domingo.

Q: Well, then what did you want to do? Did you have any type of job or area that was burning in you to go to and get to work on?

McMULLEN: In Santo Domingo, being a consular officer entailed day after day of intense, repetitious factory work. I’d come home after doing 100 or more NIV (non-immigrant visa) interviews and would exercise my brain in the evening by working on my doctoral dissertation, which I finished in 1985.

The consul general divided the DR into 20 small districts and assigned one to each consular officer. The consular officer would periodically visit the area, get to know it well, and would serve as the embassy’s expert on that part of the country. My mini consular district was the extreme southwest, where the Dominican-Haitian border met the Caribbean. Controversy arose when a company in Philadelphia proposed exporting human waste in the form of semi-liquid sludge. The company determined it would be more economical to ship sludge to the Dominican Republic, where it could be used to fertilize cotton fields, than to build a new waste treatment plan near Philadelphia. The sludge was destined for my mini consular district for use at an agro-industrial complex. It created lots of local controversy, and I the embassy’s unofficial “sludge officer.” It was not a very glamorous portfolio and luckily the state of Pennsylvania shut it down before the plan to ship tons and tons of human waste to the Dominican Republic was implemented.

Q: What did you do when you weren’t working?

McMULLEN: We had great recreation opportunities. There was a group of young junior officers, Paul Fitzgerald, Keith Eddins, Steve Del Rosso, Larry Palmer, Al Ishkanian, Marcia Wong, Tom Navratil, Dan Russell, and others, who bonded together. Some of us took scuba

lessons. Some weekends we drove to the Club Med on the eastern tip of the island. There was little town called Sosua on the north coast where Trujillo had settled a number of Jewish refugees from Europe in the 1930s. It still retained some European flavor and was an interesting destination. The central mountains had cool pine forests and waterfalls.

I'm an amateur rock collector and got interested in the DR's ample deposits of amber. On the weekends I visited amber mines and workshops in the barrios of Santo Domingo to see them working amber. One of the most interesting people I met was an old American woman. She didn't know how old she was. She might have been 90 or more. Mary Johnson was the daughter of former American slaves. If her parents as young children had been slaves until 1865, she could have been born in the 1890s. So in 1984 she might have been in her nineties. She spoke English like slaves might have spoken in the U.S. in the 1800s. There was a hand-dug amber mine on her farm, and her family used amber chips and dust as fuel in their stove. Their small house smelled like incense. They sold the larger pieces of amber, many of which had insect inclusions, to gem dealers. Ms. Johnson was widely known as "Amber Mary." We hiked out to the open-pit amber mine in the back of her farm. Mary's grandchildren scooped amber pebbles and dust into the cook stove to heat water to serve us coffee. Meeting "Amber Mary" Johnson, daughter of American slaves and amber mine owner, was a special treat.

Another interesting character I met was Agatha Gumbo, who, like Amber Mary, was also probably in her nineties. She was short and peered over the lip of my consular interview window, sliding a Danish passport across the counter. Ms. Gumbo had been born in the Danish Virgin Islands before we bought them in 1917. She had lived in the DR for many years, yet retained Danish citizenship, having been born in a Danish colony. She was applying for a visa to visit her grandchildren in the U.S. I said, "With this Danish passport, maybe you don't need a visa. This is an unusual case, and I'll have to go look this up, as we don't get many applicants from the Danish Virgin Islands." As it turned out, she was eligible to travel to the U.S. without a visa. Agatha Gumbo, like Amber Mary Johnson, was a little bit of living history.

Q: Well, then where did you go?

McMULLEN: My next assignment was in Colombo, Sri Lanka.

Q: Was this a choice or just a Foreign Service throw of the dice?

McMULLEN: Well, we talk about the open assignments system, but I got assigned to Colombo in a very strange way. My boss, GSO Chuck Angulo, was a big baseball fan and was buddies with Joe Melrose, who was working in Washington with the Near East Asia (NEA) Bureau. Joe's son was also into baseball, and my boss Chuck arranged for a Dominican baseball player named Juan Marichal to call this boy during his birthday party. So, surrounded by all his friends at his 10th birthday party, the boy gets a personal call from Juan Marichal, who had just been inducted into the Hall of Fame. The kid, of course, was absolutely thrilled. The following week Joe Melrose called my boss and said, "Thanks, Chuck, I owe you a favor. What can I do for you?"

Chuck said, “My assistant here, Ron McMullen, is a good officer,” and he covered the phone and asked, “Ron, do you have any bids on NEA posts?”

I said, “Yeah, a couple -- Manama and Colombo.”

“Which one do you want?” he asked.

I said, “Colombo.”

“Tell that to Joe Melrose,” he said, and threw me the phone.

Joe said, “You’re in Santo Domingo and bidding on Colombo?”

“Yep.”

He said, “All right, we’ll take you to panel next Thursday.” That’s how I got the job. Because of a baseball connection through the…

Q: (laughs)

McMULLEN: …through the Dominican Republic. The old boy network trumps the open assignments process again, I guess.

Q: Well, that was often the case (laughs).

McMULLEN: After a year of intense consular work and then a year as assistant GSO, we departed Santo Domingo, took home leave in Iowa, and flew to Colombo, Sri Lanka where I was assigned to the political section. I was a political officer by career track, and this was to be my first experience as a political officer. When people ask, “What was your favorite Foreign Service assignment?” I look back and say, “Colombo.”

Q: Well, you were there from when to when?

McMULLEN: We were in Sri Lanka from the summer of 1985 until mid-1987. Colombo was a two-year assignment at that time.

Q: Well, now how -- when you arrived there, what was happening with the ethnic conflict?

McMULLEN: When we first arrived in Sri Lanka, things were starting to turn dangerous, as the Tamil separatists expanded their attacks. Our first day there was quite unusual. As we drove in from the airport, it seemed like the whole island was in the midst of a wild street party. People were out dancing in the streets and waving flags. I guessed it wasn’t a special welcome for me. We couldn’t figure out. I thought, “This is really a fun-loving place”. Turns out that Sri Lanka had just beaten India in a cricket test match for the first time ever, so everyone was out celebrating Sri Lanka’s victory over India.

Most of the world's Tamils live in southern India, in the populous state of Tamil Nadu. The Sinhalese, Sri Lanka's ethnic majority, see themselves as Aryans from northern India who moved to Sri Lanka long ago and who now comprise the island's rightful inhabitants. Sinhalese view the Tamils living in Sri Lanka as recent interlopers. Of course, this view leaves out the aboriginal Vedas, a group akin to Australian aboriginals who have lived on the island for many thousands of years. I was intrigued by the Vedas, and helped with a small aid project for an isolated Veda community.

The politics of the Tamil secession movement were intertwined with the overall India-Sri Lanka relationship. When I was there it was not clear whether India supported Tamil separatism or a united Sri Lanka. A complicating aspect of Sri Lanka's ethnic politics was that the Tamil population was bifurcated into suspect "Sri Lankan Tamils" and supposedly loyal "Indian Tamils." Many Sri Lankan Tamils were highly educated and had gone into the professions because historically they had trouble acquiring land from the Sinhalese. The so-called Indian Tamils were later immigrants, many of whom toiled on upland tea plantations and did not support separatism. Most diplomats in Colombo hired domestic servants who were Tamils, and the government was dominated by Sinhalese.

Q: What were your assigned duties at the embassy?

McMULLEN: When I reported for duty at Embassy Colombo, my boss Walt Manger said, "Your portfolios include political-military affairs and counternarcotics, among other responsibilities."

I asked, "Political-military affairs, what does that entail?"

He said, "Tamil separatists in the north and east are trying to break away from Sri Lanka. Each week, you'll draft a cable called the D and D report, which stands for death and destruction. You'll write a weekly narrative summary about the fighting in this brewing ethnic conflict."

Q: The situation seems confused and dangerous. How did you come to grips with it?

McMULLEN: Somehow I had to find out what was happening and develop contacts to help me understand the dynamics of the separatist insurgency. Most of the fighting occurred in areas too remote and dangerous to visit. So I had to quickly develop a network of contacts I could trust. At a diplomatic function, I met a Sri Lankan army colonel whose first name was Daya.

Daya worked in the Sri Lankan Joint Operations Command Center, where he summarized incoming information on any recent combat and passed it to the ministry of defense, the army chief, and the office of the president, if it was serious enough. He found out in almost real time about all clashes occurring on the island. We hit it off instantly, despite the fact that he was much more senior than I was and could have been talking to our defense attaché or the DCM. But we just clicked personally. He, his wife Chitra, and their kids were delightful and Jane and I got along with them very well. I taught their son to juggle and Jane gave American catalogs to their daughter, who was interested in Western fashion.

Daya would call me a couple of times a week, saying "Mr. McMullen, this is the colonel from the Joint Operations Command Center. What follows is the official account of an incident that took place in Batticaloa this morning at 1100 hours." He would then read me the official Sri Lankan government version of some clash with Tamil rebels. Then he'd say, "Ron, this is Daya, this is what really happened." He'd continue, "Our guys in three trucks were fired on near the village of Eravur, 11 kilometers north of Batticaloa. They returned fire, killing 17 people, half of whom were women and children. We don't know how many insurgents were killed, if any."

The State Department was very concerned about human rights abuses and was looking for ways to make the Sri Lankan military more effective and responsible. The defense attaché and others at the embassy were always jealous of my relationship with Daya. The political section had many contacts. We did a good job, I think, particularly once Ernestine "Ernie" Heck arrived and took over the section. She, Caroline Johnson, and I got a Superior Honor Award for our reporting.

Q: You also handled counternarcotics? Was there much of a drug problem there?

McMULLEN: Yes, I was also the counternarcotics officer. There was no DEA (Drug Enforcement Administration) at post, so I handled narcotics reporting and some operational things. The Tamil Tigers were importing brown heroin from Pakistan, further refining it, and trading it to arms dealers in Southeast Asia for surplus Vietnam War era weapons. We aimed to help the Sri Lankans break the link between imported heroin and smuggled weapons. The Tigers sent heroin in shipping containers from Karachi to Colombo. This was before shipping container scanners were invented, and few incoming containers were thoroughly inspected. The Sri Lankan narcotics police had six Belgian Shepherds that the European Economic Community had given them, but the dogs didn't do well in the heat and humidity of Colombo. They were kept up in the highland town of Kandy and were only brought down to Colombo if there was a solid tip about heroin or other drugs coming in. They weren't very effective.

DCM Ed Marks, the head of the Sri Lankan narcotics police, Donald Ferando, and I got together for lunch to brainstorm a bit. By the way, Donald had been a stunt double for William Holden in the movie "Bridge on the River Kwai," which was filmed in Sri Lanka. "We just don't work well with dogs," Donald noted. "Too bad we couldn't train mongooses to detect drugs. We Sri Lankans for generations have used mongooses to keep cobras off our farms."

Q: I think of Rikki-Tikki-Tavi.

McMULLEN: Exactly right. The DCM said, "Well, why *couldn't* we see if mongooses can be trained to detect narcotics?" I was tasked with writing a grant proposal to the State Department requesting funding for a pilot mongoose counternarcotics training project. At first, folks laughed, but we eventually got $50,000 for the project. We hired a Sri Lankan with a Ph.D. in zoology from Maryland to be the trainer, convinced the National Zoo to let us use their space, and got heroin from the narcotics police to train the mongooses.

The idea was to release a brace of mongooses into a shipping container packed with machine parts. They'd scramble around in there, and if they found heroin, they'd come out with their tails

all a-bristle. Then the authorities would know to unload that container and find heroin. The project manager caught the seven varieties of mongooses that live in Sri Lanka, raised them from pups at the zoo, and trained them to detect narcotics. At the end of the training period, the British sent counternarcotics officers to Colombo to give the mongooses their final test, which they passed with flying colors. A reporter from The San Francisco Chronicle wrote an article about this called "Rikki-Tikki-Tavi Versus Rin Tin Tin in Sri Lanka." She characterized the project as a culturally appropriate approach to fighting drug trafficking.

The project was never implemented because two things happened. First, my assignment in Sri Lanka ended and I departed post. Second, just as we were leaving, a radical Maoist group called the JVP (Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna or People's Liberation Army) launched a bloody uprising. The JVP, a blend of Maoism, radical Theravada Buddhism, and anti-India hysteria, had earlier, in 1971 I think, orchestrated a revolt that failed. They tried again in 1987, but the Sri Lankan military hammered them down, with maybe 17,000 people killed. This happened while the Tamil secession was raging in the north and east. The fighting between the JVP and government spread to parts of Colombo, including the area around the zoo. As a result, the mongoose project was never implemented, although the British authorities who evaluated the pilot were enthusiastic. I still think it's got potential, if somebody wanted to pick it up.

Q: Oh my gosh.

McMULLEN: Yeah, it was really quite interesting.

Q: OK. Who was the Ambassador in Sri Lanka?

McMULLEN: The ambassador was a fellow named James Spain. He was a career Foreign Service Officer who had made his academic and then professional name in Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province. He was an older officer and a nice person. At formal occasions like the Fourth of July, Ambassador Spain wore what looked like an admiral's white uniform or something you'd see in colonial Philippines in 1920. He said, "You know, there's no ambassador's uniform and on formal occasions it's too hot in Colombo to wear a black suit and tie." His ambassadorial uniform looked very spiffy. At one 4th of July reception I met Arthur C. Clarke, author of 2001: A Space Odyssey and other science fiction. He was a long-term resident of Sri Lanka, perhaps in self-enforced exile from England.

Colombo hosted the secretariat of the Colombo Plan, a little international organization set up in the 1950s to coordinate assistance to developing countries. By 1985, however, it really didn't do much. Perhaps as a result, I was the embassy's liaison with the Colombo Plan. My first DCM in Colombo, Victor Tomseth, was a former hostage in Iran, one of the three Americans held at the Iranian foreign ministry when Embassy Tehran was seized in 1979. Victor and the other American hostages were released in 1981, so we served together just four years later. Iran was also a member of the Colombo Plan, and the Iranian delegates were stiff and difficult to deal with. Victor warned me, "They've got their own agenda, so be careful with them." Victor was suspicious of what the government of Iran was up to, and understandably so.

Q: Was there much British colonial legacy in Sri Lanka?

McMULLEN: We belonged to something called the Colombo Swimming Club, an old British colonial era place with a dining hall, veranda, a big bar, waiters in tattered white tunics and holey gloves, and a swimming pool. I would run over at my lunch hour and swim every day for exercise. The place had a faded charm. The Swimming Club, like much of Colombo, was infested by aggressive crows. Sometimes a crow would swoop down and snatch a pork chop or something off your plate. They were very aggressive. Periodically the Club conducted a crow cull, after which the staff hacked off and suspended crow wings from the veranda like Christmas decorations. The fluttering black wings were to act as scarecrows, but seemed to have almost no effect. Within days, the crows were back, aggressive as ever.

The British were particularly fond of the cool hill country around Kandy and Nuwara Eliya. In the mid-1980s, there were still a few charming, if dilapidated, hill country hotels that retained a touch of faded glory of the colonial era. Traveling "upcountry" for a weekend afforded a break from the heat, humidity, and congestion of Colombo.

Q: How did you and your wife find the social life there?

McMULLEN: I really liked Sri Lanka. It was an amazing place with highland tea estates, national parks full of wildlife, interesting temples, old Dutch forts, and picturesque villages. There were ancient ruins, stunning beaches, and quaint relics of British colonial days. It was a wonderful place. In Sri Lanka I became convinced I could be a good Foreign Service Officer. I enjoyed working in the political section and felt I was adding value to Embassy Colombo and the U.S. government. Perhaps that's part of the reason why Colombo was one of my favorite assignments.

We were there for a year before we had our first son, and did lots of traveling with other diplomats, Fulbright scholars, and NGO employees. We drove to game parks and to the ruins of the Cultural Triangle. One time we hiked up Adam's Peak. It's a very steep mountain with a large foot-like imprint at the top. Some people believe that after Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden, they somehow were transported to this mountaintop in Sri Lanka and Adam miraculously left a footprint in stone. That's why it's called Adam's Peak. Some Hindus, Muslims, and Buddhists credit this supposed footprint as being divinely inspired. A group of us began to climb Adam's Peak in the wee hours just after midnight, struggling up narrow, rock-cut steps. We reached the top of the 7,300-foot mountain sweating profusely, and suddenly began to shiver with cold because of the altitude and strong winds. At sunrise, if there are no clouds, Adam's Peak casts a perfect pyramid shadow on the lowlands of Sri Lanka. We were lucky enough at dawn to witness a perfectly pyramid-shaped shadow below. It was a hard climb, but the dawn vista was a magical moment.

Sri Lanka's roads were narrow, twisty, and made for bullock carts, not cars, so traveling was an adventure in itself. Every 20 miles or so was a government rest house where travelers could stop for, as it was said, "a tea and a pee." Sri Lankans were readers, more so than people in most other developing countries I've seen. We'd be traveling though some little village in the middle of nowhere and see people sitting on their front steps reading newspapers. Sri Lanka at that time

had a high literacy rate, long life expectancy, and low infant mortality rates. And yet the people were very poor. Scandinavian researchers would wonder, "How can Sri Lanka have such a high human development index when they are so poor?" American researchers would say, "Why are Sri Lankans so poor, given their high human development index?" The country was something of a developmental anomaly.

We enjoyed Sri Lanka, the people, and the island's natural beauty. There were still wild elephants in Sri Lanka when we were there. Sometimes a wild elephant would get into a farmer's field and the farmer would kill it. If the dead elephant had a baby, it was caught and given to the elephant orphanage. We enjoyed visiting the elephant orphanage, where there were usually three or four dozen little elephants. The older ones were being trained to become work elephants. One time we visited when the baby elephants were being taken down to the river for their weekly bath. It was a hoot watching the little elephants playing in the river. We enjoyed living and working in Sri Lanka — it was a good time in our lives.

Jane was pregnant with our first son. The level of public health in Sri Lanka at that time was mediocre to poor. Jane went to a clinic for prenatal care that also served animals. Jane would be sitting in the waiting room sitting next to somebody holding a goat…

Q: (laughs) Oh boy.

McMULLEN: Yeah. So she didn't have the baby in Sri Lanka. She had Owen, our first son, back in Iowa City where her dad was a physician.

On the weekends we played volleyball, softball, and traveled a lot. A few times I went to Ratnapura, which means "place of gems," and is a beehive of small gemstone mining operations. I'd buy an old whisky bottle full of semi-precious gemstones for three dollars or so, and would spend rainy Sunday afternoons sorting through the gemstones to identify what they were. The gem miners knew their business -- few if any of the stones were of gem quality -- but it was fun to see the variety of garnets, citrines, sapphires, and other gemstones. By and large, Sri Lanka was a good posting for Jane and me personally. Our son Owen spent his formative first months there and got along well. It was professionally interesting and I learned a great deal working with a good embassy staff and political section.

Q: Well, does your son enjoy sharing medical attention with the animals?

McMULLEN: Actually, Owen got quite ill in Sri Lanka and we didn't know what it was. It seemed to be some sort of gastrointestinal problem, but we didn't know if it was serious or not. A Sri Lankan doctor said, "Give him some lukewarm tea." My wife didn't think lukewarm tea would cure anything. Owen was medivaced to a hospital in Bangkok. Jane's dad, who was a physician, said, "You were medivaced *to* Bangkok*?* Bangkok sounds like a place you should be medivaced *from."* The doctors and nurses in Samitivej Hospital in Bangkok were able to fix Owen up, so it worked out all right. True, the medical care in Sri Lanka wasn't the best. We had to take malaria prophylaxis and worried about Dengue Fever and other tropical diseases. It was somewhat primitive, but we all survived.

Q: Well, I would think the Indians would be quite active there.

McMULLEN: Yes, they were. The Indian High Commission was the most important diplomatic mission in Colombo. The British seemed to think they were the most important, but it was really the Indian High Commission. The Indian head of chancery was a Sikh. This was during the troubles in the Indian Punjab, with Sikh separatism and the Indian attack on the Golden Temple in Amritsar.

Q: Oh yes.

McMULLEN: Sikhs in India were under a cloud of suspicion, as Sikh bodyguards had assassinated Mrs. Gandhi.

Q: Had killed Mrs. Gandhi.

McMULLEN: And yet, the Indian head of chancery was a Sikh, who had special credence in relation to the Tamil separatist movement. So the Indians were quite influential and were helpful to us in grasping the confusing and important relations between India and Sri Lanka.

Q: The Indians in those days were snuggling up to the Soviets.

McMULLEN: That's right.

Q: Did we see that as a problem?

McMULLEN: Only indirectly. The Indian-Sri Lankan relationship predated the Indian friendship with the Soviet Union. Vague suspicions of Indo-Soviet collaboration made it more difficult for us to work closely with the Indians. The India-Tamil connection was confusing. Nobody knew for sure if the Indian government was supporting the insurgents or the government of Sri Lanka, with which it had good relations. Initially there were a half-dozen Tamil secessionist groups, but eventually the ruthlessly effective Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE or Tamil Tigers) destroyed all rival groups. Several of the rebel groups had supporters in Tamil Nadu and perhaps sympathizers in New Delhi.

I spent part of my last day at Embassy Colombo on the roof of the chancery with a pair of binoculars trying to map out fires arising from widespread rioting. We were trying to discern what parts of the city were being attacked by anti-Indian Sinhalese thugs. Were they attacking Tamil neighborhoods or government of Sri Lanka facilities? Sinhalese nationalists were up in arms due to reports that Indian air force planes were over Jaffna. The Jaffa Peninsula is in the extreme north. It was the government's last outpost in the Tamil-dominated north of Sri Lanka. Part of Jaffna was under siege by Sri Lankan troops who still held the old Dutch fort that loomed over the city. Reports spread like wildfire that the Indian air force was dropping parachutes over the Jaffna Peninsula. Radical Sinhalese nationalists feared that India was invading and we worried that Sinhalese extremists were attacking Tamil neighborhoods in Colombo, potentially leading to an ethnic bloodbath. In fact, the government of India was air dropping relief supplies

to civilian centers that were running short of food. But we didn't know it at the time. We thought that the government of India might be intervening militarily on the side of the Tamils.

Shortly after I left, India dispatched 50,000 "peacekeepers" to Sri Lanka to help the government defeat the Tamil Tigers. The LTTE fought back ferociously against the India troops. Suicide bombers trained by the Tami Tigers killed Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and Sri Lankan Prime Minister Premadasa. The LTTE really pioneered suicide bombing and used a group of female bombers effectively. While we tend to associate suicide bombers with radical Islamists, particularly with al-Qaeda, it really was the Tamil Tigers who pioneered and perfected the art of suicide bombing. The Tigers were a bloody and skilled terrorist organization that caused thousands of deaths and nearly destroyed Sri Lanka. Thus, when I departed Sri Lanka in 1987, the country faced possible invasion by India, a growing secessionist war led by the LTTE, and a horrifying Maoist-Buddhist revolt by the JVP. Sri Lanka was in dire straits.

Q: Well, did you ever feel endangered?

McMULLEN: We had very tight security at the embassy, overseen by Regional Security Officer (RSO) Jeff Bozworth. But embassy families lived in normal neighborhoods around Colombo. There were a number of truck bombings targeting hotels and public buildings. One time Jane returned a case of empty pop bottles to Elephant House Cold Stores, which had an interior courtyard for customer service. Just after Jane had returned several cases of empty bottles, a bottle truck pulled into the Elephant House courtyard. It had 500 pounds of gelignite hidden underneath…

Q: Oh jeez.

McMULLEN: …and blew up, killing 11 Elephant House employees and customers. Had Jane arrived a few minutes later, she would have been in the courtyard when the bomb exploded.

In 1986, the LTTE bombed an Air Lanka plane as it prepared to fly from Colombo to Maldives. Two America officials were aboard, Econ Officer Lorraine Takahashi and a visiting U.S. Customs agent. At the last minute, they asked to be upgraded to business class, as they'd paid full fare economy and Air Lanka agreed. Meanwhile, a Sinhalese aircraft mechanic had been pressured by the LTTE into putting a bomb on the plane, as they had kidnapped his family and threatened to kill them otherwise. As the plane was taxiing into takeoff position, the bomb exploded immediately beneath the Americans' original seats.

The plane was cut in half. The bomb had been set to go off just after take-off, but the flight had been slightly delayed, so the plane was not yet airborne. The two Americans staggered from the wreckage. The Customs agent began snapping pictures of the smoking fuselage, which helped identify where the bomb had been placed and eventually led to the capture of the Sinhalese mechanic who had been forced to put the bomb on the plane.

Lorraine dashed back to the airport office, vaulted over the counter, and grabbed an Air Lanka clerk by the lapels and shouted, "Give me the passenger manifest." She saw that there were no other American citizens on the plane. Over 20 people were killed, many of them Japanese

honeymooners going to the Maldives. Lorraine called the embassy only moments after the explosion and reported, “An Air Lanka plane has just been blown up on the runway in Colombo. The plane’s cut in half and there are many casualties. We’re unhurt and there were no other American citizens on the flight.” Really an act of heroism…

Q: Mm, indeed.

McMULLEN: …under severe pressure. We operated in that environment. I was shot at one time. But they missed.

Q: Where were you -- how’d that happen?

McMULLEN: The JVP was recruiting in Colombo among students, Buddhist monks, and Sinhalese chauvinists as LTTE attacks grew in intensity in the north and east and India’s intentions remained unclear. After a small pro-JVP demonstration, police chased some young men into a Buddhist monastery near the embassy. The monks refused to let the police enter the monastery, and the police then surrounded the compound. Soon, students began to congregate and pelt the police with stones, spurring the deployment of para-military commandos called the Police Special Task Force, a unit that by reputation was particularly tough. The students began to battle the Special Task force, throwing rocks and bricks. The police clubbed any students they could catch, and later began to shoot at the rioters. Tires were piled on corners and set alight.

This was all happening fairly close to the embassy, and, eager young political officer that I was, I hustled over to see what was going on. As I approached the troubled area, I found I was suddenly among the mostly college-aged students who were battling the police. I asked, “What’s going on here?”

They said, “The police are trying to break into a Buddhist temple and are arresting and beating monks. We can’t permit them to commit this sacrilege.”

As I stood there talking with them, the police front line began to advance up the narrow street toward my location. Just then a bicycle appeared, peddled by a British teacher I knew. I said, “What are you doing here?”

“I live just down the street. I’m on my way home, it’s not far,” she replied.

I said, “It’s dangerous. Don’t go down there.”

She got off her bicycle and as I looked down the street, the Police Special Task Force lowered their rifles and were about to fire a volley towards us. The rioters had retreated about a half a block.

So, the British teacher and I found ourselves halfway between the police, with their rifles leveled, and the rioting students, who were behind us. We were directly in the line of fire and I thought, “We’re going to die.” The police fired a volley and I saw something black skip along the road and land in a clump of weeds. I thought, “I’m still alive, we’re not shot.” I said, “If

they'd been firing live ammunition, I wouldn't have seen something bounce along the street--they're firing rubber bullets." I begin to rummage through the clump of weeds trying to find the rubber bullet.

As I was bent over, the police began to charge down the street towards us. A student broke out of the ranks of the rioters, raced forward, grabbed me and pushed us down an alley saying, "You need to get out of here. It's getting too dangerous."

We thanked the young rioter for getting us safely out of the conflict. I advised the teacher to go stay with a friend, and I went back to the embassy to report on the riot. It was the only time in my career that I was shot at. But it was only a rubber bullet, and it missed.

Q: Well, if it's got to happen, that's the way you want it to happen.

McMULLEN: I agree.

Q: Well, what was our main objective or interest?

McMULLEN: We were supportive of the government's efforts to put down the Tamil insurgency, but we were concerned about the human rights abuses of the Sri Lankan government. The army was not very big or effective. It didn't know how to conduct a counterinsurgency campaign. The Sri Lankan army in 1986 was woefully unprepared to differentiate between Tamil insurgents and civilians. There were many human rights abuses. We had an active IMET (International Military Education and Training) program focused on improving the army's horrid human rights record. It was largely a failed effort. As the insurgency grew in ferocity, so did the military's efforts to combat it. The human rights situation was really terrible. As political-military officer, I knew a lot about atrocities being committed on all sides.

When I arrived, there were four Tamil insurgent groups. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE), the Tigers, were the most bloodthirsty. For much of the 1985-87 period, fighting was more ferocious among the Tamil groups than between Tamils and Sinhalese, or between rebels and the government of Sri Lanka. The LTTE eliminated by drowning in blood the other three rebel groups. The Tigers themselves were wiped out in a horrible last-stand battle just a couple of years ago.

Q: Yeah. Well, you were seeing rebellion, and at tremendous cost.

McMULLEN: Sinhalese and Tamils died in great numbers. The Mahaweli is a large river flowing from the central highlands. With World Bank, IMF, and American help, the government of Sri Lanka launched a huge irrigation and settlement scheme in the northeast of the island. The region was largely savannah scrub. By damming up the Mahaweli River and building irrigation canals, tens of thousands of people could be resettled from the Sinhalese south, which is very densely populated. The problem was that almost all of the settlers were Sinhalese and the area had been Tamil, traditionally. Settlers in the Mahaweli scheme became pawns in the conflict between the Tamil secessionists and the government. The rebels would attack the Sinhalese trying to establish themselves on newly irrigated land. The government of Sri Lanka looked at

the Mahaweli scheme as the hope of the future. It planned for agricultural development and resettlement that would draw hundreds of thousands of Sinhalese, poor farmers from the south, up to these newly irrigated, productive lands in the northeast. The problem was the government didn't offer the same opportunities for Tamils to settle the newly irrigated land. That was one of the rebels' rallying cries. I got to visit the Mahaweli scheme in a helicopter with Deputy Assistant Secretary Robert Peck before the war made it too dangerous to visit. The Mahaweli scheme was largely abandoned due to attacks on the settlers. It was a grand plan that the war brought to naught. Maybe now that peace has returned the government will restart it.

Q: Were we trying to help resolve the conflict?

McMULLEN: We were not as directly involved as the British or the Indians, frankly. We supported the government but were concerned about human rights abuses. We were also worried about the Maoist JVP. The JVP was a potentially pro-communist movement, and this was the Cold War period. We were watching the conflict between the Tamils and the government of Sri Lanka and the JVP rebellion. We didn't want another Khmer Rouge-style government coming to power. Embassy Colombo had an active American center, numerous Fulbright exchanges, limited military training, and a few ship visits. The United States was not the lead player in Sri Lanka. The British and Indians shared that role.

Q: Did we have any connection with the Tamil side that you knew of?

McMULLEN: Tamil professionals, many of whom were professors, lawyers, or politicians in Colombo, had frequent contact with the embassy. It wasn't my portfolio. One of my colleagues, Carolyn Johnson, had the "democratic opposition" portfolio. But the democratic Tamils were overtaken by events. As the war increased in scope and intensity, it became apparent that the democratic Tamil opposition in parliament was not able to speak for the Tamil majority. The tea estate workers in the central mountains were Tamils of more recent arrival to Sri Lanka, and they did not support the rebels. The Tamils in the hill country, the "Indian Tamils," were viewed as being loyal and had limited political clout.

The Tamil elite looked to us, in part, because during the British colonial period the island's far north, the Tamil-majority area, was dry and unproductive. The Church of England didn't want American missionaries working in the more productive parts of Ceylon so they said, "You can work in Ceylon, but only way up north." Thus, American missionaries went to the Tami areas, particularly around Jaffna, and established schools and hospitals. Many Tamils were educated in American mission schools in the north. As Ceylon moved towards independence, a relatively high proportion of Tamils were educated professionals, partly because Tamils couldn't easily acquire productive property. After independence, many Tamil students vying for university admissions were rejected, even though they scored higher on entry tests than Sinhalese who were admitted. American missionary education combined with Tamil culture to produce an educated professional class of Tamils who felt discriminated against by the Sinhalese majority. Many Tamil professionals looked to the United States to help prohibit further discrimination against Tamils. We were unsuccessful in our efforts to head off institutionalized bias against Tamils, who were seen as an advantaged minority by the Sinhalese majority and the government.

Q: How did you find the Sri Lankan government officials that you dealt with, the bureaucracy?

McMULLEN: The Sri Lankan bureaucracy was extremely over-staffed. Sri Lankans are very keen on their birthdays, because the exact time of your birth affects your future. So if you're going to get married, take a job, move, or do something important, you consult an astrologer who uses as the basis of his analysis your exact time of birth. So birthdays are meaningful for Sri Lankans. Our ambassador, Jim Spain, said to me, "I want you to write a personalized birthday greeting from me to each of the members of cabinet." I got to know the members of the large Sri Lankan cabinet mainly by having to research their backgrounds to come up with a personalized birthday letter from Ambassador Spain. It was so successful that the next year he said, "I want you to do this again and include all the deputy ministers."

Q: (laughs)

McMULLEN: I had to become familiar with the life of each cabinet minister to craft a letter signed by Ambassador Spain that was more substantive and personal than a Hallmark card. I dealt with the military because of my weekly "Death and Destruction" cable. But in terms of my everyday dealings with the Sri Lankan government, it was somewhat limited. I remember a bright rising star in the government who had gone to Oxford and had been president of the Oxford debating society.

Q: The Oxford Union.

McMULLEN: Yes, the Oxford Union. His name was Lalith Athulathmudali. The first time I typed it without having to look it up, I thought, "Now that I can spell some of these complicated Sri Lankan names without referring to my notes, I guess I'm officially settled in." We still used electric typewriters and the green paper cable forms. My contact with senior government officials was limited, being the most junior political officer and all. The lower-level officials I dealt with were plodders. Their musty offices often featured desks covered with teetering stacks of paper topped by paperweights. Most government offices had a revolving ceiling fan pushing around the hot, muggy air.

Q: Didn't Colombo also cover the Maldives?

McMULLEN: Yes, Embassy Colombo also covered the Republic of the Maldives, a long string of islands to the southwest of the tip of India.

The U.S. didn't have permanent representation there, but we did have a consular agent, a young woman named Rashida Didi. The capital of Maldives, Malé, is on an island about one square mile in size. As there are no rocks on the island, the buildings are built of coral blocks. There was an anti-U.S. protest in Malé when we bombed Libya in 1986 after Qadhafi's henchmen blew up the La Belle disco in Berlin. Rashida Didi was in the office of the consular agency during the protest, which soon began to turn rowdy. She said, "Because there are no stones, this is a sandy island with no stones, they pelted the building with used batteries." That must have been one of the few riots in history where the primary missiles were used batteries.

Q: Good grief.

McMULLEN: Yep. Rashida, our consular agent there, was of great value. I don't think we paid her very much. She was a Maldivian citizen but looked out after American citizens who needed help and provided excellent service to the United States.

Unfortunately, Maldives was not one of my specific portfolios, but we did have some counternarcotics interests there. Tourists were buying heroin and other drugs off small ships sailing nightly between isolated resort islands. Because Maldives didn't produce any narcotics, the charter planes taking tourists home were rarely checked. But growing seizures of drugs from tourists returning from the Maldives was beginning to negatively affect the country's reputation and tourism industry. We had some night vision goggles and other equipment that I took over and gave to the Maldives coast guard so they could interdict ships selling drugs at night.

Q: All right. Let me just -- today is the 21st of November, 2012. And Ron, we're having you leave Colombo. Where to?

McMULLEN: We left Colombo and went TDY to Washington. My next assignment was in Libreville, Gabon, where I was going to be the economic-commercial officer. But I didn't have French or economic training, so we went back to Washington and I took intensive French and then the econ-commercial course at FSI. In February 1988 we moved to Libreville, Gabon where I began my duties as econ-commercial officer and the small embassy's only reporting officer. Because there wasn't much political movement in Gabon, all the action was on the economic-commercial side.

Q: OK, you were there from when to when?

McMULLEN: We arrived in Gabon in February of 1988 and we were there until June of 1990.

Q: OK. What was the situation in Gabon at the time?

McMULLEN: Gabon was an interesting, strange place. It's a country of around 100,000 square miles, about the size of Colorado. Tropical forests cover some 85% of the country. A million people lived in Gabon, which was blessed (or cursed?) with lots of oil. At that time, seven American oil companies were producing or exploring for oil. There was a large manganese mine, a uranium mine, and a big forestry sector. But the Gabonese people were still pretty traditional. President Omar Bongo depended on the former colonial power, France, to help do almost everything. Gabon produced few consumer or industrial goods and almost everything was imported. As a result, prices were high. I was shocked when we paid $14 for a cantaloupe. Tomatoes flown in from Morocco or France were two dollars each. The Gabonese had enough money to hire other people to do the work. In fact, of Embassy Libreville's 30 FSNs, only four were Gabonese. All the rest were from other African countries, such as Cameroon or Senegal. Thousands of Equatorial Guineans lived in Libreville, who, like the embassy's warehousemen, who took less-skilled jobs.

Mbolo, Gabon's modern grocery store, was chock-full of imported products. People from other central African countries traveled to Gabon just to shop at Mbolo for the array of goods flown in from France, Senegal, Morocco, and South Africa. Prices were sky high. Gabonese hunters sold live pangolins in Mbolo's parking lot. There'd be somebody with a small cage or sometimes even just holding a live pangolin, which looks like a cross between a lemur, a sloth, and an armadillo. I thought for many months that they were selling pangolins as pets or something. But no, it was for food. The Gabonese liked bushmeat and so some enterprising hunters brought in live pangolins to sell in the parking lot of Mbolo.

Because Gabon was so oil-dependent, the country was shocked in 1986 when global oil prices fell by over 50%. By 1988, when we arrived, the Gabonese found they had much less money than anticipated. The government had just built a very expensive railroad 433 miles from Libreville to the interior city of Franceville, near the president's home region. Due to the fall in oil revenue, the country's overstaffed and overpaid bureaucracy became quite a burden. Cabinet ministers made about $500,000 a year, and there were lots of them, as there were civil servants in general. I worked with an IMF team to outline a structural adjustment package to help Gabon bring its revenues and expenditures into balance. The IMF found that Gabonese civil servants, who were paid for a 40-hour week, were at work only 17.5 hours per week. Of that, they spent on average 45 minutes a day in the office reading the newspaper. That meant Gabonese civil servants worked only 12 or 13 hours a week.

When the ambassador and I called on Gabonese officials, we would be frequently be offered "Okoume juice." The Okoume is a large tropical tree that's the mainstay of Gabon's forestry industry. Okoume logs are peeled and made into veneer and plywood. The British Mosquito bombers of World War II were made from Gabonese Okoume.

Q: Ah.

McMULLEN: Okoume was the original, pre-oil source of wealth for Gabon. When we called on Gabonese officials, even in the morning, they'd offer us Okoume juice. I wondered what part of the tree produced juice – some kind of fruit? The roots? The first couple of times the ambassador and I declined, but finally one day I said, "OK, I'll try some Okoume juice." I was surprised when "Okoume juice" turned out to be French champagne. In the morning. It was a bizarre place. Most of the work done in Gabon was carried out by highly paid expatriate Africans technicians or French technical advisors. Every minister had one or two French technical advisors who basically ran their departments and kept the country going. It was a strange economy and an odd system. The American oil companies were competing largely against corrupt and corrupting French and Italian oil companies. Due to the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act, American companies of course couldn't offer bribes. The European oil companies were under no such restriction, so the American oil companies found working in Gabon to be difficult — the playing field was by no means level.

Q: Well, how would you as a Foreign Service Officer get by?

McMULLEN: We did have an appropriately high cost of living allowance, as things were just so darn expensive. Even so, spending $14 for a cantaloupe or $65 for lunch galled me. Jane

said, "You're getting a cost of living allowance for this, so just get over it." It was difficult and we lived somewhat frugally. We didn't go out to eat very often and were careful about other spending, so we managed. Many people spent heaps of money, and made even bigger heaps, as wages were really high. The embassy normally had a booth at Libreville's annual trade fair. One year we hired two night guards, who just had to stay awake during the night and watch the American booth and exhibits. The watchmen were from Burkina Faso and were mostly likely in Gabon illegally. We paid each of them $800 for five nights of work, probably double the average yearly income in Burkina Faso. Those guys made out quite well.

In the late 1980s, as we were ratcheting up sanctions on South Africa's apartheid regime, the United States was worried about access to manganese, much of which came from South Africa. Manganese is one of the ingredients in high quality steel and specialized metal alloys. Gabon had perhaps the world's second largest supply of manganese, mined in the deep interior of the country. To visit the mine, I rode the Trans-Gabonese Railroad from Libreville out to Franceville, along with Jane and toddler Owen. The trip was 10 hours via a newly cut rail line through thick rainforest. I visited the big manganese mine and asked the management if they could increase production in the event that sanctions cut access to South Africa's manganese. They said they could easily increase output. Previously all Gabonese manganese ore from this interior mine was transported via a contraption called an "aerial ropeway," a 75-mile long ski lift with buckets. The ore went by aerial ropeway from Franceville to the Congo, then by rail to the Congolese port of Pointe Noire on the Atlantic coast. But because of the new Trans-Gabonese Railroad, they said, "Now can send high quality manganese ore by rail directly to Libreville to meet increased world supply should South African manganese be cut off." That was good news, as in those days we worried that sanctions on South Africa would cause shortages of strategic minerals. On that trip I also visited a uranium mine. France, as you know, has quite a large nuclear power industry, part of which is fueled by uranium from Gabon. It was enlightening to visit the manganese and uranium mines.

In Franceville I also visited a center for primate research. HIV/AIDS was just emerging as a global concern and many suspected a connection to primate diseases, so there were numerous researchers interested. We visited a large research facility in Franceville where there were scores of chimpanzees, monkeys, and gorillas being used in HIV/AIDS research.

Q: Well, you as a reporting officer -- Bongo had been the President for life I take it?

McMULLEN: Correct. He'd been there for a long time. There were almost no politics at all when we got there.

Q: So did you have much contact with the government?

McMULLEN: We did, particularly the ministries of petroleum, finance, and foreign affairs. President Bongo was quite an active leader. He would ceremonially open trade fairs and strolled around the exhibits. He once stopped and talked with me at the American booth at the trade fair. Nothing substantive, but he made an attempt to be pleasant. He was from the Bateke ethnic group, which was thought to have some pygmy ancestry. Omar Bongo was very short and always wore elevated shoes to give himself an extra two or three inches. Even with those

elevated shoes he was quite short of stature, but he struck me as a gracious man with a presence about him.

Two economic-political dynamics rocked Gabon during our time there. First was the plunge in oil prices that caused huge shortfalls in Gabonese government revenue. Second was the collapse of communism in 1989, with revolutions sweeping through Eastern Europe and affecting China. As a result, the call for democracy even reached Gabon. The country's one-party system was challenged by unrest, protests, and rioting. People demanded more freedoms, including multi-party democracy. Eventually President Bongo agreed to convene a national political conference to discuss reforming the one-party system. I wormed my way into the conference and witnessed the agreement that set Gabon on the path towards multi-party democracy, at least officially. Delegates at the national conference also lifted restrictions on freedoms of press and assembly and abolished the requirement for exit visas. Further, they devolved some government revenue to the provinces.

In May 1990 an opposition political leader died under mysterious circumstances in Port-Gentil, the oil capital. Riots erupted across the country. As it turned out, Ambassador Keith Wauchope and I were on a canoe trip down the Ogooué River in central Gabon. We were out on the river, having left the ambassador's kids, Colin and Ian, my wife, and our son Owen at the ambassador's residence in Libreville. Linda Wauchope, the ambassador's wife, was providing logistical support for our canoe trip. While we were gone, the riots erupted. As we attempted to get back to Libreville, we had to talk our way through roadblocks and skirt rioting villages. Meanwhile, back in the capital, Jane secured the ambassador's residence and corralled the boys as teargas wafted through the neighborhood. There was a French military base in Gabon and the French intervened to evacuate French citizens and other Western expatriates. They flew military transports into the French airbase and evacuated any French or Western citizen who wanted to leave.

When the ambassador, his wife, and I eventually got back to Libreville through all the roadblocks and stacks of burning tires, Jane said, "Hey, we could hitch a ride to France with the French Air Force and then make our own way back here later." Jane is a Francophile and thought it would be a unique opportunity to visit France. But since we were departing from Gabon the following month I said, "No, we better say here, because if we're evacuated to France we may never get back to collect our household effects and properly pack out."

The Gabonese political system that was so frozen in 1988 became much more dynamic and volatile by the time we left in 1990. Gabon never did get a truly competitive multi-party system, despite the grassroots reform efforts of 1990. The next year, Gabon adopted a new, more liberal constitution with greater civil liberties.

On our trip on the Ogooué River we came out at Lambaréné, which was a mission station established in the early 1900s.

Q: That was Schweitzer, wasn't it?

McMULLEN: That's exactly right, yep. Albert Schweitzer traveled to Gabon as a young doctor-missionary in 1912. He could have been a successful theologian or organist. He was a very talented musician, and was particularly interested in Bach's organ music. He gave it all up because of his religious convictions. He decided he could best serve humanity as a physician, so he went to medical school, moved to Lambaréné, and established a clinic. Schweitzer's clinic in Lambaréné was accessible to people living in the interior, as a couple of rivers joined the Ogooué nearby. He lived and worked there for the rest of his life. He died in 1965 and was buried in the yard next to his modest cottage. We visited Lambaréné a number of times and were surprised to find the clinic still functioning, run by a Swiss NGO (nongovernmental organization) now. Interestingly, the Gabonese do not hold Schweitzer in particularly high regard. In his twilight years he reportedly didn't keep up with modern medical advances and gave the impression that old ways were good enough. So some Gabonese saw him as paternalistic. Additionally, the French do not hold Albert Schweitzer in high regard because he was from Alsace-Lorraine and spoke German. During World War I, for example, the French deported Schweitzer from Gabon and interned him in France. In World War II Schweitzer remained in Lambaréné amid fighting between the Free French and Vichy French for control of Gabon. Schweitzer refused to segregate the Vichy French and the Free French wounded in the hospital at Lambaréné. The Free French authorities, who eventually triumphed, did not approve of this mingling of the wounded. Schweitzer's reputation among French expatriates in Gabon is not sterling and he's not beloved by the Gabonese. So, if it wasn't for the Swiss Christian medical NGO, the clinic would not be in very good shape. Albert Schweitzer is one of my personal heroes -- I think he's a remarkable person who lived his principles every day.

Q: Well, I know, you know, Lambaréné, as a kid growing up in the '30s was a name that we all knew practically, because of the newsreels from Lambaréné and all --

McMULLEN: Yep. He won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1952 for his service to humanity. Nevertheless, in some French and Gabonese circles Schweitzer is not held in high regard. We enjoyed visiting Lambaréné. His living quarters were very spartan, but he did have an old pump organ on which he frequently played Bach music. Mosquito nets hung over his bed and the good doctor always wore a pith helmet when outside. His philosophy, "Reverence for Life," didn't mean that you had to be a vegetarian, but if you ate chicken, then you needed to remember that the chicken had been a living being. He walked the walk. His life was dedicated to service to humanity in ways that are remarkable. Visits to Lambaréné provided time to reflect on Albert Schweitzer's approach to living a meaningful life.

Q: Was there a Peace Corps program in Gabon?

Yes, and Rebecca Mushingi, the director, and her husband Tuli were friends of ours. Their daughter Furaha was about Owen's age.

One of the most interesting dinners I've ever experienced was with a group of Peace Corps Volunteers in northern Gabon. We had quite a large Peace Corps program in Gabon, and when I traveled upcountry I'd stop by the Peace Corps office and pick up mail to deliver to the Volunteers. I'd contact the Volunteers in the area and say, "Let's get together on Tuesday night after work. I'll buy beans and beer at a local dive of your choosing, and I've got some mail for

you." I'd often take bags of Snickers or other treats for the volunteers, as many were isolated and working in very primitive conditions. In 1989, I traveled up to the far north of Gabon, to Bitam, a provincial capital. I met with a group of Volunteers at a grubby local eatery for beans and beer. We chatted about their work as teachers in Gabonese schools, where they were from in the States, and other normal expat topics. Then someone mentioned the breaking news about the two scientists in Utah who claimed to have developed cold fusion, almost on a laboratory countertop.

Q: Yeah, I remember that well.

McMULLEN: The world was abuzz with cold fusion, as it promised free, unlimited electricity. The Peace Corps Volunteers at the dinner were mostly math and science teachers, 24-year-olds working in remote northern Gabon. I asked, "If there were free, unlimited electricity, how would the world be changed?" I didn't say much else for the rest of the night, I just listened to these young math and science teachers talk about how the global economy, world politics, and the environment would be changed by cold fusion.

One young teacher said, "You know, with unlimited electricity you could distill sea water into fresh water and grow food in the desert, like they do in California. Or you could grow crops hydroponically. The price of oil would collapse and the price of farmland in Iowa would fall because you wouldn't need to grow food in rich Iowa soil." The Volunteers came up with a remarkable range of radical changes the world would see with cold fusion. Of course, we found out a few weeks later that the miraculous discovery of cold fusion had been a measurement error, probably cooked up by these two scientists in Utah. Nevertheless, listening to bright Peace Corps Volunteers discussing revolutionary changes in the world in a seedy café in northern Gabon was a unique and enjoyable experience.

Q*: How did you find operating in a country that was pretty well dominated by France? How did the American oil companies function?*

McMULLEN: There was never a level playing field. We'd sometimes accompany representatives of American oil companies to meetings with ministry of petroleum officials. Sitting next to the Gabonese director general for petroleum was his French technical advisor, who probably had friends working with a French oil company. So it was difficult. President Bongo, maybe because he didn't want to be 100% dependent on the French, allowed American oil companies to win some exploration and production contracts.

I didn't know much about the petroleum industry before serving in Embassy Libreville. One time I went down to Mayumba, located where the Congo and Gabon meet the Atlantic. We flew to Mayumba and then helicoptered out to an Atlantic Richfield (ARCO) offshore oil platform. We landed on a little helipad and hopped off the chopper. The platform's crew was drilling at the time. As I got off the helicopter an American wearing a hard hat rushed over and started yelling at me, but I couldn't really hear what he was saying over the noise of the helicopter. He was right in my face. It turned out that he was the safety engineer. He yelled, "What the hell are you doing on my rig with a beard?"

I said, “What?” I had a full beard at that time.

He yelled louder, “You’re not allowed on an oil rig with a beard.”

“Why not?” I asked.

He said, “Because we’re drilling and if we hit gas you’ve got 30 seconds to get a gas mask on with a tight seal or you’ll die. I don’t want to lose anybody on my rig, it would be a black mark on my record.”

I said, “Well, I’m not going to go back on the helicopter alone, so you’ve got me for another two and a half hours while we visit your rig.” It was a rather unfriendly welcome, but the safety engineer was doing his job. Luckily, we didn’t hit gas. I didn’t know you shouldn’t visit an oil rig with a beard, and apparently the ARCO people who arranged the visit didn’t either.

One time I flew up to Malabo with a small American oil company that had spotted promising territory on the maritime boundary between Equatorial Guinea and Gabon. Because I’d served in the Dominican Republic, I was asked to translate between the Spanish-speaking Equatorial Guinean petroleum officials and the English and French speaking manager of the small American oil company. We did what we could and had some success, but by and large the French dominated due to their colonial legacy, the fact that they had a technical advisor in every ministry, the sizeable French military base just outside of Libreville, and because French companies used bribes to get what they wanted.

Q: Did you get involved in any environmental issues?

The first ambassador I worked for at Embassy Libreville was Warren Clark. He was interested in conservation and knew that Gabon had maybe 69,000 elephants, more than Kenya, and that Gabon’s huge tracts of largely untouched rainforest were environmentally important. He wanted to learn more about the rainforest and to be able to speak with some credibility to Gabonese officials about conservation efforts.

Shortly after I arrived, Ambassador Clark talked me into going on a jungle trek with him. The plan was to hike about 60 miles through dense forest with two Peace Corps Volunteers, a Canadian volunteer, and an American resident named Tom who had married a Gabonese woman and was teaching at a high school in south-central Gabon. We planned to cover the 60 miles in three days, which meant walking about 20 miles a day, not an impossible feat. One of the Peace Corps volunteers told me, “It won’t be hard walking because the trees are so tall and dense that there won’t be any undergrowth -- it’ll just be like a walk in the park.”

I thought, “Yeah, but it’s 20 miles a day in 95 degrees with 100% humidity. It’s going to be tough.”

We flew down to Mayumba, drove to Mimongo by jeep, and continued on a dirt track to an abandoned gold mining camp, where the road ended. There was a small village at the end of the road and a faint path heading north into the forest. This was our jumping-off point for the three-

day jungle trek. We spent the night in the small village, which consisted of maybe 15 thatched huts inhabited by people of the small Mitsogo tribe. The Mitsogo maintained a deep belief in a traditional religion called Bwiti, one of the forerunners of Haitian voodoo. The Mitsogo villagers were quite hospitable. They shared a dinner of gazelle, yams, and porcupine and as night approached, an elder explained, "Each visitor can have his own house." They took us through the village, assigning a house to each Westerner. I don't know where the family who lived in my assigned hut stayed that night, but I had the place to myself. After we were dropped off at our huts, the men of the village came and said, "Would you like us to put on a Bwiti ceremony for you?" They continued, "If you buy us some palm wine, we'll put on a ceremony for you." We agreed and spent the next couple of hours in their Bwiti long house, drinking palm wine and watching the men of the village perform a traditional Bwiti ceremony to wish us good luck on our trek.

We didn't know this at the time, but a couple months later a young Catholic seminarian from that village came home for a holiday between school terms and never went back. Eventually authorities went to his village and found that the young man had been killed because he converted to Catholicism from the Bwiti religion. On further search, the policemen found a cache of human body parts. Apparently human body parts are used in some grimmer sorts of Bwiti rites. So we'd spent the night in a Bwiti cannibal village. Someone later said, "Well, they probably didn't want Foreign Service Officer body parts."

Q: Yeah.

McMULLEN: The warm welcome the villagers extended to us became somewhat colored in retrospect when we learned about the grisly case of the missing seminarian.

Q: Did you wonder about what you'd eaten?

McMULLEN: (laughs) Yes. Well, they said it was porcupine and I'd never had porcupine before, so I didn't have any basis of comparison, but yes. The next morning we got up and began the hike. In addition to the two Peace Corps Volunteers, a Canadian volunteer, Tom, the ambassador, and me, we hired two guides. One was a Mitsogo man and the other was a pygmy named Rene. Rene, the pygmy, led the way playing a small bamboo flute as we made our way through the dense jungle.

I said, "I understand there are lots of elephants and other animals in this area, but if you play your flute we're not going to see anything."

Rene said in French, "Exactly. We don't want to turn a corner and bump into a startled elephant in this thick forest." So he kept playing his flute.

The trek was absolutely hell on earth. There was thick undergrowth the entire way. It felt like we were in a sauna. We often walked in streambeds because it was the path of least resistance. Towards the end of the first long day, my legs began to cramp up and I suffered from heat stroke. One of the Peace Corps Volunteers, Todd Mitchell, gave me a packet of Gatorade full of salts and sugars that helped rehydrate me. I thought, "Gee, they're going to have to leave me along

the trail here if I cramp up and can't move." But thanks to Todd Mitchell's Gatorade, I managed to carry on.

The Mitsogo guide carried a shotgun with which he occasionally shot birds and other animals, including a big, 30-pound monkey. He tied the monkey's long tail around its neck and used it like a carrying strap. That evening he butchered, cooked, and ate the monkey. He offered to share the meat, but I declined. The Canadian volunteer, who was a science teacher, took the monkey's skull, cleaned it, and picked the brains out of it. I think he planned to use it in the classroom.

The second night we camped by a little stream. As we were making camp, the pygmy disappeared, returning 40 minutes later carrying an elephant tusk.

"Look what I found!" Rene exclaimed, as he held the tusk up for us to examine. Finding an elephant tusk? We couldn't believe it. Later, Tom, the American teacher who knew the local area well, explained, "The local Mitsogo and Bapunu tribesmen pick on the pygmies. If pygmy hunters had earlier killed an elephant, they might have been afraid that the bigger neighboring groups would seize the tusks if they tried to carry them out. The pygmies might have hidden the tusks, in hopes of retrieving them later. Perhaps Rene thought our presence would make it safe for him to uncover the hidden tusk and carry it out." Made sense to me.

In the middle of the night elephants lumbered into the stream. Fearful of getting trampled, the Mitsogo guide yelled, fired his shotgun, and scared the elephants off. We heard them crashing through the dense underbrush for quite a while, but never saw anything.

The third day our bedraggled, soggy group broke camp and headed down the path, led by a jaunty pygmy playing a bamboo flute and balancing an elephant tusk on his shoulder.

A bit later we found a freshly graded track that didn't appear on our detailed topographic map. It eventually led us to an Israeli logging camp. There were five Israelis and about 150 African workers in a newly established logging camp. They were surprised to see seven mud-covered, absolutely drenched and exhausted Westerners walk out of the forest. We were equally surprised to find an Israeli logging camp on a blank spot on our map.

We said good-bye to our guides and spent the night in the camp. The next morning an embassy vehicle picked us up and hauled us back to Libreville.

If I had it to do over, I'm not sure I would. It was a miserable three days. As a Boy Scout, I'd gone on longer hikes, but never in conditions like those in south-central Gabon. I was chafed raw, covered with bites and cuts, and my back hurt from stooping constantly to duck under branches. However, Ambassador Clark was able to parlay his trekking experience into serious conversations with Gabonese officials and NGO representatives about the need to conserve parts of the tropical forest. In fact, Gabon has become one of the world's leaders in terms of national parks and forest reserves per square mile of territory. So maybe the misery was worthwhile.

Q*: Well, did you run across Soviet embassies that were sort of stranded in Gabon, or not?*

McMULLEN: Yes, there was a Soviet embassy in Gabon. As it became clear that the Soviet Union was going to allow the rollback of communism in Eastern Europe (it wasn't apparent yet that the Soviet Union was going to implode), our antagonistic Cold War relations with the Soviets began to warm. We engaged the Soviet diplomats in Libreville in a friendly manner. For example, we gave them a tour of the Harlan County and involved them in ship-visit activities. One Saturday we had them over to the embassy's beach-front housing complex, Sabliere, for barbeque and a volleyball match. The Soviet diplomats really didn't have much to do in Gabon, as there weren't specific Soviet interests in the petroleum or mineral sectors. They were glad to play us in volleyball, tour the Harlan County, and socialize a bit.

Q: I bet they beat the hell out of you in volleyball.

McMULLEN: Our A team beat their A team. We had a Marine Security Guard detachment, and they didn't.

Q: Ah.

McMULLEN: But our B team lost to the Soviets, so we split, called it a draw, and enjoyed the barbeque.

Q: What sort of social activities did the American community in Libreville have in this isolated place?

The Marine Security Guards were a good bunch and we always enjoyed working with them and getting to know them as individuals. The Marine Corps Birthday Ball was the social event of the year. On Friday nights the Marines showed movies at their house for the American community and their guests.

One of my best friends was a British diplomat named Ian Thom. When I learned that the Marines were going to show "Field of Dreams," which is about baseball and Iowa, I invited Ian to join us at the Marine House. We watched the movie, ate popcorn, and afterwards I commented about how much I enjoyed seeing a movie about baseball and Iowa.

Ian Thom said, "Field of Dreams really wasn't about Iowa. It was about being sure that your relationships with the people close to you are always in balance, because you never know when you're going to go." Ian thought the movie hinged on the main character's remorse of having been on bad terms with his father when his dad passed away. Well, the next morning Ian Thom died of a cerebral hemorrhage. He had a blood clot after playing soccer with a Gabonese team and probably died before he hit the ground. The British embassy was small. The British ambassador asked if we had a coffin that he could use to send Ian's body back to Scotland.

I said, "Not only do we have a coffin, but we know that Ian fits in it, because last Halloween when the Marines had a haunted house for the kids in the community, Ian was the corpse in the coffin. Kids would walk in, see a coffin, Ian would sit up, say 'Boooo,' and scare the daylights out of the kids." Ian Thom's parents traveled to Libreville and attended a moving memorial

service in a little wooden Gabonese church along the river. This mutual support and friendship between American and British diplomats, in my experience, was the norm. Ian Thom reminded us all that you never know when you're going to go. It could happen in far off Gabon or somewhere closer to home and family.

Q: Well, did you get many visitors from Washington?

McMULLEN: You know, we didn't. The USS Harlan County visited and occasionally a desk officer or an office director dropped by. Herman Cohen came one time. Hank was the--

Q: He's Assistant Secretary for African Affairs --

McMULLEN: Yep. But that was about it. The USS Harlan County came on training cruise down the west coast of Africa and stopped in Libreville as well as São Tomé and Príncipe.

Q: I understand you also handled São Tomé and Príncipe?

Embassy Libreville also covered São Tomé and Príncipe (STP). I traveled there 20 times in two and a half years, becoming the American expert on this isolated microstate. Later Ambassador Wauchope visited 21 times, so I think he must hold the record for most visits. São Tomé and Príncipe was not an important country in terms of American foreign policy, but it was an interesting microcosm of developments affecting Lusaphone Africa. As you may remember, following the socialist coup d'état in Lisbon in 1974, Portugal granted independence to Angola, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau, Cape Verde, and São Tomé. The Portuguese socialist junta handed control to the principal Marxist group in each colony. So, from 1975, when São Tomé and Príncipe became independent, until the late 1980s, when we were there, the country suffered under a Marxist regime with a supposedly centrally planned economy.

The island of São Tomé is 30 miles long by 20 miles wide, and Príncipe is about four miles by 10 miles. Both islands are volcanic and have very rich soil. The originally uninhabited islands were settled by the Portuguese before Columbus discovered America. The population consisted of Portuguese planters and officials and slaves from Angola. The islands were fertile and soon became wealthy due to cocoa production on well-ordered Portuguese plantations. From about 1900 to 1930, STP was the world's leading cocoa producer. The prosperous Portuguese cocoa plantations were built up the slopes of volcanic mountains, complete with miniature gravity-powered trains to transport cocoa down the mountains.

At independence in 1975, all the Portuguese left, having never trained São Toméans in skilled labor of any kind. The group that took over in 1975 was a Marxist party called the Movement for the Liberation of São Tomé and Príncipe (MLSTP). The MLSTP didn't have a clue. Not surprisingly, cocoa production ground to a halt, as did everything else. The MLSTP's Marxist ideology meant that the government controlled everything, and thus was to blame for failures on all fronts. By the late 1980s, the early Glasnost period, São Toméans began to seek other potential investors or donors, with the MLSTP even hinting that better relations with the United Sates were possible. There was a Soviet radar site on São Tomé, but, unknown to Embassy Libreville, it was inoperable as the Soviets had abandoned some time ago. There were about

1,000 Angolan troops on the island to help shore up São Tomé's Marxist government. In the waning years of the Cold War, the United States began to wean STP away from Marxism and the Soviets and offered some development assistance.

I was tasked with developing an AID program in STP, as there was no AID mission in Gabon. Funding came through the regional AID center in Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire. Working with Portuguese and STP officials, I helped oversee a $500,000 AID program aimed at increasing agricultural production. As a result, I traveled to São Tomé and Príncipe about once a month.

As the Cold War drew to an end, the U.S. no longer needed the mothballed civil defense hospitals stored since the 1950s in the subbasements of Midwestern courthouses. When the U.S. began giving away hundreds of early Cold War pre-packaged field hospitals, Embassy Libreville requested one for donation to São Tomé and Príncipe. Washington agreed, and the U.S. Air Force planned to fly the 1950s vintage field hospital to Sao Tome in a C-141. Embassy Libreville previously sponsored a self-help project at a clinic at Monte Café plantation, where we had good relations with an Egyptian doctor, Ahmed Zaki, and a French NGO. I asked, "If we could fly over a complete American field hospital, could you use the materials?" They were keen on the idea, as was the government of São Tomé. So a gigantic C-141 came in, maybe the largest airplane ever to land in São Tomé up to that point. We unloaded a field hospital that had been stored in Kansas since 1959. An Air Force medical officer, when he saw the antique 1950s x-ray machine being unloaded, said "Stop. This machine is dangerous. It hasn't been maintained and was probably unsafe to begin with. We can't give it to them." So we threw it back on the plane, but all the other medical supplies and basic equipment was readily accepted for use at the Monte Café clinic.

The USS Harlan County visited STP in the summer of 1989. I was the only American from Embassy Libreville present in STP for the ship visit. The ship had a crew of about 250 and carried tons of material for civic action projects. I organized joint civic action projects in which sailors and São Toméans would paint schools, refurbish hospitals, hold coaching clinics, and the like. But what most impressed the MLSTP officials was a mock amphibious assault demonstration. The USS Harlan County was an LST (Landing Ship, Tank) and carried four armored amphibious assault vehicles. The Navy launched two of these behemoths off the end of the Harlan County. They drove off and dropped straight into the ocean, disappearing beneath the waves. Eight seconds later, they popped up and churned onto the beach. The minister of defense had never seen anything like this, and was impressed by the U.S. Navy's capabilities and openness. I think the ship visit helped form a favorable opinion of the U.S. among the somewhat wary MLSTP elite.

In early 1988, shortly before I arrived at Embassy Libreville, STP experienced an abortive invasion by a group of exiles. Some 46 São Toméans and one Honduran -- I don't know why he was involved -- sailed in a fishing boat from Cameroon and disembarked in São Tomé on a lazy Sunday afternoon. Their aim was to overthrow the government. The invaders were armed with political pamphlets, a couple of machetes, and rabbits' feet. Their leader claimed that the rabbits' feet, when rubbed, would make the men invisible to the São Toméan authorities. The exiles landed right in the capital and saw a policeman walking down the sidewalk sporting a holster and revolver. Thinking they were invisible, they crept up behind the policeman, reached

around, and tried to grab his pistol. Of course, he saw them, wrestled around a bit, pulled out his revolver, and shot one of them dead. The rest took off for the hills. I think one other invader was eventually killed, but all the rest were captured.

I wasn't on the island when this happened, but Ambassador Clark and I went over shortly thereafter to look into this bizarre development and to determine why a Honduran was involved. Near a small-town police station we saw a display of the mug shots and names of all 47 invaders. Ambassador Clark had a fancy camera and began to take close-up pictures of each of the mug shots in hopes of identifying the group, motives, backers, etc.

A local policeman saw us, hustled over, and said, "Halt. What you're doing is illegal. Give me your camera."

Ambassador Clark pulled out his business card and said, "I'm the American Ambassador."

The ambassador wouldn't give the policeman his camera and a crowd began to form to watch the standoff. Eventually more police arrived and Ambassador Clark had to surrender his film. We were worried because the police were quite agitated. When we got back to the capital, we received a note summoning us to the foreign ministry at 5:00 that afternoon. Ambassador Clark was fretting and said, "I could be PNGed (made persona-non-grata). This could be the end of my ambassadorship." He was quite nervous.

Another U.S. government employee who was with us said, "Ron, you're about the same size as Ambassador Clark. Why don't we tell the foreign minister that it was you who took the pictures and that the policeman was mistaken?"

As the most junior person involved in this, I agreed, but began to wonder if São Tomé had signed the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations. If not, perhaps I didn't have diplomatic immunity and could end up in a São Toméan prison. At 5:00, we dutifully walked over to the foreign minister's office as instructed and had a very cordial discussion unrelated to the exile invasion or illegal photography. It never came up. As we were leaving, the foreign minister stopped and reached into his desk, saying, "Oh, Ambassador Clark, here's your film. Sorry about all that." And we walked out.

Q: Ah!

McMULLEN: I had been sweating bullets through this whole thing.

Q: (laughs)

McMULLEN: The foreign minister handled the situation very diplomatically. We never were able to determine much about this quixotic, rabbit-foot toting exile invasion force.

During my time at Embassy Libreville there was only one way to fly from Gabon to São Tomé. I flew 20 times on Equatorial International Airlines, STP's national flag carrier that operated a twin-propeller Fokker between São Tomé and Libreville. One of the pilots was a young Libyan

and the other was an African. The plane had previously been the Nigerian presidential aircraft. During the Biafra civil war, the Portuguese flew arms and supplies to the Biafran secessionists from São Tomé. When STP became independent, Nigeria wanted to start off on good terms, so it donated the old Nigerian presidential aircraft as sort of a birthday present. The Nigerians didn't include the flight logs or any of the aircraft's manuals, so the São Toméans had no idea how long it had since the last oil change, etc. Somehow they managed to fly it to Libreville and back twice a week. Every time I left for São Tomé, I kissed my wife goodbye and hoped that I'd see her again. Thankfully, we never had any aircraft problems.

Q: Well, were the Libyans messing around there? They were doing it in a lot of places?

McMULLEN: Other than providing a pilot for the national airline, we were unaware of any other Libyan involvement in STP. As mentioned, we thought there was a Soviet radar base on Sao Tome, and we wondered about the contingent of troops from Marxists Angola. We were also concerned about apartheid South Africa. There was a small South African presence headed by a businessman named Chris Hellinger, who I encountered again when serving in Cape Town years later. Hellinger built a deep-sea fishing resort, Bom Bom, on the northern tip of Príncipe. He was also interested in volcanic-source oil, and was flying people in and out all the time. We were suspicious about efforts to circumvent sanctions on apartheid South Africa. It turned out to be pretty innocuous, nothing of a nefarious nature at all.

Because STP's economy had ground to a halt, and with communism imploding in Europe, the Marxist MLSTP decided to hold a national political conference to discuss legalizing multi-party democracy. I was able to attend. The party conference was very raucous, but the MLSTP membership eventually agreed to give up their monopoly on power. In following years, STP has held contested elections won by several different parties and has become a fledgling democracy.

To see Gabon and STP, both one-party states, move toward multi-party democracy was encouraging. I wasn't in Beijing to see Tiananmen Square, I wasn't in Berlin to see the Wall come down, and I wasn't in Romania to witness Ceausescu's overthrow. But the democratization wave of 1989 was a worldwide event, even affecting places as isolated as Gabon and São Tomé and Príncipe. I was pleased to have attended national political conferences in both countries that opened the door to democratic change. São Tomé has made real progress in this area, but Gabon still has a ways to go.

Q*: Well, had we ever had an embassy there?*

McMULLEN: Nope. Because of our efforts, particularly those of Ambassador Wauchope, there was a Peace Corps program in STP and Voice of America runs a relay station there. We have quite good relations with São Tomé, but the policy of the Bureau of African Affairs is to have embassies only in mainland African countries with some exceptions. So there's no --

Q: Cape Verde.

McMULLEN: Cape Verde, Madagascar, and Mauritius are the exceptions. But we don't have an embassy in the Comoros, the Seychelles, or in São Tomé. We cover them from nearby

embassies and that's probably appropriate. I mean São Tomé has less than 200,000 people and 372 square miles. It's really a dinky place. To build a secure embassy there would be very expensive and our modest interests are well-covered from Embassy Libreville.

I completed my tour at Embassy Libreville in June of 1990. Jane and I thought it might be my final Foreign Service assignment. Early in our marriage we considered doing three overseas tours and then leaving the Foreign Service to look for teaching jobs at liberal arts colleges in the Midwest. After Santo Domingo, Colombo, and Libreville, we thought, "Time for a career change?" I enjoyed the job and the lifestyle and was keen to stay in. Jane enjoyed it as well. Looking at the bid list for post-Gabon jobs, I said, "Well, here's a detail assignment to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. I'd still be in the Foreign Service and yet I'd be teaching. It might be a good segue from the Foreign Service to academia." Jane agreed, so I bid on the West Point job, got it, and in the summer of 1990 Jane, Owen, and I moved from Gabon to the Hudson Valley of New York to begin my assignment at the U.S. Military Academy.

Q: When were you at West Point?

McMULLEN: From mid-1990 until the summer of 1993. It was an exciting time to be at West Point, because many cadets had enrolled during the Reagan administration's arms build-up at the height of the Cold War period and thought their military career would involve a giant armored battle on the north German plain against the Red Army. Shortly after we got to West Point, it became apparent that that wasn't going to happen. Due to communism's rolling implosion, the cadets in the summer of 1990 were very interested in world politics, just as we arrived at West Point. We lived on post in the New Brick neighborhood and shared a duplex with a military officer and his family. The new faculty was getting oriented in August when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait. Suddenly there was a big interest in the Middle East. There was less interest in the Soviet Union per se, as it looked like yesterday's news. The cadets were interested in the politics and international relations of developing countries, which fit well with my experience and background. The timing was perfect from my professional, academic, and family perspectives.

I taught in the Department of Social Sciences (Sosh), which was a great outfit. I developed the utmost respect for the army officers on the faculty. They were warriors, scholars, and good colleagues. The cadets were absolutely superb, particularly the young women. At that time, the ratio was about one female cadet to every eight or nine male cadets. An all-male environment would have included a lot of scratching, spitting, and swearing, while a gender-balanced campus would have produced a more normal university social dynamic. But the eight-to-one ratio was somewhat awkward, in my view. The overall number of female cadets was limited, as women had restricted access to the combat arms. For example, female cadets couldn't go into infantry or armor at that time. That meant that some highly qualified female applicants were rejected, while lower-qualified male applicants got in. There were relatively few women at West Point, but they were impressive athletes, strong soldiers, bright students, and nice people.

During my six semesters at West Point, I taught six different courses in comparative politics and international relations. Most semesters we invited my students to our house for a Third World dinner billed as "roots and grubs." Jane would cook up big pots of Third World dishes. The

cadets came over thinking they were going to eat fried worms and nettles or something. In fact, Jane is an excellent cook and prepared exotic dishes from places we'd served. It was fun to get to know the cadets. Since we lived on post, I rode my bicycle down to Lincoln Hall, where I taught.

In January 1991, it became apparent that we were heading to war against Iraq and that an understanding of Middle East politics was vital. West Point had a world-class Arabist, an officer named Augustus Richard Norton. Dick Norton was a widely renowned academic on the Middle East, but had come down with cancer. It looked like West Point was not going to offer a course on the Middle East while we were fighting Desert Storm. I volunteered to teach the class. I told Jim Golden, the department head, "I don't know much about the Middle East, but I'll try to keep half a jump ahead of the cadets." So, while we were liberating Kuwait in Desert Storm, I was teaching government and politics of the Middle East. As I'd walk into the classroom, cadets would have the classroom TV monitor turned to the latest war news. Needless to say, the cadets were very interested and highly motivated to learn about the Middle East. Many West Point faculty members, including many of my Sosh colleagues, were mobilized for Desert Shield and Desert Storm.

The officers who weren't mobilized for Desert Storm felt they had missed an opportunity to serve in combat and worried that their careers might be negatively affected. However, they had another chance to deploy in 1993 when we intervened in Somalia on a UN armed humanitarian mission called Operation Restore Hope. Those army officers who felt their careers would be jeopardized because they hadn't participated in the Gulf War were keen to go off to Somalia. Our intervention eventually ended badly with the Black Hawk Down tragedy. It was interesting to see military careerist concerns play out among my colleagues and friends during the Gulf War and Operation Restore Hope.

Q: Did the Gulf War affect the West Point community?

McMULLEN: During the Gulf War our son Owen attended the West Point pre-school. Many of his classmates' moms and dads had been mobilized for Desert Storm, so it was a topic of interest for Owen's friends. We had a small laminated map of the northern Persian Gulf. One day I came home to find four-year old Owen lining up tiny toy soldiers on the map, saying, "These are the Iraqis, they're taking over Kuwait. Here are the good American soldiers in Saudi Arabia. They're going to clobber Saddam Hussein's bad soldiers." At West Point, awareness of the looming war filtered down even to preschoolers, as it directly affected many kids' home lives. Mothers and fathers were mobilized and many casualties were expected.

Q: Did you find -- I don't know how to put it -- but sort of a different outlook by the, both the faculty and the students at West Point?

McMULLEN: Absolutely.

Q: And your background, you know, difference between sort of the average FSO's, come out of a rather liberal background.

McMULLEN: Yep.

Q: Did you find a difference there?

McMULLEN: The military culture was something I had only seen through the Marine Security Guards. My dad was in the Air Force, but before I was born. I didn't serve in the military, so didn't have any insights into military culture. Very quickly after arriving at West Point, I became aware of the vibrant subcultures within the military, Army versus Navy, for example. Within the Army, there was significant distinction from branch to branch, such as Field Artillery versus Infantry. Further, there was a USMA (U.S. Military Academy) subculture with its own traditions, slang, and expectations. It was kind of confusing at first, but I treated West Point like a foreign assignment where I had to discern meaning, dynamics, language, and norms. Because I had a beard -- army officers of course can't have beards -- I was instantly recognizable as a civilian. Even off hours, when nobody was in uniform, I was still clearly a bearded civilian amid this sea of clean-shaven Army officers. The officers were very keen on physical fitness, because they had to pass the Army's fitness exams. They made an effort to involve people in fun ways in physical activity. There was a competitive faculty intramural league and I played on the Department of Social Sciences volleyball team. There was a high expectation among the faculty that everyone would be physically active ("an officer in the gym is an officer at work"), an attitude I appreciated.

While I was at West Point, the Clinton administration was working toward implementing the policy of Don't Ask, Don't Tell. Among colleagues at West Point, this was very unpopular and seen as a radically pro-gay move by Bill Clinton. The emerging policy was ridiculed and flat-out opposed by many officers. It's interesting to note how far gay rights have come since then. When President Obama ended Don't Ask, Don't Tell, many people thought it was biased against gays, and viewed its repeal as promoting gay rights. American society and culture have come a long way since the early 1990s when Don't Ask, Don't Tell was seen as a big step toward gay rights.

There was as much camaraderie in the Department of Social Sciences as I've seen at any embassy, and much more than in any office or a bureau in the State Department. I enjoyed it immensely. My assignment to West Point was initially for two years, but I asked to extend for a third. My career development officer said, "Ron, you're not in a State Department position. It's not going to be good for your career."

I said, "I appreciate you pointing out the potential career implications of extending, I'm going into this with my eyes wide open and would like to extend for a third year. Can you take me to panel?" He agreed and I extended for a third year.

Toward the end of my last year at West Point the academy was beginning to civilianize its faculty, not as quickly as the Naval Academy at Annapolis, but USMA was hiring civilian professors to sprinkle among the military faculty. I was asked if I would like to leave the Foreign Service and remain at West Point. I was interested because I thoroughly enjoyed teaching and living there. I asked, "What can you offer?"

This conversation took place during the Clinton administration's Cold War "peace dividend" drawdown of the DOD (Department of Defense) budget. The head of my department admitted that the academy's budget was likely to be cut, and said, "We could offer you a three-year contract, hopefully renewable."

"Hmmm, that doesn't sound very secure," I replied, adding, "I've enjoyed being a Foreign Service Officer and think I'll stay in the Foreign Service, but thank you anyway."

Having turned down West Point's offer, Jane and I also reassessed our strategic game plan of returning to academia after three Foreign Service tours. While at West Point I entered the academic job market, had some interviews, and was flown out to Central College in Iowa and offered a position. But when it came right down to it, I enjoyed being a Foreign Service Officer. I decided I'd rather be *doing* diplomacy than teaching about it. The old saw, "Those that can't do, teach," kept popping into my head. So we put the strategic game plan aside and continued in the Foreign Service.

My wife, who has a Ph.D. in French, also got to teach at West Point. Scandalously, the officer serving as the academic advisor to the women's volleyball team had an affair with a team member and got her pregnant. Both were cashiered. The officer had been in the French Department, so on short notice they needed a substitute to fill in for the semester. Jane was asked if she'd take the job, and agreed. It was a good experience for her and she enjoyed the interaction with the cadets.

We had our second son, Wyatt, in November of 1991. Because we weren't a military family, we weren't allowed to use Keller Army Hospital on post. Thus, we had to drive over Storm King Mountain to Newburgh to have our baby. West Point was a time of contentment for our family, as Jane and I enjoyed teaching, Owen got to attend West Point's kindergarten, and Wyatt was a happy, healthy baby. It was great.

Q: What did you do when the academy was on summer break?

I didn't have specific USMA duties during the summer months. In early 1992, I wrote to a number of embassies, saying, "I'm a mid-level FSO teaching at West Point without summer responsibilities. For the price of an airline ticket and a bunk in a TDY (temporary duty) apartment, I'm yours for the summer."

Embassy Port Moresby in Papua New Guinea replied, "We're eager to have you come out, as we're prepping for World War II 50th anniversary commemorations, particularly on the island of Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands." Embassy Port Moresby sent me an airplane ticket and I flew across the Pacific to Papua New Guinea, where I worked with Ambassador Bill Farrand his team. I helped organize events for the World War II 50th anniversary commemoration in Papua New Guinea and the much bigger event on Guadalcanal.

Q: What was going on? Were there any sort of policy issues of that nature that were going in those island states?

McMULLEN: Some Pacific island countries in 1992 were poor and relatively unstable. Solomon Islands experienced civil war later in the 1990s and has yet to completely recover. Bougainville Island, geographically part of the Solomon Islands archipelago, tried to secede from Papua New Guinea. We were concerned about regional stability and expected the island states to vote with us in the UN. Australia and New Zealand had the lead regionally in terms of development assistance. In the summer of 1992, I was there to help with the World War II commemorations and didn't really get involved with broader U.S. foreign policy interests in the region.

Q: How did you see the Australian and New Zealand apparatus in that area?

McMULLEN: Australia and New Zealand provided large amounts of assistance, had important investments in the island states, were geographically close, and were home to large expat islander communities. Australia was the most influential country in the South Pacific, with New Zealand playing a sidekick role.

I'd never been to the South Pacific before and found Port Moresby to be a city plagued by violent crime. Once I saw a bank robbery where the robbers struck a bank guard with an ax. Many expat housing compounds were targeted for home invasions by local gangsters called "rascals." It was a pretty rough place. I did get around the country a bit, but the main event was the big commemoration on Guadalcanal.

In 1942, the United States began its counteroffensive against the Japanese by invading Guadalcanal. The U.S. Battle Monuments Commission planned to dedicate an impressive, large monument on the island of Guadalcanal. I had thoroughly researched the Guadalcanal campaign at West Point's library and archives. In 1992, the U.S. had a one-person embassy in Honiara, the capital of Solomon Islands. Dan Vernon was the chargé, with Ambassador Farrand accredited to Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu. Thus, we had one ambassador and two embassies covering three countries. Dan was shorthanded, being the only American officer in Solomon Islands. My job was to be the ambassador's liaison with the Battle Monuments Commission, veterans groups, and Defense Department officials attending the commemoration.

I was able to hitch a ride on the USS Racine from Port Moresby to Guadalcanal. The USS Racine was an LST, like the USS Harlan County that had visited Sao Tome. LSTs have relatively fiat bottoms and tend to roll heavily, sometimes to even 45 degrees. I was a complete landlubber. As we crossed the Coral Sea from New Guinea to the Solomon Islands, the seas were mostly calm, but even so, I was not a very adept sailor. On Sunday, there was a church service in the wardroom -- the dining room area. With a lurch of the ship, my chair, with me in it, slid across the floor and crashed into the far wall. I rather sheepishly dragged my chair back to its original position, noticing that everyone else was sitting with their feet cupped around the legs of their chairs to keep them from sliding. I didn't even know how to sit properly on a ship.

The USS Racine carried a contingent of Marines. As my research gave me a pretty solid background on the Battle of Guadalcanal, I earned my passage across the Coral Sea by giving a couple of lectures onboard to the Marines about the campaign.

I shared a room a Seabee and was assigned to the top bunk bed. At night, the ship rolled so violently that I was almost thrown out of bed. I normally sleep on my side, but found I was flopping back and forth like a landed fish. The next morning I discovered the bed had straps like seatbelts to keep the occupant from being tossed out. I learned to sleep like a flying squirrel, with my arms and legs outstretched for stability.

I got seasick, even though I had an anti-seasickness patch behind one ear. The sailors gave me a hard time about that. I asked a sailor in private, "Don't sailors get seasick?"

He said, "Yes, but it's not something you talk about in the U.S. Navy."

I was relieved when Guadalcanal appeared on the horizon. The USS Racine approached the island on the same heading as the invasion fleet had in August of 1942.

We had a very busy four or five days upon arrival. Maybe 700 American veterans, who 50 years earlier had fought and seen buddies die on Guadalcanal, returned with wives, children, and sometimes grandchildren. There were also maybe 50 Japanese veterans who came with their families. It was heartwarming to see these old men, who had tried to kill each other half a century ago, greet each other respectfully. The Battle Monuments people were first class and the battle monument itself was impressive. Seabees put the finishing touches on the monument and bulldozed a gravel road up to the site.

Q: Yeah. The first Marines division had Guadalcanal on their patches.

McMULLEN: The Marines bore the brunt of invasion and the early fighting on Guadalcanal and were later relived by the Army. I escorted groups of veterans to battle sites around the island. Many vets shared firsthand accounts of combat, their memories sharp (or stories familiar with retelling) after five decades. Three Medal of Honor recipients attended the commemoration. Many of the veterans would talk your leg off if given the chance, and understandably so. But the Medal of Honor winners didn't. I don't know exactly why. Maybe they'd already told their stories enough, or maybe their experiences were too horrendous or too painful to recount.

Q: Well Ron, did you get into the Guadalcanal campaign? I think this is one of the most fascinating campaigns of World War II. Yet it seems to be overlooked. Did you get into all that?

McMULLEN: I was unofficially designated military historian for the Guadalcanal commemoration, as I'd studied the Army and Navy official accounts of the campaign. As mentioned, the Marines did much of the heavy fighting during the first phase of the campaign and were then relieved by the Army. The Marine contingent on the USS Racine had T-shirts printed up featuring a fighting man on the front and the words "U.S. Marines Remember Guadalcanal 50th Anniversary" on the back. The fighting man pictured is wearing a standard World War II helmet and holds an M1 Garand rifle. As you may know, the Marines in the invasion force were issued Springfield bolt-action rifles and some still wore flat World War I helmets. I pointed this out to the Marines, saying, "It's nice of you to highlight an Army soldier on your T-shirts." They were a little flummoxed by that. But it really was the Marines who did the heavy lifting and won the battle with great support and sacrifice by the U.S. Navy.

Q: The U.S. Navy lost more people than the Marines did during the campaign.

McMULLEN: Yep. It was a very perilous undertaking for the Navy as well. After the Marines were withdrawn to regroup for the invasion of Tarawa, the Army fought hard to eliminate the tenacious Japanese resistance on the island. It was the Marines who secured Henderson Field, which was the strategic imperative of the whole campaign.

Q: Did you meet many Pacific Islanders in Guadalcanal? Were they interested in the events?

When I was in Honiara, the capital of Solomon Islands, we met a very interesting delegation from the island of Tanna in the Republic of Vanuatu. The delegation represented the John Frum Society, one of the largest of the cargo cults that arose on isolated islands in the South Pacific in the 1930s. Islanders believed that a god-like figure called John Frum would eventually bring material wealth and abundance to the impoverished islands. It may have originated from fragmentary tales about outsiders arriving on undeveloped islands and building bases, airstrips, and ports. Later, ships and planes arrived, disgorging abundant material goods. One of the original members of the John Frum Society, an elderly man named Tom Welles, led a group of his supporters over to meet with Ambassador Farrand, some military visitors from Washington, and me. They were very cordial and just wanted to say they appreciated American involvement in the South Pacific. I suspect they were hoping that this was the coming of John From, given the arrival of an American warship, loads of military VIPs and veterans, and other U.S. officials. They believed that Americans would eventually bring material abundance to Tanna and other island. They were friendly, eager, and shared stories about the origins of the John Frum Society. I think they probably went back to Tanna disappointed that this was not the coming of John Frum and an age of abundance. It was another interesting element of our visit on Guadalcanal.

Q: Well, after this summer interlude, you went back to West Point?

McMULLEN: Yes, in August 1992 I returned to begin my final academic year at West Point.

Q: Did you find you were serving as a diplomat as well as a teacher, a representative of the Foreign Service among cadets and young officers?

McMULLEN: The Department of Social Sciences very quickly integrated us into the fabric of the academy, both academically and socially. I wasn't treated differently. West Point, an Army post, was by nature rank and title conscious. In our housing complex everybody had nameplates on their houses identifying the occupants as "Lieutenant Colonel and Mrs. Smith" or "Major and Captain Johnson." Jane and I put "Drs. McMullen" because we both had doctorates. West Point didn't treat me like a special visiting diplomat, but as part of the team.

I was rarely asked specifically about the Foreign Service, although a number of cadets asked me individually about Foreign Service career opportunities. I recently heard from a former student who completed a 20-year Army career and has just passed the Foreign Service Oral Assessment. My presence helped the cadets understand the State Department's perspectives and procedures, I think. As we've seen in Iraq and Afghanistan, members of the military and the Foreign Service

need to communicate clearly, understand each other, and coordinate closely. My time at West Point gave me a much deeper understanding of the military and I hope my cadets gained insights to the State Department.

Q: Well, on the cultural side did you notice any particular differences, such as religiousness or other aspects of society with the Army?

McMULLEN: We went to the Cadet Chapel, which was active and well-attended by both faculty and cadets. There was no overt religiosity in the Sosh Department, although many of faculty and their families attended church regularly.

The inter-service rivalry was a prevalent aspect of academy culture. USMA (*the* military academy) had semester-long exchanges with cadets from the other academies. In return, West Point cadets would go to Colorado Springs to the Air Force Academy or to Naval Academy in Annapolis for a semester. West Point cadets referred to Air Force cadets as "Pencil Necks," perhaps implying they were technically oriented wimps. The cadets called Naval Academy midshipmen "Squids" and Marines "Slug Stoppers," as in, "Marine, charge that machine gun." Exchange students from the Coast Guard Academy in New London were barely considered worthy of notice and were called "Pseudo-Squids."

The inter-service rivalry was fun but not always friendly. The week before the Army-Air Force football game, West Point would be subject to treetop fly-overs by B-52s. Before the Army–Navy game, Navy F-14s would scream over campus to intimidate the cadets. Even during Desert Storm/Desert Shield, cadets would sneak out of their barracks at night under threat of severe punishment to paint "Go Army, Sink Navy" on campus rooftops.

Within the Army there was also a lot of inter-branch rivalry, pitting Anti-Aircraft Artillery against Aviation, Infantry against Armor, Signal Corps against Military Intelligence, and the like. The faculty did a lot of mentoring, trying to get the cadets to pick the right branch. The inter-branch rivalries seemed more overt and substantive than the differences between cones in the Foreign Service.

Q: Was there anything stirring the pot that you had to focus on with the cadets during this final year?

McMULLEN: By 1993, the Defense Department's budget was in a downward trajectory, causing the cadets to wonder what sort of institution they were going to inherit. My students began to look closely at international peacekeeping operations like Operation Restore Hope in Somalia.

Q: Well, was there any emphasis at West Point in dealing with, I guess you call it asymmetrical or unorthodox warfare? In other words, dealing with guerilla movements and almost mob actions, completely different from, you know, fighting conventional wars.

McMULLEN: This was the era of the Powell Doctrine, based on Colin Powell's notion that the United States should avoid involvement in messy, incremental wars, but when our national

interests so merited, we should go in with overwhelming strength, smash the enemy, and get out quickly. No more Vietnams, no more quagmires. This view was shared by senior officers of the Vietnam War generation. We were still basking in the warm afterglow the Gulf War, fought in keeping with the Powell Doctrine. So no, there wasn't much thought given to asymmetry, counterinsurgency, or even counterterrorism. In 1993, we suffered the first bombing of New York's World Trade Center. It was terrible thing, but perhaps an aberration. The bomb injured many people and killed a few, but it didn't really cause much disruption or concern, frankly.

Q: How did you find the exchange cadets?

McMULLEN: The international exchange cadets were terrific. Because of language difficulties, many gravitated toward engineering and math, with relatively few majoring in political science. I had a very bright Turkish cadet in one of my classes who was particularly concerned about the Kurdish insurgency in southeastern Turkey. He spoke passionately against the PKK (Parti Karkerani Kurdista, the Kurdistan Worker's Party) and really focused his classmate's attention on the importance to the Turkish military of the Kurdish insurgency. Very few of the other cadets knew anything about this, despite Turkey being a member of NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) and a good ally. Interacting with the international exchange cadets was an enriching academic experience for cadets, and one that set the stage for international military cooperation later in their careers.

Q: How many tours did this make for you? What came next?

McMULLEN: While we were at the U.S. Military Academy the Soviet Union imploded, we fought and won the Gulf War, and the U.S. intervened unsuccessfully in Somalia. In July 1993, my family and I moved from West Point to Bethesda, and I began my two-year tour as the desk officer for Afghanistan. I'd done the Dominican Republic, Sri Lanka, Gabon, and West Point and finally on my fifth tour I was corralled and assigned to Washington

Q: All right. Now, you were doing the Afghan Desk for how long?

McMULLEN: I moved to the Afghan Desk in July 1993 and served there until July 1995. I worked in the Office of Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh Affairs (PAB) within the newly created Bureau of South Asian Affairs (SA). Two years previously the Near East Asia bureau had stretched from Morocco through Bangladesh. The State Department then broke off the countries of South Asia, so while I was on the Afghan desk, I worked in the Bureau of South Asian Affairs. A few years later they added the five Central Asian republics to create the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs (SCA). I was there during that interlude when the bureau just covered South Asia. I was the sole desk officer for Afghanistan at this time and was one of only two fulltime employees in the State Department focused on Afghanistan. Contrast that with the situation since 2001, when the State Department has had hundreds of people working on Afghan issues. In 1993, I was the only policy-oriented FSO working fulltime on Afghanistan. The other FSO, Sheila Peters, worked as an analyst in INR (the Bureau of Intelligence and Research). So there were just two of us, an INR analyst and myself, working fulltime on Afghanistan. The first day at the office, I received a five-minute tour of the work area, and asked, "What's this folded-up flag on the top of my filing cabinet?"

My colleagues explained, “That’s the flag from Embassy Kabul, taken down in January of 1989.” We closed the embassy just two weeks before the Soviet pullout of February 1989. The pro-Soviet Najibullah regime surprised everyone by holding on until 1992, when it fell and Najibullah fled to a UN compound in Kabul. I became the Afghanistan desk officer one year after the fall of Najibullah. Embassy Kabul was closed and its flag was on my filing cabinet. We still had FSNs at Embassy Kabul, gardeners and some maintenance guys who looked after the chancery compound. Once a month an FSN traveled from Kabul to Peshawar, collected the FSN payroll, journeyed back to Kabul, and paid the FSNs still employed.

After Najibullah fell in 1992, there was no cohesive Afghan government. Burhanuddin Rabbani, the nominal president, headed a Tajik mujahedin group called Jamiat-e Islami. But Rabbani’s group didn’t even control all of Kabul, let alone all of Afghanistan, which had collapsed into a 12-sided civil war fought by rival mujahedin groups and regional warlords. The U.S. government believed its support for the mujahedin sped the collapse of the Soviet Union, but by 1993, Afghanistan was yesterday’s news. Nobody really was very concerned about Afghanistan. The 12-sided civil war complicated delivery of development assistance and humanitarian aid.

While no longer a U.S. strategic priority, Afghanistan held some strategic interest for a couple of reasons. First, despite the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the five Central Asian states remained dependent on Russia for access to the world. We thought, “If the Central Asian countries had alternate trade and transportation routes, they might be able to wean themselves from Russia’s bear hug.” We hoped that Afghanistan could be an outlet or transit point for Central Asia with South Asia and the rest of the world. Second, the collapse of the Soviet Union changed the Cold War dynamics in South Asia -- U.S. support for Pakistan and the USSR’s strong links to India. India, having lost the Soviet Union as a patron, might now be more amenable to better relations with the United States. We saw India as more important than Pakistan, and suddenly a new relationship with India seemed possible. Thus, the collapse of the Soviet Union changed the dynamics in Afghanistan, and in South Asia as a whole.

Robin Raphel, the assistant secretary for South Asia, and had a personal interest in Afghanistan and was supportive of a more active U.S. role there. Almost any time I needed to talk to her about Afghanistan or sought her help on something, she was accessible, interested, and supportive, as were the successive PAB office directors, John Holzman and Lee Coldren.

The United States had four specific interests in Afghanistan, and none were high priorities. One concerned Afghan refugees in Pakistan who had yet to return home, despite the Soviet withdrawal. During the Soviet occupation, a quarter of Afghanistan’s population became refugees, one million people were killed, and Afghanistan became the most heavily mined country in the world. Many refugees remained in Pakistani refugee camps. The State Department’s Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration cooperated with UN agencies to support Afghan refugees and prepare them to return home. We were also providing some funds for demining operations in Afghanistan. But in the midst of a 12-side civil war, convincing Afghans to go home was not easy, and conducting demining operations while Afghan militia groups were laying more landmines was like swimming upstream. Probably 90% of Afghanistan at any given time was at peace, but the problem was that the 90% kept changing. This week

Nuristan province might be entirely quiet, but next month it could witness a flare-up of fighting. So the refugees weren't keen to go home and it was hard to get much demining done.

Another concern was regional stability. Afghanistan's borders cut across ethnic groups, creating situations where cousins live on both sides of an international border. Pashtuns are divided by the Durand Line between Afghanistan and Pakistan. There are Tajiks in Afghanistan and Tajikistan, Uzbeks in Uzbekistan and Afghanistan, and Turkmen on both sides of the border. The Shia Hazara community in central Afghanistan had ties to Iran. There were ethnic fault lines crisscrossing the region, creating the potential for neighboring counties to be drawn into the Afghan conflict. Pakistan was particularly concerned about Indian involvement in Afghanistan, which Pakistan considered its backyard. We wanted Central Asia to be able to trade with South Asia and the world through Afghanistan, but worried that overlapping ethnic ties meant that Afghanistan's civil war might fuel instability in the region.

Third, the United States was also concerned about narcotics. Without an effective government, Afghanistan had become the second largest opium and heroin producer in the world after Burma. There were tons and tons of heroin coming out of Afghanistan, a country with no effective internal security or interest in suppressing the booming drug trade.

Terrorism was our fourth concern. By 1995 there were probably 20 different camps in Afghanistan at which Islamist militants received training. We were concerned about Tajik Islamists, as Tajikistan had fallen into a civil war pitting the autocratic post-Soviet regime against radical Islamist elements. There was growing concern about the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and about Kashmiris being trained in Afghanistan, which could exacerbate the India-Pakistan conflict. Arab jihadists were also training in Afghanistan, but the U.S. was more worried about Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Kashmiris who might destabilize the region. To summarize, in the mid-1990s the United States' limited interest in Afghanistan focused on humanitarian concerns, regional stability, drugs, and terrorism.

We had no embassy in Kabul to do human rights or political reporting, so I served as the political section of shuttered Embassy Kabul. I had some great contacts. One was an Afghan-American VoA (Voice of America) reporter who spoke Pashto and frequently called people in Afghanistan and the Afghan communities in Pakistan to find out what was happening. I also had regular contact with the staff of the Afghan embassy in Washington. So, between VoA, the Afghan embassy, and to some extent the Russian embassy, I was relatively well-informed about events on the ground in Afghanistan. As desk officer, I did many things that would have been done by an officer at Embassy Kabul, had the embassy been open.

Q: Well, you were there almost at the beginning of the South Asia Bureau?

McMULLEN: Yes.

Q: Bureaucracy is not always a pleasant sight. Did you find growing pains or bureaucratic conflicts?

McMULLEN: I had no prior experience in Washington, so I had no "before picture." The South Asia bureau didn't have its own executive office, so we had to rely on the Near East Asian bureau for administrative support. That was kind of odd in retrospect. Working in a small bureau meant that even as a midlevel desk officer I had good access to the assistant secretary, Robin Raphel. As a younger person she had, I think, transited through Afghanistan in a Volkswagen minibus or something, as was sometimes done in the flower power days of the 1960s. Perhaps because of this, Assistant Secretary Raphel was interested in Afghanistan and visited the war-torn country while I was on the desk, even though it was a very dangerous place.

During the war against the Soviets, the U.S. provided Stinger missiles to the mujahedin. Many of these portable anti-aircraft missiles hadn't been used or turned in, and we were worried they'd showing up in places where we didn't want airplanes shot down. The State Department was supportive of the U.S. government's active Stinger buy-back campaign.

I helped with the U.S. - Russian Joint Commission on POW-MIA Affairs, a presidential commission headed by former ambassador Malcolm Toon. We worked with the Russian government to account for POWs and MIAs (missing in action) from World War II, the Korea War, the Vietnam War, and the Afghanistan War. The Russians were interested in accounting for about 290 Soviet, mostly Russian, POWs or MIAs in Afghanistan. I worked closely with Ambassador Toon and provided him access to Afghan contacts in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the Washington area to identify people who might be able to account for missing Russians who were in the Soviet Army during the war in Afghanistan.

I've always disliked bureaucracy in the State Department and therefore appreciated the small scale of the Bureau of South Asian Affairs (SA). Several years after I left the Afghan desk, the five Central Asian republics were added to the bureau, making it the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs. The State Department hoped that by bureaucratically separating the Central Asian republics from the rest of the former Soviet Union, these five new countries might have a more independent role in the region and the world.

Q: I think that was true. It was also of course to beef up the bureau too.

McMULLEN: Yes, absolutely. The SA bureau had embassies in only five countries -- Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and India. We didn't have a post in Bhutan or the Maldives although they were in the bureau's region.

Q: At that time, was the CIA particularly interested in Afghanistan and inserting its people there? Or was this a later manifestation?

McMULLEN: As far as I could tell, the agency was watching Afghanistan, but except for the Stinger buy-back program, not very closely. When my INR colleague and I met with the agency analysts, we knew substantially more than they did about what was going on inside Afghanistan. So I don't think the CIA was particularly engaged, except for the Stinger program.

Keeping track of the Afghan politico-military situation was like looking though a kaleidoscope -- every week the configuration of the warring groups changed. They'd form quickly shifting

temporary coalitions. It was difficult to keep tabs on everything, and few in the U.S. government had the time or inclination.

The Taliban, in late 1994, appeared out of the refugee camps in Pakistan and made headway in Kandahar Province. We didn't know they were going to be a game changer. The Taliban emerged in late 1994, took Kandahar, and tried to continue through western Afghanistan up to the border of Turkmenistan. They were routed in early 1995 in western Afghanistan and appeared to be just one more group entering the multi-sided civil war. We didn't see them as being especially different or significant at the time. Many of the mujahedin groups, such as Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hezbi-Islami, were Islamist. Sayyaf had the support of Wahhabis from Saudi Arabia, etc. So the Taliban coming out of the madrasas and refugee camps of Pakistan did not herald a new or unusually radical phenomena. At the time, the Taliban seemed like the thirteenth entrant in Afghanistan's anarchic mêlée.

Q: Well, did we see or were we concerned about the Pakistani the intelligence involvement in the militant groups?

McMULLEN: No, we worked closely during the Soviet occupation with the ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence) to channel weapons to the mujahedin groups. There were seven major groups based in Pakistan. The ISI favored some over others and channeled more weapons to Haqqani, Hekmatyar, and other favorites. The Iranians supported their fellow Shias, the Hazaras. Saudis were funding Sayyaf's group. The Soviets and later the Uzbek government had links with Dostum and Uzbek militias in north Afghanistan. So it seemed natural that the ISI had been supporting its favored groups. When it became apparent that Hekmatyar was not going to win the civil war, I think the Pakistanis decided they were going to back a new contender, the Taliban. While it was clear that the Taliban enjoyed at least semi-official support Pakistan, it didn't seem to be a dramatically new development.

In fact, the U.S. government was initially no more opposed to the Taliban than to other Afghan radical militant groups. Did we support them? Absolutely not. Did we see them as the embodiment of Satan at the time? No. They were another radical Islamist group that came out of Pakistan and became embroiled in the Afghan civil war. However, their tactics were different. They marched out of the madrasas and refugee camps of Pakistan, and their initial gains were almost peaceful. They would walk towards a town carrying a Quran above their heads, saying, "We're here to install the rule of God." Members of warring militias would fall in behind them. The Taliban took Kandahar surprisingly easily. It was only when they got out of the Pashtun border areas of southeastern Afghanistan that they ran into serious opposition – they were stopped in western Afghanistan in early 1995. I left the Afghan desk before the Taliban took Kabul and pushed Rabbani and his allies back up into the northeast. Late in my tenure, the Taliban controlled Kandahar and adjoining areas, but looked like nothing more than one of the dozen factions involved in the fighting.

Q: Could we talk to them?

McMULLEN: We didn't, as far as I know. We had the best contacts with the mujahedin groups we supported during war against the Soviet Union. In September 1993, I went on an orientation

trip to the region, visiting Peshawar to meet with Consul General Rich Smyth and his staff at the consulate. We went to refugee camps and talked with mujahedin leaders. I was most impressed by Abdul Haq, a Pashtun mujahedin commander who lost a leg fighting the Soviets. He was a remarkable leader and had met both President Reagan and Prime Minister Thatcher during the war. Abdul Haq was disheartened at how Afghanistan had fallen into civil war once the Najibullah regime had been ousted. Shortly after we invaded Afghanistan in 2001, he charged in to raise the Pashtun tribes against the Taliban, but he was captured and executed. Abdul Haq would have made an excellent president of Afghanistan, in my opinion, had he survived.

From Peshawar I planned to travel through the Khyber Pass to Jalalabad, Afghanistan, but there was a big firefight at the Jalalabad provincial council two days before my trip. Ambassador John Monjo in Islamabad said, "The Khyber Pass is off limits to U.S. government employees due to the heavy fighting in Jalalabad." My plans to get to Afghanistan were once again foiled. I had signed up to be a Peace Corps Volunteer in Afghanistan after college, but the communist coup of April 1978 caused the Peace Corps to pull out. So I was 0 for 2 in my attempts to go to Afghanistan. My Plan B was to fly from Pakistan to Tashkent, Uzbekistan to confer with the Uzbek government about Afghanistan and particularly their support for Dostum. While in grim, post-Soviet Tashkent I also talked with the staff of the Russian embassy. Luckily, my Russian interlocutor had served with the Soviet Army in Afghanistan during the war. He was very knowledgeable about what was happening in northern Afghan.

While in Tashkent I stayed with FSO Daria Fane. One night we went with a few others from the U.S. embassy to a Uyghur wedding. There was a fairly large Uyghur community in Tashkent. Uyghurs are Turkic-speaking Muslims found mostly in western China, particularly in the Xinjiang region.

Q: They're sort of in a conflicted relationship, aren't they?

McMULLEN: Yeah, some Chinese officials view Uyghurs as troublemakers and potential secessionists.

Q: The Chinese are still concerned.

McMULLEN: Political officer Daria Fane, DCM Mike Matera, a few others from Embassy Tashkent, and I attended a traditional Uyghur wedding. We were sort of the trophy diplomats, I think. At one point we were herded on to the stage and requested to dance to traditional Uyghur songs. As we danced awkwardly to the music, people ran up and press ruble notes of various denominations into our coat pockets, sleeves, and collars. Pretty soon I was practically covered in ruble notes and asked Daria, "What are we supposed to do with these?"

She said, "Collect them and quietly give them to the bride or groom."

That was the only time in my life I've been paid to dance. It was a fun evening and I enjoyed seeing Uyghur culture.

The next evening happened to be the Jewish festival of Rosh Hashanah. At that time there were about 35,000 members of the Jewish community in Uzbekistan and we attended a large Rosh Hashanah gathering in Tashkent in a civic auditorium. There was a speaker from Israel discussing the process of immigrating to Israel, which generated a spirited debated. Would it be better for the Jewish community in Uzbekistan to emigrate to Israel? Or would it be better for Israel to have a thriving Jewish community in Uzbekistan and other countries? Similar debates were taking place across the former Soviet Union at that time. I was disappointed not to have gotten to Afghanistan, but the foray up to Uzbekistan was some consolation.

Q: Did you have any contact with Hamid Karzai?

McMULLEN: No, he was a second-tier former muj (mujahidin) commander. I wouldn't say effete, but he was sort of cosmopolitan, and was not among the more influential former commanders. Karzai was not on our radarscope and didn't seem to be presidential material. We had cordial relations President Rabbani. As desk officer, I got a New Year's greeting card and letter from President Clinton to forward to President Rabbani. That December, Rabbani's faction lost control of Kabul, and I didn't know how to get the letter to him. I kept it. It wasn't until 2006, when I was working on Afghanistan for INL (The Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs) that I delivered the letter, very belatedly, to the government of Afghanistan. In 2011, Rabbani was playing the go-between, trying to start peace talks between the Taliban and the Karzai government. He was assassinated with a turban bomb. His interlocutor walked into the meeting wearing a turban with a bomb in it and blew up former President Rabbani. Rabbani was an honorable man, and the Taliban showed themselves to be bloody murderers.

Q: What was your impression of the very mixed leadership of people you were seeing in Afghan leadership?

McMULLEN: What had been a strength became a great weakness. The Afghans' divided obstinacy was a strength during the war against the Soviets. The factionalized opposition meant that the Soviets couldn't co-opt or defeat a single group. There was no single negotiating partner, no single military target, no single leader who could be bribed, co-opted, killed, or cowed into submission. When Najibullah fell, the character of the mujahedin leadership didn't change. This atomized militancy became a huge weakness, because the mujahedin leaders were still obstinate and resilient and factionalized, and weren't able to come together to form a cohesive, coherent government of Afghanistan. It was frustrating dealing with them. There were many egos involved, and most of the muj leaders had little experience as anything but guerrilla commanders. They were influential because they had armed followers. If peace and normalcy returned, what were they going to do? They were not businesspeople, they were not public servants, they were not politicians. They were military leaders. I clearly saw this strength, the Afghans' stubborn, fractionalized resistance to the Red Army, become the Achilles' heel of a potentially peaceful, united, and prosperous Afghanistan.

Even Rabbani, who was probably the best of the group, was unable to bridge the gaps and bring in Hekmatyar and the others. Hekmatyar had been the favorite of the Pakistani ISI. I blame Pakistan in part for insisting that their guy become the head of Afghanistan, when Burhanuddin

Rabbani held the presidency, at least officially, and controlled most of Kabul. Kabul was largely destroyed. It had been fought over many times, with neighborhoods controlled by rival militant groups. I enjoyed meeting with Afghan leaders of every stripe. Fierce, proud, and cordial, they had an almost chivalrous code of honor. Individually I liked almost all the Afghans I met. But the muj leaders seemed more concerned about their squabbles than the fact that their country was being torn apart. It was not a bad time to be the Afghanistan desk officer. It was an interesting but frustrating experience.

I was the sole desk officer for Afghanistan, but after 2001 the Department created a whole office devoted to Afghan affairs. Think back to the movie "Charlie Wilson's War," and how that ended. Representative Wilson's view was that we had urged the Afghans to continue their struggle against the Soviets despite impossible odds, and they eventually triumphed, although at great cost. He argued that we shouldn't abandon them now that the Soviets had been defeated. That was my sentiment for two years, but I was one of two people in the State Department devoted fulltime to Afghanistan from mid-1993 to mid-1995. I learned a lot about working in the State Department, about the bureaucracy, and about interagency politics. It was an unusual desk officer experience.

I also served as our Afghanistan liaison with the UN. Because we weren't prepared to put many resources into resolving the Afghan conflict, and I'm not sure any U.S. effort would have been successful, we saw the UN as the best neutral party to resolve the multifaceted Afghan civil war. I personally drafted a Security Council presidential statement. Working with my counterpart in the Russian embassy, we got it cleared by our respective governments and approved by the Security Council. The presidential statement called for a UN special mission to go to Afghanistan to talk with all factions about forming a broad-based government. After drafting the statement, sharing it with my counterpart at the Russian embassy, I quickly got it cleared, and sent it up to New York. That just wouldn't happen today, but reflected the zeitgeist of 1994, that Afghanistan was yesterday's news. It was almost as if the State Department had said, "mid-level Afghan desk officer, go ahead and take the lead on trying to put Afghanistan back together."

Q: Well then, what was your impression of Pakistan? Was this a lurking menace on the sidelines or a brother in arms or what?

McMULLEN: I was fascinated by Peshawar. I liked to go to the bazaar and wander through the back alleys.

Q: This is the border town.

McMULLEN: Yes, absolutely. It had all the color, buzz, and energy of a frontier town. I didn't feel threatened in Peshawar. An anti-American mob had attacked and burned Embassy Islamabad in 1979. There was a lot of security around Islamabad, but it was a city with wide boulevards, leafy parks, and big government buildings with manicured lawns. It was very much an artificial Pakistani city. However, life there could be surprisingly dangerous. It looked like such a quiet, calm, modern city, yet we've seen events in Islamabad turn dangerous in a hurry. For various reasons, I liked Pakistan a lot. I enjoyed the ambiance of Pakistan, particularly that

of Peshawar. I contemplated bidding on the principal officer job in Peshawar, but Consul General Rich Smyth extended for a third year, thus throwing off the timing.

The Pakistanis were clearly supporting Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and the Taliban. While we disapproved, we needed Pakistani approval to access the refugee camps and to the border regions to conduct demining and Stinger recovery operations. Pakistan was an annoying ally but the relationship was probably more positive than negative at the time. I certainly was fascinated by the dynamics in Peshawar and thought that that would be an interesting onward assignment, but unfortunately it didn't work out.

Q: During the time you were on the desk, what was the Russian influence?

McMULLEN: The Russians knew a lot about Afghanistan, but they were not particularly influential players overall. Their interests focused on how Afghanistan would affect Central Asia. There were Russian troops on the border between Tajikistan and Afghanistan. There was a civil war brewing in Tajikistan pitting militant Islamists, trained in Afghanistan, against the pro-Russian government in Dushanbe. Russia was concerned that instability in Afghanistan might infect the Central Asia republics, many of which had authoritarian governments supported by Moscow. Tajikistan and Uzbekistan were of special concern to the Russians. Thus, Russia and the United States worked together to encourage the United Nations to play a more prominent role in Afghanistan. Russia and the United States had somewhat common interests in Afghanistan, but the Russians were not as deeply involved, except on the northern Afghan border.

Q: Well then, you left the desk when? After two years?

McMULLEN: Yes. In the summer of 1995 I went from the Afghan Desk over to FSI to study Afrikaans. I had been paneled into the deputy principal officer position at Consulate General (ConGen) Cape Town. At FSI, I got a 3/3 in Afrikaans and then did a short TDY in the AF (Africa) Bureau. In July 1996, we moved from Bethesda to Cape Town, South Africa. Flying into Cape Town we saw snow on the peaks of nearby mountains, as it was winter in the southern hemisphere. We were there from mid-1996 until mid-1999.

This was an historic time to be an American diplomat in South Africa, just two years after the fall of the despised apartheid regime. The United States had championed anti-apartheid sanctions and the Clinton administration was supportive of the transition to majority rule. President Bill Clinton and Vice President Al Gore wanted to see South Africa become a prosperous democracy, not only for South Africa's safe, but also to establish an engine of growth in Southern Africa and a good strong trading partner for the U.S. The Clinton administration set up the U.S.-South Africa Binational Commission. This was headed by Vice President Gore and Deputy President Thabo Mbeki on the South African side. Once a year Vice President Gore and half the U.S. cabinet traveled to South Africa for ministerial consultations. Six months later Deputy President Mbeki led half the South African cabinet to Washington. For example, the secretary of agriculture met with the minister of agriculture, the secretary of the interior met with the minister of home affairs, and the secretary of defense met with the minister of defense. It was a full-blown experiment in what some people call transgovernmental relations. Rather than

limiting the interactions between our two governments to the State Department and the South African Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Binational Commission promoted direct contact and cooperation between issue-specific departments and ministries. Because Cape Town was South Africa's parliamentary capital and the most beautiful city in Africa, it was the favored South African Binational Commission venue.

As an outgrowth of the Boer War, South Africa's parliament is located in Cape Town, but the executive capital is Pretoria, where the U.S. embassy is located. We also have a consulate general in Johannesburg, the commercial capital of South Africa, one in Cape Town, and a consulate in Durban. In previous years the U.S. embassy moved between Pretoria and Cape Town depending on whether parliament was in session or not, but by 1996 the embassy was permanently based in Pretoria. Each year Vice President Gore and half the U.S. Cabinet came to Cape Town for the Binational Commission. We also had visits from President Clinton, Secretary Christopher, Secretary Albright, and First Lady Hillary Clinton and Chelsea. So it was an exciting time to be there, in part due to the high-profile commitment the Clinton administration placed on supporting the transition in South Africa. The Binational Commission was a time-consuming and extraordinary experiment in transgovernmental relations. All these VIP visits were a huge strain on the small staff of ConGen Cape Town. For example, when Bill Clinton visited in March of 1998, he traveled with an entourage of 1,200.

Q: Good grief.

McMULLEN: Yep. And the Secret Service was absolutely paranoid, because we'd had trouble with a growing Islamist militant group based in Cape Town. The Secret Service insisted that Cape Town's manhole covers be welded shut on any route the president was likely to travel. Of course, the South Africans thought this was completely bonkers and said, "No, we're not going to weld our manhole covers shut. That's crazy."

The head Secret Service agent replied, "Would you like us to cancel the presidential visit? And how do you spell your name, captain?" The Secret Service and the presidential advance team really threw their weight around. And we, as the staff of ConGen Cape Town, had to sweep up all the broken crockery after the POTUS (President of the United States) and other VIP visits.

In October 1996, I was a note taker at the Cape Town meeting between President Mandela and Secretary Warren Christopher. Secretary Christopher's objective was to win South Africa support of the Africa Crisis Response Initiative (ACRI). This was after Black Hawk Down in 1993, where 18 American troops died in Somalia. Because we had gotten our fingers burned in Mogadishu, we sat on our hands during the 1994 Rwanda genocide where 800,000 died. The Clinton administration hoped to organize and equip units of African armies to be first responders in the event of future manmade crises or natural disasters. The idea was to keep U.S. troops from having to serve as Africa's cop on the beat.

We reported to Washington that Mandela was not keen on ACRI, as South Africa's military was undergoing a thorough transformation from its apartheid-era structure to an organization reflective of the new South Africa. Most of the officers and many of the non-commissioned

officers were white. Mandela did not want to put any extra strain on the South African military, such as committing to ACRI, while its transformation was underway.

Secretary Christopher came anyway. Due to a transportation screw-up, I was tasked at the last minute to be a substitute note taker at the Christopher – Mandela meeting. President Mandela opposed South Africa's involvement in ACRI, but felt he couldn't refuse a meeting with the U.S. secretary of state. As the American delegation arrived at the meeting, Mandela met us at the door, shook our hands, introduced himself, and talked to everybody. Secretary Christopher, being an uptight attorney, wanted to delve right in to the ACRI negotiation. As President Mandela kept chatting, an impatient Christopher began to move towards the conference table. Seeing this, President Mandela said, "Oh, I forgot that the staff has kindly prepared light refreshments." As waiters appeared with tea, Mandela picked up a tray of cookies and began to serve everyone. He stopped by me and said, "Oh, I understand you're here in the consulate general. Where's home in the U.S.?"

"I'm from Iowa," I replied, and we talked for a few minutes about personal things and what a wonderful place Cape Town was. Mandela repeated that with rest of the American delegation.

Secretary Christopher was scheduled to depart just after his meeting with President Mandela. The clock kept ticking and Mandela kept chatting. Finally, he led us over to the negotiating table. Christopher, due to the short time remaining, launched into an abbreviated ACRI pitch. When Secretary Christopher concluded his presentation, President Mandela said "This is an important and complex topic you've raised -- we're going to have to study it in some depth. I know you have a plane to catch, but thank you very much for stopping by." He completely ran out the clock on Secretary Christopher. We went outside for a photo op with Mandela beaming and Secretary Christopher sporting a waxy smile. He knew he'd been outfoxed by President Mandela and would be returning to Washington without South Africa's endorsement of ACRI.

But the rest of the American entourage went out walking on air, as Nelson Mandela had taken the trouble to talk personally with each of us for three or four minutes. So I the chance to see Nelson Mandela at his charming, statesmanlike best.

Q: Well, how did you observe the situation in South Africa when you got there? It was not a particularly safe place, was it?.

McMULLEN: That's right. There was lots of gratuitously violent street crime – it was a constant negative factor. I commuted from a middle-class suburb into the center of Cape Town by train and carried a little canister of pepper spray in my coat pocket. I never used it, but occasionally I took the cap off when the situation turned potentially menacing. Our sons couldn't ride their bikes in the neighborhood. Men with knives would approach kids, threaten them, and steal their bikes. Before our car arrived, we borrowed one from RSO Dan Wutrich to run some errands. A thief broke the window and stole the radio out of the car. I saw the young guy walking away, and gave chase. Just as I was about to catch up to him, I thought, "What the heck am I doing? What if he has a knife? Do I want to get stabbed in the gut for the price of a car radio?" So I let him get away. That was about the only crime we experienced directly, but the threat of violent crime covered Cape Town like a blanket of smog. Kidnappings, rapes,

murders, and burglaries were topics of daily conversations. It was the worst aspect of living in South Africa.

Q: What sort of protection did you have?

McMULLEN: The RSO's office in Cape Town provided a roving patrol, a car that drove by diplomats' houses every so often. Our house was enclosed by a brick wall, we had bars on the windows, and the house had an alarm system like every other middle-class residence in Cape Town.

At one point we had a particular security concern that wasn't related to crime. The Dutch founded Cape Town in the 1600s as place for ships to replenish their supplies of food and water during the long voyage to the Dutch East Indies. When Indonesians resisted colonization, the Dutch exiled rebel leaders and other native troublemakers to Cape Town and elsewhere. Before long Cape Town had a well-established Muslim community, the Cape Malays, that sprang from the Dutch colonization of Indonesia.

In the mid-1990s the Cape Malay community spawned a radical element called Qibla, which in Arabic means direction -- the direction of Mecca, the way you orient your prayers. Qibla was a small Islamist group that wanted sharia law and only sharia law applied to Muslims in South Africa. Qibla's proposal was tantamount to juridical apartheid in which Muslims would live under a separate legal system – sharia – interpreted and administered by Qibla, of course. The government of South Africa replied, "We've just overcome apartheid, where people were legally separated by race. We are a democracy now and are not about to treat Muslims and non-Muslims differently under the law. So forget it." Qibla then began to attack South African officials, judges, legislators, police, and U.S. diplomats as well.

While Qibla was emerging in the Cape Malay community, a vigilante group called Pagad (People Against Gangsters and Drugs) appeared in poor Coloured areas to combat drug dealers and gangsters who were terrorizing the neighborhoods. Pagad's civic action quickly turned violent, with patrols exposing, beating up, and even killing known criminals.

Pagad, although popular in Coloured townships, had little funding or structure. Qibla moved in with money and ruthlessness, stealthily taking over the leadership of disorganized Pagad. Qibla brains and Pagad brawn proved to be a deadly effective combination. Under Qibla's hidden direction, Pagad began targeting the governing establishment as well as gangsters and drug dealers. Pagad members would sometimes wrap a chain around a parking meter, then use a pick-up to yank it out of the ground. The vigilantes would use the parking meter and its concrete base as a battering ram to bash in the front door of a drug dealer's house. Pagad members, supplied by Qibla with machine pistols and other weapons, would rush in through the smashed door and shoot everybody in the house – men, women, and children. Slowly, Qibla redirected Pagad's grass-roots vigilante violence towards Qibla's Islamist targets. Increasing judges, civil servants, police, and legislators who opposed sharia law were threatened by Pagad.

Qibla also turned its attention towards the U.S. and began to target American commercial and diplomatic interests. ConGen Cape Town was located in a multi-tenant business building

downtown on two noncontiguous floors. The ground level of this building was home to a gas station with large tanks of flammable gasoline. It was the worst possible location, in term of security, for a diplomatic facility. We kept trying to get OBO (Overseas Building Operations) and the State Department to build a new consulate general in a secure location, but it didn't happen while I was there.

At least we got the South Africans to restrict access by putting up jersey barriers to prevent a truck bomb from pulling underneath the building and blowing it to smithereens. Twice violent demonstrations occurred in front of the building, in one case leading to the shooting death of a protestor. We occasionally had to close the consulate when we received a particularly credible threat. Two Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurants were bombed. When Planet Hollywood opened a restaurant in Cape Town, Wesley Snipes cut the ribbon. Later Qibla bombed it too, causing numerous casualties, including among a group of teen-aged girls having a birthday party.

In December of 1998, I got a call from the South African Intelligence Police. A contact said, "Ron, we need to talk to you."

I said, "Well, you've got me on the phone. What do you want?"

And they said, "No, we need you to come down to the station."

I went to their office and was told they had a telephone intercept of two senior Qibla leaders discussing targeting the home of an American diplomat. The Qibla leaders mentioned two neighborhoods in Cape Town, one of which was where the U.S. ambassador stayed when parliament was in session. So we called Ambassador Joseph in Pretoria and said, "Don't come to Cape Town over the Christmas period, because there's a credible threat against your residence here." The other neighborhood mentioned was Rondabosch, where we lived. As the deputy principal officer and the political reporting officer, I had lots of Cape Malay contacts and was well-known among the Muslim community in Cape Town. Our house was on Qibla's potential hit list, and since we'd told the ambassador to avoid Cape Town, ours was the most probable target.

Jane and I called Owen, 11, and Wyatt, 7, together to review security at our house. I said, "You know how we have a plan in case there's a fire in the house? Where we meet at the street corner by the light pole? Well, we should also have a safety plan in case men with guns break into our house. What should we do then?" The plan was that Owen and Wyatt would hide in Wyatt's closet until it was quiet, then go out the bathroom window onto the garage roof, jump from the garage roof into the neighbor's backyard, and then go for help. Now, this was just before Christmas, when parents would rather be talking with their kids about Santa Claus coming down the chimney than discussing Qibla coming in the front door with machine pistols. So it was a bit of a tense time for us. The South African police provided added security to our residence and heightened surveillance on known Qibla members, while the RSO stepped up roving patrol passes. Luckily, no attack materialized.

Partly because of this episode, U.S. and South African security and intelligence folks began to work together more closely and later were able to catch a facilitator of the Islamists who bombed

Embassy Dar es Salaam. The South Africans also unraveled Qibla and arrested most of its leaders. Pagad then faded away. So, in addition to rampant, garden-variety crime, we had Qibla adding to the stress of the security environment.

Q: How did you and your wife find social life in Cape Town?

McMULLEN: Ask Jane which was her favorite of our seven overseas tours and she'll say Cape Town. We had a very normal life. Owen and Wyatt went to Bishops, a private South African school. Wyatt started kindergarten, called "grade naught," in Cape Town. Boys in grade naught played rugby, and it was fun to see a mob of kindergarteners in white shorts and T-shirts playing rugby barefoot after school. Owen played organized rugby and, to a lesser degree, cricket. Jane had good South African friends, many of whom also had sons at Bishops. She hiked on Table Mountain on Wednesdays, we attended Rosebank Methodist Church, and we had a little swimming pool and a vegetable garden in our backyard. The Western Cape is a beautiful place and we did lots of hiking, whale watching, hand-ax hunting, and some rock climbing. We had a very active social life that, uniquely in our seven overseas postings, did not revolve around the diplomatic community.

But working on the consulate was like working in a branch bank in the suburbs, rather than the main bank downtown. The embassy was in Pretoria, and while we had frequent, interaction with Ambassador Joseph, DCM Bob Pringle, and other embassy folks, ConGen Cape Town was something of a sideshow, not the main event. David Pierce was our first CG, followed by April Glaspie, who was an amazing diplomat and a great boss. There wasn't a big diplomatic community in Cape Town. Because it was such a lovely place, we hosted countless VIP visitors, including Jane's parents and mine too. In terms of work, it wasn't my favorite posting, but it was a wonderful place for us to live as a family with young children. Wyatt, who played rugby in grade naught, now plays rugby in his college in Minnesota and Owen is still an avid fan of the Springboks, South Africa's national rugby team.

During one Binational Commission session in Cape Town, I took Vice President Gore to visit a factory that made Freeplay radios, which were powered by winding up a clockwork mechanism. The factory employed ex-cons and abused women, an interesting labor force mix. The idea was to provide access to national news, agricultural market reports, and public health tips to farm families in areas without electricity. Al Gore was quite interested in the concept of hand-powered radios. He stopped and chatted with the abused women and ex-cons making the radios, and talked with the factory managers. The hand-cranked radios turned out not to be a big hit among the rural poor, but were bought by the thousands by first-world disaster relief agencies.

Q: I think L.L. Bean sells them.

McMULLEN: Yes, that's right. During another Binational Commission session I worked closely with Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt to help South Africa's national park service manage high-intensity tourism sites like the Cape of Good Hope and the adjoining Cape Peninsula Park. As we have millions of visitors each year to Yellowstone and Yosemite national parks, we shared our experience with South African park managers and environmentalists concerned with protecting environmentally sensitive, heavily visited national parks. The ecology

of the Cape is unique – the Western Cape is home to the Cape Floral Kingdom, one of the world's six floral kingdoms. The province is full of bizarre plants found nowhere else. So Secretary Babbitt met with South African national park managers and other officials to discuss managing high intensity tourism in sensitive areas like the Cape of Good Hope. He shared tips on how we manage mass tourism to popular places like the Grand Canyon and the National Mall in Washington, D.C. With sanctions lifted, South Africa was on the cusp of tourism boom, so the timing of these discussions was ideal.

I cooperated with the South African fish and wildlife officials to help stem poaching of the carefully regulated Patagonian Toothfish. Poachers from Spain, South America, and China were devastating South Africa's stocks of this giant, slow-growing fish. We also coordinated with local flower producers to help them meet U.S. import requirements, especially for the exotic, beautiful protea flowers native to the Western Cape. ConGen Cape Town worked with horticultural co-ops to establish fumigation facilities to kill South African bugs before the proteas were sent to United States.

During the visit of Defense Secretary William Cohen to Cape Town, I was asked to suggest guests for a reception. I recommended, among others, Nic Borain, a former ANC (African National Congress) militant who had helped move explosives used in ANC attacks. He was a white South African who had served in the South African Navy, later joined the ANC, and helped the ANC in some actions against the South African Defense Force. After the transition to majority rule, Nic went on to become a financial advisor to a large international bank. So here was a guy who'd been a radical revolutionary and was now a capitalist consultant. I thought it would be interesting to invite him to meet with Secretary Cohen.

I was the note taker when Bernie Saunders, the socialist member of Congress from Vermont, called on Deputy President Thabo Mbeki. It was odd hearing an American member of Congress promoting socialism and Thabo Mbeki arguing in favor of capitalism. Many observers thought the ANC was a communist revolutionary group when it was seeking to overthrow the apartheid regime. Thabo Mbeki asserted that South Africa needed more market-friendly policies. Bernie Saunders stressed the benefits of socialism. This was just the reverse of what one would have expected in an exchange between a member of Congress and a senior ANC official.

In March of 1997 First Lady Hillary Clinton and her daughter Chelsea visited Cape Town. I was on the team that helped with the FLOTUS (First Lady of the United States) visit to the former political prison on Robben Island. The Clintons saw Nelson Mandela's cell, the quarry where he worked for many years, and in the evening they were invited to a dinner at the former warden's house. Robben Island was the Devil's Island of apartheid South Africa. The South African government imprisoned many captured ANC members there. When the prisoners were freed in the run-up to 1994, most left the island impoverished, with no means of supporting their families, and in poor health. A private voluntary organization planned to have a high-profile fundraiser on Robben Island to aid former political prisoners.

Nelson Mandela, when asked about the event, said, "Yes, I'd like to attend."

Once Mandela's attendance was confirmed, South Africa's business and cultural elite wanted to participate to show their support for the new South Africa. The organizer of the fundraiser priced plates at $57,000 per person. Bill Cosby said he'd be willing to give a pre-dinner monologue. His son had been murdered in Oakland the year before and he'd been in mourning for much of the year. Mrs. Clinton heard about the event and expressed interest. We managed to get her invited. Chelsea too.

After a full day touring the island, we got the Clinton women over to the warden's house for the dinner. I was outside, sitting on our vehicle watching for great white sharks in the waters around Robben Island. The organizer came out and asked, "Ron, we had a no-show. Would you like to go in and have dinner?"

I said, "I don't know -- do I have to pay?"

She laughed and said, "No, just go in."

So I went in and was seated next to Miss South Africa, which was quite a treat. Bill Cosby got up and gave a heartwarming pre-dinner monologue. We had a little smoked salmon appetizer, and then at 9:00 President Mandela stood up and said, "Pardon me, ladies and gentleman, but I'm an old man. Wherever I am at 9:00 I go home." So he left. And it dawned on me that the Clinton women were flying back to the mainland on his helicopter. So I jumped up, said goodbye to Miss South Africa, and hustled out to fire up the jeep, and got the first lady and first daughter over to the helipad. They made it back to the mainland with President Mandela. At the end of her visit to Cape Town, Mrs. Clinton said, "You know, I have such a better appreciation for how far South Africa has come that I'd like to come back and bring the rest of the family." She meant Bill. In fact, the next year she came back with President Clinton. It was enlightening to see the very influential and constructive role that Hillary Clinton played as first lady.

I was also impressed with Chelsea. She was in high school at the time and had taken a lot of flack from the American press for various reasons. But she was an fine young representative of the United States, attentive, polite, and asked just the right questions when appropriate. Chelsea Clinton did well for herself, her mom, and the country.

Besides dealing with influential, important people, we also worked with some of the most downtrodden. ConGen Cape Town's consular district included the Eastern, Western, and Northern Cape provinces, encompassing half of South Africa's geographic area and a third of its population. The Eastern Cape included two former Bantustans, the pseudo-independent countries created by South Africa's apartheid government. Once I visited the former Republic of Ciskei and its capital, Bisho. Bisho was almost a ghost town, but had dramatic faux-African structures in its central plaza, which was full of litter and wandering goats. Bisho was the legislative capital of the Eastern Cape, but it was mainly a monument to the folly of South Africa's Bantustan policy. We sponsored self-help projects in the Eastern Cape, including in the former Bantustans of Ciskei and Transkei. Compared to the Western Cape, and even to the rest of the Eastern Cape, these two former Bantustans were really impoverished. It was sad. Our self-help projects were small, but we looked for ways to be helpful.

I really enjoyed working in the Northern Cape and traveled there six times in the three years I was in Cape Town. We had self-help projects with two small Bushmen communities. They lived together along the Vaal River in an area called Schmidtsdrift. There were about 900 men, women, and children living in absolute poverty. When I first met the elders of the two communities, I said, "I'm embarrassed to say I'm not sure how to refer to you. Some people call you Bushmen, others San. How should I address you?"

They said, "San is not a word we use to describe ourselves. It's from a Khoikhoi word that means cattle thief."

They explained that the Khoikhoi were herdsmen and farmers, whereas the Bushmen were hunters and gatherers. Sometimes they hunted and sometimes they gathered the Khoikhois' cattle. Early Dutch settlers reportedly asked the Khoikhoi, "Who are those people making off with your cattle?"

A Khoikhoi man answered, "Those are San," by which he meant cattle thieves.

So anthropologists nowadays sometimes claim, "The term Bushmen is pejorative. You should use San."

But the Bushmen I talked to say they never use it. I asked, "What about Bushmen?"

One man replied, "Well, 'Bushman' carries a sense of field craft that is part of our heritage, so we don't mind that. But we refer to ourselves in our own languages as the !Kung and the Khwe."

!Kung and Khwe both start with clicks, which are sort of (clicks twice) like a pop of your tongue and a cluck to a horse. I didn't do them very well, but the clicks used in the ancient Bushmen languages are fascinating.

These 900 people were living in tattered tents along the Vaal River. Some South African military officers were unofficially supporting them. The Bushmen had come from the Namibia - Angola border area originally, and many of the men had been trackers or scouts for the South African army when it intervened in the 1970s in the Angolan civil war. Bushmen trackers were also employed against Swapo guerrillas in Namibia. The Bushmen communities had harnessed their horse to the South African wagon. When the South African-backed side, Unita, lost the Angolan civil war and in 1990 when Namibia won its independence, the Bushmen trackers and scouts retreated with the South Africa military. They were deposited along the Vaal River and had been there ever since

I took Ambassador Joseph up to the Northern Cape to consider ways to help these destitute Bushman communities, both for humanitarian reasons and because many of the men were irregular military veterans. Without any help, they might have turned to brigandage or crime. I asked, "With a little bit of money, what could we do to help?"

The older men said, “We realize our time has come and gone, but we want you to help our children.” We provided materials to build a small schoolhouse. There was no healthcare, so we paid the transport expenses for a provincial nurse to come and give inoculations to the !Kung and Khwe children. We hired a woman who had worked with U.S. Peace Corps Volunteers to train the women how to make commercially viable woven handicrafts. The !Kung and Khwe women for generations had woven mats, bags, and other household items used by their nomadic families. Our weaving consultant helped the women use their traditional skills to make items attractive to modern customers. Later we saw Bushmen handicrafts for sale that provided money to the !Kung and Khwe women. We also worked with a group trying to get the Bushmen started in ostrich ranching. The !Kung and Khwe couldn’t go back to being hunters and gathers in Namibia as their ancestors had been, but we tried to help them find a role in the new South Africa.

Q: Well, certainly. Ron, were you -- I mean you studied Afrikaans. Was there a hard core of white Africans who were just not assimilating now? Was that an issue?

McMULLEN: The Cape Coloured community constituted about half of the population in the Western Cape. Coloureds, people of mixed race, melded Bushmen, Khoikhoi, Indonesian, Xhosa, Dutch, and/or English backgrounds. Most Cape Coloureds spoke Afrikaans and sometimes were described as “brown Afrikaners.” They were the working class and the farm laborers in the Western Cape. A quarter of the province’s people were Xhosa-speaking black Africans who had migrated relatively recently from the Eastern Cape. The other quarter of the population was white, divided between English and Afrikaans speakers. The Western Cape, with Cape Town as its capital, was the only province in South Africa without a black African majority. The Coloured and white communities together made up three quarters of the population. As a result, the politics of the Western Cape were different from the rest of South Africa.

I would say a very small minority was not reconciled to the transition to majority rule. Of the Western Cape’s white minority, probably 60% spoke Afrikaans as their first language and 40% were native English speakers. All spoke both languages to a degree, so it was rare for me to be in an Afrikaner setting where nobody spoke English. I attended a number of National Party gatherings where the language of the meeting was Afrikaans, and I was able to follow that. I used my Afrikaans more in working with the Coloured community. We had self-help projects, a neighborhood watch program, and some HIV/AIDS education projects in Cape Town’s Coloured neighborhoods. Most Coloureds spoke Afrikaans, but often with accents or slang I found difficult to follow.

Among the Afrikaners, there was a very small radical group that rejected the new South Africa. They realized they couldn’t overturn majority rule, but some of them harbored hopes of creating sort of an Afrikaner autonomous Bantustan. A couple of isolated Afrikaner communities wanted to establish self-administering white Afrikaner areas that might eventually move towards secession and independence as a small, self-sufficient Afrikaner state craved out of the Northern Cape. I asked, “How do you see this possibly coming about?”

They said, "Our hope is AIDS." At that time, the HIV/AIDS infection rate was skyrocketing in Southern Africa. Thabo Mbeki doubted that HIV and AIDS were related, which really set back the campaign to slow new AIDS infections. The tiny group of Afrikaner separatists said, "Maybe AIDS will wreak such destruction on South Africa that it will change the demographic and political dynamics in the future." This hardcore group pinned their hopes of a future Afrikaner mini-state on AIDS -- sad. By and large, the National Party -- the old white Afrikaner establishment part -- had transformed itself. The New National Party controlled the Western Cape and supported the institutions and democratic processes of the new South Africa.

Occasionally a VIP visitor from the United States would use the phrase, "the new multi-racial South Africa." If that happened within earshot of President Mandela, he would instantly pipe up, "No, we are not multi-racial, we are non-racial. Apartheid was multi-racial. The new South Africa is a non-racial democracy." I thought that was an interesting and important distinction Nelson Mandela made repeatedly.

Q: Mm-hmm. Well Ron, AIDS and Mbeki's denial of its possibilities was sort of headline news here in the States. What were we doing about that?

McMULLEN: USAID was working very hard on AIDS education, prevention, and mitigation. We supported a number of AIDS orphanages in the Cape Town area. USAID helped hospitals and rural clinics prevent the transmission of HIV/AIDS from mothers to newborns and worked with healthcare providers to reduce the number of accidental infections due to improper handling of blood or needles. The strong U.S. commitment to fighting AIDS in South Africa didn't have the wholesale backing of the South Africa government because of the odd position taken by Thabo Mbeki. I worked quite closely with the governments of the Western and Northern Cape provinces to promote AIDS awareness and education, within the limits of their budgets and writ. USAID played a very positive, forward-leaning role in the fight against AIDS.

Q: Well, what about sort of at the personal level? You and your family and others in the American community? You had to be careful about accidents, didn't you?

McMULLEN: Yes. South Africa has wonderful roads compared to places like Sri Lanka or Gabon. Drivers drove very fast and there were lots of traffic accidents. ConGen Cape Town had a walking blood bank. We knew who had the same blood type in case an emergency transfusion was needed. In Cape Town we had access to first-world healthcare. It was in Cape Town that Christian Bernard did the first open heart transplant. If you had money, you could get first-rate medical care in Cape Town. However, if you were in an accident in the Eastern Cape, where the level of public services was much lower, you needed to be concerned about infected blood supplies and unsterile medical equipment. But in Cape Town we had first-world medical facilities, although they were perhaps a decade or so behind American standards.

Q: Ron, I'm looking at the time. It's probably a good place to stop. Is there anything else we should discuss about South Africa?

McMULLEN: I wanted to comment on energy and diamonds.

South Africa has huge deposits of coal, but almost no petroleum, so it had to import most of its oil needs. This was the country's Achilles' heel during the apartheid-era sanctions. The South African government and business establishments were keen to transform the country's limited natural gas resources into liquid fuel for vehicles. South African scientists improved a gas-to-liquid fuel conversion process that transformed natural gas into synthetic oil. The Germans pioneered an earlier form of this process in the 1920s. The state-owned Mossgas company build its giant, previously secret gas-to-liquid fuel facility near Mossel Bay in the Western Cape. Given our improved relations with South Africa, I was able to tour the formerly off-limits plant and talk with Mossgas executives about the production of synthetic fuel that powered a substantial portion of South Africa's vehicles. Given America's present natural gas boom due to fracking, maybe South Africa can help us develop synthetic liquid fuels to offset our dependence on imported oil.

De Beers and the U.S. government had rocky relations, as we accused them of monopolistic practices and had initiated some anti-trust proceedings. De Beers managed to control, unfairly, we contended, the lion's share of the world's supply of rough diamonds. As our relations with post-apartheid South Africa improved, our relations with De Beers began to thaw a bit. Because De Beers is headquartered in Kimberly in the Northern Cape, I was able to take Ambassador Joseph and his wife Mary to the De Beers headquarters. De Beers officials gave us a tour of one of the company's deep diamond mines. We went down 2,700 feet into the earth, just to the outskirts of hell. We wore hard hats, coveralls, and breathing apparatus and carried heavy-duty batteries in case there was a cave-in. It was the real deal.

After observing the mining operations, we headed back up to the surface. As we emerged from the mine's top structure, a De Beers manager pointed to an overhead conveyor belt carrying rock from the mine to a slag heap. He said, "In the 1970s a gardener working near the headwords here saw a yellow stone fall off the conveyor belt, picked it up, and turned it in to the office." He went on to explain that it was a yellow diamond. De Beers decided to keep the stone as its "pet rock" because it weighed exactly 616 carats and De Beers' post office box number was 616. They let me hold it. It was dull yellow, the size of a small chicken egg but much heavier, and was worth an estimated $30 million. The gardener who found it got a cash bonus and a generous pension, De Beers told us.

They also gave us a tour of the Harry Oppenheimer House, where De Beers sorts and grades diamonds. The sorting facility had very strict security. Employees couldn't wear shirts with pockets. Their pants couldn't have cuffs and their pants pockets had to be sewn shut. I was surprised to see that the vast majority of the De Beers employees sorting the heaps and heaps of diamonds were black or Coloured.

Warming relations with De Beers and Mossgas were possible due to the end of apartheid-era sanctions and improved U.S. - South African ties. It made for some interesting economic reporting.

Q: Well, did De Beers change because of the blood diamonds that were fueling the civil wars up in Liberia and Sierra Leone and all?

McMULLEN: That happened a little bit after my time in South Africa. De Beers didn't control the blood diamonds coming out of Sierra Leone, so it was keen to ostracize Sierra Leone's infamous blood diamonds. More importantly, De Beers realized that blood diamonds could destroy the romantic myth it had spun around diamonds, epitomized by the slogan "diamonds are forever." Thus, De Beers played a fairly upfront role in the development of the international agreement called the Kimberley Process, by which the provenance of diamonds is tracked and regularized to keep blood diamonds off the market. Not coincidentally, Kimberley is also the location of De Beers' headquarters.

Q: OK. Today is the 17th of December, 2012 with Ron McMullen.

Q: First place, when did you go to Fiji? Can you talk about what the situation was like then?

McMULLEN: We moved to Fiji in August of 1999. It was interesting journey because we left the United States on August 12th and, as we crossed the International Date Line from east to west, we missed August 13th, which happened to be a Friday. If you have to lose a day, Friday the 13th is not a bad one to skip. When we got to Suva, the capital of Fiji, a new government was settling in, led by Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry, an Indo-Fijian. His grandfather had moved to Fiji from India in the 1800s. Like about 45% of the population of the Fiji Islands, Prime Minister Chaudhry was a Hindu of South Asian origin. So the country had, for the first time in its history, a government led by an Indo-Fijian. Previously, indigenous Fijians, Melanesians who made up slightly more than half the population, had controlled the government. Embassy Suva hadn't had an ambassador for a while, but two or three weeks after our arrival the new ambassador and his family arrived. I got there just in time to help snap in the new ambassador.

Q: Who was the new ambassador?

McMULLEN: The new ambassador was a fellow named Osman Siddique, a political appointee and an immigrant from Bangladesh. Osman Siddique came to the U.S. to attend graduate school, found he had a knack for business, married an American woman, and established a successful travel business, which he sold when he became an ambassador to avoid any conflicts of interest. He was a nice guy and an astute businessman. It was interesting working for the first American ambassador to have been sworn in on the Quran. We got along very well, as did our families. The Siddiques had four kids, we had two. Catherine Siddique was a gracious hostess and a wonderful representative of America in her own right. Ambassador Siddique had strong interpersonal skills and years of business experience, but was new to diplomacy. He said, "Ron, under my guidance, I want you to be the chief operating officer for the embassy and make sure things are running the way they're supposed to be." The Siddiques settled in quickly. I was pleased to accompany Ambassador Siddique when he presented his credentials to President Ratu Kamisese Mara. In addition to the Fiji Islands, Embassy Suva also covered three other countries and three dependent territories. We were responsible for the Kingdom of Tonga, Tuvalu, and the Republic of Nauru, plus French Polynesia, New Caledonia, and the French colony of Wallis and Futuna. I think our consular district was the largest in the world, but 99% of it was blue water. Thus, we had a far-flung consular district comprising four countries and three French dependent territories.

Q: By the way, if I recall, "siddique" means friend in Arabic, doesn't it?

McMULLEN: Could be. In any case, he was a friendly guy and a good chief of mission.

Q: How long were you there?

McMULLEN: We were there for three years, from August 1999 until the summer of 2002. After the settling-in process, things looked like they were going to be pretty easy. We thought, "Well, what are we going to do here to keep professionally engaged?" We saw an interesting December and January approaching, with the year 2000 on the way. As you remember, the world was quite concerned about Y2K.

Q: Oh yes.

McMULLEN: Doomsayers predicted a cyber-apocalypse and even many rational people were deeply concerned about massive computer failure. If you look at a map, you'll see that Embassy Suva was the first U.S. embassy west of the international dateline, so we were going to be the first to experience the new millennium, and hence Y2K. Somebody in the State Department figured this out and sent us a long list of things to be checked just after midnight on January 1st, 2000. We had strict instructions to report back to Washington at 00:15. It looked like there was going to be plenty of hoopla for the millennium New Year's Eve. On December 31st, cruise ships from America steamed into Suva's harbor. One ship organized a gala picnic on Nukulau, a small island near Suva. Thanks to Ambassador Siddique, our families were invited. The guest of honor was Buzz Aldrin, the second human to walk on another heavenly body. It seemed somehow fitting to spend the last day of the second millennium with someone who had walked on the moon.

Nukulau, the small island where we picnicked with Buzz Aldrin, was the site of the first U.S. consulate to Fiji. At the consulate's 1849 Fourth of July reception, Consul John Brown Williams fired a canon to celebrate Independence Day. Unfortunately, the canon misfired, exploded, and started a fire in his residence. The Fijian invitees swarmed in and looted the burning residence. The U.S. government later presented Fiji's paramount chief with a bill for the damages, which the islanders couldn't pay. The Fijians later approached the British about paying their debt to the Americans arising from this disastrous Fourth of July reception, which eventually led to the Deed of Cession, resulting in Fiji becoming a British colony in exchange for the payment of Fiji's debts.

After a wonderful last day of the twentieth century, somebody had to work the midnight shift at the embassy to report to Washington on Y2K. As the DCM, I volunteered or was volunteered to do that. Thus, I was at the embassy getting ready to report back to Washington when the clock struck twelve, church bells started ringing, fireworks went off, and people began dancing in the street. Jane and I had received four or five invitations to millennium New Year's Eve parties, and I felt grouchy, having to work. Just after midnight, the telephone rang. I glanced at the clock and thought, "It's not a quarter after twelve yet, why is the State Department calling?"

I picked up the phone and heard someone shouting, “Hello? Hello? Is this the American Embassy in Fiji?”

“Yes, who’s this?” I replied.

A man’s voice said, “This is WXKR in Toledo, Ohio! You’re live on the air! How’s the New Year in Fiji?”

I said, “Everybody who’s not working seems to be having a good time.”

“Any signs of Y2K?” he asked.

I said, “Well, the phones are obviously still working, the lights are on, and my computer’s not smoking, so no, I don’t see any signs of Y2K.”

He said, “That’s really great. And while we have you on the air, is there anything else you’d like to say to our listeners here in Ohio?”

I thought, you know, the Western world’s odometer had already clicked over to 2000 in Fiji, but it’s still 1999 in Toledo. So I answered, “Yes, I do.”

After a pause, I said, “Do you realize that your listeners are hearing a live voice from a future millennium? And that I’m hearing a live voice from a past millennium? This doesn’t happen very often,” and I hung up.

Now, I can plausibly claim to be the first person in the history of the world to have actually heard a live voice from a past millennium, because in A.D. 1000 there was no international date line, there were no telecommunications, and people didn’t know what was going on. In the year zero, even more so. So I can plausibly claim to be the first person in the history of the world --

Q: (laughs)

McMULLEN: -- to have heard a live voice from a past millennium.

Q: Wonderful.

McMULLEN: So we cleared the Y2K brouhaha without breaking a sweat. A few weeks later, I had a strange encounter at a diplomatic reception. The Fijian minister of home affairs said, “Ron, can I talk to you for a minute?” We went over to the corner. He said, “There’s an American citizen stirring up trouble on Rotuma and we’re thinking about arresting him.”

I said, “Well, Americans have to obey Fiji’s laws while in the country, but please keep us posted.”

“Maybe you should come to my office tomorrow to discuss this in more detail,” the minister said.

The next day I went to the ministry of home affairs and was briefed by a senior police officer, who said, “There’s an American who wears a robe, has a foot-long beard and long hair, and claims to represent something called the Dominion of Melchizedek. He came into the country on a passport issued by the Dominion of Melchizedek, but he also has an American passport. Right now he’s up on the island of Rotuma.” Melchizedek, I found out, is a character out of the Old Testament.

Rotuma, a small island 400 miles north of Suva, was attached to the Fiji Islands by the British in the 1880s just for administrative convenience. Rotumans are Polynesian, not Melanesian like indigenous Fijians. There had been a failed separatist campaign on Rotuma a number of years ago. This odd American was on Rotuma trying to rekindle the secession movement. As we looked into it, we found that he was from California and sometimes used the name David Korem. Korem, representing the Dominion of Melchizedek, had prepared a draft constitution for the Republic of Rotuma in the event that Rotuma was able to break away from Fiji. This putative constitution included an article stating, “The Republic of Rotuma, in recognition of the vital support extended to our independence struggle by the Dominion of Melchizedek, cedes sovereignty over the island of Solkope to the Dominion of Melchizedek, much as Italy has granted independence to Vatican City.” Solkope was a small islet just off Rotuma. It seems Korem and his confederates were trying to establish their own independent country, the Dominion of Melchizedek. The plan was to encourage Rotuma’s secession from Fiji, then get the leadership of the new Republic of Rotuma to give them Solkope, on which they could establish the sovereign Dominion of Melchizedek. They could then sell passports, print money and stamps, mint coins, license banks and off-shore corporations, auction ambassadorships, --

Q: Oh yes.

McMULLEN: We worked closely with the government of Fiji to determine what the shady Dominion of Melchizedek was really up to. The Fijians decided to arrest Korem and dispatched a boat to Rotuma. He apparently got word of it and sailed off to the country of Vanuatu, never to be seen again. I don’t know if he made it or what happened, but Rotuma did not secede from Fiji. Thus, Embassy Suva helped foil the Dominion of Melchizedek’s malign scheme to set up its own microstate.

Q: There are all sorts of these groups that were trying to assert themselves.

McMULLEN: One of the countries Embassy Suva covered was Tuvalu, which has a total land area of 10 square miles. It’s made up of nine atolls, each of which consists of many small islands strung around a lagoon, similar to pearl necklace made of many individual pearls. One day in 2001 an official from Tuvalu asked if I knew anything about the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. I said, “Well, as a matter of fact, I do. He’s the head of the transcendental meditation movement, was the guru to the Beatles, and got them into sitar music, among other things.” The Maharishi Mahesh Yogi wanted to establish an independent country called the Global Country of World Peace, but he needed a piece of territory to become sovereign. So his corporation offered Tuvalu 200 million dollars if it would sell him an island, one of the many tiny islands in their nine atolls,

on which the Maharishi could establish his sovereign Global Country of World Peace. The Tuvaluan government sought our reaction.

I said, "You know, Tuvalu is the newest member of the United Nations and you need to be a good member of the international community. There are about 190 countries in the world, but imagine if there were 2,000! Think of how difficult diplomacy, international law, and international relations in general would be with 2,000 independent countries in the world."

I continued, "If you want to rent the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi an island for a century or two, fine. But don't cede sovereignty. We don't want to see a proliferation of pseudo-microstates." Eventually the Tuvaluans said no and the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi didn't get his country.

Tuvalu's main source of revenue comes from leasing its internet top-level domain, which ends ".tv." Email addresses outside the U.S. end with a dot and then two letters. Germany is .de, South Africa is .za, Fiji is .fj, etc. As Tuvalu has .tv as its top-level domain, aspiring actors, screenwriters, or others in the television industry eagerly pay to have an email address that ends in .tv. Along with revenue from tuna fishing licenses, this was Tuvalu's main source of income, so Tuvaluan officials were quite keen to look into the Maharishi's offer. I helped convince Tuvalu not to sell the Maharishi an island, as it had just joined the UN and needed to be a responsible member of the international community.

Another of the small countries Embassy Suva covered on a non-residential basis was the Republic of Nauru. Nauru once had the highest per capita income in the world, as it was comprised almost entirely of fossilized bird droppings that had turned into valuable phosphate, which is used for fertilizer. The country is only eight square miles in area. The interior of the island is completely mined out and looks like a lunar landscape. All the inhabitants live on a littered strip of land about 100 yards wide ringing the outer edge of the island. The government of Nauru invested all its money in Japanese real estate and lost it when the Japanese economic bubble burst in the early 1990s. So, previously wealthy Nauru is now poor. The islanders have completely destroyed their country's environment, as 95% of it is barren wasteland. Desperate for revenue, Nauru began to sell offshore banking licenses with almost no regulations or background checks. Anybody with a few thousand dollars could have their own bank registered in Nauru. We found that hundreds of millions of dollars of Russia's foreign currency reserves were being stolen or disappearing through Nauru-registered banks. The U.S. was worried about the stability of Russia and we didn't want all of its foreign currency disappearing down the rabbit hole of Nauru's banks. I traveled to Nauru with an officer from the U.S. treasury department to press the government of Nauru to comply with international financial standards or risk being seen as a fly-by-night offshore financial center. As we met with the Nauru officials, I noted a large photo on the wall of a U.S. B-24 dropping bombs on Nauru in WWII, which I took as a bad omen. Luckily, however, Nauru agreed to tighten up its regulations and fall in line with international norms.

Q: Let's go back to Fiji itself. But I would think that with this Indian Fijian population there'd be a lot of unrest.

McMULLEN: You're absolutely right, there was. In May of 2000, indigenous Fijians began to agitate against the government headed by an Indo-Fijian. Because indigenous Fijians own all the land, Indo-Fijians either became tenant sugar farmers or went into business or the professions. As a result, they opened businesses, stressed education, and dominated Fiji's economy. The indigenous Fijians controlled the land and, because they were the majority, the government. Due to a split among indigenous Fijian politicians, the Labor Party, led by Indo-Fijians, won the elections of 1999.

On May 19, 2000, a large anti-government protest march through downtown Suva descended into widespread rioting and looting. Perhaps 15,000 ethnic Fijians sacked the central business district, looting, smashing, and burning shops largely owned by Indo-Fijians. The (mostly Fijian) police looked on, sometimes providing shopping carts to rioters so they could roll their loot away. While this was happening, a group of armed men seized parliament and took the members of parliament hostage. Our political officer, John Hennessey-Niland, was downtown monitoring the protest, while much of the rest of the embassy staff was celebrating Ambassador Siddique' s 50th birthday with a slice of lunchtime cake. When we got word there were armed gunmen at parliament, I rushed to the gates of the parliamentary complex with some reporters and a few other diplomats. Inside we could see masked gunmen armed with M-16s. I asked a rabble-rouser, one of the indigenous Fijian protestors, "Are those your guys in there?"

He replied, "No, look, they're carrying M-16s. Are they your guys?"

I said, "Heavens no." So there was quite a lot of confusion initially about who these gunmen were. We soon learned that they were indigenous Fijians led by a failed businessman named George Speight who, along with a special forces unit of the military, had taken control of parliament and held hostage most of the members of parliament, including Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry. They were attempting to conduct a coup d'état, but the bulk of the military didn't go over to them and President Ratu Mara, who was not at parliament when it was seized, held out. The rebels' take-over of parliament was a botched coup attempt that turned into a 56-day hostage siege. Embassy Suva went into crisis mode.

That first day telecommunications were cut in Suva, but we were able to connect to Washington by satellite phone. We asked a previous coup leader, a former general named Sitiveni Rabuka, to come into the embassy. When he entered the ambassador's office, he raised his hands like a surrendering prisoner and said, "Not guilty. It wasn't me." We took him up to the roof of the embassy and he talked to officials in the State Department, giving his view of what was happening. We slept in the embassy for four nights in rotating shifts to maintain communications with Washington and to respond to any late-night crises. Meanwhile, things were getting dicey all over the Fiji Islands. Roadblocks were going up, power lines were cut, and land and buildings were being occupied by groups of young ethnic Fijian men.

There were two American missionary families that lived directly behind parliament. I told them, "You should leave, because there's big trouble right in your backyard."

They said, "We know people on both sides. We'll be OK."

I replied, "If you ever feel threatened, let us know. But I'm telling you now, you should leave."

A few days later, we got a frantic call from one of the American missionaries saying, "There's a firefight right outside our backyard. We need to leave. Can you help?"

I said, "Pack two bags per family. I'll be there in 10 minutes."

I ran down and jumped in the ambassador's armored sedan, and asked an FSN who'd served in the army to hop in with me. We drove across town, running roadblocks and swerving around barriers. As we approached their houses, we could hear gunshots up at the parliamentary complex. I drove through a ditch, over a rugby field, turned in between the two houses, and flung open all the car doors. The two families dashed out, threw their suitcases in the trunk, dove in the car, and we roared away in a cloud of dust. The two missionary families sort of camped in our living room for a couple of nights until they were able to find other accommodations. One of the refugees staying in our living room was a math teacher at International School Suva. Owen and Wyatt were uncomfortable having one of their teachers sleeping on our couch, and they had to share their stash of A&W root beer with her daughters.

Embassy Suva went to authorized departure and most of the American families, including mine, went back to the U.S. because of the unrest and rising danger. A few days later an American journalist walked into parliament to interview the hostage takers and was promptly taken prisoner himself. I was standing outside the gates of parliament again when a friend from the New Zealand high commission came up. I said, "An American's just been taken hostage. Do you happen to know any of the senior hostage takers?"

He said, "Yes. One of them was at my house couple months ago and I've got his number here on my cell phone."

I asked, "Could you call his number and then hand me the phone?" which he did. The rebel spokesman answered. I said, "Hi, this is Ron McMullen from the American Embassy. I understand you've just taken an American citizen hostage."

The rebel spokesman said, "That's right, we've got him here. He's now our prisoner."

"Listen," I said, "You're up to your eyeballs in trouble. You do *not* want to mess with the United States of America." I added, "If that American citizen doesn't walk out the front gates of parliament in 20 minutes, all hell is going to rain down on your head." And I hung up. It was a complete bluff. We had nothing. We had no resources, we had no plan B. Twenty minutes later, the American journalist was released and walked out of the gates of parliament. I told him, "You clearly don't have enough sense to stay out of harm's way here. Go home and look for a domestic assignment in the U.S."

Q: Where you able to leave Fiji at all during this crisis?

The king of Tonga turned 82 on July 4, 2000. The event was quite a big deal, at least in Tonga, and I got to represent the United States at the king's birthday bash. It was a welcomed break

from the stress of Fiji's near meltdown. The 100,000 Tongans live on 176 small islands, formerly called the Friendly Islands. We don't have a resident embassy in Tonga, but the U.S does have a Peace Corps program there. I went to Tonga six times all together, but attending the birthday party of King Tāufa'āhau Topou IV was really quite a spectacle. The French sent a naval warship from New Caledonia and a company of French Polynesian soldiers from Wallis and Futuna. As the French soldiers marched in a slow, almost swaggering cadence, they sang hymns in some Polynesian language. The Tongans just ate it up. The swaggering, hymn-singing French Polynesian troops were a huge hit. The rotund king reviewed a unit of Tongan troops from the back of an open SUV. He wore wrap-around sunglasses and knee-high boots with silver spurs. He was quite a character. The king later held an audience for the assembled diplomatic core. During the session, he asked the British High Commissioner for a Gurkha knife, a kukri, big enough to kill a buffalo. Why an 82-year-old king wanted a giant Gurkha knife was beyond me, but that was his birthday request to Her Britannic Majesty's representative.

Tonga's royal jester, an American named Jesse Bogdonoff, was also at the birthday celebration. He was a poet, juggler, hypnotist, and songwriter hired as the Kingdom of Tonga's official court jester. He was perhaps the only court jester employed anywhere in the world. Besides being assigned normal jester duties, for some odd reason he was also given management control of the Tongan Trust Fund, 26 million dollars the kingdom accumulated in the late 1990s by selling Tongan passports to Hong Kong residents worried about the reversion to China. We later learned that Bogdonoff allegedly lost all the money after investing in some Nevada-based derivative financial instrument. The king's advisors asked me about their legal recourse and how they could recoup some of the money. We provided some guidance about how the American legal and financial systems operate. It's not every day that we got involved in a case where a royal jester loses millions of dollars in shady investment deals.

Q: What did they do?

McMULLEN: Well, I think they lost most of the money. They filed suit against the jester and the company he invested in. There was later a settlement of some sort, but it did not end happily for the monarchy. The small democratic movement in Tonga capitalized on the incident, claiming, "The king is not accountable and gave 26 million dollars his jester to manage! We really need a democratic system so we can have a responsible government." The jester incident became a bone of contention between monarchists and democrats in the Kingdom of Tonga, and rightfully so. We were friendly with the king and the royal family, but favored a more democratic system. The royal jester scandal cost the poor country of Tonga millions of dollars.

Q: Well, were many Tongans going to the United States?

McMULLEN: Quite a few Tongans were converted to Christianity by Protestant missionaries in the 1800s, and the Wesleyan Methodist church has long been the largest in the kingdom. However, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints has been very active in Tonga, and nearly every village sports a Mormon church with a fenced basketball court. Many young Tongans are offered scholarships to Brigham Young University. There was tension between Mormons, dangling scholarships to Brigham Young to win converts, and the more traditional

Wesleyans who viewed Mormonism as an unwanted interloper. Many Tongans in the U.S. originally went on Mormon scholarships to Brigham Young, either to the main campus in Utah or the branch campus in Hawaii. A surprisingly large number switched back to the Tongan Wesleyan church after graduation, and somehow managed to remain in the U.S.

Q: Meanwhile, how did this situation in Fiji get resolved?

For the next 11 or 12 weeks, Fiji was paralyzed by the continuing standoff at parliament. It was unclear how the crisis would be resolved. On May 29, ten days after the start of George Speight's hamstrung coup attempt, Commander Frank Bainimarama and other senior officers ousted the constitutional president, Ratu Mara. They were the real coup makers of 2000, not George Speight. The military leaders felt President Mara was unable to deal decisively with George Speight's rebels because his daughter, a member of parliament, was among the hostages. Eventually the military signed a deal with George Speight, who then released the hostages unharmed. However, as the rebel gunmen emerged from the parliamentary complex, the army double-crossed them and arrested most of their leaders. George Speight was charged with treason and is still in prison. This was a very traumatic, disruptive period for Fiji and for Embassy Suva. As things quieted down the Department lifted the authorized departure and our families were able to return.

Q: Well, did you, you know, as you went through the process, did you have any naval vessels on call or was there anything prowling the Pacific in the area?

McMULLEN: No, there wasn't. The United States was not the focus of this at all. We had pretty good relationships with Fiji Islanders of all stripes. It was Australia and New Zealand, Australia in particular, that took a hard line on the seizure of parliament and the subsequent coup d'état. It was the Australians who put the most pressure on George Speight and the junta that ousted President Mara. So it really wasn't an American issue. American citizens were able to leave without incident, so we didn't mobilize any military assets in response to the crisis in Fiji.

Q: Did you see at the time -- a little bit early in the game, but did you sense any sort of Islamic fundamentalist messing around in the system?

McMULLEN: We didn't. About a quarter of Fiji's Indo-Fijians are Muslim. Oddly, during the crisis almost all Indo-Fijians just hunkered down or applied to emigrate to Australia or some place. The question was, how can Fiji get back on the democratic track? Once the military had deposed the constitutional government and quelled George Speight's nativist rebellion, the generals appointed a civilian caretaker government until new elections could be held. I pressed Laisenia Qarase, the army-appointed prime minister, to allow the United Nations to monitor the elections to ensure the winners were certified as a legitimate government. Fiji had never invited UN election observers before and some army officers objected to giving the UN a role. I said, "Well, somebody's going to win the election and somebody else is going to lose, but we don't want the loser to cry foul and put Fiji right back in the soup again." He agreed, and the United Nations was invited to send observers, which it did.

The other concern was Fiji's hardcore traditional chiefs in the central highlands who weren't sure they would allow any election to take place, UN monitored or not. They didn't want to risk having Mahendra Chaudhry's Labor Party win again. I spent a number of days calling on the highland chiefs. I approached them in a very formal manner, often meeting a chief and the men of the village assembled in a thatched longhouse with woven mats on the floor. My driver, Jone, served as my herald. He preceded me into the longhouse and announced my arrival. The chief and many of the men of the village wore grass sulus (skirts), were bare-chested, and were slathered with coconut oil. As I entered their lodge, the villagers commenced a traditional kava ceremony. Kava is made from the ground root of a pepper bush and is the universal social drink in Fiji. It's neither alcoholic nor narcotic, but it has an anesthetic effect on the drinker. It numbs the fingers, toes, and lips, sort of like having a shot of Novocain or nitrous oxide --

Q: (laughs)

McMULLEN: -- at the dentist. A traditional kava ceremony is serious business. A burly young man bearing a length of water-filled bamboo with a wad of grass stuck in the end as a filter enters the lodge and pours the water into a large wooden bowl called a tanoa. Another man squishes a sack full of kava powder around in the tanoa with his hands until the water looks like muddy river water. Then an oiled Fijian the size of a linebacker scoops up the kava in a cup made from half a coconut shell. Amid much ritualized cupped-hand clapping, the first coconut shell of kava goes to the chief's oldest male relative, usually some 80-year-old gent coughing his lungs out in the corner of the lodge. This shows the visitor that the kava is not poisoned. Using the same cup, ("did the old guy have TB?" I wonder) the server brings me the second serving. I clap three times before accepting the kava, which I am expected to drink in one gulp. After the chief and his entourage have each downed a bowl of kava, the substantive discussion begins.

I did this for three or four days going from village to village to convince the chiefs not to send their young men down to the lowlands to disrupt the elections. I thought, "These chiefs don't care anything about democracy, so I can't convince them by extolling the virtues of representative government. I have to argue from their perspective, from what they value." Fiji's military had been active international peacekeepers. Whenever the UN asked for peacekeeping troops, Fiji put its hand up.

Q: Yeah. We've got them in --

McMULLEN: Lebanon and Sinai and --

Q: Many places, yes.

McMULLEN: As international peacekeepers, the troops get paid first-world salaries, plus other expenses. As a result, Fiji's military was almost self-financing, as the ministry of defense kept about half the soldiers' pay. Most soldiers still made enough from a peacekeeping gig to buy a house, a vehicle, or start a small business. So the Fijians were very enthusiastic international peacekeepers. My pitch to the chiefs went something like this: "Fiji's warrior tradition is legendary. Today that warrior legacy is carried on by Fiji's brave soldiers serving as UN peacekeeping troops around the world. However, if you send your men down to disrupt the

United Nations-monitored elections, I guarantee that no Fijian soldier will ever serve in a UN peacekeeping mission again. And you personally will be responsible for ending Fiji's warrior legacy."

That really hit home with them. As a result, elections of August 2001 went forward peacefully and were observed by the United Nations. FSI did a little educational vignette about this, called "Kava Diplomacy." The film stressed the need to negotiate from your negotiating partner's perspective and values, not from yours. Our short foray up to the central highlands of Fiji to negotiate with the traditional chiefs was an interesting and fairly successful experience. And I didn't get sick from drinking all that kava.

Q: Ron, you're mentioning what you're doing. What about the ambassador? Where did he fit in with this?

McMULLEN: The ambassador was withdrawn for consultations in protest after the military overthrew Ratu Mara. He was back in Washington for about a month, then was asked to accompany President Clinton on his state visit to India. As Ambassador Siddique was a political appointee, he had to resign after President Bush took office, but he and his family were allowed to stay in Fiji until June of 2001. I served as Embassy Suva's chargé for 15 months, altogether.

Q: Did you find that you had to balance off almost everything you did between the Indian community and the Fijian community?

McMULLEN: Yes. We were careful to invite a mix of people to every function so it didn't look like we were playing favorites. Just after Ambassador Siddique arrived at post, Prime Minister Chaudhry said, "I suspect the prime minister's office is bugged. Can you bring in a team of technical specialists to sweep the office?" Somehow, Ambassador Siddique got Washington to approve this unusual request. However, as the technicians who do this sort of thing use sensitive methods and equipment, we told the prime minister, "You'll need to vacate your office during the duration of the sweep. We'll even remove some of the office paneling to see what's behind it." Chaudhry agreed. The U.S. technicians had complete access to the prime minister's office -- we could have planted any bugs we wanted. We didn't, of course, but we could have. In fact, we found no listening devices in Chaudhry's office. The technicians put the paneling back on and said, "This room is now secure. It's clean only until somebody comes in to your office and plants a bug. That could happen tomorrow or at any time." Checking the new prime minister's office for bugs was a bit unusual, but it made Chaudhry feel more at ease and showed him that the U.S. was willing to be helpful.

Q: How did you deal with the Australians and New Zealanders, as they had the South Pacific under their wing?

McMULLEN: The Australians, and to a somewhat lesser degree the New Zealanders, were the dominant players in the region. We saw eye-to-eye on democratization, but were commercial rivals. They were geographically closer and had better access to Fiji's markets and investment opportunities. The Australians were the dominant diplomatic mission in Suva. Thousands of

Indo-Fijians emigrated to Australia during our years in Fiji. We had a friendly commercial rivalry with them, but generally got along very well.

Q: Was there a significant number of Fijians in the West Coast of our country?

McMULLEN: That's right, there are. And Hawaii as well.

After Fiji's traumatic experiences following the takeover of parliament on May 19, 2000, by November there was a short-lived army mutiny, but things began to return to normal. Embassy Suva, to celebrate democracy, planned a big election watch party for the U.S. elections. We rented a hall in a hotel and invited people of all political persuasions to join us in watching American democracy in action…

Q: (laughs)

McMULLEN: …and to show them how to do elections properly. We erected a giant map of America showing the outline of all 50 states. When a state was won by the Democrats or the Republicans, we picked somebody from the crowd to go up and color it red or blue, amid scattered partisan cheering. But we kept having to flip Florida back and forth. "Go color it blue – no, red – no, blue again." As the event dragged on the crowd dribbled away and we all went home very confused. It was not good lesson on how to conduct elections, given hanging chads, Buchanan and Nader's confusing roles, odd court rulings, etc. It wasn't until December, of course, that George W. Bush was finally declared the winner after the Supreme Court decision. We tried to use the event to bring Fiji Islanders together in a celebration of democracy, but it really didn't work very well because of the strange outcome of our 2000 elections.

Q: Yeah. Well, this of course has been repeated all around the world.

McMULLEN: *(laughs)* Indeed.

Q: Wherever we were. With mud on our face or something.

Q: But at least we had an outcome and it, you know, it --

McMULLEN: It was deemed constitutional and it was peaceful. So that's something.

Q: Yeah.

McMULLEN: Ambassador Siddique departed post in June 2001 and I served as charge for the next year. As we had strongly recommended, Fiji's August 2001 elections were monitored by the United Nations. Embassy Suva also sent out teams of observers made up of both Americans and FSNs. I was accredited as an official UN monitor, and was assigned to the large northern island of Vanua Levu. The coalition of Interim Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase narrowly beat Chaudhry's Labor Party.

September 11, 2001 was a peaceful, normal day in Suva, due to the time difference between Fiji and the U.S. However, in the wee hours of September 12th, I got a call from the duty officer, Howard Betts, who said, "New York and the Pentagon have been attacked, turn on CNN." That's how I learned about the attacks. In the following weeks, there was a great outpouring of sympathy and support from all over the Fiji Islands. I spoke at a memorial service in the big Anglican cathedral in downtown Suva attended by a standing-room- only crowd of over a thousand people. The opening prayer, in Arabic, was led by a representative of the Fiji Muslim League. That was the first time a Muslim had prayed in Arabic in Suva's Anglican cathedral. After the service, I was touched to see Suva's entire fleet of fire trucks lined up outside in a show of solidarity with the New York firefighters who had tried so valiantly to save lives in the Twin Towers. It was quite an emotional experience, and we were grateful for the outpouring of support and empathy from all communities in the Fiji Islands.

Following the deadly anthrax attacks in Washington, Embassy Suva had a white powder incident that gave us a bit of a scare. The mail clerk opened a letter and white powder fell out. We immediately quarantined the mail room and the management officer, Mike Bakalar, donned his moon suit, went in with bleach, and scrubbed down everything. We sent samples of the white powder to Fiji's College of Veterinarian Agriculture. Meanwhile, the mail clerks and Mike Bakalar had a couple of nervous days until we got the lab results back. Luckily, the lab reports indicated there was no anthrax in the white powder. To try to avoid another copy-cat incident, I went to the media, which had interviewed me three times after September 11th. On Fiji TV I casually mentioned that, "We've had a nuisance letter containing white powder, but we have very good procedures in place to deal with pranks like that. It caused no disruption whatsoever and was really sort of a childish thing to do." This was a big fat fib, because it had completely bunged us up for two days, but I didn't want anybody to know how disruptive it had been. We didn't have a repeat of the incident, thank goodness.

Q: Yeah, quite a few years ago a writer wrote Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers, including big people who were usually Fijians or --

McMULLEN: Many Tongans and ethnic Fijians are large people. And they like to play rugby. Rugby is a passion in Fiji and Tonga, and many of islanders play world-class rugby for their national teams and professionally in Australia and beyond. Owen played rugby at International School Suva. The school used an Australian curriculum, but the uniform for boys was a Hawaiian shirt -- called a Bula shirt in Fiji --, flip-flops, and a wrap-around skirt known as a sulu. We had just come from South Africa where our boys attended a British-style school where they wore blazers, ties, knee-socks, and black shoes to school. When I saw the school uniforms in Suva, I thought, "My boys will never wear a skirt to school." But pretty soon, given peer pressure, they were going to school in their sulus, these wrap-around skirts. When you saw big burly Fijian soldiers standing guard at the presidential residence wearing sulus, it didn't seem a bit unmanly.

Originally, we thought our tour in Fiji would consist of time on a beach holding a glass with an umbrella in it. But given all the unsettling events in Fiji and around the world, with the takeover of parliament and the attacks of September 11, 2001, it was more disruptive and active than we

imagined. As a family we tried to keep occupied with things that were constructive and interesting.

Paddy Nunn, a professor from the University of the South Pacific with a daughter in Owen's class, invited us to participate in an archaeological dig he and his students were conducting on an outer island. They were looking for traces of the first settlers of the Pacific Islands and their Lapita pottery. We went with a very multinational group of students from the University of the South Pacific to Laucala Island, once owned by Malcolm Forbes, the American multimillionaire businessman who started Forbes Magazine. He was buried on the island, but when his son, Steve, decided to run for the presidency, the Forbes family thought they'd sell the island to fund Steve's campaign. Embassy Suva got involved in repatriating Malcolm Forbes' remains from Laucala to the U.S. As it turned out, this was the very island of the archaeological dig. We spent three or four days with the professor, his daughter Rachel, and archaeological students from all over the South Pacific working this dig on the old Forbes island. The first day Wyatt said, "Dad, you've got a really strange idea of what's a fun vacation."

Q: (laughs)

McMULLEN: But by the end of the dig, Owen and Wyatt were talking like archaeologists with the college students from the University of the South Pacific.

Q: Did they come up with anything about who settled the area?

McMULLEN: Yes. During the dig on Laucala Island we found a large number Lapita potshards and bones. Archaeologists are piecing together a pattern of settlement ranging from Taiwan, the Philippines, and Indonesia all the way out into the Pacific to Hawaii and on to Easter Island. It's really just remarkable what navigational skills these early Pacific pioneers had. I'm not an archaeologist but am interested in this. I'm grateful we had the chance to participate in the dig and contribute a little bit to the effort to trace the settlement of the Pacific islands.

Q: Were the Fijians part of the navigators?

McMULLEN: Probably less so. The people who speak Polynesian or Micronesian languages, like the Maoris of New Zealand, the Tahitians, and the Hawaiians were the real long-range pioneers. The Melanesian people who settled Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, and Fiji were not the long-ranging sailors the Polynesians were.

Q: Well, how about French Polynesia? There's quite a bit going on there, was there?

McMULLEN: Tahiti and Bora Bora had a number of American citizens who periodically needed assistance from our consular section. Ambassador Siddique went as well at least once, but I didn't get to any of the dependent territories. Embassy Suva didn't cover political or economic developments in the French Pacific islands as they are considered part of France. So as not to tread on the toes of Embassy Paris, we normally sent only consular officers there to provide citizen services.

Q: Well now, you had the Solomon Islands too, didn't you?

McMULLEN: No. Solomon Islands was covered out of Embassy Port Moresby. Embassy Suva was responsible for Tuvalu, Nauru, Tonga, and Fiji, plus the French dependent territories of New Caledonia, French Polynesia, and Wallis and Futuna.

The Office of the Inspector General (OIG) conducted an inspection of Embassy Suva near the end of my tour. We were a relatively small post with about 12 Americans and maybe three dozen FSNs. It was quite an unusual inspection, as the inspectors checked us out from tonsils to toenails and came up with no formal recommendations -- I'd never seen that before or since.

It was an interesting and professionally rewarding three years, although it was somewhat disruptive for our sons' schooling as they were on authorized departure for 11 weeks in 2000. By and large, Fiji was a good posting, but when 2002 rolled around we were ready for new challenges.

Q: So where did you go then?

McMULLEN: From Fiji I was offered the DCM position at Embassy Rangoon. We hadn't lived in Southeast Asia before, so we were curious and exited. In July 2002 we moved from Fiji to Burma, which was a country completely unlike anything we had experienced. We were aware that the U.S. government had a very antagonistic relationship with the military government of Burma.

Q: Yeah. We're talking now in 2012, where things have moved, the President has made a visit to Aung San Suu Kyi.

McMULLEN: Yes.

Q: She's actually been elected to parliament. It sounds like it's been sort of a provisional change, rather than a profound change. But I don't know.

McMULLEN: Yes, it's a work in progress. We hope that there will be more reform and an end to the horrible political oppression in Burma. We've seen surprisingly positive developments in Burma in the past two years. When we were there it was quite different. I'm very pleased that Aung San Suu Kyi is now at liberty and has been elected to parliament. The people of Burma deserve a brighter future.

Q: All right. Could you describe first our relations with Burma and then the situation on the ground when you arrived there?

McMULLEN: Our relations with the junta were flat-out bad. After the Burmese military annulled the democratic elections of 1990 won by Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD), the generals established a blatant military dictatorship. The United States withdrew its ambassador and Embassy Rangoon has since been headed by a permanent chargé. As DCM I worked for two different chargés at Embassy Rangoon, the second of whom, Carmen

Martinez, wanted to be addressed as chief of mission. We previously had a consulate in Mandalay. The consulate was closed about 1980, but we still owned the building and the land. Our chancery in Rangoon was in an old bank building, right downtown, separated by a space of about four feet from decrepit old firetraps on two sides. We had about 45 Americans at post and around 200 FSNs. The embassy's very active American Center, housed in the former North Korean embassy, taught English, had a popular library, and hosted cultural activities. Post had a defense attaché's office and a Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) office, as DEA and the government of Burma shared an interest in stamping out Burma's once-thriving opium and heroin industry. About the only area of mutual interest was counternarcotics. Our DEA folks cooperated with their Burmese counterparts to shut down the heroin and other drugs coming out of the Golden Triangle area.

Q: Well, you know, you say that you have an absolute dictatorship and lots of money being made by narcotics, and warning bells go off. You know what I'm talking about.

McMULLEN: The DEA officers often had good connections and insights and their Burmese counterparts were dedicated to the anti-drug effort, in part for political reasons. Picture Burma as an upside down U, with mountains along the country's perimeter and a flat, well-watered, rice producing area in the center. The outer ring of mountains is inhabited by ethnic minorities overlapping into neighboring countries. The hill tribes have brothers, sisters, and cousins living just across the border. There has long been conflict between the Burman majority on the plains and the ethnic minorities in the mountains. The British staffed the colonial militia and police force with recruits from the hills. Christian missionaries found converts in the pagan hill tribes. During World War II, many Burmese sided with the Japanese who seized Burma from the British. Simultaneously, many of ethnic minorities sided with the allies against the Japanese and Burmese.

Democracy versus dictatorship and the ethnic minorities versus the Burman majority are the two all-encompassing dynamics of Burmese politics.

The U.S. government was promoting democracy and human rights as the Burmese junta was committing horrible atrocities against ethnic minorities and trying to eradicate the NLD. Things were so bad in mid-2002 that we couldn't travel beyond Rangoon without advanced written permission from the junta. This was contrary to the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, which we pointed out to no avail. Only when the junta began to invest in tourist hotels around the country did we re-open the issue with the prime minister. We said, "If we can't travel freely, as we have the right to under the Vienna Convention, we'll have to issue a travel warning to alert tourists, airlines, and travel agencies that it's not safe to travel to Burma. Because if an American citizen outside the capital is in an accident or needs consular assistance, we can't get there quickly. So if you won't let American diplomats travel freely, we'll be forced to advise Americans not to come." Of course, as the generals were investing much of their ill-gotten gains in developing domestic airlines, travel agencies, and hotels, they needed foreigners to visit Burma. Still, they refused. We knew that security agents were required to follow us and monitor our activities.

Q: Yeah.

McMULLEN: We made a reasonable counteroffer, saying, "OK, we'll inform you in advance where we're going. If you don't want us to travel there for a specific reason, then notify us at least 48 hours before the scheduled travel and we'll cancel the trip." There was, after all, active combat in some of the frontier areas. Surprisingly, they agreed. For a few months, this "advance notice" protocol was in place, but after a while they said, "Oh, just go wherever you want." We were able to travel relatively freely after that.

Q: As time moved on did you move into problems about going places?

McMULLEN: Not really. Occasionally the junta organized outings for the diplomatic corps. One time they flew is in helicopters up into far northern Burma along the Chinese border, where the United Wa State Army had recently signed a cease-fire with the government, while supposedly agreeing to get out of the drug business. The junta was trying to gin up international aid for the Wa, who were very poor. Once we went with the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) to inspect the resettlement of Rohingya Muslim refugees along the border with Bangladesh. UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund) organized two tours to review its projects in the provinces. Burma was a very isolated, traditional country. Traveling upcountry was like stepping back a century or more.

When we arrived in mid-2002, Aung San Suu Kyi had just been released from her second stretch of house arrest. Our first chargé, Priscilla Clapp, introduced Jane and me to Aung San Suu Kyi (ASSK) at a reception at the chargé's residence. Priscilla left shortly thereafter and Carmen Martinez replaced her. Carmen and ASSK did not hit it off, so I became the embassy's chief liaison with Aung San Suu Kyi. Working with ASSK was very interesting and I got to know her quite well. She's a person of remarkable moral strength. Political chief Patrick Murphy and I would often go to the NLD headquarters to talk with the "uncles," as the septuagenarian senior NLD officers were called. We also worked with the NLD Youth Wing, many of whom were taking English classes at the American Center. Jane taught English at the American Center and had a number of NLD members as students. Aung San Suu Kyi followed the progress of the NLD students at the American Center and sometimes involved herself in administrative minutia. She faced the herculean task of unseating the entrenched military dictatorship and replacing it with the rightful winners of the 1990 elections. However, her party, at least that part of it out of prison, consisted of eager, inexperienced youth and a clutch of aging political figures, the Uncles, who were wise and experienced, but didn't have much energy to contribute to the daily tasks at hand. So Aung San Suu Kyi ended up doing lots of things herself.

Q: She was not in prison or under house arrest?

McMULLEN: She was at liberty for the first nine months of our tour there. I got to know here quite well. Once, during a meeting at NLD headquarters I noticed she looked weary and worn. Her two sons, who she hadn't seen in years, are five years apart in age like our two sons. I asked, "Why don't you come over to the house Saturday for lunch -- no politics, no work, just a family lunch with Jane and the boys."

She smiled and replied, "Would there be a chance for blueberry cheesecake?"

I laughed and said "Blueberry cheesecake? We're in Burma! Well, Jane's a pretty creative cook, I'll see what she can do." Jane somehow managed to come up with blueberries, cream cheese, and whipped up a tasty blueberry cheesecake.

Q: (laughs)

McMULLEN: As the household staff excitedly prepared to host Aung San Suu Kyi for lunch, I said, "She's our guest. You can say hi to her, but I don't want any pictures or for her to feel put upon. It's just a friendly, low-key lunch."

She arrived in her modest old car and was warmly greeted by Jane, our sons, and the adoring household staff. Aung San Suu Kyi attended high school in New Delhi when her mom was the Burmese ambassador to India. She, Owen, and Wyatt chatted for much of the lunch, comparing notes on what it's like to be a diplomatic kid. You don't know the school system, you don't know who the teachers are, and the names are hard to pronounce. You go to a school dance and the music's funny, you don't understand the slang, and the unwritten social norms are hard to decipher. Aung San Suu Kyi is Buddhist, but she went to a Catholic high school in New Delhi. She said she didn't want to take theology from the nuns, so she registered for double math. She told our sons that when she was a little girl she was afraid of the dark. To overcome her fear, she would get up in the middle of the night and wander around the house in the pitch dark until she was no longer afraid. We thought it epitomized her strong-willed character. It seemed that the family lunch and the huge piece of blueberry cheesecake lifted her spirits, which was our aim.

I got a call from Al Neuharth, the founder of U.S.A. Today, explaining that every year he gives a "Free Spirit Award" to someone personifying the spirit of freedom. Aung San Suu Kyi was that year's Free Spirit Award recipient. If he came to Burma, could I get him in to see her? I said, "Yeah, I think so."

"Can I bring a photographer?" he asked?

I said, "That'd probably be OK too."

The photographer was Eddie Adams, the Pulitzer Prize winner who took the iconic Tet Offensive photo of a South Vietnamese officer executing a Viet Cong prisoner in the streets of Saigon.

Q: Oh yes, I remember that very well.

McMULLEN: Al Neuharth, Eddie Adams, and another guy from the Free Spirit Foundation came to Rangoon and we called on Aung San Suu Kyi in her lakeside residence. Al Neuharth said, "We've selected you as the recipient of the Free Spirit Award, which comes with a million dollar prize. We'd like to know if you accept the award and the monetary prize."

I asked Aung San Suu Kyi, "Can I talk to you for a minute in private?" We went from the living room around the corner into her piano room. I said, "If you want the money, the embassy will help facilitate this. If you want it to go to your sons, we'll help do that. If you want it to go to

your late husband's foundation, we'll help arrange that. If you want it here in a big trunk to use for the NLD, or whatever, we'll do it. Whatever you want, we'll make it happen." She nodded.

So we went back in and she said, "Thank you very much, I accept the award."

"And the prize?" Al Neuharth asked.

She said, "Yes, I accept that as well. Ron has my banking particulars. Whatever he says to do with the money, do it." I was a bit surprised by that.

Al Neuharth continued, "We normally have a reception and dinner in the recipient's honor in Washington. But since you won't be able to attend that, would you be willing to record a message that we could show at the award ceremony?"

She answered, "Yes, I'd be glad to."

Eddie Adams had a video camera. ASSK sat on a stool in her living room, looked into the camera, and gave a riveting, 12-minute presentation on what freedom meant to her. We were all just dumbfounded. I said, "When people see this in Washington at the dinner, they won't be as impressed as we were, because they'll think your staff wrote the speech, you edited it, had it loaded onto a teleprompter, and then read it off the teleprompter screen." She laughed. We were awed, as she had just delivered this uplifting speech flawlessly in complete paragraphs. Her speaking style and oratory skills were outstanding.

In the spring of 2003, Aung San Suu Kyi undertook a public speaking tour around Burma. She attracted massive crowds, even in Shan State and other areas inhabited by ethnic minorities. The military rationalized its dictatorship by claiming a firm hand was needed to "save the Union," shorthand for keeping the restive ethnic minorities from breaking away. But ASSK's wildly enthusiastic reception by minority groups showed that a democratic leader could also maintain the Union. The adoring throngs, especially in minority areas, exposed as baseless the military dictatorship's supposed raison d'être. She attracted such massive crowds that the generals decided to act. They organized a mob of about 5,000 thugs to attack her convoy in late May 2003 as she traveled in central Burma. Maybe 70 people were killed, beaten to death by regime supporters, and hundreds more were wounded. Aung San Suu Kyi was arrested and thrown into prison. Eventually she was transferred to house arrest.

After Aung San Suu Kyi's convoy was attacked in May 2003, she was arrested, and later placed under house arrest. On June 19th, her 59th birthday, we gathered at an embassy housing compound called Washington Park, which was on the same lake as Aung San Suu Kyi's house. Birthdays are important in traditional Burmese culture. We thought her birthday should not pass unnoticed, so we ordered 59 flying lanterns -- contraptions made of plastic sacks, a wire frame, and a wax-filled piece of bamboo. The candle is lit and the heat causes the sacks to inflate, producing a glowing, miniature hot air balloon. Once inflated, you let go and the flying lantern gently floats up into the air. The gathered Americans one by one lit 59 flying lanterns. Up they sailed, up over the skyline of Rangoon, up in an arc over the lake by Aung San Suu Kyi's house. We hoped to remind the people of Rangoon and Aung San Suu Kyi herself that she was not

forgotten or alone. We later learned that she had seen the flying lanterns from Washington Park and was grateful for the birthday greeting from the American community.

While she was under house arrest, once a week a delivery boy was able to take her a carton of groceries. Aung San Suu Kyi is fond of chocolate. We found out who the grocery boy was and once or twice smuggled in a plate of Jane's brownies to help keep her spirits up. She occasionally sent us notes out via the laundry. We did what we could to help.

Many members of the NLD Youth Wing were imprisoned on trumped-up charges. The regime sometimes released those who were particularly sick. They'd come out of prison with malaria, tuberculosis, AIDS, or some other malady. They had no money, and no government hospital would treat them. The Muslim Free Hospital was a private hospital that catered to Rangoon's destitute. Pro-democracy doctors and nurses volunteered to treat the released political prisoners, but there was a severe shortage of critical medicines. Embassy Rangoon mounted a stealth medical supply operation. We'd get a shipment of medicine from the Regional Medical Office in Bangkok, then I'd arrange to meet a trusted contact from the Muslim Free Hospital in a dark alley. I would drive myself to the pre-arranged rendezvous at dusk. My contact and I would quickly and silently unload the medicines from my car into his car, careful to prevent anyone from learning where the Muslim Free Hospital was getting medicine for the released prisoners. We were able to provide at least some assistance to the young men and women who had suffered so much for their support of democracy.

I was also involved with another stealthy operation aimed at helping the Kachin people who lived in far northern Burma. During World War II, OSS (the Office of Secret Services) Detachment 101 conducted forward reconnaissance and sabotage operations against the Japanese forces occupying Burma.

Q: Yeah.

McMULLEN: Young Kachin men formed the Kachin Rangers, who fought alongside OSS Detachment 101. After the war, veterans of OSS Detachment 101 and their families began sending money to support the families of the Kachin Rangers. Poor Kachin villagers became involved in opium poppy production, as they had few other options. The 101 veterans and their families convinced the State Department to help fund a crop substitution program called "Project Old Soldier 101." The State Department provided hybrid seed corn to Kachin villagers to grow in place of opium poppies. The high-yield seeds and other agricultural inputs were smuggled into Kachin State from southern China. Nobody from the U.S. government had been up to review this project for years, so the State Department said, "Unless we get a positive assessment of this project, we'll have to stop our funding."

I informed the foreign ministry that I planned to travel to the eastern part of Kachin State on an orientation visit. As it turned out, the Burmese official I spoke with was the son of a former Kachin Ranger. He knew the Kachin region well, probably guessed why I was going there, and informally endorsed the visit. After traveling 850 miles north of Rangoon, I finally made it to the project area and was greeted warmly by the children and grandchildren of the Kachin Rangers. There were fields of tall, healthy corn, thriving villages, and no opium poppy at all. I

sent my trip report to the State Department, which decided to continue funding Project Old Soldier 101.

Embassy Rangoon was also involved with another project stemming from World War II. The Nationalist Chinese leader, Chiang Kai-shek, threatened to sign a separate peace treaty with the Japanese unless the U.S. could keep his armies supplied with ammunition, food, and money.

The U.S. realized that if China dropped out of the war, a million Japanese soldiers would be freed up to fight us in the Pacific. Since the Japanese controlled the sea lanes around China, the only way we could do this was overland, through Burma, which the Japanese occupied, or by flying over Burma from India. So we organized a massive airlift from eastern India across the foothills of the Himalayas into southern China, which the airmen called Flying the Hump.

Q: A good friend of mine was a British pilot flying a Dakota C-47 over the hump.

McMULLEN: Soon the Japanese figured out what we were doing and shot down scores of allied transport planes over Burma. About 600 American airmen went MIA, probably killed in action but their remains were never recovered.

Embassy Rangoon was trying to find some common ground with the Burmese generals. As they were military officers, we thought they might allow us to attempt to recover the remains of our WWII airmen. We said, "It would be possible, thanks to advances in forensic science, to identify a bone fragment found at a crash site as human versus monkey or deer or something. Using modern DNA applications, we can even identify the individual person in most cases." We requested the junta's permission to excavate WWII crash sites in northern Burma. Surprisingly, they said yes.

A forensic team from Hickam Air Field in Hawaii flew to Rangoon. We secured the junta's permission for the anthropologists to fly into northern Burma to identity crash sites. The team conducted several excavations and found human remains, which they took back to Hawaii. They resolved a number of long-open MIA cases and provided closure to families who, since World War II, had no information about the fate of missing loved ones.

Some crash sites had been found and salvaged by locals understandably eager to get their hands on usable aircraft materials. To locate additional undisturbed crash sites, I traveled up to the Naga area on the Burma-India border. I attended the annual gathering of the Naga tribes. Nagas assembled to celebrate their culture, catch up with old friends, see distant relatives, and participate in sporting and musical competitions. I had fliers printed in Naga, Burmese, and English saying, "If you find a crashed airplane, please don't disturb it. Call the Burmese authorities or the American Embassy so the mortal remains of the aircrew members can be recovered." The gathering of the Naga clans was like stepping into the pages of National Geographic, as nearly everyone was in traditional dress. I distributed fliers and talked to tribesmen about ethnic problems, opium production, and the Naga guerillas from India who were creating trouble along the border. We got several leads on unknown crash sites as a result.

Q: Well, it sounds like the Burmese government, although they were obviously hostile to many of the things we wanted, you might say the response of many things was rather mixed?

McMULLEN: Yes. Overall, the junta treated the Burmese people terribly, especially ethnic minorities and democracy activists. Rangoon had a large Christian cemetery in an area of town populated by ethnic Karens. The Karens lived along the border with Thailand and have long resisted rule from Rangoon. This Karen Christian cemetery had perhaps 5,000 graves. The government announced that it was going to build a condominium complex where the cemetery stood. Family members had one month to disinter and relocate the remains of their loved ones. Anything left would be bulldozed. The mother of a Karen FSN who I particularly liked was buried there. When I heard about this, I volunteered to help him with the cost of the disinterment and reburial.

I went with him to the cemetery. It was absolutely grizzly to see thousands of families digging up the remains of their departed loved ones. If the person had been buried relatively recently, the family could just dig up the coffin. In other cases people carried black garbage bags, hoping to find at least some part of the deceased. It was ghastly and I felt so sorry for the FSN. The junta was really heartless. The cemetery episode also reflected the junta's militant Buddhism, which resulted in action against other religious groups, including the Rohingya Muslims.

Q: Did you ever get out of the old embassy building into a safer location?

Washington Park was a wonderful lakeside embassy housing complex with huge trees. Its large houses were built in the 1930s and 1940s. Because our old chancery was so decrepit and vulnerable, we badly needed a new embassy building. The junta would not sell us land or give us a long-term lease, so we had to knock down all the houses at Washington Park and build the new embassy there. To clear the site, we called for bids to tear down the 11 or 12 houses, hoping it wouldn't cost too much. Oddly, the lowest bid was zero, as the houses contained valuable teak lumber. We canceled the deconstruction bid and called for salvage bids. Many companies bid for the right to recycle the old teak-framed houses. We broke ground on the new 84 million dollar chancellery building – I got to turn a spade of soil at the ceremony. It was hard to watch the beautiful old houses at Washington Park being torn down, but the junta wouldn't allow us to acquire land for a secure new embassy.

Q: Maybe the opinion shifted, but could you tell about the view of the Burmese government by our officials there? I mean how did we see them?

McMULLEN: With perhaps one exception, the vast majority of the staff at Embassy Rangoon saw the senior generals as an evil bunch, committing horrible human rights abuses against ethnic minorities and Burma's rightful rulers, the National League for Democracy. There was little sympathy among the embassy staff for the junta. The DEA had a good working relationship, as they were strictly apolitical and focused on combating drugs. After the junta's bully boys attacked Aung San Suu Kyi's convoy in 2003, the U.S. tightened sanctions. Mitch McConnell was a very ardent proponent of Burmese democracy and --

Q: The senator.

McMULLEN: Yes, Senator McConnell of Kentucky. First Lady Laura Bush was also a very strong supporter of Aung San Suu Kyi. So there was widespread support on the Hill and in the White House for increased pressure on the government of Burma. We were in constant battle with the regime. Today's reforms are possible only because Senior General Than Shwe, a hard-liner, retired and passed the torch to a younger general, Thein Sein, who's turned out to be a reformer. I can't explain it. There certainly wasn't any hint of reform while I was there. I've been keeping my fingers crossed that the reforms are genuine. Aung San Suu Kyi was allowed to travel to the U.S. and return to Burma. Secretary Clinton and President Obama both visited Burma. That's great, and I hope for the sake of the long-suffering Burmese people that the political and economic reforms continue. While we're seeing progress on the democracy front, I hope it will be accompanied by progress on the human rights front. Perhaps a future democratic government will be more inclined than the junta was to accord human rights to oppressed minority groups.

Q: How about relations with Thailand? Was there any movement in that direction?

McMULLEN: The Thai government allowed Karen refugees to flee across the border into Thailand and has allowed them to stay in refugee camps. Some Thai army offices were involved with Burmese generals in shady deals on timber, jade, gemstones, and drugs. The Thai government employed something like "constructive engagement," a policy we did not support. The Thais, having depleted their own forests, looked greedily across the border at Burma's forests, agricultural land, gems, and minerals. India and China were in strategic competition for Burma. The Chinese were clearly ahead. In part, the Indians saw Burma as their gateway to Southeast Asia. But most of the rivers and mountains in Burma run north and south, making east-west transportation difficult. Chinese businesses found moving goods north and south through Burma much easier. The Chinese were advancing on all fronts, particularly in jade and gemstones.

Q: Yeah.

McMULLEN: Besides commercial interests, China had politico-military interests too. After the communist takeover of China in 1949, some Nationalist units retreated into Burma and continued fighting, with covert U.S. support, until the late 1950s. Some of those old Nationalist Chinese leaders morphed into drug lords and controlled bizarre ethnic armies – Chinese versions of Colonel Kurtz in "Apocalypse Now."

Q: The movie.

McMULLEN: There were pockets in northern Burma still controlled by the descendants of the Nationalist troops who ran heavily armed, drug-financed operations. The Chinese provided development assistance and commercial alternatives to growing opium poppies in order to stem the flow of narcotics into China and to undermine the old Nationalist warlords.

Q: Well, I realize that you had the DEA going, but what was happening drug-wise there?

McMULLEN: The government of Burma was eager to wipe out opium poppy production, in part because many drug lords were also warlords heading ethnic armies in conflict with Rangoon. Opium poppies were not grown in territory under the government's control, but in areas controlled by ethnic rebels. The junta thought they could stamp out drugs and get some international credit, as well as impoverish rebels dependent on the drug trade. We saw sharp reductions in the acreage of opium poppies planted, perhaps because the drug lords were going into meth production in buildings not subject to airborne surveillance.

Q: Oh.

McMULLEN: We were seeing the drug business transition from heroin to methamphetamines, which were flowing into Southeast Asia by the container load. Poppies growing in a field were visible for months, but a meth lab in a small building was harder to monitor.

Q: Where was the stuff going?

McMULLEN: It would go from northeastern Burma into Thailand and Laos, then on to Vietnam and the Philippines, and increasingly into China. Thailand was probably the biggest consumer of Burmese meth at the time. Some Burmese heroin was still going to the U.S., sparking DEA involvement.

Q: Well, say in Bangkok, could one get drugs or not?

McMULLEN: Methamphetamines were used in Thailand by truck drivers and taxi drivers who wanted to be alert for long stretches. And speaking of Thailand, you know the old movie "Bridge on the River Kwai?"

Q: Yes.

McMULLEN: The movie was based on the construction of a railroad linking Thailand, a Japanese ally in WWII, with Burma. The Japanese built the rail line to avoid the dangerous maritime route via Singapore. After taking Burma, the Japanese invaded India, but didn't get very far.

Q: Yeah.

McMULLEN: The "Death Railway," as the Thailand-Burma Railway was unofficially known, was built in part by 60,000 allied POWs used as slave laborers. Many died. Several people from Embassy Rangoon were invited to a commemoration in Moulmein to mark the 60th anniversary of the 1943 completion of the railway. We met a few Australian former POWs who worked on the railway, including an 84-year-old doctor named Rowley Richards. Dr. Richards had been a prison camp doctor. He said, "Some 700 Americans who'd been captured on Corregidor were used as slave labor on the Death Railway, about a quarter of whom died during the course of its construction." Dr. Richards continued, "I was intrigued by the accents of the boys from Brooklyn and spent more time doctoring the Americans than I probably should have, because I liked that Brooklyn accent."

He survived the Death Railway. As he was being shipped to Japan to work as a slave laborer in a factory, a U.S. submarine torpedoed his ship off Taiwan, and the ship sank. Most of the POWs on board drowned, but Dr. Richards was rescued by a Japanese warship and was taken to Hiroshima, where he was forced to work in a factory. He got there in time for the atomic bombing of Hiroshima – and lived to tell the tale. So he survived the Death Railway, having a ship torpedoed, and the nuclear attack on Japan. He was a spry 84-year-old with a bunch of grandchildren. What an amazing life.

Q: Did you get any Americans who had been with Merrill's Marauders or any of the Stilwell's troops that had come back to visit the area?

McMULLEN: Unfortunately, no. However, veterans of OSS Detachment 101 provided funding to have a bronze statue made of Kachin Rangers and American troops. The defense attaché's office commissioned the sculpture from a young man from Myitkyina, the Kachin capital. I got to see it in Myitkyina and meet the Kachin artist. It now stands in front of the new chancellery building in Rangoon.

Q: Well, how about contact with the Burmese people?

McMULLEN: The Burmese people were wonderful and long-suffering. The regime attempted to keep us isolated. For example, anyone coming to our residence had to pass through Burmese security men and give their names, an effort to deter and intimidate Burmese visitors. My wife, an English teacher at the American Center, had lots of interaction with young Burmese adults.

As mentioned, we still owned the consulate in Mandalay. We closed it in 1980, but had a caretaker who tended it for us. Occasionally the embassy would organize an outing to our vacant consulate in Mandalay where we held an "American Day" event to reach out to Burmese youth interested in studying in and learning more about America.

The junta's minions heavily monitored the internet and web-based email was not permitted. Our sons attended International School Yangon and told us of competition between the students to locate web-based email services the government hadn't blocked. They'd find some obscure email service and use it for three or four weeks, the government would find out about it and cut it off, and then the kids would switch to another email service. They managed to stay one step ahead of the censors, but they had to work at it. Young Burmese were enthusiastic English language students at the American Center, hoping improved English might lead to an opportunity to study abroad.

In mid-2003, after the junta re-arrested Aung San Suu Kyi and the U.S. stepped up sanctions in response, I was talking with a senior, pro-democracy figure and asked, "What is your view of the U.S. sanctions?"

He looked at me and said, "We don't want you to sanction us. We want you to invade us. Invade us like you did Iraq and overthrow this horrible government. Save some bombs for Burma."

I was shocked, but I understood his sentiment. He was an old guy, in his eighties probably, and was deeply frustrated. The Burmese saw the U.S. standing up for our principles and against the dictatorship. We'll keep our fingers crossed that the political reforms underway today in Burma are real. But we didn't have an inkling of them back then.

Q: Did you get any feel about the recruitment and the training of the military class?

McMULLEN: The military was very large and constituted a state within a state. The military had the best housing, the best schools, and the best clinics. They drove around in the best vehicles. Generals owned jade mines and ruby mines and flew to Singapore for medical care, while normal people had nothing. The military took care of its own and dominated the Burmese economy, buying officers' loyalty with parcels of the country's economy. It established separate military housing, education, healthcare, and transportation structures for the soldiers and provided business opportunities for the officers. Thein Sein's reforms threaten not only the military's grip on politics, but also its control of the economy and thus its state within the state. We'll see if reforms continue. I hope so.

Q: How stood American morale in a difficult country like that?

McMULLEN: In many ways it was surprisingly good, given the besieged environment we lived in. FSNs, embassy contacts, and social friends were liable for attention from military intelligence. The tourist infrastructure was fairly rudimentary. The embassy-sponsored American Club had a softball diamond, swimming pool, and restaurant. Expats gathered at the American Club to play softball, swim, and socialize. The further you got from Rangoon, the less English was spoken. As the government developed more tourist infrastructure, such as domestic airlines and hotels, it was a little easier for the American community to travel.

The demolition of Washington Park, the wonderful old housing compound, dislocated families who had to move out of the beautiful houses surrounded by giant tropical trees.

Q: Well, there are various problems with, you know, close living.

McMULLEN: There were cliques in the community that were reinforced by rivalries between teams in the softball league. Also, the charge had a big dog that scared and sometimes bit people. She had a management style better attuned to a less isolated, stressful situation. There were almost no interagency divisions, which was good. As DCM, I tried to boost morale and create a team mentality, but my efforts weren't always successful. The stress within the embassy community was probably a byproduct of the overall pressures we were under. Right across from the embassy's front door the regime erected a giant billboard urging the masses to:

"Oppose foreign nations interfering in internal affairs of the state,"

"Crush all internal and external destructive elements as the common enemy, and"

"Oppose those relying on external elements, acting to as stooges, holding negative views."

Right in our face. That was what we had to deal with on a daily basis.

Q: Well then, how about the other embassies there? Were there many?

McMULLEN: There were 27 embassies in Rangoon, including one from Israel. Israel and Burma had long been friends, as they won independence about the same time. The Israelis were looking for support in the UN and provided agricultural assistance. There was an active Russian Embassy. The Russians sold weapons to the junta. The Chinese had a large and influential embassy, plus a commercial office. The Indians were trying to compete, but were far back. The Southeast Asian countries had admitted Burma into ASEAN (the Association of Southeast Asian Nations) and were trying to normalize relations with a constructive engagement approach. The British, as former colonial masters, had a small embassy but punched above their weight. They were quite influential and had good contacts. The Australians seemed pretty involved and active as well. The UN agencies were also big players, with UNICEF, UNHCR, and UNDP (the United Nations Development Programme) running substantial programs. The ICRC (International Committee of the Red Cross) played a key role in supporting political prisoners and their families.

I was president of the "Thursday Club," a monthly luncheon gathering of all DCMs in Rangoon. It was an active and interesting group. As DCM, I had no peers in the embassy and was most folks' boss, so many of my best personal friends were DCMs of other missions. The Thursday Club provided a relaxed venue to exchange views and information about what was going on.

Q: Were you tasked with going to the Burmese government on human rights things?

McMULLEN: Yeah, but it was sort of like hitting our heads against a brick wall. We dutifully conducted all demarches as instructed by Washington. Often the mid-level political officer carried them out, because they were so futile. We saw very few fruits of our labors. Some of our actions were unconventional, like sending up 59 flying lanterns on Aung San Suu Kyi's 59th birthday. The next year, on her 60th birthday, Wyatt and I kayaked down Inya Lake as close as we could get to her house without getting arrested. It was a quiet, still day. Wyatt yelled at the top of his lungs, "Happy birthday!" His greeting reverberated up and down the small bay on which Aung San Suu Kyi's house is located. Hopefully, she heard Wyatt's 60th birthday greeting, as she was still under house arrest and more isolated than ever.

We tried to do what we could personally, as an embassy, and as representatives of the U.S. government to keep the flame of hope alive in Burma.

Q: OK, today is the 20th of December, 2012 with Ron McMullen. Ron, you were leaving Burma. Where did you go and when and what happened?

McMULLEN: We left Burma in the summer of 2005. We had done three interesting, very different overseas tours in a row -- Cape Town, then DCM in Suva, and DCM in Rangoon. We'd been out of Washington for nine years and I'd been promoted into the Senior Foreign Service. My career development officer said, "Ron, you need to know how Washington works.

You've been overseas now for nine years in a row and need to get back to Washington." My onward assignment from Rangoon was to be associate dean at the Foreign Service Institute's School of Leadership and Management. So I went to FSI and took over the portfolio called Senior Policy Seminars. A couple of months before I arrived at FSI, the last of the Senior Seminars was conducted. The Senior Seminar had been the gold star senior executive training for promising Senior Foreign Service Officers. FSI eliminated the Senior Seminar and in its place started a series of short, often two or three-day policy seminars. Having a Ph.D. and an academic bent, I thought this would be a good posting. However, I found it very unsatisfying.

In early 2006, Secretary Condoleezza Rice developed the concept of transformational diplomacy. She wanted the Foreign Service to conduct transformation diplomacy in places like Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere. We built a series of policy seminars on the transformational diplomacy model and invited people from the State Department, both Foreign Service and Civil Service, as well as from DOD, the intelligence community, and other federal agencies. I helped conduct a series of seminars for 20 to 30 participants on such topics as transformational diplomacy and human rights, transformational diplomacy and democracy, transformational diplomacy and the fight against disease and global pandemics, and transformational diplomacy and terrorism. One of the problems was, this didn't have the cachet of the Senior Seminar. To pull a busy, top-notch officer away from his or her duties for three days really was difficult. As a result, we got mostly second-tier officers who were not vital or busy. Furthermore, the person I replaced, Michael Guest, moved up and was my boss. He gave me very little leeway to do anything interesting or important.

I was unhappy, perhaps the least happy I'd ever been in the Foreign Service. I considered retiring, as I was over 50 and had more than 20 years of service. I also took the rather radical step of looking into curtailing from FSI and volunteering for Iraq. I talked to people on the Iraq recruiting desk and they said, "Oh yes, we'd be glad to have you in Iraq." Of course this was 2006, as the insurgency was at its height and some people were wondering what the future of Iraq was going to hold. I had an affinity with the Kurds and the Kurdish region of Iraq. I'd never been to Kurdistan but always felt somewhat sympathetic. There was an opening for the provincial reconstruction team leader in Erbil, the Kurdish regional capital. I was interested and ready to jump ship from FSI and head to Kurdistan. Jane and I had discussed it, and we were leaning toward the curtailment and posting to Erbil, even though it was a non-accompanied tour. Then, just by chance, I happened to talk to a former colleague from the Dominican Republic, Mike Oreste, who was stationed at Embassy Baghdad. He was the coordinator between the embassy and the provincial reconstruction teams (PRTs) in the provinces. I said, "Mike, I'm kind of interested in this PRT leadership position in Erbil, and I'm thinking about curtailing out of FSI and volunteering go to go Erbil."

Mike said, "Yes Ron, we know you're interested, but you don't understand how the system works. You don't get assigned to Erbil. You get assigned to Embassy Baghdad, and then an embassy committee assigns you to a specific PRT. Right now we're searching for someone to head up the PRT in Tikrit, Saddam Hussein's hometown and a hotbed of Sunni insurgency. We're looking at you to go to Tikrit, not to Erbil."

And I thought, "That means the guys on the Iraq recruiting desk either: a) don't know how the system works, or b) are feeding me a line of horse hooey. Either way, it's not good." So I didn't curtail out of FSI to volunteer for Iraq.

Q: Can you describe transformational diplomacy, as perceived by Secretary Rice and the Department?

McMULLEN: Secretary Condoleezza Rice at Georgetown University in January of 2006, announced that "the United States along with its many partners will help build and sustain democratic, well-run states that are responsive to the needs of their citizens and conduct themselves in a responsible manner in the international community." This was the core concept of transformational diplomacy. This was her answer to dealing with Islamist terrorism. We found it difficult to kill our way out of Iraq and Afghanistan – both countries seemed to be getting worse, not better. Secretary Rice had pondered the root causes of terrorism. Her notion was that Foreign Service Officers shouldn't just sit in their offices drafting cables, but should be out in the field transforming countries into democratic, well-run states that were responsive to the needs of their citizens. If a young man wasn't aggrieved and his government was responding to his needs, then maybe he'd be less likely to sign up for jihad against America. Governments themselves needed to be good members of the international community, not rogue states or state sponsors of terrorism, for example.

Under transformational diplomacy, FSOs were supposed to be landscape architects, not merely gardeners. Others described the approach as not just hunting crocodiles, but draining the swamp so crocodiles don't have a place to live and multiply. The role of the State Department in the Bush administration's global war on terrorism was to build and sustain democratic, well-run countries. Now, some countries didn't want to become democratic -- Saudi Arabia, China, Eritrea, and North Korea to name a few. Other governments didn't want to become well-run, they wanted to stay corrupt to maintain their access to wealth and power.

Doing transformational diplomacy was a tall order, and one that many Foreign Service Officers took issue with, due to the implication that we were all just sitting on our duffs drafting cables and not out there in the field doing things. That ruffled the feathers of many FSOs, who, like me, had served in developing countries and had been doing programmatic fieldwork for years. Secretary Rice's contribution to the global war on terror was to task the State Department with transforming societies so they wouldn't produce terrorists or become state sponsors of terrorism. That was the aim. As there was a lot of confusion about transformational diplomacy, we used it as the framework for a series of senor policy seminars at FSI.

Q: Well, how did you feel about the whole concept? You know, I can see all sorts of problems with -- well, for one thing getting out in Iraq in the field without going with an armored column?

McMULLEN: Transformational diplomacy was an element of the idealism at the core of the Bush administration's reaction to the attacks of September 11th. This idealism held that we, through promotion of democracy, could help keep the peace and reduce terrorism around the world. We couldn't play defense all the time everywhere, and when we played offense, particularly in Iraq, it wasn't as quick and clean as we hoped. The Bush administration believed

that democratization was one of the keys to preventing terrorism. The secretary of state sought to use the tools at her command, the State Department and USAID, to this end. Spreading democracy has long been an American value pursued by American diplomacy, as has been the promotion of human rights, at least since the Carter administration. But to have this as the cornerstone of American foreign policy was a new venture for the Foreign Service and one that didn't outlast the Bush administration.

Q: So what happened with you?

McMULLEN: Well, I was relatively unhappy at FSI. Part of the problem was that my boss, Michael Guest, had taken all the interesting parts of my job for himself. For example, one of the portfolios of my position was to conduct the training and orientation workshop for newly appointed ambassadors, but Michael kept that for himself and left me with the three-day policy seminars.

While at FSI, I spent a week at the Air War College in Montgomery, Alabama as part of a State Department delegation. We discussed the very different organizational cultures of the State Department and the military, and how we could work together more effectively in settings like PRTs in Iraq and Afghanistan, for example. It was one of the few interesting aspects of my time at the Foreign Service Institute. I've never eaten grits so often in my life as that week in Alabama.

One evening I talked with my friend and A-100 classmate, Nick Burns. He and his wife Libby had been our friends since A-100. Nick at this time was the Undersecretary for Political Affairs. He had been the star in our A-100 class, had been ambassador to Greece and to NATO, and now was the highest-ranking Foreign Service Officer in the Bush administration. I told him that I was not making much of a contribution at the Foreign Service Institute. He said, "You know, Ann Patterson has taken over as Assistant Secretary in the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL), and she needs help getting the Afghanistan/Pakistan portfolio in shape. Why don't you think about going over to INL and helping Ann Patterson with Afghanistan and Pakistan?"

I jumped on the chance. Thanks to Undersecretary Burns, I curtailed out of FSI and happily joined Ann Patterson's team at INL as office director for Afghanistan and Pakistan programs. When I got to INL, I found that my new office was staffed by an interesting mix of contractors and civil service employees, with few Foreign Service Officers. The contractors were expensive and weren't doing very much, so with Ann Patterson's permission, I fired them. We recruited a number of Presidential Management Fellows (PMFs) to fill in those positions until we could get them encumbered with fulltime State Department employees. The PMFs were the cream of the crop of America's graduate students and had been selected for a two-year fellowship in the federal government. These bright, energetic twenty-five-year olds stepped in and did a much job than the contractors, many of whom were overpaid retired military officers. The office itself ran rule of law and counternarcotics programs in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Our budget for these programs was about 609 million dollars a year, an absolutely gargantuan sum.

Just as I transferred to INL, alarm bells were going off all over Washington, as Afghanistan had just produced the largest opium-poppy crop in the history of the world. Opium poppies, which are refined into heroin, constituted about one-third of the Afghan economy. Narcotics corrupted the Afghan government and helped fund the Taliban. President Hamid Karzai's brother was thought to be in cahoots with drug dealers in Kandahar Province. A top priority of the Bush administration was to reduce opium production and its corrosive, destructive effect on our aims in the region. It was an uphill battle. I was shocked to learn that the American-funded anti-poppy police unit was eradicating Afghan poppies by hand. We'd send a truck of counternarcotics police out to a field of blossoming opium poppies, the police would hop out of the truck, pick up sticks, and walk through the field whacking poppies with their sticks. This primitive approach to eradication clearly wasn't very effective.

Some senior policy makers, especially INL's Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary Tom Schweich, were keen on aerial eradication, using crop dusters to spray herbicide on poppy fields. But the Defense Department, after its experience with Agent Orange, refused to sign on with aerial eradication. One DOD official told us the Pentagon would never agree to spray chemicals on a country where there were tens of thousands of U.S. troops on the ground. Aerial eradication was not going to happen, even though it was probably the most effective way to eradicate opium poppies. I thought there must be a better way of eradication than walking through fields hitting plants with sticks. I said, "What about mechanizing the eradication?"

My able deputy, Al Matano, said. "We tried using tractors. But the poppy farmers always seemed to find out when the tractors are coming, and they flood their fields, making it impossible for the tractors to move." Ironically, in the 1960s USAID had constructed a world-class irrigation system in Helmand province, the very system now used by poppy farmers to flood their fields. The opium-poppy crop was about ready to be harvested, so we needed to move quickly to mechanize the Afghan Poppy Eradication Force. We came up with the idea of using four wheel drive all-terrain vehicles, ATVs. Working through DynCorp International, one of INL's biggest contractors, we bought 50 ATVs, had them airlifted to Baghram Airfield, and gave the Afghan anti-poppy force a crash course on how to operate the ATVs. As the opium harvest got underway, we trucked men and ATVs to the target areas. The farmers flooded their fields. Undeterred, the ATV-mounted police roared through the flooded fields, spraying mud and water into the air while dragging iron bars behind. The iron bars mowed down the opium poppies, making short work of a large field that would have taken men with sticks all day to eradicate. That harvest season, the ATV-mounted poppy eradication force in one day took out 45% of the acreage of the previous year's total eradication. Using ATVs proved to be an effective way to mechanize poppy eradication and INL considered it a big improvement – ATVs weren't crop-dusters, but they were better than sticks.

I headed something called the Afghanistan Working Group, an interagency committee that discussed and helped coordinate justice and law enforcement programs in Afghanistan. DEA, CIA, DOD, and the White House Office of Drug Control participated. In addition to the complicated interagency coordination among interested U.S. government agencies and departments, we were also involved with discussions on counternarcotics and the rule of law with the United Nations, coalition allies, and the government of Afghanistan. Canada had troops in Kandahar Province, a big drug producing area. British troops had the lead in Helmand

Province, the largest opium poppy farming province. The Netherlands, soft on drugs at home, was the lead country in opium-producing Oruzgan Province. We had not only to convince stakeholders in the U.S. government that eradication was the right policy, but we also had to convince other coalition governments. Most importantly, it became clear that the government of Afghanistan needed to own the counternarcotics effort -- it needed to be something the Karzai regime wanted to do rather than something we made them to do.

Q: Did you ever get to Afghanistan?

McMULLEN: Yes, finally. My first two attempts to make it to Afghanistan failed. As mentioned, I had signed up to be a Peace Corps Volunteer in Afghanistan just after college, but the communist coup caused the Peace Corps to pull out. Then, as Afghan desk officer, my planned trip through the Khyber Pass to Jalalabad was cancelled due to an outbreak of fighting there. My assignment with INL provided another opportunity to travel to Afghanistan. Along with PDAS Tom Schweich and two others from INL, we flew to Dubai and then on to Kabul. We were met at Kabul airport by the INL staff from the embassy and were loaded into two lightly armored Suburbans, with our "shooters," DynCorp security contractors, in a follow car. DynCorp had the contract to provide security for INL's people and programs. There was an armed driver and a security guard riding shotgun in each of the passenger vehicles. The follow car carried four or five armed DynCorp contractors. Overall, my office had about 1,200 contractors on the ground in Afghanistan and Pakistan, of whom 700 were armed. Our security contractors included Gurkhas from Nepal, veterans from the Balkan wars, South Africans, and a few Americans. Our convoy went at breakneck speed from Kabul International Airport toward the embassy, sometimes traveling the wrong direction down one-way streets, and once driving on the median of a divided highway. At congested intersections, shooters jumped out of the follow car and ran up through the traffic, beating on hoods and trunks of cars not moving fast enough until the traffic jam was cleared. I afraid we were going to have a car accident, and I was also worried that we were alienating all the other people on the road, acting like ugly Americans. But the DynCorp security people were doing their job, getting us to the embassy without being blown up by an IED or car bomb. Their job was not to win the Afghans' hearts and minds. I was nevertheless embarrassed at our heavy-handed behavior.

Once safely at the embassy I was assigned to a hooch, a modified shipping container used for lodging, across the street from the chancery. My host told me, "You're going to be here for several days and sometimes we take incoming mortar fire. So during daylight you need to walk the route from your hooch to the bomb shelter. If the alarm goes off at night and the compound is blacked out, you need to be able to find your way to the bomb shelter." I noticed my hooch had no mortar-proofing sand bags on its roof, as many others had. It was just a metal shipping container that could have been shredded by a mortar round. I dutifully walked to the bomb shelter so I knew where it was. Luckily, there was no attack on the embassy's hooch park while I was in Kabul.

INL has its own air fleets in Afghanistan and Pakistan, about a dozen aircraft in each country. In Afghanistan INL flew MI-8s, Soviet-designed helicopters armed with door-mounted machine guns, and twin-engine transports piloted by Russian or Ukrainian DynCorp subcontractors. From Kabul we helicoptered up to Baghram Airfield where we inspected INL's aviation

operations. It was quite an experience to fly at low altitudes over Afghanistan's countryside in a Soviet-designed helicopter. Overall, we had a fruitful visit talking with Afghans, embassy personnel, and DynCorp contractors about INL's law enforcement and police training programs.

The day we departed Afghanistan, one of the INL transport planes crashed in Helmand Province. As the plane was landing, a truck suddenly drove onto the runway, perhaps on purpose. The airplane pulled up, but it didn't have enough speed to maintain altitude, and crashed into a house. Two pilots and three people in the house died. I was already at the airport in Kabul and had no way to contact Jane to let her know I was OK. Back in Falls Church, someone heard that an INL aircraft had crashed in Afghanistan with numerous fatalities and passed the news on to Jane. Meanwhile, no word from me. So, when I got home and walked in our front door, I met a very relieved and fairly upset wife, who reminded me in no uncertain terms that I needed to be a better communicator when I'm in war-torn countries like Afghanistan.

Being in Afghanistan provided a world of understanding. No matter how much book-learning you have about the country, until you've been there it really doesn't come together. I was pleased to have had the opportunity to see Afghanistan and review INL's operations there.

Q: Well, what was your impression overall of the effectiveness of our eradication program?

McMULLEN: We did substantially increase the amount of poppy eradicated, but the Taliban resurgence threatened all of the gains we'd made against narcotics. Defeating the Taliban guerillas became the all-consuming priority. The military was hesitant to alienate poppy farmers, even if their opium was a major source of the Taliban's funding. As the insurgency grew in ferocity, counternarcotics fell in priority. The Obama administration's counternarcotics policy did not include eradication as a major element. U.S. policy focused on stabilizing the Karzai regime, training the Afghan army, and at least neutralizing if not defeating the Taliban. In contrast, the Bush administration figured that unless you cut the drug industry down to size, it would corrupt the government while funding the Taliban. With narcotics unchecked, Afghanistan's government would be corrupt, poorly run, and unable to bring the well-funded Taliban to heel. I think the Obama administration got it wrong, but did so because of the military priority in defeating the Taliban.

Q: What about your programs in Pakistan?

McMULLEN: INL had a large program in Pakistan that was more successful than the one in Afghanistan. When in Pakistan for an INL orientation visit, I accompanied Ambassador Ryan Crocker to the ceremonial burning of 60 tons of narcotics and other illicit substances in Quetta, capital of Pakistan's Baluchistan Province. Quetta is the probably headquarters of the Afghan Taliban. Nevertheless, this is where Pakistani authorities hosted the 60-ton drug burning ceremony. A bevy of VIPs sat on benches under a canvas marquee facing a huge mound reportedly consisting of hashish, marijuana, moonshine, heroin, and opium. The governor and Ambassador Crocker were to depress a plunger, like an old cartoon dynamite plunger, that would ignite a fire to incinerate the assembled hillock of drugs. They pushed the plunger. Nothing happened. They pushed it again. Still nothing happened. The organizer appeared with a stick topped by a flaming rag. He said something like, "Your excellencies, please walk out to the

gasoline-soaked mountain of drugs and light it with this torch." The alarmed RSO had visions of Ambassador Crocker being consumed in a huge fireball of gasoline and narcotics. The ambassador and the governor jointly held the stick and burning rag, gamely walked out to the mound of drugs, and successfully started it on fire without incident. After they rejoined the other guests in the seating area, the stiff breeze shifted directions and began blowing a thick cloud of hashish and opium smoke right into the stands. Needless to say, the ceremony came to an abrupt end and we all departed in a hurry.

Later I flew with Ambassador Crocker in an INL helicopter to Baluchistan's border with Afghanistan. INL was helping the Baluchistan Frontier Corps construct a number of Beau Geste-like forts along the frontier to serve as customs, immigration, and border patrol outposts. After the helicopter touched down amid the rocky hills of Baluchistan, we hiked up to inspect a crenellated fort straight out of a Rudyard Kipling story. We talked with the 36 troopers garrisoning the outpost. Most of them were from the aboriginal Brahui ethnic group native to the area. As I peered out of a rifle loophole, a sergeant said, "That's Afghanistan over there. You see that abandoned pick-up? That's about where the border is".

I asked, "How often do you coordinate with your counterparts across the border in Afghanistan?"

"Oh, we never talk to anybody on the Afghan side," he replied.

I said, "But what if there's a convoy of drugs coming your way or insurgents or something?"

"We just don't know because we never talk with them," he shrugged.

I couldn't believe it. This led to INL and others, trying to get the Afghans and Pakistanis to talk to each other about the border. The border, called the Durand Line, had been delineated by the British in 1893. Neither Afghanistan nor Pakistan recognized it as the legitimate border and it divided the Pashtun people. To start a discussion on border cooperation, we invited 20 Afghan and 20 Pakistani border officials to the Marshall Center in Garmisch, Germany. I participated in the workshop and broached discussions about how to improve coordination against narcotic trafficking.

I also spent time in Peshawar, Pakistan working with the Northwest Frontier Corps. The brigadier general there presented me with an antique Martini-Henry carbine as a token of appreciation for our support – a very Pashtun sort of gift, I thought. Peshawar still had the Wild West feel I experienced as the Afghan desk officer a decade earlier, but it was much more dangerous. The ability of Americans to travel in and around Peshawar was greatly diminished, so working and being in the city much less enjoyable than it had been in the mid-1990s.

Q: Well, did you feel like you were really getting at the heart of the distribution, or was this just sort of stuff that was passed on to keep you busy?

McMULLEN: What INL was doing was by far and away the most significant counternarcotics efforts undertaken in Afghanistan. Little Afghan heroin ended up in the U.S. Most heroin consumed in the U.S. comes from Colombia. Afghan heroin was consumed in Russian or

Europe, but the Russians didn't want to get involved in Afghanistan again and many Europeans treated heroin as a health issue rather than as a crime. The U.S. policy perspective focused less on the harm caused by heroin per se, and more on the negative political effects of the narcotics industry on the Afghan government and people. It was undermining the government through corruption, ruining Karzai's reputation, and helping fund the Taliban. We opposed it for those reasons. The Obama administration's short-term military priority will leave the opium problem in place until U.S. combat troops are out of Afghanistan in 2014. Narcotics could very well undermine the government of Afghanistan and fuel a return to civil war or widespread warlordism. Optimistically, a well-run government in Kabul -- one not headed by Karzai or up to its eyeballs fighting the Taliban -- might eventually resolve some of the other pressing problems negatively affecting Afghanistan and our interests in the region.

Q: What sort of cooperation were you getting in the field? I mean you were cutting off these guys' profits?

McMULLEN: We estimated that the value of the drug trade in Afghanistan was equivalent to about one-third of Afghanistan's GNP (gross national product). Urging Karzai to mount an effective counternarcotics campaign was like asking an American president to halt all U.S. economic activity west of the Mississippi. Can you imagine the American reaction to a foreign government demanding that we stop all economic activity west of the Mississippi River? That was the magnitude of what we were asking the Afghans to do.

We approached the problem from a couple of different angles. We asked leading Muslim mullahs to reiterate that good Muslims don't do drugs. That was somewhat effective in reaching people who were particularly religious. INL worked with schools and civic organizations to warn that every drug producing or transit country eventually develops its own large addict population. Just because Afghan heroin producers were selling their dope mostly in Russia and Western Europe didn't mean Afghanistan could avoid widespread addiction. In fact, Afghanistan has a very large and growing addict population. We tried to reduce demand through education and appeals to religious authorities. DEA had the lead on interdiction. USAID helped farmers grown crops other than poppies. I think that if we'd implemented the provincial incentive policy (the "pocket-gopher" strategy), Afghans would have reduced narcotics production themselves. Ultimately, the problem wasn't resolved.

Ann Patterson was a superb Assistant Secretary for INL. She was bright, engaged, and personable. She was concerned with big policy issues, the interagency arena, management of the bureau, and about the people who worked for her. Ann's low-key manner and sense of humor made her particularly effective within the State Department. She was one of the most capable FSOs I've seen in action.

Q: I would think that INL would be a pain in the butt for most other bureaus, because here is a subject that, you know, there doesn't seem to be a real solution to.

McMULLEN: We had running battles with the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs (SCA). We had support from the White House, I had a budget of over 600 million dollars a year, and INL had a clear, narrow policy orientation. The Office of Afghanistan Affairs wanted to see

the institutionalization of democratic governance and the defeat of the Taliban before tackling drugs. They saw counternarcotics programs as undermining, rather than supporting, those goals. We argued, "Not only is it *not* undermining democracy and the war effort, but absent a large reduction in opium poppy production, Afghanistan will continue to be a corrupt country and the Taliban will have funding to continue their struggle." We went around the block several times on this issue. INL won the policy battle with Secretary Rice, but the Obama administration was not keen on pursuing a substantial counternarcotics agenda.

Q: Where was the drug money going?

McMULLEN: Some drug money went to pay off the Taliban so they wouldn't attack the areas where opium poppies were grown. Sometimes Taliban fighters provided security for the opium farmers, drug convoys, and heroin labs. Drug money was used to pay off police, judges, customs officers, and senior Karzai administration officials. It was corrupting the government and helping fund the Taliban. It was a serious detriment to the establishment of good governance in Afghanistan.

INL's Office of Afghanistan and Pakistan Affairs was located on Navy Hill, the old naval observatory complex situated just north of main State. In 1850 Congress decreed that the prime meridian, zero degrees longitude, ran through Washington D.C. and specifically through the dome of the naval observatory. The U.S. officially held that the prime meridian ran, not through the royal observatory in Greenwich, England, but through the dome of the old naval observatory in Washington, D.C. Some U.S. states had their boundaries described using longitude west from Washington. I got a kick out of working right on the old U.S. prime meridian. There were also three or four grand old residences at Navy Hill used by senior admirals. Defense Secretary Bob Gates moved into one of then, thereby becoming the State Department's next-door neighbor. Perhaps that was one of the reasons that he and Secretary Clinton got on so well as cabinet secretaries.

Q: What there any thought given to a new policy or direction in Afghanistan?

McMULLEN: I got thinking about how we might incentivize governors and provincial administrations in Afghanistan. One summer when I was a kid, my home town of Northwood was plagued by a boom in the population of pocket gophers. The city did not develop an expensive, highly paid, foreign-led pocket gopher eradication force. Rather, the county simply placed a bounty on pocket gophers. My friends and I, too young for regular summer jobs, enthusiastically went out and trapped the pesky pocket gophers, cut the forepaws from the dead gophers, and presented the forepaws at the courthouse for the fifty cent bounty. That did the trick. Could we use a poppy bounty to incentivize Afghan provincial administrations to take out opium poppies? We developed a concise, simple approach and came up with substantial funding for the proposed program.

The plan was based on rewards, to be used in provincial development projects, for each province's annual reduction in the acreage planted in poppies. We planned to use the United Nations survey of poppy acreage from the previous year as a baseline. Each province would get substantial funding for development projects depending on the reduction of acres planted in

opium poppies. The province administration itself would benefit, as funds would not go into the black hole of corruption in Kabul, but directly to provincial administrations that had reduced the level of opium poppy production. Funding would be used for specific roads, schools, markets, or clinics and the aid would be publicly announced each year and monitored.

I personally pitched the new policy initiative to Secretary Rice. She thought it was a great idea and said it made much more sense than having us directing Afghans to half-heartedly eradicate opium poppies. Unfortunately, our discussion took place late in the second Bush administration and there wasn't time to coordinate this change in policy before the administration left office. The Obama administration, which was not keen on opium poppy eradication, did not implement it.

Q: Today is the 10th of January, 2013 with Ron McMullen. And Ron, we've left you, you were -- say you spent some time in the old naval observatory.

McMULLEN: Yes. I was on Navy Hill working for INL. As mentioned, I directed the office that ran our Afghanistan-Pakistan counternarcotics and law enforcement activities. While I was at INL, Ann Patterson, the assistant secretary, asked if I would like to be nominated for any of the chief of mission jobs opening in 2007. After looking at the list of vacancies, I said, "Well, I think I could do any one of these seven."

She said, "In that case I'll nominate you for all seven," which she did. My name was tossed in the hat and I was shortlisted for several chief of mission assignments. Embassy Dili in East Timor was on offer, but no dependents were allowed at post due to recent unrest. Jane and Wyatt couldn't have lived in Dili with me. We discussed having them live in nearby Darwin, Australia or elsewhere, but it didn't seem like a good idea.

My A-100 classmate Nick Burns was on the D committee, which selected ambassadorial candidates. He asked, "You're under consideration for several chief of mission positions -- what's your top choice?"

I said, "Eritrea."

"Are you sure?" Nick asked, knowing that Eritrea would be a very difficult assignment.

"Yes," I replied. Asmara had an international school of sorts and dependents were allowed at post. That's part of the reason why I chose Asmara rather than Embassy Dili.

Even though I was not the Africa Bureau's candidate, I was selected by the D committee for Asmara, got the nod from Secretary Rice, and my nomination was sent over to the White House.

Q: So you were in Asmara from when to when?

McMULLEN: The nomination process went forward with Eritrea. The government of Eritrea granted agrement in March of 2007. I waited, along with a number of other State Department nominees, for a confirmation hearing with the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, which was

at that time headed by Senator Joe Biden. Biden was campaigning for the Democratic presidential nomination, although his support was near zero. He kept us all twiddling our thumbs until November, when he finally got around to doing his job as chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and called the hearings. I had to put my life on hold for seven months while convicted plagiarist Joe Biden ran for the presidency. I eventually had my hearing – Biden didn't attend, of course – and my nomination was quickly confirmed by the Senate. In November of 2007 I was sworn in by Undersecretary Nick Burns in the Ben Franklin room. It was a wonderful ceremony. My dad and mom flew out from Iowa, lots of A-100 classmates were there, as were colleagues from previous postings. Wyatt held the family Bible for my swearing-in. My only regret was that I forgot to kiss Jane immediately after the swearing-in. I'm still trying to live that down. We had a nice reception afterwards at the Dacor Bacon House where I visited with the guests, including friends from college and other relatives that attended the ceremony. We flew to Eritrea in November 2007 and served there until July 2010.

Q: OK. Can you give me an overview of the situation, government and Eritrea in 2007?

McMULLEN: After Eritrea's independence in 1993, Embassy Asmara included elements from the State Department, USAID, Peace Corps, a military assistance group, a defense attaché's office, and other agencies of the U.S. government. But in subsequent years the government of Eritrea forced us to close all offices and programs apart from the State Department presence. When I arrived, we had a lone sergeant in the defense attaché's office. When her tour was over, the Eritrean government refused to issue her replacement a visa, so we shut the defense attaché office. Embassy Eritrea had about 230 Eritrean employees and around 15 American employees of all kinds when I got there. There'd been a long gap between ambassadors. Morale was bad and tensions were high between Eritrea and Ethiopia. Eritrea fought for 30 years to secede from Ethiopia, finally gaining its independence in 1993. From 1998 until 2000 Eritrea and Ethiopia fought a bloody, World War I style war with trenches, artillery and human wave assaults over the disputed border town of Badme. Badme, in the course of the peace settlement, was deemed to be part of Eritrea, but has remained occupied by Ethiopia. Ethiopia refused to abide by the outcome of the border commission and give Badme back to Eritrea. Thus, Eritrea viewed itself as being in a state of no war, no peace and its huge conscript army was still mobilized. Eritrea had the second largest standing army in Africa, and the nation's economy was still on war footing because the border problem with Ethiopia remained unresolved.

There was a UN peacekeeping mission in Eritrea called UNMEE, the UN Mission for Eritrea and Ethiopia. It had about 1,500 troops from India, Kenya, and Jordan and was headed by an able Jordanian major-general named Mohammad Taisir, with whom I had very good relations. A condition of the peace settlement was that Eritrea could not place military personnel within 15 kilometers of the border with Ethiopia, a buffer area designated the Temporary Security Zone (TSZ). UNMEE observed the TSZ to ensure that the previous combatants were making no military moves in the area. We had good relations with UNMEE and exchanged information with them about what was happening along the border. Eritrea accused us of not pressing Ethiopia to abide by its word and give back the disputed town of Badme, so relations between Eritrea and the U.S. were antagonistic. I arrived with hopes of building bridges of understanding with the government of Eritrea and improving relations between the Eritrean and American people.

The main U.S. interests in Eritrea were to promote human rights and regional stability. Eritrea was a menace to the region – many regional rebel and opposition groups had operations based in Eritrea with the backing of the Isaias regime. The dictatorial government of Eritrea was horribly oppressing its own people and trying to destabilize the region. We went head-to-head on a number of these issues.

Q: Can you tell us about Eritrea?

McMULLEN: Eritrea's main concern, at least officially, was getting Ethiopia to comply with the ruling of the border commission and returning Badme. Some observers felt the Eritrean regime used Ethiopia's non-compliance as an excuse for maintaining its dictatorial grip on the nation. Our concerns were regional stability, including terrorism, and human rights.

Q: Can you talk about the personality and the composition of the leadership in Eritrea?

McMULLEN: The government of Eritrea was dominated by the president, Isaias Afwerki, who led the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) to victory over Ethiopia. He was a brilliant guerilla fighter and military commander who failed to make the transition to democratic president and statesman. I've never been a big fan of George Washington, but he managed to make the transition from rebel military leader to democratic statesman. Isaias failed miserably in making that transition. It reminds me of the old saying, "When your only tool's a hammer, every problem begins to look like a nail." Isaias was good at mobilization, guerrilla warfare, and strategic planning. He was willing to suffer and was patient. The country fought for 30 years to win its independence -- many Eritreans thought they had been patient enough and suffered enough. Isaias hoped to transform Eritrean society into his Maoist vision of utopia in the Horn of Africa. He and his henchmen exhibited the need to be in complete control of all aspects of society. Some people refer to Eritrea as the North Korea of Africa, given the ruthless state control over every aspect of society.

As a young man, Isaias went to China for political commissar training. Mao's China offered support to the EPLF cause, but only if their struggle was more politicized. So, Isaias and a few other Eritrean rebel leaders went to China in 1967 to learn how to become revolutionary political commissars. This was during the depths of Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution. Mao was nationalizing land, destroying traditional religions, trying to break up family life, and sending teachers to the fields and university students out to do manual labor. Isaias soaked it up like a dry sponge. If you look at what Mao was trying to do during the Cultural Revolution, Isaias is trying to do that now in Eritrea. The Eritrean regime has nationalized land, controls the economy, and tightly restricts religion. Only four kinds of religious worship are allowed in Eritrea -- Islam, Orthodox, Catholic, and Lutheran. Everything else is illegal, and anyone worshipping in an unauthorized manner is subject to arrest, imprisonment, and torture. Students must attend a militarized, isolated camp for 12th grade if they want to graduate from high school. A student in the upper half of his or her graduating class is assigned to national service position working on road construction, digging irrigation canals, building terraces, or working for a government office for about three cents a day, indefinitely. This is open-ended labor conscription, the equivalent of involuntary servitude. If you're in the bottom half of your class,

you're handed a rifle and a uniform. You'll sit in a trench facing Ethiopia for as long the government of Eritrea wants you to.

Isaias is the world's last Maoist ruler. China realized what damage Mao was doing to the country and Deng Xiaoping launched a reform movement. There is no Deng Xiaoping reformist visible in the Isaias regime. Interestingly, the Chinese ambassador in Asmara said that whenever a new book on Mao was published, Isaias would often ask for a copy and the ambassador would dutifully send it over. Sometimes the ambassador would include a book on Deng Xiaoping, but Isaias would send it back. He didn't want anything to do with reformists like Deng. Isaias apparently played a mean game of ping pong and likes Chinese food. Isaias periodically asked the Chinese ambassador's chef to send him a meal. Isaias watched Chinese international news. There are strong policy parallels between the Isaias regime and policies Mao Zedong championed in China in the mid-1960s. In short, Isaias' experience in China infused him with revolutionary Maoism that he is now inflicting on poor Eritrea.

Q: Well now, did the Chinese have an embassy there?

McMULLEN: Yes, there were 17 embassies in Asmara. The Chinese had a generous, unconditional assistance program. Basically, they gave Eritrea a gift card worth millions of dollars. An Eritrean official would take the gift card to China, buy whatever the regime wanted, and have it sent to Eritrea on a Chinese ship. The purchases were supposed to be related to development projects jointly endorsed by China and Eritrea, but no questions were asked and there was no follow-up. It was an effective kind of foreign aid in terms of winning friends in the Eritrean government, because there were no conditions or oversight except that the good had to be Chinese and transported on Chinese ships. The Chinese were influential.

Probably the most important embassy in Asmara was that of Qatar. The emir of Qatar was very fond of Eritrea and visited regularly. He sent his private yacht from Qatar over to the Eritrea's Dahlak Islands in the Red Sea. The emir and some pals, escaping the restrictions and pressures of Doha, sailed around the archipelago, occasionally trying their hand at spear fishing. The emir got to know Eritrea and enjoyed his time there. When Isaias traveled internationally, the emir lent him an aircraft and crew from Qatar Airways. The emir of Qatar was very generous in terms of investment projects and credits for Eritrea. So the embassy of Qatar had probably the most influence, given the emir of Qatar's very generous support of Isaias and Eritrea.

Q: Did you have much contact with Isaias?

McMULLEN: No, I didn't. A person who knew Isaias well told me that Isaias had a vision that he would die in a U.S. missile strike on his residence in Massawa. I attended several events where he spoke, but the only time I talked to him was during the visit of New Jersey congressman Donald Payne, who came to Eritrea with Mia Farrow and her son Ronan. Mia Farrow was a UNICEF ambassador and wanted to talk to Isaias about Darfur. I presented my credentials to the Eritrean foreign minister, whereas other ambassadors presented theirs to Isaias.

We were an embassy besieged. Between 2001 and mid-2010, 48 FSNs from Embassy Asmara were arrested. Some were released after a relatively short imprisonment, but others had been

jailed, in chains, for years. Several FSNs were religious prisoners arrested for secretly worshipping with unauthorized Protestant or Evangelical groups. Another FSN was arrested and held for 15 months because his son, along with his entire artillery unit, had deserted from the Eritrean army.

Young people fled the country in droves. The Eritrean national soccer team lost half its players every away game. The regime required exit visas and normally issued them only to men over 54 or women over 48. Border guards had shoot-on-sight orders for people fleeing Eritrea. It really was very dangerous. The regime implemented a system of collective punishment. If a young man or woman in national service fled the country, the regime would arrest the parents and seize their business or home. Two FSNs were arrested in 2001. We believe one of them died in prison and that the other is alive but continually shackled. Another FSN was arrested for belonging to a banned Christian denomination and was kept in an underground prison for many months. He eventually was paroled and came back to work. He shared chilling details of the plight of religious and political prisoners in Eritrea.

Embassy Asmara operated in a very difficult environment, as we were specifically targeted by the Isaias regime for extremely tough treatment. For example, at one point the regime stopped 11 of our diplomatic pouches at the airport and refused to allow them into the country. This happened three or four times, particularly if we had crates of telecommunications equipment or cartons of new computers coming in. We repeatedly protested the detention of our diplomatic pouches in both verbal and written form, citing the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations, etc. Finally, I ordered the consular section to close and even refused to provide visa services to official government of Eritrea travelers. This was particularly effective when Eritrean officials needed to go to New York for the UN General Assembly. We said, “Because you’ve excluded our diplomatic pouches containing consular supplies such as visa foils and materials that we need to process visas, we’re unable to do any visa processing, even for official visits.” I told senior foreign ministers officials, “You’re welcome to go to any other American embassy in the world and apply for a visa to New York. Because we are obligated to allow you to travel to the UN General Assembly, you’ll get a visa. But due to your actions against my embassy, I’m physically unable to issue you a visa because of your exclusion of our diplomatic pouches.” They didn’t like that at all, but eventually we got our pouches in. Even a routine activity like receiving a diplomatic pouch was a struggle.

Another restriction the Isaias regime placed on us was the requirement for internal travel permits. To travel more than about 12 miles outside of Asmara you needed written permission 10 days in advance. During my three years in Asmara, I requested domestic travel permits 65 times and was granted only 14. The regime didn’t want us gallivanting around the country seeing what was going on and talking to people. Our phones were tapped, public internet was monitored, and members of our household staff and FSNs were forced to report to the Eritrean intelligence service. We were hassled on all fronts. Ajani Husbands was a first-tour political officer who enjoyed helping with public diplomacy events. At one function regime security thugs roughed him up and pointed a cocked gun at him. The RSO and I heard about this, immediately went to the scene, grabbed the senior security officer present, and tried to diffuse the situation. The regime attempted to stymie us on all fronts, but they were unsuccessful in forcing us out or curtailing our efforts to promote American interest and values in Eritrea.

However, the regime was successful shutting down the UN peacekeeping operation, UNMEE. Starting in January of 2008, UNMEE couldn't get diesel fuel, which was controlled by the government of Eritrea. Regime officials told UNMEE, "Your allotment of diesel fuel isn't available now, but you'll get it soon." It didn't appear. Repeated queries by UNMEE went unanswered. UNMEE asked, "Can we purchase and import our own diesel if you're not able to sell us our allotment of fuel?" The government of Eritrea refused. UNMEE badly needed fuel to conduct mechanized patrols of the Temporary Security Zone. It also used diesel to run generators that supplied electricity to isolated outposts. The electricity powered security lighting and refrigerators that held food and medicines. Finally, because the Isaias regime cut off the fuel UNMEE needed to sustain its operations, General Taisir and other senior UN officials decided that peacekeeping operation was no longer viable. UNMEE was forced out. Isaias could have told UNMEE that it had done a great job, noted that peace prevails along the border, and thrown a victory parade for UNMEE on the way out to the airport. In that scenario, UNMEE would have gone out with flags flying and heads held high, and Eritrea might even have garnered a bit of international good will. Instead, the Isaias regime shot itself in the foot by forcing UNMEE out, thus garnered the antipathy of the United Nations and the troop-supplying countries of India, Jordan, and Kenya. The UN Security Council terminated UNMEE's mandate on June 30, 2008.

We hung on. Embassy Asmara rarely got TDY visitors, as the regime wouldn't issue them visas. When the regime refused to issue a visa to a defense attaché nominee, we closed the defense attaché's office. We couldn't even get visas for the OIG (Office of the Inspector General) inspectors, so we did a self-inspection and sent the results to the OIG. In short, Embassy Asmara was isolated and struggled daily with the antagonistic government of Eritrea.

Q: Well, how did you get anything done?

McMULLEN: We did have good personal connections with a number of senior party officials. Cabinet members came to my house for receptions and the occasional dinner. We saw a temporary thaw when President Obama was elected. The Eritreans thought there'd be a new beginning with a man whose father was from East Africa. Shortly after President Obama's inauguration, Jane and I were invited to a senior party member's farm for a picnic with a cabinet minister and several high-ranking officials. But that opening closed relatively quickly as it became apparent that the Obama administration was not going to radically alter policies toward Eritrea or Ethiopia. It was tough to do anything. We kept our embassy open to voice our support for human rights and democracy, even though the Isaias regime continued to deny the Eritrean people the fruits of their hard-won independence. It was a constant, interesting battle.

Eritrea hosted rebel movements from Sudan, Ethiopia, Djibouti, and Somalia. We regularly met with Somali exiles. Ethiopia invaded Somalia in December 2006 and kept troops there until early 2009. Leaders from the Somali Union of Islamic Courts fled to Asmara when Ethiopia invaded, forming an umbrella group called the Alliance for the Re-liberation of Somalia. I met with them quietly a number of times in an old Asmara hotel to convince them to join what was called the "Djibouti Process" of national reconciliation. About half of them agreed, attended a national conference in Djibouti, and eventually became part of Somalia's Transitional Federal Government (TFG). The hardcore Islamists didn't take this path towards reconciliation and

returned to battle the Ethiopians and the TFG. Eritrea particularly supported Hizbul Islam, a group that later merged with al-Shabaab.

Jendayi Frazer, the assistant secretary for African affairs, was keen to designate Eritrea a state sponsor of terrorism. I didn't think it was a good idea and we butted heads on this. I argued the case for multilateral UN sanctions, rather than unilateral U.S. action against Eritrea. Bad blood between Jendayi Frazer and Isaias Afwerki was legendary. They hated each other. Personal animosity, in my view, clouded the policy judgments coming out of the Isaias regime and the Jendayi Frazer-led AF Bureau.

I tried to slow the bureaucratic progress of the designation of Eritrea as a state sponsor of terrorism as much as possible. However, by January 2009 the designation papers made it to Secretary Rice's desk, awaiting formal approval. All that Secretary Rice had to do was sign the memo and Eritrea would have been on the state sponsor of terrorism list. It came right down to the wire. I went into the embassy on January 21, 2009 to check the cable traffic see if Secretary Rice had signed Jendayi's memo on the last day of the Bush Administration. She hadn't. After that, I worked closely with Washington, our mission to the United Nations, and allied countries to win support for UN sanctions against Eritrea for its support of Islamist terrorists in Somalia. In December 2009 the UN Security Council passed a sanctions resolution against Eritrea. The United Nations sanctions on Eritrea were more helpful and appropriate than the unilateral U.S. move that Jendayi Frazer favored.

Q: Why were we going after the unilateral declaration? Was it just to show we really didn't like Eritrea? Was this personal?

McMULLEN: Jendayi felt close to Condoleezza Rice. To designate Eritrea a state sponsor of terrorism, Jendayi only needed to shepherd a decision memo from the Africa Bureau to the counterterrorism office and then to the secretary's desk. Frazer thought this would be easier, I think, than going to the UN where we had to worry about a Chinese or Russian veto. Designating Eritrea a state sponsor of terrorism would not have affected Eritrea's willingness or ability to continue supporting radical Islamists in Somalia. Jendayi detested Isaias and told me she considered the U.S. to be at war with Eritrea.

Oddly, Isaias disliked radical Islamism but was supporting Hizbul Islam, which later merged with al-Shabaab. Isaias sees Eritrea as being locked in an existential conflict with Ethiopia, which has a population 20 times larger than Eritrea's. The Isaias regime's strategy for cutting Ethiopia down to size begins with Somalia. Eritrea hoped to install an anti-Addis Ababa government in Mogadishu, which then might assist Somalis in the Ogaden in breaking away from Ethiopia. Eritrea would then support the separatist Oromo rebels in freeing Oromia from Ethiopia, eventually whittling Ethiopia down to a rump state of consisting of just the Amharic and Tigray regions. Isaias' strategic plan seemed to be to dismember Ethiopia by supporting radical anti-Addis Ababa groups in Somalia as the first step in breaking up Eritrea's large enemy. I met with members of the Alliance for the Re-Liberation of Somalia and got to know the president of the Oromo Liberation Front quite well. We met with members of Sudan's Justice and Equality Movement and other Darfuri rebel groups. We had warm relations with the

Asmara-based representatives of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement and I once met with the leader of the Ogaden National Liberation Front.

In 2006, Eritrea had brokered a cease-fire agreement between the government of Sudan and the Eastern Front, a collection of rebels from the Red Sea region. USAID Khartoum provided Embassy Asmara funds to conduct a series of peace-building workshops in Eritrea. The workshop participants were young members of civil society organizations from eastern Sudan. We invited 25 to 30 people to each workshop, which focused on how to promote development and civil society. The participants came by bus across the Sudan-Eritrea border. We held the workshops in a hotel on the outskirts of Asmara. Many participants were experiencing international travel for the first time. They were young leaders of local environmental groups, women's micro-finance groups, education volunteers, election observer groups, and many others. I enjoyed talking with the young Sudanese about the importance of civil society and how they could play a constructive role in their communities. This was all aimed at cementing the 2006 Eastern Sudan Peace Agreement. These civil society workshops were about the only cooperative undertaking between Embassy Asmara and the government of Eritrea.

Eritrea fought a three-day border war against Djibouti in June of 2008 near Ras Doumeira, a rocky peninsula located where Eritrea, Djibouti, and the Red Sea meet. The French and Italian colonial powers never got around to demarcating the exact border in this area. In early 2008 there were Eritrean and Djiboutian trenches within yards of each other along a rocky ridge running inland from the coast. On June 10, 2008 a group of Eritrean conscripts jumped out of their trench and, in an effort to desert, dashed towards the Djiboutian lines. Eritrean officers began to fire at the deserting conscripts. The Djiboutian troops, thinking they were being attacked, returned fire. There wasn't much damage done. Things quieted down. The Eritreans said, "You must send back the deserters." No reply from the Djiboutian side. About four hours later an Eritrean officer jumped out of his trench and raced toward the Djiboutian trenches. Eritrean troops shot and wounded the officer to prevent him from deserting. When it became apparent that Djibouti was not going to hand back the deserters, Eritrea attacked. Tough Eritrean soldiers drove the Djiboutian troops down the ridge and knocked them back a number of kilometers. The disorganized Djiboutian units began to disintegrate in the 110-degree weather. Just in time, about 100 French Foreign Legionnaires arrived to save the wavering Djiboutian line from complete collapse.

Djibouti is home to the only U.S. military base in Africa, Camp Lemonnier, which we use for counter-piracy and counterterrorism actions in the Horn of Africa and Yemen. So the country where I served as ambassador had attacked a friendly country hosting the only U.S. military base in Africa. On the second day of the war, June 11th, the government of Eritrea refused to take our calls. That evening I encountered four senior officials at a diplomatic reception and said, "The message from Washington is: stop attacking in Djibouti now." And I said, "Or else."

The Eritrean officials flatly denied they were fighting Djibouti. It was very odd. One of them said, "What war? There's no war. We're not fighting. We have good relations with Djibouti." This short border clash produced 200 to 250 casualties overall. The vast majority of the Eritrean troops captured by Djibouti didn't want to go back to Eritrea and requested political asylum. Many of them were resettled in Canada, Italy, or the U.S. Eritrea captured 19 Djiboutian troops,

but refused to acknowledge that it held any POWs. It was a very odd border war. Although sparked locally by the desertion of Eritrean conscripts, Eritrea was angry that Djibouti sponsored the Somalia reconciliation effort known as the Djibouti Process. This was an attempt to establish a broad-based government in Somalia, which Eritrea perhaps saw as threatening its plan to install a radical anti-Addis Ababa regime in Mogadishu. I believe the Ras Doumeira border clash was an effort by Isaias to destabilize or punish Djibouti for thwarting Eritrea's plans for Somalia.

Several parties sought to halt the fighting, separate the combatants, and resolve the border dispute. The United Nations couldn't do it. The Africa Union couldn't do it. However, the emir of Qatar offered to dispatch Qatari troops to separate the warring sides and delineate the border. Eritrea and Djibouti agreed. The emir of Qatar played a constructive role in resolving this issue.

Q: Did you feel that the embassy was providing a positive role?

McMULLEN: Every month we had access to an auditorium that held maybe 150 people. We hosted an evening lecture series, where we'd invite someone from the United States, Embassy Asmara, or an Eritrean who had studied in the U.S. to talk on some noncontroversial topic like marine biology in the Red Sea. We'd pack the auditorium with young Eritreans eager to interact on an academic topic -- and have a free snack afterwards. The regime shut down the University of Asmara because students think freely. It was illegal for five people or more to gather without government permission. But young people could come to the American Center auditorium for a sociable evening, hear an interesting speaker, and have a piece of cake and a cup of lemonade afterwards. The American Center also provided uncensored, unmonitored internet connections to the outside world. The American Center's small computer lab was always full, as it offered internet access unmonitored by the regime's censors. It was used by students applying to American universities, looking for information about the outside world, and much more.

I volunteered to be the monthly speaker at the American Center auditorium. I was interested in early anthropology and how Homo sapiens probably left Africa through southern Eritrea about 65,000 years ago to populate the rest of the world. My talk was entitled, "Eritrea: Africa's Bridge to the World." We had permission from the ministry of foreign affairs. However, when I went to the auditorium I found about 150 or 180 people milling around outside. Eritrean intelligence agents had chained the doors of the auditorium. I said, "We have permission from the ministry of foreign affairs to have this event."

A plain-clothes Eritrean security official said, "We don't care about the ministry of foreign affairs. The ministry of communications doesn't approve."

So, on the spot we invited all 150 people standing outside the American Center auditorium to a patio just inside the gates of the chancery. On a moment's notice, we relocated the event into the embassy compound. The Eritrean security officials couldn't prohibit me from speaking to people inside our own embassy. That was one way we managed to continue our outreach programs in the face of direct opposition from the regime.

Q: Well, did the Chinese -- were you able to sound out the Chinese about how they saw the situation there?

McMULLEN: The primary Chinese interest in Africa is access to commodities. China is consuming vast quantities of oil, minerals, and agricultural products from Africa and wants to maintain or expand access to these commodities. There were a number of Chinese mining companies with interests in Eritrea. Geologists discovered a couple of billion-dollar gold deposits in Eritrea that drew the attention of Canadian, Australian, Chinese, and South African mining interests. Because Eritrea was at war for much of the previous 30 or 40 years, modern geological surveys had never been conducted in Eritrea. Now, with the stability provided by the authoritarian dictatorship, mining companies could properly prospect for gold and other minerals. China was also interested, I think, in demonstrating to Eritrea and others that it didn't interfere in the domestic politics of other sovereign states, one of its foreign policy principles.

Speaking of commodities, it was really hard to come up with daily bread. As U.S. ambassador I received rations from the government of Eritrea, as very little was available in local markets. Eritrea has the highest rate of malnutrition among newborn infants of any country surveyed by the World Health Organization.

Q: Good grief.

McMULLEN: The American employees of Embassy Asmara received ration allotments from the government of Eritrea enabling us to buy on a monthly basis flour, sugar, cooking oil, and sometimes coffee or tea – things that were not generally available in the market. We would always buy the maximum amount authorized, then give it to our domestic household staff who didn't have access to basic necessities like flour and cooking oil. It was hard to find many consumer items, but, thankfully, Eritrea produced good fruits and vegetables. We probably had a healthy diet with some fish up from the Red Sea and lots of fruits and vegetables. Even bread was hard to come by. There had been a Coca-Cola plant and a brewery in Asmara. Both were shut down for long periods due to the lack of foreign exchange needed to buy inputs. There was almost nothing available in Eritrea in terms of basic foodstuffs. Thanks to the State Department, we had a consumables allowance of 5,000 pounds of that kept us fairly well supplied. Hosting a diplomatic function in a country with no food is a real challenge. Jane and our cook, Abeba, somehow managed to come up with food for diplomatic receptions and dinners that provided a semblance of normal representational entertaining.

Q: You must have known about this situation there. So why did you pick it?

McMULLEN: I have great empathy for the Eritrean people. I had cheered them on during their liberation struggle. When I was an intern in Khartoum back in 1979, I met many Eritrean exiles, young people from Eritrea who had fled to Sudan. They were optimistic, confident, dedicated, and interesting. I was interested in Eritrea due to my experience in Sudan and because I had followed their long independence struggle against Ethiopia. I had sympathy for the Eritrean people, their struggles, and their cause. I thought that being in Asmara when the Isaias regime opened up or collapsed would be an opportunity to see the long-suffering Eritrean people finally get the fruits of the freedom they had so dearly earned. It would have been akin to being ambassador in Budapest in 1989. I hoped that there would be either an opening or a change of regime while I was there. It didn't happen on my watch, unfortunately.

From December of 2009, when the United States voted for United Nations sanctions on Eritrea, until May of 2010, the regime did not approve any requests by U.S. diplomats to travel outside the capital. It was a tough time. I hoped to normalize relations with Eritrea, but Isaias was not interested. He thought he was smarter and more "strategic" than the U.S. government and could outlast or outfox us. Meanwhile, he's done great harm to Eritrea and its people. What a shame. Eritrea deserves better.

Kagnew Station, the former U.S. military listening post located in Asmara, was an important element of U.S. – Eritrean relations. There were 4,000 Americans stationed in Eritrea in the early 1970s. Embassy Asmara today occupies one end of what had been the main compound of Kagnew Station. Access to Kagnew was an important reason for our support of Ethiopia for much of the three decades of Eritrea's independence struggle. The Eritrean defense minister told me that when he was in junior high, GIs from Kagnew Station helped teach math and science classes. If a student did well on a quiz, the GIs would sometimes give the student a stick of Juicy Fruit as a reward. The U.S. recognized Eritrea's independence in 1993 and we had good relations until the 1998–2000 war with Ethiopia.

Q: How about marriages? Many American GIs marry Eritreans?

McMULLEN: I don't know of any Eritrean wives of GIs who served at Kagnew Station. Perhaps the U.S. military didn't allowed it

I tried to use a shared interest in military history to build a relationship with the minister of defense. About 50 miles south of Asmara was a former Italian airfield at a place called Gura. The Italians built Gura Airfield and used it during their invasion of Ethiopia in the 1930s. Once World War II started, the British invaded Eritrea from Sudan and conquered the Italian colony. Meanwhile, the British were battling the Italians and Germans on Libya's border with Egypt. The Royal Air Force (RAF) put damaged Hurricanes and other aircraft on ships in Egypt, sent them down the Red Sea, and trucked them up to Gura Airfield, where they were repaired and flown back to the front. President Roosevelt authorized a secret operation under the Lend-Lease Act to send 3,000 American employees of Douglass Aircraft Corporation to Gura. The Americans patched up the British planes to keep the RAF flying in North Africa. The Douglas Aircraft employees made the most of the situation and even had a golf course and made ice cream. When Japan attacked Pearl Harbor and we entered the war, all the Douglas Aircraft Corporation employees in Gura were drafted on the spot and Gura Airfield became a U.S. military facility.

In 1876, the year Custer's command was wiped out at the Little Big Horn, Gura witnessed a bloody battle involving several American Civil War veterans serving in an Egyptian army. Egypt, which then controlled Massawa on the Red Sea coast, sent an army inland to conquer Ethiopia. The Egyptian expeditionary force of about 12,000 troops included nine American mercenaries, veterans of the Civil War. One of them was a West Point graduate from Iowa. Several of the American veterans wrote accounts of their time with the Egyptian army and the battle of Gura. The Egyptian expeditionary force marched inland as far as Gura, where it was attacked and nearly annihilated by a much larger Ethiopian army. The Egyptian retreat left the

territory open for Italian colonization in subsequent years. In 1876 there were nine Americans at Gura, during World War II there were 3,000 Americans there, and as late as the early 1970s there were scores of Americans working at the Gura annex of Kagnew Station.

One of the last big battles of Eritrea's independence war was an armored clash that took place at Gura in 1991. The defense minister himself had commanded the Eritrean side. I invited the defense minister to go with the Egyptian ambassador and me to Gura, but he declined. I did, however, get a rare travel permit to visit Gura. Jane, Owen, and I found remnants of the airstrip and the hangar facilities used by Douglass Aircraft Corporation. We even came across several old men who remembered when the Americans were at Gura during the early days of World War II. Abraham, the wizened sexton of the local church, told us he worked for "Douglas" as a young man. Thus, we tried to use military history to forge personal connections and some common ground with the minister of defense to develop a bit of traction with the Eritrean government.

Q: How did the long guerilla war play out in Eritrea?

McMULLEN: Eritrea's 30-year struggle for independence was a bloody, hard-fought guerilla war. The Eritrean victory, like that of the Vietnamese, was a classic example of guerilla fighters facing a large conventional army. The fighting ended only as the Soviet Union neared collapse. The Iron Curtain had opened and Gorbachev was about to dissolve the Soviet Union itself. The communist Derg government in Ethiopia found it couldn't get supplies from the Soviet Union. The Eritreans and allied rebel movements overcame the collapsing Derg regime, the Soviet-backed government in Addis Ababa, only in 1991. It was partly the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War that changed the international playing field and enabled the Eritrean guerillas to win.

Almost every Eritrean family lost members in "the Struggle," as the guerrilla war is known, and had property damaged or destroyed. There were minefields all across Eritrea. Farmers, children, and livestock lost legs to landmines. The whole country suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder. Many problems of Eritrea stem from the horrible conditions that people endured for decades. I think President Isaias has mental problems. He is very good at what he does, is ruthless and dedicated, but I think he too suffers from 30 years of war. We're learning about the traumatic effect on American troops of fighting in Afghanistan or Iraq. Consider what 30 years of constant warfare must do to people and societies. One can understand the tribulations of Eritrea, the paranoia, the xenophobia, and the feelings of supremacy. Eritreans say, "We beat Ethiopia backed by the Americans, we beat Ethiopia backed by the Soviets, we can beat all comers, and we're going to build the best society in Africa." Unfortunately for Eritrea, and for America's interests in the Horn of Africa, Isaias is using Mao's failed vision as a blueprint for a model state.

At the 2010 Fourth of July reception, I gave a very hard-hitting speech on the freedoms and liberties that Americans and Eritreans fought so hard for during our respective independence struggles. I made the point that these freedoms and liberties – government of, by, and for the people -- are enjoyed in America but has been denied to Eritrean people by Isaias. Afterwards, many Eritreans came up to me and said, "Oh, we've been waiting so long to hear that!" The

regime apologists were apocalyptic, but the vast majority of Eritreans seemed pleased to hear an American ambassador speak so clearly about Eritrea's longing for the freedoms stolen by the Isaias dictatorship.

Q: How did you and your wife, maybe it's not the right word, but survive under these difficult circumstances?

McMULLEN: Our son Wyatt went to the Asmara International School for part of tenth grade. The high school had a total of 28 students and three teachers. For his 11th and 12th grades we sent him to boarding school in the U.S. That was hard on us and him.

Asmara is a unique, decrepit, and faintly charming place. In the 1920s, when the Italians were building the city, Eritrea was the place to be if you were a young architect. Before WWII there were 50,000 Italians living in Eritrea, mostly in Asmara. It was the workshop of East Africa with cement factories, breweries, mills, glassmaking factories, and a railroad workshop. Downtown Asmara has a large collection of modernist architecture from the 1920s and 1930s. Because Asmara is at 7,700 feet above sea level, it's cool and dry, so even though there hasn't been much maintenance on the old Italian buildings, they're still in pretty good shape. Asmara's main street is lined with large palm trees and features a beautiful Catholic cathedral built in 1923. There are little espresso bars with vintage Italian espresso machines frequented by old Eritrean men in suits. On a crisp, sunny morning, it's still possible to imagine the charm of colonial Asmara.

While we couldn't travel far outside the capital very often, we did lots of walking and exploring in the 12-mile radius around Asmara that we could access without a travel permit. One could go from a 1930s Italian city to medieval villages in 15 minutes. There were picturesque towns perched on the lip of the dramatic escarpment that dropped down to the Red Sea lowlands. Many villages featured stone buildings with thatched roofs, muzzled oxen threshing barley, farm implements fashioned from olive wood, and dung cakes, used as cooking fuel, plastered on rock walls to dry in the sun. Some Orthodox churches suspended long, flat stones from a frame of wires, which, when struck by a mallet or small rock, served as homemade chimes. The Eritrean people were very nice. We'd hike over a hill and down a path into some village, visit the Orthodox church, and see the school. That's kind of what we did for entertainment. We walked a lot and explored what I called the Near Abroad, the area we could reach without a travel permit.

The weather was perfect in Asmara. Every day was 75 degrees with low humidity and a robin-egg blue sky. Again, it was cool and dry and just an ideal climate. The diplomatic corps entertained itself a lot because we were all so badly treated by the regime, apart, perhaps, from the Chinese and Qataris. Other diplomatic missions had pouches seized and travel permits denied, and the Dutch ambassador was even roughed up by security thugs at a checkpoint. We were a very sociable and cohesive diplomatic corps by necessity. Embassy Asmara had a swimming pool and one of the few tennis courts in the country. I occasionally rode my bicycle to work, and of course I didn't have a security detail. I sometimes led what I called my 75¢ tour of Asmara, a two-hour walking tour of historical, architectural, cultural, and funky aspects of the city. That's some of what we did to keep our sanity and our spirits up.

Q: I assume there were no fleet visits or anything like that?

McMULLEN: While I was in Eritrea there was one request for a ship visit, but the government of Eritrea didn't agree to it. So we had very limited contact with the U.S. military. When the last person from our defense attaché's office left, the regime refused visas for any DOD replacements and we had to close the defense attaché's office.

Q: What about activities from Djibouti? We were flying drones over there in Somalia. Were you getting any reaction to those?

McMULLEN: Yes, the U.S. government was quite concerned about al-Shabaab, the radical Islamist group in Somalia supported by Eritrea and financial backers from the Gulf, including Qatar. I went to Doha once to talk with Qatar's foreign ministry about private and foundation support from the Gulf going to al-Shabaab in Somalia. Another worry was the fact that al-Shabaab had recruited about four dozen Minnesotans who had gone to southern Somalia and had been trained by al-Qaeda in suicide bombing techniques. Two or three of the Minnesotans carried out suicide bombings against international peacekeepers or the government of Somalia. Another killed himself in northern Somalia, bombing a UNDP office.

In January 2009 there was news that al-Shabaab assassins reportedly planned to travel through Europe to Canada, and from there across the northern U.S. border to assassinate President Obama at his inauguration. Part of the beefed up security we saw in Washington on Inauguration Day of 2009 was due to the reports that al-Shabaab planned to kill President Obama and his family on January 20th. It didn't happen, thank goodness.

We tried to convince the government of Eritrea to stop supporting al-Shabaab, which we saw as a direct threat to the U.S., particularly as it was training Somali-Americans from Minnesota. The UN sanctions imposed on Eritrea in December of 2009 were appropriate. It was a multilateral effort to isolate Eritrea for its attempts to destabilize the region. In 2012 we've seen al-Shabaab rolled back a bit, as Kenya got involved in the AU peacekeeping operation in support of the new government in Somalia. Perhaps the pressure on Eritrea since 2009 limited al-Shabaab's outside support, weakened the radical Islamists in Somalia, and thereby reduced threats against U.S. interests. Maybe.

Q: Well, were you under threat from al-Shabaab?

McMULLEN: Not that I know of. I met with members of the Alliance for the Re-Liberation of Somalia accompanied by our entry-level political officer. At other times Embassy Asmara staff met with Somali or Darfuri representatives without incident. As mentioned, I didn't have a protective security detail, often rode my bicycle to the embassy, and hiked many weekends in the countryside around Asmara without a security escort. One of the silver linings of living in one of the world's most ruthless dictatorships was that there was relatively little crime or risk of terrorism. Isaias had such a tight grip on the country that not much happened that he didn't know about. Embassy Asmara had lots of concerns and challenges, but crime and terrorism were not among the most pressing issues.

Q: Well, whatever contacts you had in the Somali Military interested in --

McMULLEN: Our Somali contacts were political leaders and we didn't knowingly deal with militants. Part of the Somali group in Asmara jointed the U.S.-backed Djibouti Process, but the Eritrea-backed hardliners returned to Somali and fought alongside al-Shabaab.

Q: Well, then did you retire at this point?

McMULLEN: No, I did one more assignment. As I was finishing my tour in Asmara, Johnnie Carson, the assistant secretary for Africa, called and asked if I wanted to be consul general in Juba and help midwife South Sudan's upcoming independence. Unfortunately, Juba at the time was an unaccompanied post and I didn't want to go without Jane. Instead, I became a diplomat in residence (DIR) at the University of Texas in Austin. I worked for the State Department's human resource bureau doing recruiting, public speaking, and outreach across Texas. We spent from mid-2010 until July 2012 in Austin, Texas. I was based at the LBJ (Lyndon B. Johnson) School at the University of Texas and traveled from the Rio Grande valley to the Texas panhandle. I spoke at 38 different Texas universities over the course of the two years, and addressed civil organizations like the San Antonio World Affairs Council. The objective was to make known Foreign Service opportunities for internships, fellowships, and careers to "segments of the American society historically underrepresented in the State Department." That is, members of minority groups perhaps unaware of State Department opportunities. I think this was an outgrowth of the two consent decrees signed by the State Department after the two class action lawsuits. I spoke at historically black colleges, Hispanic-supporting institutions, and other campuses to highlight State Department opportunities for ethnic and racial minorities, women, the disabled, first-generation college students, and students from poor families.

Neither Jane nor I had spent much time in Texas previously, so we treated it like a foreign assignment to the former Republic of Texas. I taught graduate courses on diplomacy and the Middle East at the LJB School. It was odd going from being a U.S. ambassador to being a DIR completely on my own with no administrative support whatsoever. I traveled almost every week and had to make all my own reservations, appointments, and travel arrangements and file my own travel vouchers when I returned. I had been spoiled serving as DCM, chargé, or ambassador for much of the last nine years. To suddenly be filing my own travel vouchers and talking with clerks in Washington about clarifications on line 57-A of my travel voucher was probably good for me, although it was a pain in the neck at the time. The DIR assignment was also a good segue back into academia. I had been in graduate school working on my Ph.D. when I joined the Foreign Service. I defended my dissertation during home leave between the Dominican Republic and Sri Lanka. When I retired in August 2012 I accepted an offer from the University of Iowa to teach comparative politics and to work on international engagement for the university. So I've been doing that since August of 2012. Being a DIR was a good transition to retirement, as I was removed from the State Department and the Washington policy environment. Being in Texas, physically removed from Washington, and helping recruit the next generation of American diplomats was an enjoyable final Foreign Service assignment. It provided, psychologically and professionally, a good bridge to post-Foreign Service life.

Q: Well Ron, being in the Texas environment, how did you find that?

McMULLEN: Texas has no state income tax, and is a low-tax, low-service state. Many services other states finance by taxes are funded in Texas by oil and gas revenues. The University of Texas at Austin, for example, is a wealthy, successful, and selective school in part because of the oil and gas royalties that under Texas legislation accrue to the University of Texas. The students I met at the University of Texas were generally bright. Several students I taught in class and a number of individuals I counseled have entered the Foreign Service and are going to be part of the next generation of America's foreign policy leaders.

Q: Did you find there's a difference in teaching and working with people who come from a more fundamentalist background, compared to the old Eastern establishment?

McMULLEN: Stu, I'd like to compare two Texas schools. One is Southern Methodist University (SMU). It's a top-notch school favored by children of business executives from the Dallas/Fort Worth area. The students are all nicely dressed and many drive Mustangs, BMWs, or SUVs. During an info session at SMU, students were interested in becoming an ambassador without having to slog their way up the ranks of the Foreign Service. I said, "Give bails of bundled money to the winning presidential candidate with a note attached that says you'd like to be ambassador to some place small, but nice. About a third of American ambassadors basically buy their appointments that way. You could go that route, if you want." Most of the SMU students who attend the information session were interested in the Foreign Service as a career, but others were specifically interested in how to become a politically appointed ambassador.

Contrast SMU with Baylor University. Baylor is the largest Baptist university in the world. Like SMU, the LBJ School, and the Bush School, the student body is self-selected. The male students had their shirts tucked in and several wore coats and ties to my information session. Many of the young women wore dresses or skirts, not T-shirts and shorts. I don't think Jane or I ever opened a door for ourselves at Baylor. Polite students held doors open, or stepped ahead of us to reach the door first to open it for us. It was kind of odd, like stepping back into 1962. I found Baylor to be fruitful recruiting territory. There was interest and talent, in part because many Baylor students had gone on international mission trips with their churches...

Q: (phone rings) That's all right, go ahead.

McMULLEN: …and had learned foreign languages. Many had substantial cross-cultural experience from their mission trips. Baylor was a different environment than SMU. For every politically appointed ambassador educated at SMU, Baylor will produce four or five career FSOs, in my view.

Q: Did you find the legislature weighing heavily on your teaching? Did your students have a particular political orientation?

McMULLEN: The LBJ School was established by Lyndon Johnson and many students and faculty were rather self-selecting Great Society Democrats. The Bush School of Government and Public Service was located at the rival Texas A&M University. More conservative students

and faculty members gravitated toward the Bush School at Texas A&M, whereas the LJB School attracted a more liberal crowd. At the University of Texas there was no attempt to influence what we taught.

Q: Parts of Texas are heavily Hispanic. Was that good territory for State Department applicants?

McMULLEN: I was interested in the large Hispanic communities of the Rio Grande Valley. There are three state universities between Brownsville and Laredo, each with about 15,000 students, of whom 95% were Hispanic. I thought these universities would constitute a rich recruiting pool, as many of the students were bilingual and had grown up right next to an international border.

In reality, I found it to be a much harder recruiting environment that I imagined. Many young men and women were first-generation college students whose parents, uncles and aunts, and maybe grandparents had scrimped and saved to help cover their tuition, room and board, and other college costs. After graduation their families expected them to return to their communities to be role models for their younger siblings and cousins and to support the extended family.

While visiting one Hispanic-majority university I walked into the break room used by the career counselors. A young woman sat a table, almost in tears. I asked, "Having a tough day?"

She explained, "Oh, I'm so frustrated. I'm the counselor for education majors. While there aren't many teaching vacancies in our immediate vicinity, there are quite a few in the Galveston/Corpus Christie area. But I can't get any of our students to apply for them, because Galveston is too far away."

I said, "Wow. I'm trying to interest your students in Foreign Service careers that would take them to Malaysia and Madagascar and Mauritania. How am I going to succeed, when you can't even get them to apply for jobs in Galveston, Texas?"

"That's a problem," she agreed. "Many students have extended family obligations and feel they have to stay close to home." So we were less successful than I hoped in recruiting students out of the Rio Grande valley. It may take something of a generational change before we get significant numbers of interested, qualified students applying to the Foreign Service from there.

Q: You know, I understand the same problem exists in the Washington area, with Hispanic students expected to start helping support their families as soon as possible.

McMULLEN: There are cultural hurdles that we haven't overcome yet. I also had a very interesting experience substituting for a DIR colleague who covered North Dakota. I didn't know North Dakota well, so volunteered to go up and talk at a number of tribal community colleges there. At Fort Berthold Community College in North Dakota my first appointment was with the college president. I walked into his office and found his manner somewhat formal and aloof. He said, "I think it's only fitting that the U.S. Department of State send an ambassador to us. In the treaties we signed with the U.S. government in the 1860s and 1870s, we were to be

treated as a sovereign power. So I'm very delighted to greet you, Ambassador McMullen." And quite rightfully so. I spoke to Native American students at tribal community colleges in North Dakota about opportunities to serve. Native Americans are the ethnic group most underrepresented in the Foreign Service. There's a residual resentment, as expressed by the president of the Fort Berthold Community College, that U.S. government, including the State Department, has broken promises to the native nations agreed to by treaty. While Native Americans have served in the armed forces in relatively large numbers, I tried to make the point that military veterans who wanted to continue to serve the nation could do so as a U.S. diplomat. We had some success in sparking interest at the tribal community colleges in North Dakota by taking that tact.

Q: Yeah.

McMULLEN: Given the vast numbers of highly qualified people applying for Foreign Service now, only about 2% of those taking the Foreign Service Officer Test each year land jobs with the Foreign Service. It's easier for a college football player to make it into the NFL than it is for an applicant taking the Foreign Service Officer Test to get into the Foreign Service. It's still highly competitive and we ought to have the pick of the crop. I've been impressed in my last couple of assignments with the quality of the entry-level officers the Foreign Service is recruiting.

Q: Well, did you find much interest, you know, from all the levels of culture and all in the Foreign Service where you are, or not?

McMULLEN: Students who come from well-off families can afford to travel for a college semester abroad, participate in intensive overseas language programs, and take unpaid internships with the State Department, United Nations, or international NGOs. Poorer students have to work their way through school and find paying jobs in the summer to cover college costs. Thus, the resumes of richer kids are likely to have more of the "international texture" that is so valued by the Foreign Service selection board's Qualifications Evaluation Panel. I met many bright, qualified students from upper-middle-class families who were keen on Foreign Service careers. I also met students from more modest backgrounds with high interest but less international experience.

As a DIR I got to nominate worthy students for paid State Department internships. I met a young man at Baylor University who was originally from Louisiana. His father was an illiterate deckhand working on ships along the Gulf coast. His family was hit by Hurricane Katrina and lost everything they owned. This young man, a Native American, received a Gates Foundation scholarship to continue high school at a boarding school in the aftermath of Katrina. He was a junior at Baylor when I met him. He was interested in the Foreign Service, had a high grade point average, was an avid volunteer in community activities, and was from very humble origins. I nominated him for a paid State Department internship at Embassy Rabat. He came back from Morocco enthusiastic about his experience and with his sights set on a career in the Foreign Service. Providing opportunities like that to deserving, bright students from humble backgrounds was a satisfying aspect of being a DIR.

Q: Well, I guess we're probably at the end of this now.

McMULLEN: I think so.

Q: OK, well, thank you. And I've really appreciated this, Where are you now?

McMULLEN: When I retired from the Foreign Service in August of 2012, we moved to Iowa and I'm at the University of Iowa in Iowa City.

Q: OK, take care.

McMULLEN: Thanks very much.

End of interview