The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
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HUGH [SHER] PLUNKETT

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy & Robin Matthewman
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INTERVIEW

Q: *Today is February 17, 2020 and we are interviewing retired USAID officer Hugh Sheridan [Sher] Plunkett. I always like to get a little information about where you came from and all. When and where were you born?*

PLUNKETT: I was born in Fort Smith, Arkansas. I was born on the eighteenth of October of 1938. So tomorrow, I will be eighty-two.

Q: *Oh boy. Hang on there! You want to talk a little about your family? On your father's side, where do they come from?*

PLUNKETT: Well, the Plunkett side, as far as I can tell, is what they call Scots Irish. The name is actually traceable back to the Normans, who invaded Ireland and settled there. But my first known ancestor was Ellison Plunkett, who was born in Carolina in the very early 1800s. The speculation is that our family got a free ride from Oliver Cromwell back in the 1650s, when he rounded up the Irish, and shipped them off to the West Indies and the colonies, but we don't quite know exactly how that worked out. My ancestor Ellison Plunkett settled in Arkansas in the very early 1830s, in the Arkansas River Valley. We have a family graveyard there that dates from 1838. My family was there until my grandfather, Sheridan Plunkett, moved. He was one of the first traveling automobile salesmen in and around Arkansas and Oklahoma.

My father, Carlton Plunkett, was born in 1913 and the family settled in Fort Smith, as Fort Smith was a sort of commercial center. It was also for a long time the last frontier in the continental United States, because it bordered the Oklahoma territory, so it was a kind of a rough town, with a very interesting history. My father was the youngest of his family and I was the oldest. I was born and raised and finished high school in Fort Smith. I had three brothers all younger than me and no sisters. My mother was Virginia Thompson, born in 1917. So my folks went through the [Great] Depression as young adults, and that made an impression on all of us.

Q: *Well, what was your father doing in business?*

PLUNKETT: When I was born my father had made it through the Depression and was working as a driver for a laundry. He did that for several years. I used to travel around with him occasionally. Those were the days when you got your laundry delivered and it was pressed and ironed and starched in a brown paper bundle with string tying it.

Q: Oh I remember that.

PLUNKETT: I still remember that whole business. Our family always had starched, pressed jeans and shirts to wear to school. We never had a lot of money, but we were comfortable and happy. My mom looked after us, and I had many relatives. We lived in a house on a hill that my dad and my uncle Bonnie, who was a master carpenter, built in 1941. We had no neighbors for quite a while, and I am four years older than my next brother, so I was sort of a solitary child until I started grade school. Dad worked his way up and became the laundry manager. Then he decided to try his hand at his own business and started his own dry-cleaning business. It proved to be fairly profitable, but he was working himself to death, and so he went back to the laundry as the manager with the understanding that he was going to buy out the owners. That was the situation when I left to go to college. The deal didn't work out and he left and became an insurance salesman. Because of his involvement with the Junior Chamber of Commerce and his extensive network of contacts he became very successful as a commercial and industrial insurance salesman. And the family fortune improved considerably after I left home. But as I was growing up, my father and my uncle built our house on top of the hill and the house in what was sort of the outskirts of town when I was about three. So I grew up in the tail end of World War II, living on a hill and then either walking or taking the bus to grade school, which was only about a mile away. Then later on, in junior high school and high school.

I was an early reader and loved to read adventures. I was taken with books like *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*, and stories about the frontier and stories about the Old West, and that gave me a kind of an itchy foot. When I was probably about twelve, I came across a book at a library sale called *The Proper Study of Mankind* by Stuart Chase and that struck my mind.

I was trying to figure out what I was going to do with myself and I was not very good at math. It turns out I had very poor eyesight, which nobody at home or in school ever caught since we didn't have any eyesight testing. I didn't know that until I went to college, had headaches, and learned I needed glasses at the college health unit. I was never very good at seeing the blackboard, so I never got very good at mathematics.

As I think about what led me to the career I finally had with the United States Agency for International Development [USAID], Stuart Chase's book probably played a role. Somewhere in it he mentioned the contribution that social scientists and especially anthropologists could make toward problems like reducing race riots. At that time in the

1950s the civil rights movement was going on. My mother and grandmother and my father for that matter—because of his many years of managing the laundry—were very concerned and sensitive about civil rights for what are now called African Americans.

My grandmother was very active in the State PTA [Parent Teacher Association], and was friendly with a lady named Daisy Bates, who was very important in the Arkansas NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] as I recall. And my dad had the role of acting as a protector for a number of his employees at the laundry. Because of the segregation situation, though we had a very small black population in Fort Smith, there were occasionally issues about that. In any case, I grew up with that, sort of in the back of my head.

I did reasonably well in high school and got noticed, I guess, and competed for the usual essay contests and things that one does in high school, and won several of them. Among other things, in my senior year, I competed in a radio contest that was sponsored by the University of Tulsa. It was sort of like a Jeopardy operation. We were up on the stage and they asked us questions and the fastest reply, if it was correct, got you the most points. So I somehow got to be faster than the other guys and won a scholarship to the University of Tulsa. I also competed for a National Merit Scholarship. I believe that was the first year for those, 1956. I didn't get a National Merit Scholarship, but I got a scholarship offer from the University of Chicago, as well as offers from the University of Arkansas and, gosh, I've forgotten where else, Duke, and a bunch of other places. I discussed it with my mother and father and their view was that although the University of Arkansas was probably the most attractive in terms of being with my high school buddies and being close to home; Chicago was the better deal in the long run. I looked it up, and I was very taken with the approach that Chicago had in those days for undergraduate education.

Q: *The 100 books.*

PLUNKETT: That's correct. It was based on the Great Books [of the Western World]. Although Robert Hutchins, who started that program, was no longer there. The curriculum was based on that and it also was structured in European fashion, I guess is the term. You attended seminar classes, discussion classes, they were called. Then, at least once or twice a week, you sat in on a large lecture that was given not by a graduate assistant, but by the actual professor. Some of the professors were world class professors. You were also invited to attend any lectures you wanted to, whether it was your class or anybody else's. Alternatively, if you didn't want to attend the class or the discussion session you didn't have to, because the entire grade for the year was based on comprehensive exams that took place at the end of the year in May.

So my parents put me on the train. It was my first time riding in a Pullman car. They sprang for the money for my trip to Chicago on the train. I got down at the station on South 63rd Street, not knowing that it was a slum area. It was a high crime area then. I walked over from 63rd to 59th, I guess it was where my dorm was located, and started learning that I was a very different sort of person than the usual University of Chicago

student. I went to the student orientation sessions and a number of people were looking at me strangely, because of my accent and clothes. A considerable portion of the undergraduate population was from New York City or Miami or Los Angeles. In those days, there were quotas for Harvard, Yale, and Princeton for Jews and, consequently, a large number of Jewish students from well-to-do families went to Chicago. And so my first anthropological fieldwork was in assimilating myself to the local student culture.

Then, at the University of Chicago, the first procedure was a week or so of placement exams. Based on your scores on the placement exams, they determined where in the scale of the Great Books undergraduate curriculum you were to be placed. There was humanities one, two, and three; social sciences one, two, and three; natural sciences, one, two, and three; and so forth, and so on. I was able to place out of Spanish based on my high school Spanish. I also placed out of the art and music portions of the humanities section. I had been in both the junior and senior high school bands, so I was familiar with music, but I still don't know how I placed out of the art section! I came within one point of placing out of English, but they decided I should take English and it hurt my feelings. I didn't enjoy it. My professor for the English class was Philip Roth, the author. They had provided a place for him and gave him a token teaching assignment; he was there mainly for writing novels. He did not appreciate having a class at eight o'clock in the morning in wintertime in Chicago, and I didn't appreciate it either and I don't think many of the other students did. He really didn't know quite what to do with me for my assignments, but I managed to struggle through, and I made a decent grade, but I sure hated it. I got placed in the social sciences two, which I enjoyed thoroughly because we used the Great Books to look at sociology, psychology, and political science. Humanities two was also very enjoyable. We looked at history with readings based on the Great Books.

The main thing about the University of Chicago is that they valued argumentation and critical thinking. I was on a scholarship for full tuition, and room and board. The tuition at that time was $690 a year and the board was in a cafeteria in the dormitory. I had very good roommates who became friends for life and I later moved with one of them into an apartment for the latter part of my undergraduate years.

Anyway, I'm trying to stick to what brought me to USAID. The Chicago experience was great. I had very stimulating professors for the most part. I had a bad second year, though. I moved into a fraternity house and joined the fraternity because it offered me half my board if I served as steward, managing the food service. If I did that it was cheaper than the dormitory but it had all sorts of temptations provided by the ex-GI fraternity members who liked to party. One of the brothers worked for Playboy Magazine, and we put on elaborate and rowdy Playboy parties, for example. My classes in the second year weren't quite so interesting but I made it through, barely. My grades were lower, I lost my scholarship and had to take out a student loan. I finished the required undergraduate curriculum that year.

In those days Chicago let undergraduates into any graduate courses where the professor was willing to accept them. So, in my third year, I took my first anthropology class in a

graduate course in political anthropology. I never had an introductory anthropology class. The course was political anthropology taught by Eric Wolf, who was a famous and extremely competent anthropologist. Sort of a mild-mannered Marxist, but very, very good at what he did, and an excellent teacher. I also took a course in Latin American geography with two graduate students and the professor. That got me access to the library stacks, which graduate students were allowed to explore. The professor, Philip Wagner, signed a waiver for me, and I spent the last two years of my college undergraduate career down in the deep dark stacks of Harper library, reading all kinds of stuff and solidifying my interest in anthropology, social anthropology, as it was called at Chicago. Trying to understand social change, and social processes, the sort of thing that Stuart Chase had put me on to. In my third year, I took the Indian civilization sequence of courses, because it was presented by anthropologists. I didn't have much interest in India, but I had read the India novels by John Masters when I was in junior high school. I focused on Kashmir and the Northwest Frontier and the Himalaya area for my papers, and made good grades in the course.

I did well in my third year, and got my scholarship back. But I still had to work during the year and over the summers to cover my expenses, since my parents couldn't help. I worked at the University Press warehouse on Cottage Grove and 62nd Street. The university printed most of the readings for its courses, and I was able to get free "shelf-worn" copies, so that saved me a lot of money. I remember looking for a text there, and the boss asked me what I was doing. When I told him, he grabbed a copy, cracked the spine slightly, and said, "Here's a shelf-worn copy for ya." Much appreciated!

I was doing my studies without really understanding that anthropology was totally oriented toward academic work and research, and I had never intended to be an academic. When I was in high school and junior high school, because I liked to read books, my teachers kept encouraging me to be either a teacher or librarian but I didn't see any adventure in being a teacher. So, I was going to go do something, but I wasn't quite sure what, and political anthropology opened up some ideas for me. At that time Chicago required you as an anthropology student to cover the five fields of social anthropology, which are: comparative sociology, ethnology, which is a historically oriented approach to understanding world cultures, physical anthropology, which was based on biology and evolutionary theory, and archaeology, which is looking at ancient people's trash. And finally, linguistics, which I also found interesting, though I wasn't very good at it.

I had very good professors for archaeology. I had Robert Braidwood and Robert Adams. Adams later became the head of the Smithsonian Institution. They were both interested in civilizations and in Mesopotamia. That got me much more tuned into complex societies, rather than the sort of thing that anthropologists were identified with—very simple societies, hunter gatherers, and "tribal peoples," and so forth. I also had access to the sociology department, Morris Janowitz was one of the professors. I took his class on social theory, I finally got around to that. I had a very exciting class on city political machines, taught by two historians, and that turned out to be influential in casting my thoughts toward political anthropology, social change, and the kinds of things that happen

as different diverse groups come together in limited space. City machines in Kansas City, Memphis, of course, Kansas City where President Truman came up, Boston, and not to mention the situation in Chicago, then and now.

So, I came to the end of my undergraduate career and intended to be a Latin American anthropologist, because I'd had Spanish in high school. I forgot to mention that one of the influential people in my high school career was my Spanish teacher, Miss Wilma Jimerson. Somehow, I had an affinity for language learning and for Spanish that she encouraged. I did journalism where I was the advertising manager for the high school newspaper and I also wrote a column. A second influence was the high school journalism teacher, Hazel Presson, who encouraged me and took me with a bunch of other kids from all over Arkansas on a trip to the New York City journalism convention. So, I got to see something as a high school student of what the outside world was like. Two other things I did in high school were drama and band. I was never all that great as an instrument player, I played clarinet. But I was the band librarian, and I got to make lifelong friends there. We traveled to a number of band competitions and won most of them and that was one of the fun things in my life. I was a character actor for several school plays.

So I was at the end of my undergraduate career. I was awarded a Woodrow Wilson fellowship. The Wilson fellowship required you to go to graduate school somewhere other than your undergraduate school. I had taken the Indian civilization course and done well in it. I had no interest in South Asia. But I said, "Okay, I'm interested in Kashmir," so I started doing papers and doing studies and concentrated on that part of northern South Asia. One of the professors from that course, Edward Dimock, put his arm around my shoulders and said, "How would you like a three-year fellowship to stay at Chicago?," which I wanted to do if I could because I wanted to study more with Eric Wolf. He said, "The only condition would be that you have to study Urdu." And I said, "Well, Urdu is the language of Pakistan and northern India." Hindustani, Hindi, Urdu, they're very similar. So, I knew what it was, and I said, "Okay, what's the deal?" And he said, "The first year is your tuition and fees and $2,000. The second year is $2200. And the third is $2400."

So, I said, "Okay!" First of all, I was ensconced in Chicago, I had adapted and assimilated to the University of Chicago way of life. I could even stand the cold weather. When I was an undergraduate I worked at the University of Chicago Press warehouse all four years, which meant walking from wherever I was in the early morning through the snow, uphill, et cetera. I worked at the warehouse and then went to class and then would go back and work at the warehouse. I was putting in thirty and thirty-five hours a week at the warehouse, and with that and the scholarship I still was barely able to make ends meet for apartment rent and expenses. My last two summers I worked nights down in the Chicago Loop on the night clean-up team at Kraft Foods, cleaning mayonnaise off machines. Suddenly I was offered more money than I had ever seen in my life, and the deal was, study Urdu, so I said, "Okay." I thanked the Woodrow Wilson people, and I became an honorary Wilson fellow. The fellowship was through the National Defense

Education Act. That was put in place in, I think, 1960 when the government decided that we didn't know enough about a lot of the world.

So, I became the University of Chicago's only Urdu student. My professor and I studied Urdu, and then in the summers, I worked on the development of the Urdu poetry program, which for a beginning level student was a pretty challenging job. I learned a lot of vocabulary, and later on I was providing literal translations of poems. Another student who was supposedly more advanced, who came from somewhere else for his second or third year there, he was taking what I did in Urdu poetry and turning it into really awful English poetry. But in any case, Urdu, I acquired a liking for it and have stuck with it ever since.

I finished my master's degree in anthropology in the South Asia area. My advisors were two anthropologists who were South Asian specialists. My would-be mentor, Eric Wolf, left Chicago for the University of Michigan, and I was stuck without anybody I could work with in the field I wanted to specialize in, which does require a sort of master-apprentice relationship to do well. Especially if you're going to be an academic, because your mentor is the one who uses his network to get you jobs.

I clearly understood what I wanted to do, and I did a master's thesis supervised by a very nice man named Lloyd Fallers. They called him Tom Fallers. He was an Africanist who had done his work in Uganda. He said that he would love to have me as a PhD student, but I'd have to shift to Africa as my area. I said no way. But I was desperate, since my fellowship was ending and I got no support for my PhD research from the Chicago anthropologists. I managed to get a grant from the University of California at Berkeley that would let me continue studying South Asia. I also managed to get married to another Chicago student, who was a history student. The South Asian language program person, Norman Zide, who was a linguist specializing in tribal languages in India, offered me a job as the administrative assistant for his linguistics project in India for the summer of 1963.

If you know the studies about what induces stress, change of location, change of job, change of status, change of marital status, it all happened at once. We went the summer of 1963 by way of England, where we stopped briefly for some orientation in the India Office library. Then to Germany and then to Greece, and then landed in Calcutta on the second of June. That of course is the end of the hot season and start of the rainy season. It's very hot. I looked out the window of the plane at this rundown tropical airport, then we went out and got ourselves through customs and immigration and I learned my first lessons in Indian bureaucracy.

Calcutta is the capital of West Bengal and was the capital of India for many years and that is literally where the term red tape comes from, because they used to bind up files in this red cord. The traditions of bureaucracy are maintained to this day. In those days, it was going strong. We went out and suddenly, the term teeming Asian masses became real. Because there were these hordes and hordes of people on the road, and vehicles like ours

making their way through them, and the heat and humidity struck us. My wife had never even thought about going to India before she met me, so she was appalled, and I was saying to myself, Is this really what I signed up for? Of course, it turned out later that we landed in the middle of rush hour. It wasn't quite always like that. We settled into a second-rate hotel recommended by my professor who stayed in the first-rate hotel when he arrived three weeks later.

My job was to clear up problems from the previous years' work and to acquire the equipment and funds for the linguists who were coming, and to make sure that this year's project funding was in place. All of this had to be done so that several linguists could get to the field for the summer's work in the mountains of Orissa and other places in central India. So, I learned quite a lot from that.

One of my first tasks was to take a taxi to find the driver from the previous year who didn't speak any English. He spoke a variety of Hindi and I spoke a variety of something based on Urdu. We communicated very nicely, and we did very well. The first thing we did was to buy a Jeep in Howrah, made up of reconstituted parts from World War II Jeeps. They would take all the pieces and the frame and the suspension and the wheels and the tires and everything and put them back together. The cost of the vehicle was based on the year of the engine. So, we bought, I think it was a 1952 Jeep with all the electrical wiring the same color for I'm going to say fifteen hundred rupees. It wasn't very much, and we drove that Jeep with my wife and the driver and me in the rag top Jeep through the monsoon rain five days down to the field site in Orissa in the mountains. Since the paperwork fully accrediting me for my position was delayed, I had to negotiate a deal with the bank to withdraw the funds for the linguists who were arriving. I could write checks for less than a hundred rupees. So I spent many hours writing ninety-nine rupee checks to outfit eight expatriate linguists, each needing ten thousand rupees before going to their field sites! That finally ended before I wore out my fingers. I had to fly to New Delhi and meet with the USIS [United States Information Service] officer there to get the situation unraveled.

Q: What year was this that you ended up in Calcutta?

PLUNKETT: Oh, this was 1963.

Q: How long were you going to be there? Just for the summer?

PLUNKETT: It was a summer program, a month in Calcutta, a month in the mountains of the state of Orissa. It was monsoon season, and up in the hills in the rain and cold, with poor food and sanitation, and people were getting sick. There were several American linguists and Indian linguists and then the interpreters and the informants. As the admin person, I got to go to the district headquarters once a week to collect correspondence, since there was no delivery to our village. The driver, Ram Kishan Singh, and I, got to have our lunch at the South Indian restaurant there, which was much better than the miserable, cold rice with gravel in it and cold pumpkin curry we got in the village!

Several staff became ill, so my boss moved us all down to the coast to the town of Puri. We spent a month there and then we went back to Calcutta, closed out the project, that was my job.

Then my wife and I flew by way of Hong Kong, Manila, and Midway Island and Honolulu to Berkeley. We were met at Berkeley by friends from Chicago, who took us across the bridge into the flats of Berkeley. In this bright California sunshine and blue skies they said, These are the slums of Berkeley. We all broke out laughing, because the slums in Berkeley were far different from the slums of Southside Chicago, where I had spent seven years. Anyway, I was at Berkeley and I had passed candidacy—I forgot to mention that I took the exams and passed candidacy for a PhD in Chicago. My professors at Chicago wanted me to do a study on a topic of interest to them, which had been studied to death in my opinion, and I didn't want to do it. That's why I went to Berkeley. Because I wasn't eager to do their study, they were not helpful in supporting me for grants. I was applying to go to North Pakistan and study a princely state called Chitral, and they wanted me to go to the middle of India and study their topic.

I went to Berkeley, and the anthropology faculty said, You've passed candidacy there, so you don't have to do anything here except two years' residence and pretty much study whatever you feel like studying. So, I took a class in Persian, and I had a class in Hindi, proper Hindi to compensate for my emphasis on Urdu, and some anthropology classes. My wife had a Woodrow Wilson grant to study Indian history. However, our grants combined were not very much and we managed to have a baby as well, so we were not in good shape.

I was a research assistant for a wonderful man named John Gumperz, a social linguist who had worked in India. He managed to get me a job teaching a Peace Corps group, one of the first large India Peace Corps classes, at the University of California at Davis, up the road from Berkeley. We moved to Davis, where we were given a furnished apartment, a job and six hundred dollars a month. My job was to teach the area studies component for a group of about a hundred Peace Corps volunteers going to India. I have to say, I was delighted to do this. I had put in to go to the Peace Corps while at Chicago and been accepted. I was notified while I was on the mountain in Orissa that I was to report for Peace Corps training for a Pakistan Peace Corps group. I was unable to do that. I did send a note saying, "You want me to do rural development in Pakistan and that means area studies training. I know the area, I know the language, and the topic is rural development and that is my field, so why don't I just meet you in Karachi?" That didn't meet their requirements, so I wound up teaching Peace Corps, living in Davis and commuting once a week or so to Berkeley until I completed my residency, defended my PhD proposal, and got a grant to go not to Pakistan, but to India. In the meantime, I was concerned about what was going to happen to me, and to the family.

That was my first marriage, which was, in retrospect, not a good idea. But anyway, we had a small child, and so I took the CIA exam, NSA exam, State Department exam, and something called the management internship exam, which was all federal service. I was

accepted by all of them. What they all wanted me to do was to be an analyst, with the exception of the State Department. I didn't want to do that because in those days, with the cold war, you were not allowed to travel if you were working on sensitive classified material, and I wanted to do fieldwork and see the world.

The last part of the management internship exam was an oral roundtable. It was a social psychology exercise where they tested you on how frequently you spoke and what sort of utterance you've made, judgmental or whatever. I scoped that out so I talked a lot and started everything with "as I see it" or "we should" and did all right. At the end of it one of the interviewers put his arm around my shoulder and said, "You're just the person we've been looking for, we would love to have you. What we need you for is for pre-counterinsurgency studies in northern Thailand." This was 1965. I thought, I don't really know anything much about Thailand and I have put in all this effort toward South Asia and field research in political anthropology. So, I said something neutral. The very next day my grant came to take us to India and I didn't take that job. I learned later that the job was in Laos, organizing the opium shipments to Saigon, which would have been interesting and I would have come out of it like so many of my colleagues who worked in Vietnam, with the gold Rolex and the gold bracelet and the Thai wife or Vietnamese wife.

We went to India in October 1965—just after the second Indo-Pakistani War ended. It was a sensitive situation, but we were able to get by. I was struck by the good fortune that happened to me. I planned to go to a former princely state in the Indian State of Rajasthan to study the social changes that had occurred with the transition from the princely state to the Democratic Republic of India. They had some six hundred or so Indian princes, including those of Kashmir, Chitral, and Hyderabad and the other big ones that had been merged forcibly in the late '40s. So, the question was how they had adapted. I chose a small state where it was known that the former Maharaja was active in the Congress Party, which ruled all of India at that time. Because if I had tried to do my research in an opposition area, which most of the larger former princely states were, I would never have gotten permission to do it. We left our eighteen-month-old son with my parents and went to India. This was an American Institute of Indian Studies fellowship, paid in rupees from U.S. Public Law 480 [PL-480] Food for Peace shipments to India. We arrived in the town of Kotah, about three hundred miles south of Delhi, and that was the railhead. Got down, took a rickshaw to the rest house, which is a quasi-governmental arrangement they had there, to stay overnight, and then we were going to make our way by bus down to a place called Jhalawar. It had been a small princely state.

I had one letter of introduction to a member of the Legislative Assembly that another Berkeley political science student had known when he did his study in Rajasthan, and who happened to be connected to the Jhalawar area of Rajasthan. I had written to him, and I hadn't heard from him, but when I got to the rest house, lo and behold, there he was, a member of the Legislative Assembly. His name was Jujhar Singh. He was escorting the minister for agriculture on a tour of his area. The minister of agriculture was a member of the other faction of the Congress Party, so he was there to escort him but also to keep an eye on him. Jujhar Singh was a wonderful man. He understood what I was

trying to do for my research. He thought it was interesting and he said, “Okay, come along.” The next morning, I went out with the minister of agriculture, Jujhar Singh, and a host of other notable folks to the dedication of a factory. We sat in the front row. It was a Russian funded instrumentation factory. People thought I was Russian, I think. I had the chance to chat as best I could, with my still fairly stilted formal and underused language with people who spoke mostly varieties of Rajasthani, including the minister of agriculture. So, I made all kinds of important contacts starting day one.

After that, Jujhar Singh loaded my wife and me into his car with the driver and the person who became my research assistant. He took us down to Jhalawar, moved us into his guest room, and introduced us to his wife and his sister-in-law. We were exhausted and settled in and then they said, “Okay, it’s time for dinner,” and they fed us royally with highly spiced food. My wife had been in India with me in 1963 and she had shifted to Indian history, but she was not really accustomed to people, I guess that’s the best way to put it, and the spicy food caused her to break into tears. She stayed in Jhalawar for another six weeks and she couldn’t stand it anymore. I should mention that she was not interested in having our son, who was about eighteen months old at the time, in India with us. And my parents were not interested in that either and so they took our son, and had him for the year and a half that we were in India. My wife moved to Delhi, moved into the Young Women’s Christian Association [YWCA] and continued studying toward her dissertation work in Indian history, which was on Rajasthan.

I stayed in Jhalawar and was assimilated, I guess the best way to put it, as a sort of member of the Maharaja’s group and part of the political machine. I tried to stay neutral and distant enough while I was there so I could maintain my contacts with the people in the other political factions and the people who were not in any political faction—also, so I could make sure that the government of India did not get upset at my activities and chuck me out. I had constant police presence spying on me. I had a dedicated policeman who kept track of me the whole eighteen months I was there, which I knew about. I assumed that was the case. I made it very clear what I was doing, and I made it very clear to all parties that whatever somebody told me I didn’t pass to anybody else. I had a lot of people accepting that. I also had, these being politicians, when they wanted to disseminate something, whether it was information or disinformation, they would tell me something.

There was one man I remember vividly because he was a member of what was called a Scheduled Tribe, not a Scheduled Caste, which is what they used to call Untouchables. Now, they call them Dalits. He was a tribal person and he had been sort of tokenized into a position. He was very concerned about his own importance and he used to tell me things, and I knew that whatever he told me, the exact opposite was true. It was great fun. He’d been a wrestler—wrestling was very popular—and he was a wrestling referee. Whenever there was a big wrestling match with visiting wrestlers coming through, he would be a master of ceremonies and other politicians would show up and work the crowd. Anthropologists or politicians or predators of various kinds, you want to go where

the water holes are because that's where the animals are and that's where you do your thing.

So, for a year and a half, I did that. I traveled around on field tours with the politicians. I went here and there. I bought a motorcycle with my grant money to get around. If I had bought a car, I would have constantly had to fend off politicians wanting me to drive them around. I learned a lot. I learned a lot that I was not able to in good conscience publish. It made it very difficult when writing my final dissertation to be clear, fair, and touch the points I was trying to emphasize about the operation of different networks and groups in a very complex social field, and how this affected social change, and the kinds of changes were taking place in Rajasthan at that time. However, I made it through that year and a half, and we went back to the States where again, I was stuck looking for something that would keep us under a roof and fed. We spent the summer of 1967, the "summer of love," in Berkeley, but we didn't notice much because we were working on our dissertation notes.

Q: *How did you feel that the politicians delivered social change or responded to social demands in Rajasthan?*

PLUNKETT: In this case, because of the way the budget worked, it was a patronage management operation, through the state and the central government, for really basic things. One of the things that was really significant when I was there was the extension of rural electrification and there were issues about who got electrified, which village got electrification, which one did not, and how that related to political support. That in turn was related to the caste composition of the area. It was without a dominant caste. Most of the politicians in the Maharaja's group were Rajputs. Most of the opposition Congress faction were Jains and Mahajans. They had joined the Congress Party because they saw it as the party where the growth of patronage was coming from after independence. So, on one side with the Rajputs it was a more modern form of noblesse oblige. But the Maharaja had been schooled in public administration as a young man in England, had joined the Congress Party out of enthusiasm, and had willingly turned over his state. He became the minister for Public Works and Power. So that's why electrification was a significant patronage benefit in this area. The Chambal dam was also being constructed not too far away, but it was far enough away that it didn't really enter into what I was trying to find out. Other more mundane kinds of political issues were access to seats in the colleges, jobs of various kinds, and routine patronage, I guess you'd call it. I was also there for the national elections in 1967.

Q: What happened next?

PLUNKETT: Back in Berkeley, I started a series of job interviews. I went to an anthropological convention looking for anthropology department jobs. And I still did not really understand how I was going to get to do what I wanted to do, which was applied anthropology. So, I interviewed at Vanderbilt, at Missouri, at the school that later became Rhodes College in Memphis. Frankly, I interviewed with those because they were fairly

close to my hometown, and my folks, and my son was with them. I wanted to be somewhere where we could visit back and forth, because my wife had no interest in our son. Didn't want to have him, didn't want to have anything to do with him. The University of Virginia was starting a South Asia program. Several people I knew from Chicago were there and it was a social anthropology department. It didn't have archaeology and things of that sort. The guy who recruited me made a very, very good pitch and I went there to visit, liked it, liked the idea of it, was promised release time and assistance with my dissertation, so forth, and so on. So, I went to the University of Virginia but the four years there were a dreadful experience. None of what I had been promised was provided, I was forced to teach additional classes I wasn't prepared for, and I couldn't work on my dissertation.

In 1970 I went from Virginia to Davidson to help start another small South Asia program. And found again, that was a difficult situation. I had been promised that they were going to change the rules at Davidson. You had to be a practicing Christian to be given tenure at Davidson. That meant basically you had to be an active member of the Presbyterian Church on campus. They said they were going to change that when I got there, but they didn't change it. However, Davidson helped me financially to complete my dissertation, and I am grateful to them for that. As soon as we got to Davidson, my first wife left us. She had never had an interest in our son, and didn't see that I was going to go anywhere, and had given up on becoming an Indian historian herself, because of the situation that happened. After she taught for a while at the University of Virginia, she then was bumped out of a job for a less qualified person due to academic politics. A few months later, I met a South Asian linguist who came through and we hit it off. She was a wonderful stepmother for my son. It was clear I wasn't going to have any future at Davidson so I managed to get myself a grant. And so, we packed up and went to Pakistan and got married on the way. That's how we wound up at the Tarbela Dam with an American Institute of Pakistan studies grant in 1974 and that's where I met up with USAID.

The second wonderful piece of good luck in my life was when I learned about a job at USAID the day we arrived in Pakistan on the research grant. I can tell you all about that. I can also perhaps, fill in some of the earlier stuff if it is of interest to you and to the program.

Q: Today is November 11, 2020 and we are continuing with Sher Plunkett.

PLUNKETT: Where we left off the last interview, I think we had just arrived in Pakistan on a research project to study the social impact of the Tarbela Dam, on the Indus River. The study was funded by the American Institute of Pakistan Studies. The first evening, we were there with the person who ran the program, Charles Boewe. We were having dinner at the American Club in Islamabad, and happened to meet a fellow anthropologist, who was just leaving Pakistan. And she asked me if I had any interest in working with USAID, because USAID/Pakistan was desperately looking for social scientists to help them with their program. As it happened, that was exactly what I was hoping to do—hands on applied work as a social anthropologist, as I think I mentioned in a

previous interview. I had left Davidson College with my new wife and my son to come to Pakistan for this research project. And this was another one of the strokes of luck that happened to me over the course of my life.

Q: It really is remarkable that it happened this way.

PLUNKETT: Yes, it is. I have been extremely lucky at least two or three times in my life. And this was one of the major ones. The next morning, I went over to the USAID office, and said, "Here I am." And they said, When can you start? But it being the U.S. government and USAID, it wasn't quite that simple. I started the paperwork, and they started trying to get permission to hire me. At that time, the idea was to bring me on directly as a direct hire. But while I was waiting, I went off on my research project, and went to the Tarbela Dam on the Indus River about seventy-five miles from Islamabad, where they had been constructing the largest earth-filled dam in the world over the past decade.

Before we get into that, if you don't mind, I'd like to mention a couple of things that I didn't dwell on too much earlier. I think I told you, I was born and raised in Fort Smith, Arkansas, and I'm a child of the 1940s. I was raised at a time when patriotism was high, World War II was on and I always had the idea of serving my country. In that part of the country, that usually meant that you went through school—or not—, and then you joined the military. I fully expected I was going to grow up and join the military and serve my country. It didn't happen. I was lucky enough to get scholarships and was encouraged to go to university. I intended to do ROTC. At one point, there was a possibility of me going to Annapolis. I was talked out of that by a marine captain, who said, "Well, you go to Annapolis and you become an engineer." Since I was not very good at math, I didn't feel too excited about that. He said, "Go to university, and to the Platoon Leaders Class, and it turns you into a Marine Second Lieutenant." That's what I intended to do, except I got a scholarship to Chicago, which didn't have any such program. And ultimately I never did serve in the military. But I've always had an attraction to the military and military history. It turns out that has served me very well, in both India and Pakistan, and AID, because I was able to do mil-speak. And I had learned a lot about the British Indian Army, which gave me a lot to talk about with the people I worked with in Pakistan and India. I'll come back to that later on. Shall I continue?

Q: Oh, please do. I like these vignettes because I feel that in oral history, one of the things to do to make sure that people understand who these people who are giving the oral history are and what's their background.

PLUNKETT: I was extremely fortunate to get to Chicago. I was extremely fortunate to be able to continue my career by virtue of Berkeley and UC Davis and the Peace Corps training, and get to India, where I was extraordinarily fortunate to strike exactly the right level for me to do the study of political machines, which taught me about South Asian bureaucracies and organizational culture. And then, after an awful interval in an academic life, to get the grant to go to Pakistan, and immediately find this situation with USAID. I

should mention that the previous summer, the summer of 1973, I self-funded myself from Davidson, went to India, went back to my old field site, saw all my old friends there, and learned of the changes since I had left. I also made a circuit of all the international agencies that I could find asking about jobs, but didn't find anything specific. But it did tune me in a little bit to the international development setting, much more than I had been able to do before. So, I went over to the mission, started to discuss with USAID, and met Joe Wheeler, the AID director in Islamabad, who was a very sharp person. His wife was a former missionary with many years in Pakistan. I don't know whose idea it was to start looking for a social scientist. But AID, after its experiences in the '50s and '60s, realized that its infrastructure projects were not really reaching down to the lowest levels. And so, somebody in AID—or perhaps it was an AID contractor, Development Alternatives—started talking about small farmer programs and getting input from the small farmers about their agricultural projects and other projects as well. That, I think, induced Joe Wheeler and his program economist to look for someone like me.

In the meantime, I was up at the Tarbela Dam. We drove up there the morning after I talked to AID and arrived at the contractor's colony headquarters. Totally cold arrival, and not any context as far as I can remember. It was an Italian construction consortium, with a very large number of people. It involved three different contractors, and several residence colonies had been constructed on site. I went to the site manager, a very nice man, whose name I wish I could recall. And he said, "Oh, you're here to study the resettlement aspects of the project. Unfortunately, we are in the last stages of the project. So, we can't accommodate you as we did visitors in the past. We have some empty bungalows, but we are going to have to charge you rent." And I had a small research grant. I thought, Oh, my goodness, what's going to happen? He said, "Let's take a look at the bungalow and see what you think." So, we went. It was a two bedroom bungalow, fully furnished down to washing machine and dryer, a bidet, centrally air conditioned and heated, with potable water, which is very rare in Pakistan. We went back to the office, and he said, "We can let you have that bungalow, but we do have to charge you rent." And I said, "Well, how much is it going to cost me?" And he said, "Would seventy-five dollars a month be too much?" I said, "I think I can make that." "Oh, and by the way, instead of your son having to do a Calvert course for remote learning for the fifth grade, we have an international school here for our international staff. He would be admitted there without any tuition fee."

So we moved into this lovely bungalow. The manager also said, "Because you're not a part of the expatriate staff you can buy in the commissary. You can buy anything, you know, that's local, any Pakistani stuff. But you can't buy the wine and the other things that we have imported. However, we do have a first-class Italian restaurant, which is walking distance from the bungalow. We have three clubs, and you're automatically a member of the clubs, the hill club, the city club, and the golf club. And let's see, we also have a mess. It's like a fast food cafeteria, Italian style." The food was wonderful both at the mess and the restaurant. They told me the first item of heavy equipment they brought in was the oven for the pizza. For a year, we were based at our villa. I was intending to study the resettlement effort, which had started about twelve years before. I was affiliated

with the Board of Economic Enquiry at the University of Peshawar for my American Institute of Pakistan studies grant.

The interesting thing that happened, literally days before we arrived, was a major miscalculation by the government of Pakistan. I guess the Water and Power Development was responsible. They had been constructing the dam and they decided to do a test fill of the dam. And the problem was that the resettlement of something like 120,000 people in several villages in the fill area, the reservoir area, which was very large, had not proceeded according to plan or schedule. Most of the people who were supposed to have been resettled by the government had not moved. And as the fill proceeded, they were in danger because the fill rate was greater than calculated. The Pakistani officials called in the Pakistan Army trucks and forcibly moved around 120,000 people and their livestock and possessions out of the fill area in a very short period of time, with almost no loss of life. I think only about eight Pakistani soldiers drowned in the course of removing people.

What I didn't realize was that I was trying to go in and study a very touchy situation—touchy in the past and touchy immediately. We arrived at the dam and we saw rebar from the spillway scattered a half mile or mile down the Indus River. What had happened is that the fill rate was greater than what they had calculated. They were moving the people out, and they decided to reduce the fill rate by opening the spillway gates against the advice of the engineers who constructed the gates. The force of the water going through the gates tore out the tunnels there and wrecked the gates, and the vibration, the cavitation from the water going through there shook the ground so much that for a time they were afraid that the entire dam was going to be washed out. I had absolutely no knowledge of this until we got on site, then we realized why everybody was nervous in general and suspicious about why I was there.

We settled in and I began trying to make an entrée as an anthropologist and establish rapport and define my position as a neutral researcher/observer. We were in this Italian engineers' colony with a very large number of monolingual Italian engineers who had been expatriated and working on projects for many, many years sometimes. So, on my next trip to Islamabad I had to pick up an Italian grammar so I could talk to my neighbors. We acquired a very good servant bearer cook. He'd been working for a French family and picked up some recipes there. We kept him for all the time we lived in Pakistan.

I then made my way to the University of Peshawar to get the letter of accreditation I needed so I could officially begin research, and found that, in typical South Asian fashion, I was a point of contention between two factions of academics at the University of Peshawar. Nothing against me personally, but one side was saying I should be given the accreditation, and the other side said, We won't because you want him to have the accreditation. So, we will block it. This continued through the entire time we were at Tarbela. I was never officially accredited by the University of Peshawar's Board of Economic Enquiry. At the end of my year at Tarbela, the board officials said, We will finally let you have your accreditation, but all of your data and all your information will

belong to us. So I never was able to publish much of my findings from the Tarbela research.

At the same time I was in parallel pursuing the job with AID. One thing that happened in one of my several visits to Peshawar University was that I did make some friends there. There was a professor of geology, who happened to be from the Tarbela Dam site area, and who had warned the government of Pakistan and the engineers some time ago about the delicacy of the geology of that site and felt himself to be vindicated by the problems with the gate structures. I was in Peshawar probably in January 1975 or so, the cold season. I was in discussions with the Board of Enquiry and an anthropologist colleague who was on the board invited me to attend a presentation by a member of Zulfikar Bhutto's inner circle. In those days, Bhutto was the prime minister. This person had been at the university and he was giving a presentation. And his old professor was to be there. I was invited to go to the presentation, but it was cold, and it was getting late. I was going to have to take what's called a tourist wagon, which was a Ford Transit van filled with people, that went back and forth to Tarbela. It was a four hour trip. I was going to miss that if I had to stay over. So I decided not to, and I went back to Tarbela. I found when I got back that somebody had put a bomb in the lectern at the presentation. It blew up killing Bhutto's henchman, and everyone in the front row of the presentation had serious damage. I was fortunate, because if I had been there, I would have been, as a token foreigner, probably in the front row. I was happy to miss it.

Something similar happened when I was on another visit to Peshawar. This was also back in early 1975. At the time, there was a separatist movement for Pashtunistan. I was walking in the bazaar, on the way to my favorite bookstore, which happened to be across the street from the American Center run by USIS. As I was walking toward it, I heard a boom. I saw people leaving and I went around the corner and it turned out that somebody had blown up the American Center. Exciting times. That sort of thing has, I guess, become more of a norm in the world these days. But it was new for me.

Q: And his daughter later was Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto?

PLUNKETT: The daughter later became prime minister for a while before they blew her up. Zulfikar Bhutto was a much more interesting person than she was in my opinion.

At Tarbela I met Muhammad Iqbal Niazi, who has become one of my closest friends over the years. He showed up at my door, as I recall, and said he had heard that I was there and that he had studied sociology at college—college there is more like a high school. But he was a lab assistant at the Pakistani school. It was run by the WAPDA organization there, separate from the International School. I said, "Well, I can't pay you, but I can work you." I bought a Honda motorcycle. Iqbal turned out to be a person who was extremely capable, and extraordinarily well qualified to do what we were doing, in that he spoke a bunch of different languages. He was the son of a country mullah—a preacher. He was very religious. This made him extremely acceptable in the area when we were talking to people, plus he was a local and knew the area intimately. Iqbal and I drove around on my

motorcycle, and we talked to people and I took notes. And I did everything I could do, about fieldwork, except I was not officially accredited to do it. I did that for a year, alternating with trips to Peshawar and trips to Islamabad. And when it wrapped up we moved to Islamabad. I think it was April 1975 as the grant was terminating, in time to learn that the Americans had gotten chucked out of Vietnam. So all of a sudden there was great disruption in the USAID program, because all the people in Vietnam were government direct hires, and USAID was trying to find places for them.

AID/Washington was saying, You cannot bring Plunkett on board. We have a direct hire employee who was an advisor to the Vietnamese police who can fill your social scientist slot. I think there were several people suggested, looking at my credentials versus their credentials. Joe Wheeler was able to resist, and the AID mission put me on a personal services contract for two years to freeze me in place, and put me to work.

One other thing that happened in Tarbela was my friend Iqbal had another friend, Muhammad Zareen. Mohammed Zareen was a young man who had been working for WAPDA as a clerk. He was from a mountain area to the north and east of Tarbela, in what was called Kohistan. Kohistan just means, place of mountains. He happened to speak a very distinct language that immediately attracted the attention of my wife, Ruth. Although he was assisting me, she also co-opted him as a linguistics informant, and proceeded to continue with him and study the languages of that area for the next several years. She has continued research on those languages for the rest of her career. But she started there.

I should also note, this is another aside, but Ruth and I met, as I said, at Davidson College, when she came through on a visit. She at the time, was moving to Berkeley, to head a Nepal studies program that was started there on federal money. She set it up, got it going. She was a professional linguist with a lot of credentials from working in Nepal. The program only lasted a couple of years. Just as we were looking at going to Pakistan, that was the time that her program collapsed for lack of funds. President Nixon, I guess it was, stopped the funding for South Asia and other area studies and caused a great deal of disruption in academia, including for people we knew in South Asian studies. Ruth continued as a linguist and continued her research. Ultimately, she wound up in a very comfortable position at the University of Oslo in Norway, based on the fact that she had cracked the code for the very difficult language that she started studying with Mohammed Zareen.

I started working for USAID in the Program Office. My boss was the program economist, Ed Auchter. He was a key person in getting me hired. I still have in my file somewhere a copy of the memo that the head of the Program Office wrote to the director, to the effect that, “We have these projects, and they are all well designed. But they’re not working and we don’t know why.” And this memo stimulated them to think about hiring a social scientist. That coupled with the AID policy about doing something directed toward small farmers, was what got me hired.

So, what was my job? Well, they didn't know quite what to do with me when I first got there. They didn't have the funds for a program funded personal services contractor. So, they put me on a project funded contract with a drylands agriculture project. And so, for my first year, I guess the first contract for a couple years was in the Agriculture Office. In those days AID had its own technical specialists who were direct hires. They also had started using contractors, so there was a contract firm responsible for the drylands agriculture activity. I worked for the agriculture officers on that project. Ken Lyvers was my immediate boss. Another one, Spud Bullard, was a potato specialist. We worked for the head of the Agriculture Office, Richard Newberg, who was an economist. He had no idea of there being any way of finding out anything except through the use of formal surveys, filling up forms on paper, asking specific questions. So, the idea of open-ended qualitative interviews, combined with observation, combined with more formal techniques, the anthropological approach, was something he didn't know about. And to the extent we told him, he didn't want to hear about it. That meant that for the drylands agriculture project, I went on field visits and talked to farmers with the contract experts. But I was also firmly instructed to develop a multiple question formal sample survey that would be administered to farmers, samples from the North West Frontier Province and Punjab Province where the project operated.

I started relearning how to design and run sample surveys. I was working in the Frontier Province with another person who became a good friend, a young USAID economist named Tariq Durrani, who was with the AID office in Peshawar. We began designing questionnaires, did a sample design, and then came the question, "How would this be administered?" We were working with the Agriculture Departments of the two provinces. And of course, this was something that they didn't know how to do. It was the foreigner's money doing stuff for the benefit of foreigners. I was trying to indicate how this could help them to make the project look good for their bosses. I designed the questions in Urdu, then I was informed that, "No, the questions had to be in English," because English was the prestige language, and all bureaucrats in Pakistan were supposed to operate in dealing with foreigners in English. Which is a little complicated because not only were their staff not familiar with English, but they weren't even in some cases familiar with Urdu because in the Punjab, they spoke Punjabi. That is the de facto language, mostly, of Pakistani politics. And in the Frontier, Pashto, or Pukhto in the northern area.

I spent a good part of my first year with that horrible survey. And the other thing was, there was no money for it. For printing the documents or getting the things out to be filled up, that was all supposed to be going through the Agriculture Department in the provinces. And the funding, the budgetary procedure for that was all what they call a pre-audit procedure, you had to get prior permission to spend any of the money. You couldn't spend the money and then get it reimbursed. So, there was no money. All the money from the project had gone into the coffers of the Ag Departments, or the Pakistani provincial Treasury. And they were not about to let loose of that.

So, ultimately, for the Frontier, Tariq had a slush fund of about fifteen thousand rupees that we used to produce and administer the questionnaires. In Punjab, I don't remember

offhand exactly how we did it, it was equally weird. And, ultimately, questionnaires were collected by low level agriculture employees, who had no training and didn't speak English and couldn't read the questionnaires, from the dryland areas of the two provinces.

The University of Islamabad had been contracted to do the data processing on their IBM mainframes. That never happened because every time they would get somebody trained to work on the mainframes, he would get a better job in the Middle East and leave. And it would all sit until the next person got trained. In the interval, I simply started digging into the raw data, and doing reports and producing material that was usable for making decisions about the project.

It was an interesting experience. It taught me a lot. One of the things that I learned early on, but didn't make people happy, was that in the dryland agriculture areas where they were working, when they designed the project, they never bothered to ask the farmers about anything. They simply said, We have these new, high yielding varieties of corn. And if you use the seeds, and you had an adequate amount of fertilizer and other inputs, you could grow enormous amounts, more corn than you could with local varieties. This is part of the Green Revolution Norman Borlaug started. He has never in my mind received enough credit for transforming South Asia into a food basket. In this particular area, dryland agriculture meant that they were dependent on rainfall, not irrigation. If you look at a map of the Punjab, Indian and Pakistani, you have these five major rivers, and the British colonial administration had established very large irrigation systems, I guess, the largest irrigated area in the world, and resettled people in that area.

It turns out that the farmers in the dryland areas around Rawalpindi in the Punjab but also in the Frontier, were the main people who had been in the Pakistan Army or Navy, and had retired to their home districts on their pensions. They had their income and they were growing fodder for their buffaloes. And the buffaloes gave the milk to make the yogurt, and the ghee, that was part of a satisfactory diet, which was very tasty. They were growing corn not for market, but for fodder. And also they had lands in the irrigated areas, which they had out on tenancy. That's where the major portion of their income was coming from.

The agronomists on the project had never checked into any of this. And so when you started talking to the farmers, which they hadn't done, the farmers would say, We don't want to spend any money for our crops here. You want us to use more fertilizer, but first of all, it's hard to get because you get it from the government, so you have to bribe somebody to get it. And that was an expense. And secondly, the corn that you want us to grow here, it's a short stalk corn. So it doesn't provide very much fodder. The corn varieties that we grow with longer stalks are what the buffaloes like. They are tasty. When you try them on the short stalk corn, they don't like the taste, and they don't eat it.

The moral of that particular story is something that I began carrying out for the rest of my career with AID. What you're doing in development, development projects, is a form of service delivery, service or product delivery, you're delivering commodities, your

training, or your technical assistance, or funding, to not only reach but be accepted by the end user. The way it was put to me, when I worked later on a lot on irrigation projects in Pakistan and elsewhere in South Asia, an engineer named Gil Corey from Cornell said, "The whole irrigation system is dependent upon water reaching the root zone of the crop, at the right time and the right amount and the right quality, not too salty. Unless that happens properly, the entire irrigation system from the tail all the way up to the headworks and the dam is useless." So that's been my root metaphor, when I'm teaching classes on development, anthropology or anything else, is to start with the end user, go down to the root zone. And then you work your way back, all the way up to the headworks—the organization that funds and delivers the project.

I was the only person in the USAID mission, Pakistani or otherwise, who could touch type Urdu—a fairly useless skill. But I also spoke it and I was able to make a lot of friends among the Foreign Service nationals [FSNs], which I found many of the expatriates just didn't do. I used to eat my meals in the cafeteria with the FSNs, have a fine time and learn a lot about what was going on. I found that not only were the USAID expats not tuned into that, but even less so the embassy staff. I had almost no contact with the embassy at that time. And I saw very little of the State Department diplomats except a lady named Robin Raphel, who was working as an economist in the AID mission and her husband, Arnie Raphel, was the junior political officer at the embassy. They happened to be neighbors, as well.

Q: I've interviewed Robin.

PLUNKETT: Nice people, and they were neighbors. We actually saw a fair amount of them, and I went to Arnie Raphel's ceremony in Washington when he was sworn in as ambassador to Pakistan. And of course, as you know, he was killed in Pakistan along with Zia-ul-Haq, in I think 1988. I've seen Robin off and on since then. In the second phase, I moved to be a program funded, as opposed to a project funded personal services contractor in 1977. It looked like I was going to become a direct hire. At the last minute there was a freeze on all USAID hiring. It looked like I was going to have to leave, but the mission rolled it over and put me on a program funded personal services contract.

So, I stayed on with my family. My then wife, Ruth Schmidt is her professional name, not only was doing her linguistics research, but she'd also done the occasional short-term contract for the mission. She became the director for the University of California at Berkeley's Urdu studies program, overseas, where advanced students would come to Pakistan, and study, particularly the literary forms. She moved down to Lahore to set up the program there. She was fully occupied, I was fully occupied.

My job broadened out. Actually, even when I was doing the dryland agriculture work, I was also asked to look at other projects, help with project design, and write parts of project development papers, for the entire range of the programs—health and population, agriculture and education, and infrastructure. To do that, I had to design and oversee or

carry out eighteen or twenty different separate research activities. These were all under time constraints, of course.

I found myself developing what later turned into a subset of anthropological methodology called rapid rural appraisal. It didn't have a name. I would go to a USAID project officer and say, "Okay, what do you need to know? When do you need to know it? And how much are you willing to pay to get it?" I would interview them and write down what their concerns were, and use that to develop a research protocol.

And then, most often, I would turn Iqbal loose on a purchase order basis. He had moved from Tarbela. Actually, no, I think he still stayed at Tarbela most of the time, but he had control of several of the languages and had this wonderful entrée because he would go to a remote village and give a Friday sermon, in the mosque. Iqbal and I had a procedure which combined observation and interview, and group interviews, and specific, focused interviews and questionnaires. These would all be done fairly rapidly. We could turn something around in approximately six weeks or two months and provide information which was actionable and reliable and credible, that could be fed into projects, in some cases pretty well. I had a very good time, I was traveling as much as I could, either by AID vehicle or just on the tourist wagons, so I was all over Pakistan.

The Pakistan office of the Ford Foundation asked the USAID mission to loan me to them to do a couple of things. At that time, I was concerned about doing activities for women. And we combined forces for a program that took into account the fact that women were not supposed to perform on the public stage, in business or anything like that. That is to say they shouldn't be in the public view. One thing that they could do that was not in the public view, but is critical, is banking and finance. The Ford Foundation director at that time was Robert Shaw, an Englishman who was familiar with social anthropology.

We developed the idea and he developed a program and got a very large number of educated young women started in finance and banking. And that was doing pretty well. I still remember, at some point in the middle 1970s, we had a CODEL [Congressional delegation] that came out from Washington. It included a young woman from Wellesley, who had something to do with Jimmy Carter's administration. And she was just incensed when she got there, and she found that in Pakistan the culture was one of separate worlds for women and men, and that women are going around with these burqas on. "How is it that AID was not totally focusing on blasting this custom out of existence?," she demanded. We pointed out what we were doing which was very, very successful. I'm very proud of it. She thought that was inadequate because she wanted to see total revolution immediately. She proceeded to antagonize every Pakistani that she met. Oh, CODELs are interesting creatures, as I'm sure you know, as well.

The other one of the interesting loan outs I got was a request by the chief minister of the province of Sindh in southern Pakistan. Sindh is an interesting place because it was—probably still is—the least known, anthropologically, part of South Asia. There was an area between the levees on the Indus River. Down in that area, that distance between

the levees was sometimes twenty or thirty miles, and a whole bunch of channels of the river. And there was an area that was not officially settled with land tenure demarcations, so it was called the "*kaccha*" area—meaning "undeveloped." But it was home to a large number of people. The Sindh government was interested in ideas about what development activities could be done in that area. So, they asked for me to go down and I spent time wandering around in that area, which incidentally was an area with zero law and order.

The fact of it was, the people who farmed and raised livestock in those areas on an annual basis, would, as the floods came, move up across the levees and would then become poor refugees, and be assisted in their distress by various foreign agencies. The floods would then recede and after that they would go back to their farms, where the soil was very rich. They were known for rustling livestock from the areas across the levees, and the other thing that they did was kidnap people. They were particularly fond of kidnapping doctors. The doctors would be held for ransom. I was able to take photos of them constructing a school in the area. The school was constructed by weaving together very large canes, making very large five to twenty foot walls, and then putting a central roof on. And that was the school, and the school lasted till the flood came, and then they would build another school. I learned that they were being compensated for the destruction of their schools, on the basis of their being brick-and-mortar schools.

I put all this in my reports, as I found them out. And sometimes this was of interest and sometimes it upset people. In the end, I wound up suggesting that the Sindh government set up dairy product processing facilities adjacent to the levees to harvest the dairy products that are coming over the levees from the area, from all that rustled livestock. I also suggested health centers in the areas near the levees. This impressed the chief minister of Sindh, so he called me up one day and offered me a job with UNICEF funded money to be his advisor for institutional affairs. I liked the province and I was extremely tempted to do it. But AID at that time had finally decided to make me a direct hire [a full, permanent position with USG benefits]. That was something I was familiar with. I liked AID since I felt I was serving my country. And I was also to stay in Pakistan another four years.

So, I chose AID over Sindh. And then, I was informed only a couple weeks later that we would have to close down the AID mission entirely. This was in 1979. We had to close down the mission because of nuclear reprocessing issues. So, they told me, You have to go to Washington and get sworn in. And you can choose jobs in Egypt, Indonesia, and Bangladesh, but you can't stay in Pakistan. So, this was an introduction to how USAID functions. I'd always heard stories about the military and how whatever you thought you were doing in the military, you're going to be doing something else. My wife had this job in Lahore. She could not leave it and didn't want to leave it and was very good at it. I had to go back to the States to be sworn in. And then I was to go to Bangladesh.

I went back to the States and went to the Science and Technology Bureau there. I was making the rounds. I was in the Asia Bureau. I was supposed to be given an orientation. I

saw an anthropologist named Gerry Hickey, who was famous as an anthropologist who'd worked in Vietnam and done very good work there. He said, "I heard you were coming. Listen, you're going to go over and get sworn in as fast as possible because your reputation precedes you. And you're seen as being negative about AID." I said, "Well, I don't want to be negative. I have always tried to indicate what I thought would work, where the problems were, and how something could be done to make them work better." But anyway, I went over, I got sworn in. I was supposed to be trained all about the procedures and so forth.

I got snagged by the science and technology people. They said, Listen, we need you more. You have been working for AID for four years, so you know something already. We need you to help to develop this major rural development project. So I wound up working most of my time in Washington on the Participatory Rural Development Project, which turned out to be successful as a centrally funded project in developing active participation by what I call users or customers [not beneficiaries] of USAID projects. I went with my son, David, back to Pakistan and dropped him off in Karachi. He flew up to Lahore and rejoined his stepmother and went to high school in Lahore for a year while I went to Bangladesh. That was in the fall of 1979 when I went to Bangladesh. I had not been to Bangladesh before. I had been in Calcutta and Orissa, and had formed a general antipathy toward the whole eastern side of India. I didn't want to go to Bangladesh, but if my family was in Pakistan, it made more sense to go there than to try to go to Indonesia, where I had not a clue about anything, or to Egypt, which was the same. At the same time, I was developing skills both in management as well as social science. So I went not as a social science specialist, which was my title in Pakistan, but as a program officer, the research and evaluation officer for the mission.

Q: You mentioned Sindh. There's a story that during the British conquest of India, yes, there I think was one of their military leaders in the Punjab, but Sindh was a separate place, and of course, communication was slow. But he, at one point, the commander and a military commander sent a telegram to the Foreign Office saying, "Peccavi."

PLUNKETT: Yes. One word in Latin.

Q: Yes. I have sinned.

PLUNKETT: Yes. Peccavi. The Latin translates into "I have sinned."

Q: Yeah. Yeah, I love that.

PLUNKETT: That was Napier, who conquered Sindh in 1842. The other person who had an interesting time in that part of the world was Sir Richard Burton, the famous adventurer.

Q: Oh, yes.

PLUNKETT: And the translator of—

Q: —A Hundred and One Nights.

PLUNKETT: I spent some time in Karachi. One of my friends was an FSN in Islamabad. His family were Goanese from Goa, and settled in Karachi; his brother ran the commissary in Karachi, and his father, who had retired from the Indian Civil Service, lived in Karachi. He had been the chief administrative officer, the deputy commissioner, for a district to the east in the desert of Sindh during World War II. I would go to Karachi and instead of sitting in the staff house, very often I'd stay with his family. One of the things he talked about was during World War II, having to go out into the desert frequently to pick up fliers whose planes had crashed. They flew all the way over to wind up in Burma or in Assam. When the plane had a problem, they would have to land or crash in the desert, so he'd have to go out and fetch them.

I was always fascinated with the social organization in Sindh. As an example of that, in the area between the levees where I was working, trying to figure out how far the government extended into that area, I'd ask people, "If you have a problem, and you and your kin can't resolve it locally, who do you go to?" And they always said, "We go to Makhdoom Sahib," and, "Makhdoom Sahib, who's that?"

Well, he was a Sindh landowner, like the Bhutto family. He controlled a land area of something like eighty thousand hectares; hectares are about two and a half acres. He controlled the lives and everything of the people. He was like a feudal lord. But he was also a religious figure. And he was also a major figure in the Pakistan People's Party, which was the ruling party. So it was a very similar form of patronage/clientage to what I had been looking to study when I was in India. I never met Makhdoom Sahib. Had I stayed in Sindh I would have made a point of trying to do so just because I thought it would have been interesting. Sindh is fascinating. Not very scenic, but fascinating.

Q: Did you feel that in your years there that you were able to redirect AID to more of a demand driven model of designing projects?

PLUNKETT: Well, yes, and no, in the sense that, if you're closely associated with the design, you can do that. More importantly, the problem with AID, as with the World Bank, is that once the project is designed and funded, attention drops off sharply. The World Bank had absolutely no interest in a project once it was funded. One of the things I had to do was to escort World Bank visitors to places in Pakistan where they had projects or they wanted to see villages. So we would go to the headworks of a major irrigation project, stand and look out over it, and be talked to by the Pakistani officials, then we would go to the big lunch. And that was the extent of their involvement or concern. I never had a lot of respect for World Bank capabilities.

And the same thing happened in a way with AID. The project paper is a sales document. Unless you pushed it, it was not referred to often afterward in operating the project. You

got your points for clever design. What a lot of the AID officers seemed to do is design something that would get attention, write it up, and get it approved, and then transfer to another post, and somebody would come in to run a project while they were thinking of something to design; and so implementation in AID meant getting it to the contract. This was when it was moving from direct hire technical employees to overseeing contracting out the activities. So, you get no points from getting something done. You got points from design and for your mission getting the money.

I was once told flatly by the director in Bangladesh, "We don't want to know what you do researching problems in projects, we don't want to know this, because if we know it, we have to do something about it. If we do something about it like cancelling the project, our level of obligations will go down." His points were gained by how much money he got from Washington, vis-à-vis the other missions, not what he did, but what he got. Which was very different from what I thought I was supposed to be doing. I kept telling people I was never interested in being a director. I never was interested in that. I wanted to be the AID equivalent of what the army used to call a technical colonel, somebody who was the person to go to for a specific thing. In my case, it was social analysis, and particularly how do you get the information you need? How do you find something out fast? And so, a good decision can be based on it, because you can't wait for things to happen. I happened to mention I didn't want to become a director to my Program Office supervisor, and later when he showed me the draft of my annual evaluation, he had written that I lacked ambition. I got him to remove that, but it demonstrated the mindset.

The other thing I got really good at later on is how to get around the procurement system. Because AID's procurement meant that something would be approved, and then it was eighteen months before any funds for it appeared. By then the regime could have changed. The need could have changed. So I learned how to work the system, so that I could get something done in weeks rather than years. My involvement with the drug trade started in India, because where I did my dissertation research was an opium area and opium was a major source of funds for politics and issues there. And so I learned about some things there. When I got to Pakistan, of course, there was a big drug, big opium growing area there. I wasn't cleared for classified information about that. But people kept coming to the office saying, You're not supposed to see this, but what do you think of it? Because I was the one who was out in the field. I had contacts with people and they were growing all kinds of interesting things and doing all kinds of other stuff. So, while maintaining discretion, I was learning a lot.

The thing about AID at the time I started was it was moving away from direct involvement and toward being a contracting agency rather than an implementing agency. You do that and your ability to influence things is different, especially when you're working not with a contractor, but with a university or an NGO, and where you're dealing not with a contract but with a grant or a cooperative agreement. I had to learn all that.

Q: And you were working not only on agriculture, but also health projects and other rural development projects?

PLUNKETT: When I was in Pakistan, the population projects were very popular. The Pakistan project had been touted as a success story. There was a fella named Ray Ravenholt in Washington, who was a great politician. This was back in the early ’70s, when we were all going to die because of the population explosion. And also, we were going to freeze to death. So, they were doing all kinds of things toward population control and I was involved in several projects, providing information about them as well. And education, I worked on education. You always have to think of development as having three dimensions; you have the policies, such as population or agriculture. And you have the technologies, which may be complicated, in some ways, but straightforward agronomy or irrigation engineering or whatever, something you can get your hands on.

But in between those is the institutional or socio-cultural dimension. Because policies guide and technologies operate through a series of implementing social cultural organizations down to the end user. That is tricky, because on one hand, you’ve got the policy view sitting back in Washington, and the policy is changing every administration anyway. And then down here, you got the end users who have their own concerns. And in between, you’re dealing with American political administration, American political agency administration, and its culture. And that links to Pakistani administration, which is British Indian, or Latin American, or whatever administrative procedures they use. And, as far as I can tell, whether in the State Department training for its staff, or certainly in the case of AID, people were not trained or given any familiarization with any of this. The State Department’s A-100 class supposedly gave you some background information. And your country training prior to being posted, supposedly gave you some training.

But it was, in my opinion, extremely ineffective. And then once people got to post in Pakistan, or in Bangladesh, which were basically backwaters, not prestige posts for State Department, the tendency was to clump together and to stay within the bounds of this sort of island, bounded by the embassy, the office, the American Club, and the swimming pool. Almost nobody that I knew of was actually connected to anything other than the upper classes of counterparts that they met with on a daily basis. And that tended to inhibit the capabilities and reduce the effectiveness of people in actually getting things done. That may be a subject to pick up before we do another one of these interviews, because I learned a lot more about that in Bangladesh, having become a direct hire AID employee.

Q: I’d like to carry on talking about your impressions of how we operate and how we connect to other cultures.

PLUNKETT: Back in the late ’90s, there was talk of merging USAID and the State Department. It has sort of happened now, I think. One of the things I was tasked to do at the time when I was with the reengineering group was to look at the merger. I did a study for a guy on the State side who was a special high-level advisor on mitigating organizational culture conflict. I found that State and AID had very different organizational cultures. This came up early in my career as a direct hire because, around

1980, AID Foreign Service staff became commissioned officers just like State FSOs [Foreign Service officers]. I got a commission, which made me proud. There was a great deal of resentment expressed about it, because of the way that AID recruited. The criteria for recruitment meant that AID staff came into the Foreign Service at higher ranks, and when they were commissioned, that just made it more annoying to their State colleagues in the missions.

Q: Okay.

PLUNKETT: I learned about that a bit later on.

Q: This is interesting for people coming into our business.

PLUNKETT: The thing is, I was doing what I had intended to do when I was fourteen years old. It happened to be that AID was the vehicle for doing it. And I wasn't entirely independent, autonomous, or even always successful at doing it, but I was able for twenty-eight years to have a really nice time. And it's fun remembering all of the above.

Q: Next time, you can pick up at Bangladesh unless you think of other things you want to talk about on Pakistan.

Today is November 12, 2020 with Sher Plunkett. To resume, you were just finishing your first tour.

PLUNKETT: My first tour, yes, in Pakistan. I was hired overseas.

Q: Okay and so let's move on to Bangladesh.

PLUNKETT: That's right. Last time, I was wrapping up on Pakistan. As I said, I was hired off the street while I was there on a research project. I worked as a personal services contractor because the agency couldn't hire me after they had so many people run out of Vietnam in 1975. So, they put me on a contract to keep me in Pakistan because they felt they needed what I had to offer. Then that rolled over in 1977, but just as I was about to go direct hire, they had another freeze. I did another personal services contract until 1979 and then I was accepted for direct hire. And I left for Washington to be sworn in as I recall, at the end of July.

Q: Of what year?

PLUNKETT: Nineteen seventy-nine, to go to Washington to be sworn in, which was a very interesting time. I was happy to leave Pakistan. I loved my work there and the time there, but I left at the end of July. As you know, in November, there was civil disorder uproar over the activities in Mecca. It resulted in the embassy in Pakistan being attacked and burned in November of 1979.

There had been rumors that this attack was being set up for almost a year beforehand. I had mentioned it to my contacts, and a couple of other people who also had good networks had done the same. Unfortunately, the embassy didn't pay attention and so some bad things happened that might have been prevented. I was gone by then.

Q: Well, let's go back to where we left off and start there.

PLUNKETT: Well, that's pretty well where we left. I worked for AID for four years in Pakistan, spending a lot of my time in the field. I counted something between eighteen and twenty different development projects that I had a hand in, ranging from where I started with agriculture, and then infrastructure, roads, population planning, health, basic education.

One of the things I was proud of in the health field was that there was a project providing training and materials to the Pakistan Health Ministry and, as you know, Health Ministry employees are like a lot of other government employees. They work government hours, basically from maybe ten o'clock until maybe four o'clock. If they showed up at all. In the rural areas there was no adequate supervision of what they did, or what they did with the inventory. So as a consequence, there were a lot of public Pakistan Health Ministry offices that existed either in name only or were not functional. These were the people, the health assistants, who were supposed to be trained through arrangement with the government of Pakistan.

A very bright FSN employee in the health section of the mission said, "We have all these materials, and you know they're transferable." So, I said something to the effect of, "Well, okay. There's the Aga Khan Foundation, there's the Red Crescent, there's any number of NGOs providing health services and they are actually providing effective health services, but they need some training. Then they probably need materials." Training like how to maintain a cold chain is very important in a country like Pakistan for getting medicine that has to be kept at a certain temperature. So that employee and one of the other FSNs and I went around the different provinces, having a fine time stuffing ourselves on local cuisine and talking to all these different entities that were out there, NGOs [non-governmental organizations]. As a result, we were able to get a memorandum of understanding to share that material with these other entities. Or maybe we formed a consortium of NGOs we could use as a counterpart. So, we actually were able to get some health services through the system and to the end user. I was proud of that. I think I also mentioned last time my adventures with the governor of Sindh, and let me see what else I did.

Q: You mentioned that you had dealt with population control. Did you find that was a tricky one because of the politics of it?

PLUNKETT: Oh, yeah.

Q: How were we dealing with that at the time?

PLUNKETT: That was an interesting situation because there are two kinds of politics involved. First, was the politics between the United States and its policies in the government of Pakistan, a Muslim country. Secondly, there was the internal politics within AID. I had been fortunate enough, while I was still an academic at Davidson, to attend two scholar diplomat seminars the State Department sponsored. One was a kind of general introduction.

The second one focused on what in the late ’60s, early ’70s was called the population problem. Paul Ehrlich’s book *The Population Bomb* had come out, and there was an awful lot of what turned out to be nonsensical stuff by the experts about how we were all going to die due to overpopulation and lack of food, and also, we were going to freeze to death due to global cooling. The State Department wanted to showcase what it was doing on the population explosion. So about fifteen or sixteen academics, including myself, spent about a week in Washington. We met all sorts of people, including the AID guru for population Ray Ravenholt. So, then I got to Pakistan and started working in the mission in 1975. At that time, Pakistan was being touted within AID as a success story on population planning, because of the dissemination of materials through the population projects.

The thing is that, in Pakistan, as a rather strict Muslim country, there’s a lot of segregation of the sexes. How this was to be disseminated was always somewhat of a question. I was asked by my boss in the Program Office to look in and see how things are going. The population and health section chief was very good at writing glowing memos about how well things were going. I went and talked to him and I learned that he never went out of Islamabad, that he never went to any of the field sites. I was used to wandering around the rural areas and also had people I knew, and as I mentioned last time, I had an excellent assistant going around as well. When we went on field trips, we would connect with the local population, including government officers. Then I would come back and write up my field report. That tended to cause some problems because I wrote down what I saw, and the metric that was being used with the population project was family acceptors—people who were accepting family planning, contraceptives. On a field trip I went to talk to a friend I had met at Tarbela, who was a population officer in the area north of Swat in the Dir Province, which later became famous because that’s where the local Taliban got together. In any case, he was up there, and he took me to a meeting, and he showed me all around. There were his acceptors who did so to be courteous to the government officer. Yes, these people would accept contraceptive foam or something like that, but acceptance is not use.

Actually, as I recall, I took a picture of a can of contraceptive foam with spider webs on it. That was in one of the acceptors’ houses. This did not make me popular with the section chief. However, it did make me popular with my boss and the mission director, because they were able to then use that for refining their discussions and improving their policy approach to the government officials. Other things like that came up from time to time. The answer, I guess, to what you’re asking is that when something comes out that

doesn't have buy-in from the potential users, it's not going to work. So, what you do first of all, is you do marketing.

The most appropriate population family planning activities I found, later, were done by PSI [Population Services International]. It was a social marketing company. And that's when they look to see what people are interested in and capable of and to move things out in the same way. When I got to Bangladesh, I also was doing work through the Population and [Reproductive] Health Office. I found there that huge numbers of contraceptives were being picked up in Bangladesh. However, I found that they were being picked up by the Eastern European embassies and shipped back to Eastern Europe, because contraceptives were very hard to find there, or at least reliable ones. So, as I said last time, my root metaphor for what I was doing and as a development person is that you're looking to the end user, and you're looking to the service delivery. You have to define that in ways that are appropriate, through feedback from the end users up the chain of linkages from the end user, to whoever, to the source. Whether you are talking about money or training or education or technical assistance or commodities, it still applies. So that's what I learned by getting my hands into things and making some people unhappy with me. People who had perfectly nicely designed development projects, designed without any marketing research oriented toward the end user.

Q: It seems incredible.

PLUNKETT: It does, doesn't it? But the thing is the stuff came from Washington, and the concern was, as my son was just telling me the other day that he's just learned in his job that the only thing that people were focusing on was the inputs. So, what I tried to set up as I went along in my career was to go to the end user, go to the root zone, as it were, see what is required there and understand that in each level, there's a linkage.

Another thing I did in Pakistan was I was in touch with the University of Islamabad on some basis or other. I was friendly with Dr. Ahmad Dani who was an archaeologist at the university. They decided that they would like to expand the anthropology program. We were sitting around having tea, and I said, "You know, money is scarce in Pakistan, so academic anthropology is not going to be well supported. But, if you build the department from the beginning with the statement that you're going to be doing applied anthropology in support of Pakistan's development and economy, that's going to get you somewhere." They had a professor who had been on a Fulbright at California State who came back at that time, and he and I and Dr. Dani and, I think, the Ford Foundation guy, Bob Shaw, who was also an anthropologist, started the anthropology program for social anthropology at Islamabad. That program continued for a long time. Years later, when I was about to go to Peru, I was doing some intensive language work at FSI [Foreign Service Institute]. I was standing in the bus line waiting to take the shuttle, so I got into conversation with the Pakistani lady standing by me. It turns out that she was one of the instructors in Urdu, and a graduate of the anthropology program at the University of Islamabad. So that was something else that got done.

And I learned in Pakistan—in my first project actually—to navigate complicated processes. I'd known from working in South Asia about British colonial administration and the way they manage finances there and as you know, in India, the Bengali Babu and the East India Company and the government of India was famous for quibbling over minor things and not releasing funds. In Pakistan, the finance arrangements went through a pre-audit system. So, the money would go from an AID project to the government of the Punjab or the government of the Northwest Frontier Province. And it would sit in their finance section, but it wouldn't necessarily be dispersed because you had to apply for it. Then it had to be approved, and then they would quibble about it. So, it would be very complicated and take a very long time. I was trying to run a couple of standard surveys, because my boss insisted on a standard survey rather than rapid appraisals. To do that, we had to hire people to print the questionnaires so the field assistants could do the surveys. Oh, and the questionnaires, the officials insisted they had to be in English, because English was the proper high status language. So, you have an English survey administered by government field agents in Punjabi. And you can imagine the kinds of gaps in perception.

Q: Oh, yes.

PLUNKETT: The point was that we had no money available to do questionnaires and time was going on. We were finally able to work it out, using a petty cash fund that nobody had his eye on. But that was kind of tricky. I learned the hard way about that sort of thing, and then was able to make use of what I learned as I went along. So, I left Pakistan wiser than I came.

I still had a lot to learn, and I went to Bangladesh. At that time, as I mentioned, I was married to a professional linguist, who was running the Berkeley Urdu language program and she had responsibilities for a number of students, and plans and finances. And also, because this was career building for her, we agreed she'd stay in Pakistan and my son stayed because there was no high school in Dhaka in Bangladesh at that time. The choices were for him to go to boarding school or to stay with her. So, they stayed in Pakistan and I went, by way of swearing in in Washington, to Dhaka where I was in my first position as a direct hire AID employee. I arrived there in September of 1979 and settled in as a situational bachelor. My family moved from Islamabad to Lahore where my wife's program was set up.

So, I started as a full-time employee, and as you know, there's a difference. In Pakistan I had been on personal services contracts, which meant that I was paid out of program funds. In the first go around, the funding was out of the Agriculture Department but the second contract was generic program funds from the mission. That's what paid for all my wandering around and field trips and checking on things in the field while I was in Pakistan. The reason I went to Bangladesh, that I became a direct hire employee, rather than taking the alternative job that was offered to me by the Sindh government in Pakistan was because it was a permanent job. The mission had also said, Oh, we want you to stay another four years here in Pakistan.

But no sooner did I get sworn in than, Oh, we're closing down the mission over the nuclear reprocessing issue. You can't stay here. We have three possibilities for you: Egypt, Indonesia, and Bangladesh. All right. Here I am a South Asia specialist. I know next to nothing of Egypt or Indonesia. I am accustomed to doing really close, intense project designs and rapid appraisals and things like that. I had been in Bengal before and didn't like it much. But my family was going to stay in Pakistan. So, I said, "Okay, I'll go to Bangladesh." Once I got there, I found that my situation for work was very different. The country is very different. The politics were very different. There were, I think over a hundred and twenty NGOs active from various countries and all over Bangladesh. It was still recovering from the war with Pakistan and separation and creation of an independent country. Some very bad years had followed and as I recall, there was a serious cyclone that hit there as well. In any case it was extremely poor, extremely densely populated, and the conditions were very different. I came in as a program officer, with the title of research and evaluation officer.

So, I geared up and said, "Okay, here's what I need to do to become familiar with the country and to make myself useful." The first thing is that I really needed to learn the language. At that time, there was a place in the town Barisal where people were sent from the NGOs for intensive short term language learning. I said, "I'd like to go and get my language up." Mission management said, No, can't do that.

Turns out that I was funded, not under program funds anymore, but under operating expense funds. Those are much more tightly held, and they didn't want to spend it on me because the director liked to have those funds available to be out of the country, because he hated the place. Not only did he hate it, but he was not very clever about it and he made it known and the Foreign Service nationals knew this and resented it. And they didn't like him. In any case, there was no money. Then I said, "Well, I'm supposed to look after such and such research activities and evaluation projects, so, I need to take a look at some of the projects that are in design." No, I can't travel to the field, no money. So, I was stuck in the town of Dhaka, by myself, and in the Program Office.

When I asked to see one of the key pieces of research that had been done before I got there, I couldn't see it because it had come up with results that were not favorable to the government. The mission director had collected all the report copies, locked them up, and it was not available. This is real life; this is not what you expect. I was not taken with that kind of approach. I made the best of things. In 1979 I started working on a very large survey. Another formal survey. Luckily, I'd had experience in Pakistan with something like that. This was a baseline survey for a very large rural electrification project that the mission was sponsoring in conjunction with the World Bank. It was being executed by the NRECA, National Rural Electrification Cooperatives Association, and it was going to be taking place in thirteen different areas of Bangladesh.

I started working on that and settling in, and all of a sudden in very early November the affair in Mecca blew up, where the far-right Islamists were objecting to the way that the

more liberal Saudis were running Mecca. They took over the sacred places, and there was a siege of something like six weeks there. It caused a great stir throughout the Muslim world. It also kicked off the situation in Pakistan where the Palestinian and Iranian students and Pakistani students took school buses from the University of Islamabad, knocked down the brick wall at the embassy, attacked the embassy, set it on fire, killed a couple of people, and caused a lot of disorder. It was not clear what was happening, but the word came down that because of the uncertainty non-essential employees were to be evacuated to the USA from Dhaka.

I should mention that, no sooner had I gotten to Dhaka then we got a request from the mission director in New Delhi, for me to come over for about six weeks to assist in a broad ranging re-examination of their general portfolio because I was supposed to be an "expert" on the region. But again, the mission director and the deputy director said, No, you can't go. "Why?" Oh, we need you here. "What for?" I couldn't figure it out. Anyway, I was not supposed to be going to New Delhi, but when we were to be evacuated, I said, "I'll just go up there." I quickly got in touch with Delhi. They said, Oh, sure. Come on over.

I got on the plane with all the other evacuees. I sat next to the wife of another employee, and her six-week-old baby. She had three diapers for the baby. I remember that. We flew to Delhi, I got off, the rest of that plane load of people went from Delhi to Islamabad, then to all sorts of other places, Athens and Frankfurt. Altogether, I think they were on the plane for fifty-seven hours, and they landed in Washington at the end of November with clothes suitable for Bangladesh in the summer. They were not allowed to come back for several months. Meanwhile, I went up to Delhi, met my opposite number, an economist named Tom Timberg, and the new program officer there, John Westley. The three of us went off on a long tour by road of western India, all the way down to Bombay, now Mumbai, and Pune. Had a fine time, collected a lot of information, and examined a very large irrigation project funded by the World Bank in Gujarat. There we pointed out that although the project provided reimbursement and assistance for the people resettled downstream from the headworks, the mostly tribal villagers in the reservoir area were being ignored. That resulted in the World Bank and the Indian Government modifying the project. Tom Timberg and I have been friends ever since that trip.

I kept trying to find out what was going on in Pakistan because the embassy had been attacked and my family was in Lahore and all the official Americans in Pakistan were evacuated. I was trying to find out, "Does anybody know where my family is?" I wound up going out to the New Delhi airport when the planes were coming in from Pakistan. Luckily, I was out there as Jim Gingerich, my former colleague in the Agriculture Office, came out and I said, "Have you seen Ruth and David?" He said, "Yeah, they're right behind me." As I said, my wife was a linguist. She had a very strong opinion about her professional independence and autonomy. She'd never accepted the red passport the AID people got, and she always traveled on her blue passport under her own maiden name, her professional name. As my dependent she was supposedly under the wing of the embassy. But she didn't want to be, and she had her own responsibilities in Lahore. As it happened,

she was in Peshawar with her students on a field trip when all this came down in Pakistan. They were rounded up by the Peshawar consulate staff and were supposed to be taken back to Islamabad on a bus to be put on a plane. She had the habit of dressing in local dress, and so did her students, or at least the women. As far as I can tell what happened, they just kind of sidled off and out to a car because they had to get back to Lahore where she had her responsibilities and her organization and funds and everything that she was responsible for. So, they went back to Lahore.

In the meantime, my son who had been in school was taken over to the consul general's house, I guess it was. I was gone, his stepmother was gone, and he didn't think it was a good idea to be separated from his mother. He told me later, "You know, there's no way that a Baloch was going to let a bunch of Punjabis bother a guest." So, he went to a Baloch, which is another ethnic group there, like Pashtuns, out the side door and over to his Baloch friend and waited there till his stepmother came back and then they got on the plane and came to Delhi. I thought that was rather an interesting experience. We stayed together in Delhi and I went on my field trip, and then I was called back to Dhaka. Most of the other people from the Dhaka mission were kept in the U.S. until sometime in the following Spring. But I was called back after about six weeks, shortly after New Year's.

The reason I was called back is because some TDY [temporary duty] people from the Census Bureau were coming to Dhaka and mission management thought they needed somebody who would be able to speak their "language," social science language. They called me back, but my family couldn't come back with me. They went back to Pakistan. And that caused an uproar, because as dependents they were not supposed to return to Pakistan, but my wife was not traveling on orders or with any sort of passport other than her private one, and because she had responsibilities, and she was a very strong-headed person. She went back to Lahore and her program without any problems. I should mention that in Bangladesh, the NGOs looked at the AID and embassy people who were being evacuated and wondered why because there was absolutely no problem in Bangladesh. I was back in Dhaka and this series of cables came into Dhaka, about my family being in Pakistan. The director called me. State had sent this cable bringing to their attention that my family had left safe haven in India. The cable asked the mission director that I be requested to order my family to return to safe haven. I knew that was not going to fly with my wife, and by then things had calmed down in Pakistan. So, we concocted a very, very long cable, saying that there are many factors that must be considered, including fiduciary and professional and this and that, and the implications of closing down an important language program, a highly prestigious language program in a situation where matters were uncertain, but likely to improve, et cetera, et cetera. Basically doing the classic South Asian bureaucracy tactic of delaying until things moved on, which they did. Things calmed down and my family stayed in Pakistan and I went back to working on the rural electrification project, and the other things that I was doing for the mission in Bangladesh.

I was now in a very different situation than in Pakistan. I was hired originally because of my social science specialist capabilities and when I went to Bangladesh, my special

capabilities were not considered special or even particularly useful. So, there's a question there. I was a permanent employee trying to figure out what I was going to do with myself. I had no experience or training as a program officer in AID. Program officers typically looked at budgets and they wrote memos and they wrote cables and performed staff rather than line functions. I had done a little bit of that in Pakistan, but my job had been to find out what was going on and report that so things would move more smoothly. I wound up spending about half my time, the first year or so on this very large rural electrification survey.

There was a tradition of bringing out people from the States to do research activities. That was not necessarily the best way to do things and it wasn't developmental. So, I looked around for local talent because there were a number of Bangladeshi academics and other people who had advanced training in the U.S. and were withering on the vine for lack of opportunities. I set up the procedure with the Department of Statistics at the University of Dhaka for this baseline survey.

I worked very closely with the person from the university who I hired on a purchase order contract. I worked with him and with the poor devil who had been assigned to be the evaluation officer for the Rural Electrification Authority. He was a very nice and willing young man who didn't really have any idea of what he was supposed to be doing. But I convinced him that, "If you do what I'm suggesting, you're going to look very good." We designed a baseline survey to determine who the potential clients were, households, commercial, et cetera, et cetera. We did the survey questionnaire, we set up the sampling design, we hired, I think it was something like ninety-four or ninety-six field survey interviewers. I did something that I had learned from previous experience and from what I'd heard about surveys in South Asia, where the tendency was to hire college students who would go out and collect the information. Well, the college students who are hired were upper class, in a very stratified society, that's how they've gotten into college. So having them go out and associate with lower status people didn't work out too well. Very often the situation was they would go out and sit down under a tree somewhere and fill out the forms themselves without bothering to ask anybody anything. I didn't like that.

So, I set up some procedures for checking on people as part of our survey. We did the survey in three waves, as I recall, in thirteen different areas. We go into the first area and collect the information. But we had people going along behind double checking, and when we caught people cheating, or forging the information, we fired them and made it known that this is what was happening, and this made the others cautious. So, we started with ninety-four and I think we finished the third wave with thirty-two interviewers. But later on, not only did we use this material with NRECA, and set up the project and extend electrification to all these areas, as not generation of power, but the distribution of it. And setting it up in ways that people would actually not only get billed for their electric power, but we would know how to make sure that they paid for it. Later on, my friend Tom Timberg, the same person I'd gone around western India with when I was on evacuation, was hired by the World Bank to do a midterm evaluation of the project. He reported without my coaxing that this was the first time they'd ever been able to make

use of a baseline survey to do a midterm evaluation and feel like they were dealing with reliable data. That made me feel good.

The other thing that made me feel good was at the end of my first year in Dhaka, as a direct hire employee, I was to have an evaluation. The evaluation officer was the deputy program officer, Larry Crandall, who later went on to a pretty illustrious career in AID. In his evaluation, he wrote that he had worked with several anthropologists in the past, in Ethiopia and Afghanistan and other places, and that I was the first anthropologist he worked with he felt was worth a damn. So, I felt like I was doing what I needed to do here. So, I stayed on. Larry was a great boss. Shortly after the 1979 Russian invasion of Afghanistan, Larry became the mission director for the Afghanistan program and did all sorts of interesting things that got celebrated. Some of it was mentioned in the book *Charlie Wilson's War* and in the movie of the same name.

I kept trying to get transferred to get back to Pakistan, which is where his mission was located, to work on that program. And I kept being told, No, we need you here. Never did get there. I was able to go back after the first year I was there. I had leave and I traveled back to Pakistan and celebrated Eid with my family in Lahore. So, there I was in Bangladesh, and in the Program Office.

I was trying to recall some of the other things. Before I went to Bangladesh, I asked somebody who just came back from there, "What should I be sure to take to Bangladesh?" And he said, "Take your tennis racket." And I said, "I don't play tennis." And he said, "You will." It turned out that the American community revolved around the American Club and its two tennis courts. But I never did wind up playing tennis. I found the working conditions in Dhaka were different. The people in Dhaka, if they saw a foreign face, they had been trained as it were, that the foreigner gives baksheesh, money. If you stopped on the street there you were immediately surrounded. This was very uncomfortable for me, because I wanted to be friendly and they wanted me to give them stuff. So, the situation was that almost all Americans only went between home, office, and the American Club. So, there was very little local contact for most Americans, not all, there were some remarkable exceptions. Almost everybody there played a lot of tennis or had some sort of weird hobby in their home. One engineer had recreated a Wisconsin beer pub bar, and my neighbor had a whole room filled with a toy electric railroad set.

We couldn't travel outside of Dhaka easily because there was very little in the way of roads. Most of the travel was actually on the rivers. It was a very constricting atmosphere, the whole time I was there. I wound up volunteering to be the duty officer at the embassy on weekends, to go down to the embassy from where we lived, because there was nothing much else to do. It was a local custom, which may or may not have been appropriate, but if you were the duty officer, if you volunteered to be the duty officer, you got comp time for it. I racked up a lot of comp time and when I had the comp time, and some leave, and some holidays, I would go to India.

My family moved from Pakistan when the Urdu language program wound down and my wife got a research fellowship and moved to Patiala in the Indian Punjab. Her linguistics career took off like a skyrocket because she solved the linguistics problem that had puzzled people for decades. She moved over to India, and my son moved to boarding school in India. I would go up and join them and we would go to Kashmir, then I'd go back to Dhaka, and they'd go back to what they were doing.

The other thing that happened in my first year there, somewhere in the early part of 1980, I came down with dengue. I was by myself in an apartment with dengue, sick as a horse with no friends to speak of. I had one servant that had been provided to me and he turned out not to work out too well. I was down for something like three weeks. And that's about as sick as I had ever been. When I recovered, I went back on my campaign to get some language training and was joined by the agriculture officer, Chuck Antholt, and a couple of other people. We were able to convince the mission to pay for language lessons in Dhaka at a facility that one of the missionary NGOs had set up. The Mennonite Cooperative or Mennonite something, MCC [Mennonite Central Committee]. We would go over a couple times a week to the school and sit in the waiting room, reading the *Reader's Digest* in the waiting room. Then we would go and translate the jokes in the *Reader's Digest* with our instructor and have a very nice time. I did learn a reasonable amount of Bangla. I was able to pass the Foreign Service language exam. The person who came from Washington to test us was a Calcutta Brahmin lady and her view of Bengali was the Calcutta version. The Dhaka version that we had learned had a different vocabulary. So, we were all downgraded one grade on the basis that we didn't have proper language. I think I got a 2 in Bangla. I worked on rural electrification and I worked on evaluations. We had ongoing projects all across the board—population, health, and agriculture, a Food for Work program, and a very large program for providing fertilizer.

I spent my time in Bangladesh working on a fairly broad spectrum of projects and programs. One thing you'll notice is that I haven't mentioned very much about the State Department and the embassies so far. One of the things that really did strike me was how distant socially AID and the embassy were. In Pakistan, the embassy and AID had separate offices and in Bangladesh, we had separate offices. We had very little to do with each other except at the American Club, at least at my level. Because I was the duty officer frequently, I did make friends with some of my embassy counterparts. I enjoyed chatting with them, but I also was learning that the organizational cultures of the two organizations were very different.

One of the things that happened shortly after I got there was that it was determined that AID direct hire Foreign Service officers were to be commissioned like State Department officers. I received a commission as a Foreign Service officer. I was hired originally as an FS-04 and then I suddenly became an FS-02, which with the step increase bonuses I got for language skills bumped up my salary considerably. The reason behind this was that when AID hired people, you had to have a master's degree, or some sort of technical specialty, and government regulations mandated that credentials had to be considered. So

AID people came in green as grass, but with higher FS ranks than the State Department people. This caused State FSOs to be unhappy.

The recruitment, socialization, tasking, and objectives of the two organizations were and are quite different. Although we both were serving the United States abroad, we were doing so in different capacities and with different orientations and techniques—sort of like cats and dogs in the same basket. Most of the time we got along pretty well. In Bangladesh, I realized that I didn't want to be a program officer but I kept having to learn program duties whenever somebody would leave. Then there would be just a mission economist and myself there, and he didn't want to do any program work, I could never figure out if he did any work. Nice guy, but he mostly talked about tennis and the fact that he couldn't manage his investment portfolio using the slow pouch mail system.

So, I started volunteering, when people would go on leave, to manage their projects. I managed the agriculture research project. There was a project called the Technical Resources Project, which had been set up very cleverly, I thought, to do things that required only short-term activities, or were intended to explore possibilities for expanding the portfolio. This was managed out of the Program Office, so I took that project over and was able to do some interesting things with it. One of the technical activities was with the people who did agricultural research and reporting. It turned out they were not doing very much, and results were not getting reported out. So, I took a look at it. It turned out there was a hang up because there was some rivalry between the statistics section that produced reports and the agriculture section that actually did the research. And this is all in the Bangladeshi context with people who were very status conscious. Stove-piped sections who didn't like to talk to each other. So, the research was done and then it sat because the statistics people didn't want to process it. The statistics people liked to be taken on trips to Bangkok to look at mainframe computers, and I guess other things in Bangkok.

I took over and noticed that there was no output from this project. Just at that time, the microcomputer came into existence, Radio Shack started selling microcomputers in Dhaka, what later became known as desktop computers, you may remember the Apple II. Through this project activity I equipped the agriculture people with two Radio Shack microcomputers, very limited capacity in terms of what we have now but at that time, it was a big deal. The next problem I had there was after they got equipped and they got the training they came to me and said, Oh, we've got the equipment, and we got the training. Now we need somebody to actually push the keys on the keyboard. Because we are agriculture scientists, and, you know, secretaries do that sort of thing. So, I said "No, that's not the deal. This is where the true scientist becomes capable of managing his own affairs, and not waiting for all sorts of things." So, they started doing very simple statistical stuff with their data and the reports started coming out like crazy. And FAO and the World Bank and everybody was very appreciative of what they were doing. I got a kick out of it.

Another part of that same project, somehow my predecessor had managed to tell the guy who worked on the mainframe computer at the Bangladeshi Engineering Technology

University, that despite having an advanced degree from University of California, he wasn't capable of handling the SPSS software installation on their mainframe. And they were going to have to bring out specialists from the United States to do that. So, he got all huffy, and it hadn't gotten done. By the time my colleague left and I took over and had my introductory interview with him he was annoyed about that. I smiled sweetly and we got him the software and they got it plugged in immediately, so we were able to make use of them quite nicely as part of our operations with the rural electrification project. I was pleased about that.

In my domestic situation with my wife, it became very clear that my wife and her career had taken off and she wanted to be an academic and I did not, and she wanted me to leave my job, go back to the States, and get an academic job. I wasn't happy in Bangladesh, but I was happy in AID, and I didn't want to be an academic. She wound up her grant in India and came to Bangladesh, but it was pretty clear to both of us that we were not going to have the same goals. We split. She briefly was the women in development [WID] officer for the AID mission, and then she left.

Mission management said, She's gone, you get to be the WID officer. That was part of the fun in doing things with the Technical Resources project. The women in development activities documents started pouring in by cable about all the work that AID was doing in women in development. It was all studies about how women are oppressed and poor. I said, "This is not news to anybody who knows South Asia. But what is going on? Is anybody actually doing anything?" I happened to have a bit of an opportunity, because the government of Bangladesh, responding to the donors and responding to the World Bank, started hiring young women of good family, upper class women, in the government. Once they were hired, they were really not trained. They were there and young and ambitious. In some cases, they were interested in seeing what they could do in a sexually segregated society, and as good Muslims. Okay, what do bureaucrats need, they need to know how to manage something. They need to know how to manage, how to file things, how to do basic office activities. The kinds of things that we take for granted very often. Literally, they did not know that. I had an NGO train young women in office management, and it took off like a skyrocket and it was extremely popular. The next thing I knew I had people coming to me and saying, "Well, you're doing this for women, but we want our men to be trained too." So that made me feel pretty good.

I'd had that experience in Pakistan helping with the Ford Foundation training women, particularly in financial management, jobs that didn't require them to be out in front of the public, but which were in terms of organizational politics, very career enhancing. So that took off and worked very well.

About that time, I met my current wife. I had seen her around before, but she lived in Mymensingh, not in Dhaka. But she moved to Dhaka about that time, and we struck up an acquaintance. She worked for CARE [Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere] in the CARE Food for Work program, where the funds and material and commodities were provided by AID through PL-480. For some time, CARE had been

complaining about the Food for Work programs. CARE was administering the activities all over the country and workers were hired and they would repair roads and repair levees and they would be paid in PL-480 commodities, which is wheat. Leaving aside the fact that in the rice eating culture, they had to figure out what to do with the wheat.

CARE complained over and over again that the government was shorting the workers and not paying them what they were supposed to be paid. And they had been complaining for years. Well, my boss said, "Okay, find out what's going on here." So, I went to a local professional, as was my practice. I went to one of the local academics and helped them to design an evaluation. I had a regular procedure for such purchase orders. I paid them a certain small amount at the beginning so they could bribe the dean and get permission to do the study. Seriously! I paid them a certain amount when they had an acceptable draft design, another certain amount when they'd done some fieldwork, and then a final amount when they submitted the final product. Because otherwise, they would go off somewhere and write something up without doing the work.

So, I designed the study for Food for Work workers. The Bangla academic went out, looked around, found that lo and behold, workers were getting shorted about 25 percent of their pay. The reason for this was that AID, the U.S. government, paid for the commodity to get to Bangladesh, but the transportation in the country was supposed to be the responsibility of the government. The way the government paid for it was by siphoning off the funds from the program, instead of paying the workers. This finding was a problem, because I had been told several times that we don't want to know things. Because if we know things then we have to act on them and that can result in a reduction in our obligation levels of money. And what really counts for mission management is how much we get from Washington, not what we do with it. I didn't like that very much, didn't then, don't now. I always felt that you wanted to get the project to the root zone and make the difference.

So, in this case, I had to figure out how to report these awkward findings. I was able to do so by slipping it into the annual report the mission sent to AID/Washington on our program. The program office wrote the report, but I knew it wasn't read carefully in the draft before it was sent. As a consequence, mission management had to take note of the findings I had reported when the comments came back from Washington. The political appointee deputy director was not happy with me, but the mission did something actually quite good about the problem. They wound up sending a letter to the government of Bangladesh saying, "You have to repay X amount of money." And they may even have paid it, I don't know. But in any case, I think the workers got more of what they were supposed to be getting.

I met my current spouse there. At that time she was the CARE deputy for that program. She was in the field more than her official working hours allowed, traveling. She did something I thought was kind of neat. When she took over the program, the payments were due based on the measurement of how much road got done and this was measured by surveyors' chains. She got hold of several survey chains, and measured them to see if

they were the right length. And as she told me, not only were none of them the right length, but none of them was the same length as any of the others, until she fixed it. Remember this is a woman in a sexually segregated society out in the rural areas and walking twenty miles a day on road alignments. She is a formidable person as I have found out, sometimes, to my dismay later on. We've now been married close to forty years.

In 1981 I was acting as duty officer one weekend and I had a call from a fertilizer importer. He called to say that General Ziaur Rahman—who was the prime minister of the country—had been assassinated. I immediately called the DCM [deputy chief of mission], and I called the political officer, and went down the list of the people I was supposed to call. They all came into the embassy, which was on the fourth and fifth floors of a building in downtown Dhaka. They were there, and were trying to find out what was going on. They were calling around to see what they could learn, and I just was listening out the window. Then after about nine o'clock, I didn't hear anything in the air. I decided, this is not a contested coup. Turns out I was correct about that. But in the meantime, I wound up spending thirty-six hours at the embassy with other people who came down. Steaks were brought in from the Marine House, we watched a movie, and we had a very jolly time as we collected information and did the best we could with the telephone system back to the Situation Room in Washington. In those days, the phone systems were not all that great, and the cable system was not much better. So, I was able to see how that kind of thing was handled.

Q: That was the emergency action committee, right?

PLUNKETT: Yeah. I'm not sure. I don't think we ever gave a label to it. The thing is the people who were supposed to be there were there and then a bunch of other people came down because in Dhaka on the weekend, there's nothing to do anyway.

Q: Well, what year was it?

PLUNKETT: I believe it was 1981. After that a few other things happened and we always knew something was going to happen if we were at home, because there were civil disorders. There's kind of a riot season in Bangladesh anyway, in early spring, about the time that university exams are supposed to take place. It's also the time between harvests and so people are coming in from the rural areas to try to find something to do to feed their families.

Q: Were floods a major problem?

PLUNKETT: As they say Bangladesh is an emerging democracy—every six months, it comes out from under water. Later on, in 2004, I helped to evaluate a very large disaster management program that we had started when I was there. Twenty years later I went back, and things had improved. But the thing about the Food for Work Program was just exactly that. Every six months all the roads vanish because they are mud roads. The rural

settlements are built up on mounds above the flood water line. Every year you have to deal with the flooding in the rural areas, and so we had a couple of projects that were going on. I was not part of that program. There was one program that helped to set up satellite surveillance, which would provide early warning systems for disasters. That was one of the AID programs that I think has born pretty good fruit over the years since then.

The other thing we had was attempted coups. We always knew when something like that was going to happen, because where we lived the people who owned the houses we were renting would call the military and the military would put up machine gun nests at the two entrances to our neighborhoods.

I can't say I enjoyed my time in Bangladesh. I didn't want to be there. I wanted to be more productive elsewhere, but I was able to do a few things that I think were helpful. Things I'm proud of.

There were a couple of project ideas I was able to kill. There was a lot of deep well irrigation that was not very efficient. I had some experience in Pakistan with irrigation and I like working on that topic. I went around and found out the reason they were not efficient was because these deep tube wells were powered by diesel engines off Russian truck motors. If a farmer got some diesel, he would go and give it to the manager of the irrigation pump and then they'd irrigate his area, but not the broader area that could have been irrigated. There was kind of a one-on-one thing. It was also hard on the pump motors. The other thing that was happening was that a very large number of shallow tube well pump technology was coming into the country privately, and people were picking it up. This was being managed and assisted by fertilizer distributors. So, farmers were getting these pumps and putting them in. About that time the deputy director decided that the mission should have a deep tube well project that would be efficient. I was able to go around and look especially at deep tube well sites. CARE was running a deep tube well project that worked, but only because the local CARE employee maintained the supply of diesel, so it was not sustainable. I was able to look at it and others and determine why they were mostly inefficient, and how they were overwhelmed by these shallow tube wells. We were proposing to put a lot of money into the design of a project that wasn't going to go anywhere.

I got much more interested in not just the design of activities, but the implementation. Implementation meant, increasingly with AID at that time, drawing up a contract or a grant for somebody else to do the work as AID technical specialists were vanishing as the budget shrank. I wanted to specialize in things that were done by locals for locals, and were done primarily from the point of view of operations and maintenance, just to make sure that the outputs and the results were what we had in mind.

That's what I learned while I was in Bangladesh. One other thing I learned about in Bangladesh, that I was able to follow up on, was the AID procurement system, and how things did or did not happen, and how long it took for them to happen, and what to do to make them happen. I got pretty good at that. As I said, I had this Technical Resource

project that had all these activities where I could actually get my hands on the money, find local talent, set them up in a way that made sure that they did what they were supposed to do, and get things done. It meant not only learning the system, but learning the ways around the system, which in any organization you have to learn. But AID had its own particular unique variety of that.

Q: Can I ask you a couple of questions on that?

PLUNKETT: Go ahead.

Q: Do you remember who the ambassador or DCM was when you were there?

PLUNKETT: I'll have to think about it. One DCM, I remember, was John Helble because he was somebody I had lots of chats with. Oh, Jane Coon. I think her husband was ambassador in Nepal at the time. That'll tell you something about AID and the embassy, I saw so little of them.

Q: I think that happens to all of us after a while.

PLUNKETT: Yeah.

Q: So, when you got there, Bangladesh was only about eight years old as a country, right? You got there in '79?

PLUNKETT: The 1971 war made them independent and I got there in the fall of 1979.

Q: So, it was still being born in a way?

PLUNKETT: Oh, well, yeah, it had its George Washington type figure, Mujib-ur Rahman. But he had been assassinated. He was replaced by General Ziaur Rahman. Zia had very strong associations with the Islamic world. And then he was replaced by Muhammad Ershad by the coup in 1981. I do remember one thing about General Ershad. In one of my stints as duty officer, I was chatting with the junior political officer, and happened to mention that according to my contacts General Ershad had a guru, or the Muslim equivalent of a guru, who was located in the district of Jessore. As it happened, it was also a rural electrification project area. Ershad went to visit his mentor at least once a week by helicopter. He was very concerned with his mentor and he followed his mentor's advice. I was dumbfounded to learn that this was not known to anybody in the embassy. To me, the first thing I would have done is go out there and lay a hefty bribe on the mentor. That's Harold Lasswell's approach to politics, who gets what and how. As a political anthropologist I'm particularly concerned with figuring out how influence is acquired in a culture. They may have followed up on that, but I don't know.

I did find it strange, especially because out in Jessore they always talked about the helicopter. They called them mechanical vultures because the general and his entourage

came in and of course had to be fed chicken curry. So, they ate up all the chickens and then went home. In Jessore, there were not a lot of roads. People rode bicycles along the trails, the irrigation levees. You could hire a guy to ride you on his bicycle, as a taxi, and those bicycle taxis were called Jessore helicopters, which I thought was cute.

I left Bangladesh the very first day my tour ended. I got married to Peggy in 1982. We were married and we had a child who was born in Bangkok. She left CARE. They offered her a transfer and a promotion if she'd give me up. She's regretted it ever since. We left Bangladesh in March or April of 1984. I thought originally we were going to go to Bolivia, because about then it was clear the South Asian jobs were disappearing. I had the Spanish and I always wanted to be in Latin America anyway, and I was going to have to leave South Asia. I put in for Bolivia and I was supposed to go to Bolivia. Then Wayne Nilsestuen, my old colleague from Pakistan, called from DC, and said, "We took you off that Bolivia job." They didn't ask me what I might prefer. I said, "Okay, what am I doing?" He said, "You're going to go on to an exchange program." "What am I being exchanged for?" "Because you have a PhD. There's an arrangement between AID and the universities we do a lot of work with, and so, you're going to go teach for a year." And I said, "Where?" And he said, "You tell us." This was not something I expected.

I very quickly got into communication with Colorado State University [CSU] where I'd worked on irrigation with the consultants in Pakistan and Bangladesh. Where else? The University of California at Davis, where I taught Peace Corps, and which was close to my wife's home. That's where she graduated in animal nutrition. We went back to Washington and camped with a friend while I negotiated with the AID Washington personnel bureaucracy, who had no idea how to process any of this information, or papers, or documentation or anything. I had to invent stuff, memorandums of understanding, and do all kinds of paperwork. After six weeks of living in my friend's basement, we got in our car and drove to Fort Collins, Colorado, where I was to teach in the sociology department half time and then in the anthropology department the other half. The anthropology department was mostly archaeologists, and they really didn't know what to do with me. The sociology department contact was the chairman and he was somebody I had worked with a lot in Pakistan, and he knew exactly what to do with me. We went out at the end of May for the irrigation management program that they ran for international trainees. I was part of that for the summer. The best thing I remember was academic hours and federal pay. It was a wonderful experience. One of the nicest things AID ever did for me.

I went from my Bangladesh posting to Colorado State University via AID, what's called an Intergovernmental Personnel Agreement [IPA], under which academics are brought into AID on a term limited basis. They decided that they would like to have some of us who had PhDs or training to go to the cooperating universities.

Before I get into my adventures there, I thought I'd wrap up a few things that occurred to me about the Bangladesh situation—what I learned there, what happened to me. The first thing that I want to mention is a shout out to the late Volker Tondorf, who was a personal

services contractor in the Dhaka mission with USAID. Not only was he the disc jockey at the Marine House for the weekly dances and celebrations we had there, but he was quite a clever fellow and a German trained engineer. For personal reasons, he was living in Dhaka, and he also was part owner of a bar in Bangkok. An interesting fella. One of your permanent-expatriate-type-of-person. What I will mention about him is two things: First, because I was receiving a computer magazine through the pouch, and of course, everybody knew what everybody got in the pouch, they decided that because of these microcomputers coming in the early 1980s, that I would be the person to set that up in the mission. At the time, we were just learning how to use the Wang word processors. Remember Wang word processors?

Q: Oh, yeah. Basically, a fancy typewriter.

PLUNKETT: Exactly. With gigantic disks. We had those Wang word processors. Actually, we did not have them. The embassy had a room full of them.

In my capacity as research and evaluation person, I started sending our FSN secretaries, and of course, anybody else who was interested, to learn how to work with them. They all knew how to type. At the same time, I was reading what the potential would be for microcomputers, way beyond the capacity of the word processor. The mission had some funds, so I put up a proposal to our management officer. However, she was sort of a stick-in-the-mud; if it wasn't her idea, she didn't like following up on it. She came back and said, "Well, if we're going to do computers, we can't just have them in the office." I was going to have them at people's desks like microcomputers are today. She insisted, first, that she bring somebody from the Philippines on TDY to provide expert advice. He also didn't know anything about microcomputers but knew about mainframes. He and she discussed, and we talked, and the upshot was, yes, we must have a special room constructed for the microcomputers. We ordered them, and they built the microcomputer room. We got set up and then everybody was eager to learn how to use them, not only the secretaries but also the other expatriate staff, direct hires, and so forth.

At that time, Volker Tondorf noted that down in the storeroom there was a bank of I don't know how many batteries because the management officer had managed to order a bunch of stuff for the telephone system and had mis-ordered them, so they were no use to anybody. They'd been sitting there for a year or so. Volker realized, "Okay, we hook these batteries up and we can power a whole bunch more microcomputers." Because of his initiative and knowledge, we were able to get all together, I believe, a dozen microcomputers, Apple II microcomputers, which I ordered because they had interchangeable disk drives, and once one disk drive failed, you could swap in another one. I wanted to be flexible, so we got the Apple IIs in place. Everybody started using them for word processing, spreadsheets, and everything you can think of that we now take for granted. That was primarily due to Volker's expertise.

The other thing he did is that Volker saved a hydro project with a screwdriver. There's a power supply for Bangladesh, which I'd worked on in the rural electrification project but

the generation of power came from, among other places, a big dam down by the town of Chittagong, which was difficult to access because there were terrorists down there. We had a hard time visiting, and I never did get there—past this town of Chittagong. But, Volker and a Bangladeshi engineer went down at the request of the Bangladesh government to look at the Westinghouse generators that were installed there, because they were not working right. It looked like Westinghouse was going to have to bring out new generators since the power being generated was only about 20 percent of what it was rated for.

They went down and did an inspection tour with the staff. They went all over the facility. At the end, they were up in the office. I was not there but that's what I was told. And all the time, Volker in his German accent was saying, "This is not right. This is not right." He kept looking and looking, and finally he looked over at a panel on the office wall and then opened the panel. Inside, there was a screw of some sort. Volker took the screwdriver which he always carried in his front pocket, and backed the screw off just a small amount. I have no idea what it was connected to. But immediately, the turbines started going and went up to 95 percent power immediately. Everybody loved it. And so, this was duly reported, and Volker got a commendation. In addition, the engineer who accompanied him on the trip got a cash award. The Bangladeshi government and people suddenly got a lot more generated electric power. I thought that was one of the neatest development stories I ever heard.

Because my story is about what I learned and how I learned it, there are a couple of other things to mention about Bangladesh when I was there. I had this Technical Resource project, as I mentioned, which was good for small activities, support activities, and it used the mission funds, so we didn't have to go back through Washington to do things that were short term or were small scale. One of the things that we decided would be a good idea was to try to develop capability in Dhaka for the sort of things we use think tanks for in Washington. So, we used Technical Resources and made an arrangement with a very bright economist at the University of Dhaka, and established, I forgot what we called it, a small separate entity from the University of Dhaka, contract funded through Technical Resources, to address development issues that we thought local academic capability would be suitable for. We set it up, and it ran for about a year.

However, one of the things I learned about it, since I did not directly manage it—that was handed off to a junior, new hire female in the capital development office. I was not around to oversee it. She did not monitor it adequately from a management perspective. She was looking at the technical side, but not the management side. Sure enough, problems came up with managing the funds, and using the vehicle, especially the vehicle, and other things that we provided, in ways that were not appropriate for the project. Once that came to the attention of the mission, she had to close it down. I think the mission suffered for that lack of capability afterwards. But instead of trying to remedy the situation, they just closed it down. So, I learned something about the chain of delivery services and how one maintains an ongoing monitoring capability and why one should do that.

Through managing the Technical Resources project and standing in for other project officers when they were on leave, I learned a lot about procurement, which I needed later in my career. As the research and evaluation officer, I was tasked with responding to cables from AID Washington from the centrally funded "research projects" there. They would send cables saying, "We have this wonderful project, so and so and such and such. We would like the mission to buy into it, so we can continue with what we're doing." I kept looking, asking how does this relate to the mission portfolio? What practical, immediate mission benefit is there if we put our money in? What do we get for it? Almost never was there any clear connection. So, I would write what became a standard response cable saying, "Thank you very much. It's very interesting what you're doing, and as we see the need for it, we will let you know. Goodbye." Little did I know, though, that shortly afterwards, I would wind up on the other end of that line, managing a centrally funded project in AID/Washington. So that was Bangladesh.

We went off to Fort Collins, Colorado and settled in late May, June of 1984. I became a participant in the irrigation management seminar where Colorado State through the Water Management Synthesis project with USAID provided a worldwide program of support to irrigation and agricultural management. We settled in, and I immediately made friends with a guy named Arthur Silver, who was an AID program officer. We had mutual friends because he'd served in Pakistan, and he had somehow managed to get himself into the irrigation management seminar. So, he and I, and about twenty eight officials from various governments, from India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, plus two from Egypt and two from Sudan, were there to learn about this multidisciplinary approach to irrigation management, which the project had pioneered. I'd worked with it in Pakistan. I had worked with some of the Water Management Synthesis staff out in Bangladesh, so I was somewhat familiar with the approach. But I had no engineering and very little economics training, and this multidisciplinary approach combined the social sciences, sociology, anthropology, economics, irrigation, engineering, agronomy, and public administration. It focused on the complex operations of very large irrigation projects.

The seminar was wonderful. Since I had a Colorado license to drive, I was recruited to be one of the van drivers and to drive one of the big trucks around on field trips, which was a great experience. At the end of the classroom session, we went on the road and visited irrigation sites in western Colorado, and down to northern New Mexico. We wound up in Taos, New Mexico where we looked at several sites and talked to the farmers. There were Hispanic sites and Pueblo Indian sites. And of course, those two groups were, as in the case with water in the West on any basis, at daggers' points. So, I watched my mentor for this, David Freeman, the sociology professor and chairman, as he diplomatically managed to get all these diverse groups to work together to explain their sites to our group. It was a wonderful experience. I learned a lot hands-on about how to do things in irrigation canals, and even more importantly, how to work with water user groups. Concepts that I'd picked up in Pakistan and refined a bit in Bangladesh, got refined still further.

Art Silver and I formed the South Asia van for the field trip. We had our Indian, Nepali, Bangladeshi, and Sri Lankan guys in the van which I drove. We would drive to the town where we were overnighting, and Art would find the nearest Mexican restaurant in this small Colorado town or New Mexican town. Art would jump out and check it out. Then, we would take our van crew there for meals. The poor devils had been in the dorms at Colorado State for I think three weeks before we started this tour. At the end of the first evening, one of the Indian guys, an Indian Muslim from Gujarat, came up to me with tears in his eyes and said, "Thank you, thank you. Because that was the first decent meal I've had since I got to the United States." What we did was go in and tell the Hindus, "You don't eat this," and tell the Muslims, "You don't eat that, et cetera." And they got spicy food for the first time. It went on like that. Town after town, night after night, different places.

We wrapped up in Taos, New Mexico, where we had a very good visit with the mayor of Taos, who happened to have written a book on the irrigation systems of Taos. I had been in and out of Taos traveling back and forth across the country camping out. I loved the place then, now it's gotten yuppified. Back at Colorado State, I taught in the irrigation management program. I found at the end of the summer, when the trainees all got certificates, it was never quite clear whether I was a trainee or staff until they gave the certificates out. Then I learned I was a staff member. For the rest of the school year, I taught South Asia courses in the anthropology department, which was otherwise very heavily stuffed with archaeologists. They really didn't know what to do with me, because I was a social anthropologist, and they were cultural or archaeology anthropologists—very different orientations.

Q: That confuses me.

PLUNKETT: Well, that's the problem. Social anthropology looks at social organization and behavior, and we see culture as the communication capability for managing behavior. The cultural anthropologists were all over the lot. They were looking at symbolism, design, and things like that. Frankly, I have never been able to understand what they do. Nowadays, they have gone off into postmodernism combined with social activism and the preachings of the French philosopher, Michel Foucault. They are even less capable of communicating with the outside world. On the sociology side, I helped to teach the irrigation management stuff, and I learned a very large amount from sitting in on those classes. I wrote a little bit, published some short articles, and participated very actively in a regional group of applied anthropologists, which I'm still a member of, and went to their retreat with my family. In general, I had a very refreshing and intellectually invigorating time as I was there for the year. I learned later that almost everybody who went on an IPA from AID never went back. They all went back into academics. But I didn't do that.

I want to mention that while I was at Colorado State University, I had the opportunity with the irrigation management seminar to review the Nepal irrigation management

project design. I'll come back to that when we're dealing with Nepal. But one of the things about it was we agreed that they had put in that design every bad idea that had ever come into an irrigation project. So, I was aware of that in advance of going to Nepal.

Q: Can I ask you a couple of questions about Taos?

PLUNKETT: Sure.

Q: I remember I read The Milagro Beanfield War trilogy. So that was before you ended up in Taos in 1984? Is that right?

PLUNKETT: Yes, that was 1984.

Q: So, those books were written just five, six years before that and they concern northern New Mexico, and how the Hispanics and the new Anglos were wrangling over water. Taos has a very big, very established Pueblo Indian community. I guess my question is, what did you learn from that experience and others? What did you learn about bringing social groups together, no matter where you are?

PLUNKETT: *The Milagro Beanfield War*. The film is much better than the novel in my opinion. I was just talking about that with my son when we were in Taos for the National Applied Anthropology Convention, no, I guess it was Santa Fe, and had a presentation by the author. I felt that the film was better than not only the book but also better than his presentation. What you have in northern New Mexico is a very complicated situation. Wonderful history. I love the area. But you have the original inhabitants, the Pueblo Indians, and not just one group, but different groups. They don't necessarily get along. Then you have the Hispanics who have been there since the 1500s, the Anglos, who started coming in the early 1800s, and then you must add the Californians. They just started coming in, but they're not a real problem on the agricultural side, except perhaps some of their radical views on water and environmental issues. Water use in areas of water scarcity is always an issue.

I was simply following the lead of Dave Freeman, my sociologist colleague, because he had for years been cultivating all of these people and was a known person. They had squabbles and arguments and huge amounts of legal cases. They were able to explain to the trainees and us how they managed their water rights, how the different kinds of water rights were managed, and how the frictions were to some degree mitigated, if not minimized. To me, this was just wonderful. I learned it, basically, in terms of three dimensions as far as development is concerned. I think I mentioned those before. You have the policy issues coming out of Washington, and the administrations change policies, and so forth. Then you have on the other end, you have the technology, which for irrigation is water management, engineering, and agronomy and so forth, that gets the water to the root zone and the crops out. In the middle, you have the human factor, the institutional dimension, which is multi-level. Again, going all the way from the national and state governments, or in the case of places like the Rio Grande, you're dealing with

Mexico and its claims to Rio Grande water and how that is or is not sanctioned by the United States in any case. These were issues that were taken up in the seminar.

But you have links all the way down through the state government and water user associations. There are two levels of those in places like Colorado, regional and then the actual irrigation system. Then, you have the individual users themselves in very complex relationships. It's multi stranded and complicated by different expectations and cultures in that sense. It's a great place to see. If you haven't been to Taos, you should go. When you go, you go out of Taos and down the road to the town of Truchas, which is where they filmed the movie, and then up the road to Chimayo. There's a famous restaurant called The Rancho de Chimayo. Don't miss that restaurant. The food is wonderful.

Q: Another question, as we go forward, did that help you in the future? In making sure big projects like that were designed well?

PLUNKETT: Oh, yeah. Very much so because I had the background for Latin America. This put me right up close for the very first professional time with Latin American law and custom with regard to water management juxtaposed with the Indian law and the states of Colorado and New Mexico. It was very educational. I was able to build on that through the rest of my career. I was in Bangladesh as a backstop 75, which was a social science specialist, but that backstop disappeared. AID decided that social scientists were more trouble than they were worth because they kept telling people things they didn't want to hear. I may have become a backstop program officer, or rural development officer, while I was in Colorado, but I have forgotten. My wife decided that we should have our next child in the States. Our first child was born in Bangkok, and that was a great experience. In fact, it was nicer than having one in the States, we found out later.

We looked for a position in AID Washington. I was able to find one in the Science and Technology Bureau [S&T] Rural Development Office. We went from Colorado State in the spring of 1985 back to Washington, settled in a suburb in Virginia where we still live, and I started working in the Rural Development Office which was located in Rosslyn. If you wanted to go to the AID office in Main State [Department of State] you took the shuttle over there. A little side story about old history. When I first came into Washington in 1963, my then mother in law was working in Rosslyn. Every so often I would come into Rosslyn with her. Then, I would get on the State Department shuttle and go over to DC. I had no official status with the State Department at that time, had no official ID to show, and no one ever asked for my credentials. That was what security was like in the old days, folks. Nobody ever terrorized us or anything.

While I was searching out the position in the Rural Development Office, I was lucky enough to learn about a project that was in design there. Once I was assigned there I was tasked with taking over the design of that project and carrying it to approval.

I went to the S&T Bureau. I also paid my respects to the S&T Agriculture Office in our building in Rosslyn and the Environmental Office as well. The project I was supposed to

be designing was called Development Strategies for Fragile Lands, or DESFIL. This was an idea that came out of USAID in Bolivia. Rob Thurston, the agriculture officer in that mission, said that there are issues with steep slope agriculture and the humid tropical lowlands in Latin America, so we need to have a multi-disciplinary approach from agriculture, environment, and rural development to see what we could do about that, and support with what the S&T Bureau could provide to the Latin American missions. When I got there, there was this group, which included rural development, environment, and agriculture, that sat around the table and talked about what we're going to do for technical support. That was the way the project was designed. There was to be this committee that would guide the project activities.

At that time, in 1985, the environmental movement had made its weight felt in Congress. Of course, the trickle down put pressure on little AID, this tiny statutory agency. I'm not sure exactly when the Foreign Service Act [FSA] was amended and added the section that was written by the head of the Sierra Club that mandated AID to pay close attention to environmental issues. As you know, AID is subject to all sorts of oversight by special interests in Congress and otherwise. Well, that came through the S&T Bureau. There were some very interesting and capable people in that bureau, and I worked very closely with a couple of them. I also went down to talk to the water management synthesis project officer in S&T/Agriculture and got him and a couple of other guys from there involved.

DESFIL was an interesting project because it was focused on Latin America instead of being worldwide. That made a lot of sense to me because it meant you could concentrate on specific issues. I had learned from looking at the S&T project cables in Bangladesh, that it was something that needed to be done. The Latin America Bureau put in partial funding for the project on a "Let's see what it's like" basis, because bureaus are somewhat stovepiped, and they didn't know quite what the S&T Bureau was going to do with their money. I had to become diplomatic and talk to them. The first thing I had to do was to go through the draft documents and write up the project documentation. I immediately saw it proposed "rule by committee." As they say about a committee, it's an animal with many legs and no brain. So, I immediately changed the term. Instead of being the Fragile Lands Working Group, it became the Fragile Lands Advisory Group [FLAG]. That was sexier anyway because it was FLAG, and everybody likes acronyms like that in AID. I wrote myself into the script, thoroughly, as the person who made the decisions about everything in the project design.

I had a very good boss, Eric Chetwynd. He was the head of the Rural Development Office. The first thing he did, when I came in, was to have me go to the short term procurement class across the street, in the USA Today building, so I was able to learn a lot more about how USAID's procurement system worked—or did not work, as the case may be. A lot of the S&T projects were cooperative agreements with universities or NGOs. I very carefully did the final design document for DESFIL. DESFIL is the acronym we used. In Spanish, it meant procession or something like that, but anyway, it was catchy. I wrote its scope of work as a contract, and got it completed as a contract.

Basically, contractors do what the manager tasks them to do. Cooperative agreements are agreements that the funding agency will go along with what the grantee would like to do. That makes it much more difficult to manage. So, I got that going.

Eric sent me on a tour of missions in Latin America to be familiar with their staffs and activities, using operating expense funds. I actually got to go on a TDY as a direct hire. I went to Costa Rica, Honduras, Bolivia, and Ecuador. That made my face known to the Ag [Foreign Service Agriculture Office] officers there because this was going to be a project that was supporting their activities. I learned what they thought of S&T and its projects, which was pretty much what I had thought about them when I was overseas. I came back and used what I learned to design a support project centrally funded for Latin America that turned into one of the more successfully funded projects of its time. That was DESFIL. I worked on that, and I supported other activities in rural development; backstopped those. Altogether, I was four years in that slot.

Let me talk a little bit about DESFIL, as an AID person trying to do development. I increasingly became aware that I was trying to do development and so were my colleagues, in a foreign assistance agency. Foreign assistance at AID was following the policy directives of the U.S. government in the various countries that seemed to be worth supporting, or where we were trying to influence their policies via foreign assistance as part of diplomacy. That's not necessarily development, as you know, because you could do a money dump, or you could do something else for a short term gain. But improvement of the quality of life or the income of people in the country was not necessarily the same thing.

For DESFIL, I was supposed to provide technical assistance to the Latin American, Central American, and Caribbean USAID missions. Having learned something from the procurement class, I very carefully built a trap door into the project design and into the contract. One of the paragraphs in the scope of work said something to the effect that, "In addition to whatever else, we can provide technical assistance to the missions for short term activities." I've forgotten the phrasing, although I still have a copy of the document buried in my files. That turned out to be very useful. I sent out a cable, but you could also talk on the phone to Latin America in those days. So, I called up the Ag officers and schmoozed them—did marketing. I said, "You've got such and such going on, how can we help you out?" They'd say, We want an agronomist or a forester. We were doing a lot with proper forest management in South America. We had some very good people on the contract, who had decades of experience in Latin America, and so the Ag officers said, We want such and such.

I had a regular procedure. I said, "Send me the document." We called it the PIO/T, project implementation order. Ordinarily, as documents came in, they went to the Latin America Bureau, and then were sent to the Procurement Office to the contract officer. They came up in paper copies, and then the contract officer, when he got around to it, sent it to a service that turned it into a Wang disk. Then, the Wang disk came back to the contract office, and then he would process it and then it went to the contractor as a work order. I

said, “First of all, send me the project documentation, the paper copy, and a Wang disk.” They would send that directly to me. I would walk it across the street to the USA Today building and put it on the desk of the contract officer. I then schmoozed the contract officer and found that this procedure shortcut a very long series of delays. My pride and joy was a request from the mission in Belize on day one, and I had technical assistance advisors on the ground in Belize on calendar day ten.

Q: Wow.

PLUNKETT: The Latin America Bureau was just dumbfounded. They had never had a centrally-funded support project that was responsive, so the word got around. Because I was doing this, not only through the Ag, but also the Environmental Offices, we had a whole bunch of things we could do for the Latin America missions under DESFIL. That worked out very nicely for us all. In those days, you had a core funding of a certain amount, and then the missions were able to buy into that by allocating some of their mission funding for it. So not only did the Latin American Bureau continue its funding to our core, but the Latin American missions, almost unanimously, as I recall, also bought into it.

The head of the S&T Bureau was Niall Brady, who was a fertilizer response scientist from Nebraska or South Dakota, and had been part of Norman Borlaug’s Green Revolution. Brady seemed to have no idea what the Rural Development Office did and couldn’t quite figure it out. Once or twice a year, we would have our office meeting with Niall Brady. He would always be shaking his head because he was seeing the figures and the DESFIL project was generating four and five times its core funding via country mission buy-ins. I was proud of it then, and I’m still proud of it. It got a lot done over time in various parts of Latin America. I got to go on a couple more TDYs, and participated in a good seminar in Ecuador, where we got together experts on subjects like raising llamas, and different kinds of crops. People who didn’t know each other, or if they did, they only knew them from a long distance. We put them together for two weeks in Ecuador. It was just dynamic, how much interchange of ideas and information came out of that. Later, I got to see some of the results when I did TDYs in Bolivia and Peru. So, that worked out well. That is part of what I did as part of the S&T Bureau that I thought I wanted to mention.

I was friendly with the very nice elderly gentleman, Worth Fitzgerald, who was the project manager for Water Management Synthesis.

Q: What do you mean by very elderly? I’m ninety-four.

PLUNKETT: Well, in those days, I was forty-five. He was probably sixty. Now I’m eighty-two. He’s long gone. But in any case, Worth Fitzgerald was his name. A wonderful gentleman. He oversaw the Water Management Synthesis project, and I arranged to have myself deputed to help him out, which I really enjoyed doing. It got written into my tasking, and we were at the point where we needed to do another rollover

water management project, Project Water Management Synthesis III, a worldwide project.

The first thing I learned was that Worth had a secretary or administrative assistant working with him on the project, and there was this big room full of boxes. I asked him about that. Colorado State University was responsible for sending out the project's research reports. What they were doing was boxing them up, and sending them to AID Washington to Worth Fitzgerald, whose assistant had to re-label them and send them out to the field missions. That seemed a little strange. So, I looked at the zip codes. Was it 20520, the zip code for the State Department/Washington mail pouch? But if you want to send something overseas, you send it to zip 20523. I got on the phone, called Fort Collins, Colorado State, to the person I knew there, who I had been dealing with for the previous year. I said, "Hey, I got an idea. You know, you're sending all these boxes. What you do is make a change on the address, and you send it to the USAID, whatever, at zip 20523." And she says, "What does that do?" I said, "Well, that's direct. Otherwise, it comes to Washington and then sits until somebody gets around to re-addressing it." That was something else that got cleared up.

Something I always felt comfortable doing is tracing the lines, process analysis, if you want to call it fancy—like figuring out how to get things down the line, where the bottlenecks are blocking and the ratholes where something is leaking out. In this case, within a few weeks, Water Management Synthesis was bombarding the missions with good quality research reports that were made use of by people in the field, including not just the staff but their counterparts and academics in those countries.

As you may know, bureaus tend to be involuted, and as an anthropologist, not an aggie, and a non-LAC staff person, I was obviously an outsider. But I was worming my way into becoming a project officer and worming my way into doing more and more with agriculture and natural resources environment. I didn't want to be a program officer, and that meant I wanted to be not staff, but line. AID was evolving, and health and population was getting most of the money, and not agriculture and natural resources. But my experience in Bangladesh and Pakistan with health and population was that you don't do interesting field trips. You go to your counterpart's office, you sit around, and they lie to you for a while about what they're doing with your money, then you go back to your office. That was health and population. In Bangladesh, I was schooled nicely by a health and population officer, Charles Gurney, who was very good at managing what he did. But I decided I didn't want to do that. I would take over an agriculture project when someone was on leave. And at Colorado State, I was more of an aggie. Then in S&T as a rural development officer I was still more in with the aggies.

So I started attending the Agriculture Council, which was a meeting of the agriculture officers from the various bureaus who met once a month. I just showed up. You know, it's one of these things that works. If you walk like a duck and quack like a duck, they assume you're a duck. So, I just showed up, and they assumed I was supposed to be there. That was the first time that I did that, but it turned out to be something I did a lot

later. Because of my participation in the Ag Council, I was able to spot my next assignment in Nepal in 1989. That's the next chapter in my career story. At that time, AID was rapidly drifting away from direct assistance and its own technical staff toward much more of a procurement agency. So, I was seeing that and being carried along with the tide as that started to change. One of the things that I did in the S&T years was—we still had social scientists that were the day before yesterday's fashion at AID. It was before the environmental fashion came in. Back in the 1970s, AID had hired a bunch of social scientists, and there were still a few of us in the agency. In S&T, I sent out emails to the people who were identified or wished to self-identify as social scientists. We had a little anthropology network to exchange ideas. I got us listed in the American Anthropological Association [AAA] register of departments and organizations for a couple years. It costs three hundred dollars a year. After the second year, the agency or the bureau decided they didn't want to spend such lavish funds for that purpose. While we had it, we had a very active network of social scientists, exchanging experiences and passing tips and hints around. It worked.

Q: That's what we're doing. We're listening.

PLUNKETT: One interesting thing is how little contact I had with State. LAC had offices in the State Department on the second floor. We had our offices in Rosslyn. On my level, there was almost no contact, or even much communication back and forth between what we were doing and what our counterparts in State were doing. I may have had a few discussions with desk officers. I remember several occasions that I made sure that the desk officer was aware of the communication we were having with missions as a matter of courtesy. I don't remember anything that they came forward with.

Oh, I will say one other thing about S&T. I was not a nice person; I am not a nice person. I firmly believe that my responsibility as a commissioned Foreign Service officer was to the constitution and taxpayers. There was a project in our office, another guy ran it, it had bounced around from several bureaus. It was a cooperative agreement with the University of Illinois on farming systems support. Farming systems was a hot topic at that point in development. I came in after New Year's holiday and found a stack of waist high documents in front of my door, because the guy had left, and he just piled all the files for that project for me to inherit. I started looking at it, and the more I looked at it, the less I liked it. It had been running for some time at the University of Illinois. They had been doing studies that showed interesting information.

However, I found almost none of the reports that were scheduled to come out. None of the research project findings was disseminated to anybody. They were doing academic studies, and the professors involved were using that for their purposes. But it wasn't doing what the project design called for. So, I got on the line back and forth with the professor. I also found the guy's definition of farming systems was, "We have all this information and agricultural extension, so we're going to disseminate it to the farmers." But there was absolutely no feedback built into that system. There was no, "We're going to ask the farmers anything about what they're doing." So, there was nothing coming

from the root zone. It was, we know best. Very familiar, harked back to my first project in Pakistan.

So, I said, "Okay, well, what are you doing to get the feedback?" Never got a response on that. After several months, we had our annual budget cut. Instead of doing what other offices in S&T did, which is a 10 percent cut on everybody across the board. I said, "You do that and you're punishing the good ones and encouraging the bad ones. If you have a dead dog, get rid of it." I started a very tedious process of terminating that grant. It succeeded, but I succeeded in the face of a lot of opposition. I had to write letters explaining things to senators from Ohio and Illinois. Niall Brady, the head of S&T Bureau, was a personal friend of the dean of the agriculture college at the University of Illinois in Urbana. I guess I didn't make a lot of friends by doing that, but I felt it was justified because it was not doing what it should have been doing.

Q: I have a question about the bigger picture of moving from direct work to more contracting work. Sometimes changes in procurement policy or delivery of development services is related to the beliefs of AID directors to administrators—

PLUNKETT: Changes are related to AID policy. Primarily, AID Washington policy responded to congressional earmarks. As I recall AID has many earmarks and directives, second only to the Defense Department, which is ridiculous considering their relative sizes. AID is very tiny, but at that time, there were a lot of people who had gone through the Peace Corps and into Congress, or they had a constituent NGO, or something like that, they insisted on AID providing assistance to.

If you've got something going, it may take years to develop lasting results. Reducing support so you can respond to sudden policy shifts meant less effective programs. On another activity I was involved in the '90s, our reengineering team was asked to do an assessment of the S&T agriculture programs. We found that something like 85 percent of all their funding was tied up in long-term agreements, mostly with universities. Whatever they were doing, they were not necessarily producing, but they couldn't get out of the agreements because of U.S. politics. The office had no flexibility. So that's the policy dimension I'm talking about. This is critical to understand even if you're a ground level grunt like I was. What you have to do is see what's happening and what you can put together to get what you think is necessary to get the results that the taxpayers should be getting.

Of course, AID is considered by the taxpayers to be an extravagant organization with a great percentage of the foreign assistance funding. In fact, it is less than 1 percent, but they have never been able to market themselves, that's how things are. In the same way, I don't think State does a very good job of marketing itself to the public, except those who may be overseas and deal with the consular sections. In any case, I do want to mention that little adventure, because I was able to build on that later on in my career. I mentioned the environmental lobby insisting on things being done that had the effect of not just using extra funds, but also hampering the implementation of activities and operations of

overseas projects. Some good things came out of it. Some support for some interesting environmental NGOs. We did some support with the Nature Conservancy in Ecuador that I think was productive. It's only productive for me if it's more than just an output. If you go back years later, you want to see that there's something there that wasn't going to be there otherwise. Otherwise, you're not doing development. You may be putting funds through, paying somebody's salary, and maybe putting their kids through school, but that's not quite the same thing.

Q: So, when you were able to finally be the designer of a program or projects, were you able to put into place some measures of impact and into the design at the beginning? That probably would've been an important aspect of your work.

PLUNKETT: That's a critical point because AID used a procedure for design, called the Logical Framework. You were supposed to go through it for your project inputs, outputs, and so forth. This was done for project documents. An elegant design got rewarded. Typically, it took so long to do the design and get funding approval that person who designed it moved on. Once it was designed and funded, the emphasis was on getting the funds and getting the money into the mission in competition with other country missions. Whenever you put the emphasis on the input, what you emphasize is what gets measured. The guy would come in to manage a project that was running, and what he did with it was maybe something else. As they moved away from direct technical assistance toward contracting, implementing meant getting the contract in place. That's called implementation. Whatever they did after that had less significance, which is counterproductive.

I was able to both design and run two projects in my career. I was able to tinker with some projects I inherited, make them work a little better. The first one, DESFIL, got a lot of buy-ins and was extremely popular. If you go to Latin America, some of the stuff AID got started down there was very effective. In fact, you don't even have to go there. Go over to your supermarket and you will see sweet onions and other kinds of things coming out of Peru and Ecuador. It took years to get that into place, and I had two contributions, through DESFIL and then later in the '90s with a project called LAC TECH [regional technical support project managed by the Rural Development division] out of the LAC [Latin American and the Caribbean] Bureau.

But the whole question of how to make AID, how to make foreign assistance effective in development terms is an issue that still has not been adequately addressed in my opinion. I think part of that was the fact that it was so bottom heavy with so many Civil Service employees in Washington, and political people. So, consequently, there's the usual problems with institutional memory and institutional direction. That is difficult because of administrative changes and policy shifts, and generally speaking, a lack of vision. It's my personal opinion, but I'm not the person to resolve that. I wonder who will.

Q: Today is November 19 with Sher Plunkett.

PLUNKETT: There seem to be four themes that I keep pursuing. The first is the fact that as I learned more about what was going on, I realized that the development organizations that I was concerned with were strongly input oriented, driven by funds and politics. One of the issues we had was doing development in that context. The second theme, related to that, is the distance in the communications and different orientations, which were subject to change every time the administration changed. This was particularly noticeable in AID when I was in the field in the fact that the procurement system that AID used was terribly matched to the needs of the field missions. In the same way, the earmarks that were laid upon AID, which I mentioned before, related primarily to domestic politics, lobbying, and putting people's noses in the trough back in Washington. I'll have a story about that later on in my Nepal experience. The fourth thing that was mentioned was the State versus USAID cultures. As I said, at that time, it was clear that at my level, there was no AID contact with the embassies. This worked sometimes to a great disadvantage to some individuals. That is something that, over the course of time, I worked toward changing, so that when I finally got to my last field post, I was a little more effective about that.

Finally, something that bothers me as an anthropologist, then and now, is the fact that despite the A-100 course State gives its people and the Foreign Service Institute training that their people go through for language, there still seems to be a continuing ignorance of the counterpart administrations and organizational cultures, in my case, in South Asia. Because I had studied a political machine in India and had a fair number of experiences as an academic there, I was pretty familiar with the British colonial administration and its aftermath. I found that when I was working in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and even TDYs in India that I had an awful lot of explaining to do to people who didn't want to hear it.

I would like to backfill a little bit. While I was in the Science and Technology Bureau, I got loaned out to do TDYs. There was a guy, Stephen Lintner, whom I had known before I joined AID. My second wife, the linguist, had him for a Sanskrit class in California. He then was a geographer out of Johns Hopkins and joined AID at the time that AID began developing this environmental concern in the 1980s. Stephen got requests from Pakistan for an exploratory study on a project design. There was an anthropologist associated with the Pakistan mission, but she did not like to leave Islamabad. It was very strange.

I went out on Stephen's recommendation, he knew me. We'd camped together in Shenandoah and elsewhere. I had a very interesting TDY to Chitral, in the very far north of Pakistan. That was the valley where I'd intended to do my dissertation research. I'd been there a couple of times while I was living in Pakistan. Because of the weather we couldn't fly to Chitral, so I went out and drove up to the Swat Valley with Ken Davis, who was the admin person. He was a Pakistani Christian, former member of the military—a Pakistani major. He and I and a driver went to the Commissioner's Office in Saidu Sharif to explain what we were going to be doing. I went in and this person was standing by the commissioner. I said something like, "You look familiar." He says, "I had dinner at your house in Islamabad." It turns out, he was the cousin of another friend, so

we did the big hug and so forth and this certainly made things easier for the commissioner to go along with what we were going to do.

Then, we went up to Dir, which was the next town up and stopped there for the night. There was a guy standing there, and I said, "Oh!" He was a medical officer there. He and I had gone fishing for trout when I was in Swat before. So, again, we had a big feast and jolly time. Then, we went on up to Chitral, over the pass, which is what we were supposed to be looking at, as the project had to do with digging a tunnel under the Lowari Pass. We got on the other side into the Chitral Valley and found we were snowed in. My friend, Ken Davis, happened to know the commander of the Chitral Scouts, the paramilitary group that was responsible for law and order in that area. So, we went to Drosh and stayed in the Scouts mess for a while. I was very pleased. I went into the mess, and it was the British colonial military army to the core. The best silver was there, all the mystery rituals were there, and there was a flag on the wall. I said, "Oh, that must be the flag of Umra Khan of Bajaur." Their jaws dropped. I was so proud of myself. There had been a siege in Chitral in 1897 that was broken by the British Army. It was a rebellion by this Islamic guy. That was his name and that was his flag. They couldn't do enough for us while we were there. Oh, we had more fun. I wound up being given the Chitral Scouts cap badge and a cap to go with it.

At one point, they drove us out to the Chitral airfield where two Soviet Army helicopters had landed. That's high altitude and the helicopters can't go quite that high. They were going around through the valleys, but the Afghan war was going on at the time. This was the fall of 1987. They got lost and had to come down in Chitral. These were not military. They're MVD [People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs] or GRU [Main Intelligence Directorate], intelligence types. So, the Chitral Scouts stripped the weapons off the helicopters. They were in the process of figuring out what to do with the crews and passengers until they could get them across the pass because you couldn't fly out or drive out. We were all snowbound, and we were snowbound for a week. But, during that week, I was able to go around and meet all the people I needed to meet and gather the information I needed for the project. I reported back to Gene George, the person in charge of it, who was another friend from Bangladesh in the Pakistan AID mission. After a week, we were able to squeak our way out and over the pass, barely passing stranded trucks. I then wrote up the report and flew out just in time to be present for a conference on Bangladesh environmental issues at the Smithsonian and the birth of our youngest boy. I really enjoyed the opportunity to do something useful and have an adventure at the same time.

Not long afterward, in about March of 1988, Stephen Lintner got me back out to Pakistan with Gene George to fill in for this lady who didn't want to do field work. I went to Balochistan, the southwestern part of Pakistan, to look at a proposed dam renovation and irrigation project. The hottest part of Pakistan, the hottest part of the year, myself, a Baloch-American economist, Naik Bozdar, and a driver, driving around in the desert for about six weeks collecting information. I have a picture—me looking at a long single shot black powder rifle that the guy in the middle had, with my bodyguards. They were

from the Kacchi Scouts, similar to the Chitral Scouts. We knocked around and interviewed people. We went to the village in the picture because there had been six people murdered there just a few days before. We went to see if it had anything to do with the ethnic frictions between the Brahui, the Baloch, and the Punjabi immigrants, that were part of the project concern. As it turned out, it was just a personal family thing. Somebody stole somebody's wife. So we had a nice chat, and tea, and left.

When we finished our field visits, we went up to Quetta. After lying out in the desert, looking at the stars for several weeks, talking about the wonderful food we were going to get if we ever got back to Quetta, we went straight to the bazaar and restaurant. We gorged ourselves on this mutton dish that Balochistan is famous for called *sajji*. Afterwards, we went to the AID office to call in and we couldn't get through to the mission. Then, we tried the radio and the phone, but we couldn't get through with anything, so we were concerned.

It turned out this was the day that the Russians in Afghanistan had organized a sabotage activity at the arsenal between Rawalpindi and Islamabad and things blew up. The embassy and AID and the people in Istanbul were bombarded with explosions and bits and pieces of things. Several rockets hit various parts of Islamabad. Three rockets hit the International School where my son had been until I left Pakistan. One of those rockets went across the stage of the auditorium, which was a safe haven for the kids, and across behind the kindergarteners. It did not explode. None of the rockets exploded. They just made a mess. But this was a big event in Islamabad. So, we stayed in Quetta until we were told to come back.

Q: So, this particular sabotage was related to showing unhappiness with what we were doing in Afghanistan or was it something else?

PLUNKETT: The Russians were unhappy with Pakistan and the U.S. because we were feeding Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence [ISI], strongly supporting the mujahideen at the time. In fact, as I should have mentioned, on the way up Chitral on my first TDY, we passed several ammo dumps along the side of the road. The road is very narrow. The mujahideen's idea of an ammo dump was an open square of ammo boxes with a nice fire burning in the middle, so that the guards could keep warm. That meant, as far as I was concerned, we couldn't get by fast enough. I had a marvelous time in Balochistan, even though it was over 120 degrees during the day there. It was hot.

Another backfill item is, I think I mentioned it, while I was in Pakistan, but this was also elsewhere. The idea was a Potemkin village, I think you know the term. In Pakistan, there were villages that were conveniently located near each of the major cities. When TDY people came out from the World Bank, AID, or new embassy people, they were taken to these villages. This was their field trip so they could get to know something about the country. They always went to the same place because it's convenient. You could get out there and come back for lunch. As the resident South Asia type, I was detailed to take people many times to these villages or up to the Khyber Pass, which was also a big deal

for the people out from Washington. I must have done that trip at least a dozen times. But the Potemkin village concept meant that the Pakistanis who lived there became familiar with their role in the scenario. Because I was there so much, I became friendly with some of the people in those villages. There was one fellow at the village outside of Peshawar. He was a retired officer in the Pakistan Navy and had a lot of land, which he was a little cautious explaining. He dressed in the traditional dress, turban, and all that. Whenever people came out, he was the model farmer. I found that this is a theme in the foreign assistance world. It's convenient for all sorts of people. One of the things that I learned then and in Nepal, especially, is how the recipient counterpart government, country, and people manage the foreign assistance role. I think that's something worthy of a lot more attention.

The final backfill. In Pakistan, there was almost an evacuation when I was there. There were civil disorders. I mentioned the bombs going off in Peshawar. In Bangladesh, there were regular civil disorders and riots that coincided with the hungry period between February and April. That also coincided with university exam periods, so there were students who were interested in participating. I got to be familiar with responses to, dealing with, and staying out of the way of civil disorder.

I had been managing agriculture projects for the Bangladesh mission when people went on leave. As an ex academic, I was detailed by the mission director to go to the Bangladesh Agricultural University, because they'd received a request from the Vice Chancellor that we provide assistance. In the past, AID had provided assistance, participant training, and degree training for some of the faculty there. So, I went up and had a long discussion with the vice chancellor.

I found that what he said he needed was more infrastructure and more labs. As I said, I had some experience in India and Pakistan. There was a similar academic culture and administration there. I talked with several of the faculty and found several who had gotten degrees in the U.S., at Texas A&M, especially, who were really hard put to deal with the lack of facilities that they had.

I found, however, that part of the problem was there was no overall management. Each faculty member who had a lab had his own lab. They did not share the lab facilities at all. They particularly did not share the lab equipment and expendable items, because those were also marketable outside the university. If they were not kept under lock and key, they disappeared. There was no hands-on maintenance, just as at the Bangladesh Agriculture Research Institute that I dealt with. If there was something broken, the faculty was not willing to lend a hand to fix it, even though they might know how. The reason they needed more lab facilities was so everybody could have his own, and they could pursue their own work.

Secondly, they had no concept of, for example, research being transmitted to extension or to farmers. I had a long conversation with a professor who thought never in his life would he stoop to passing research findings to a lowly farmer. He was working on soybeans. It

was interesting stuff that would have been commercially valuable and helpful. The university staff said that the dormitories were full, so they needed new dormitories. I learned that the reason the dormitories were full is because you could get admission to the university and be there for as long as ten or eleven years without ever graduating. In fact, one of the dormitories was famous because there was a gang of highway robbers that had been living there for years. Nobody could get them out, everybody was afraid of them. And the students got a monthly stipend. I went back to the mission and made my report and indicated how our own agriculture project would be of some use there. One of the most useful things they did in our project was to go around repairing lab equipment, and repairing electrical switches and things like that. They had one person who came out on a regular routine, so they could send him up and have him work there. But otherwise, I saw that unless there were major administrative changes, there was not much that AID could do that would be useful to the university. Then, I left. I don't know if they ever gave them a project or not.

I went off to Nepal with my family as the deputy agriculture office chief in the fall of 1989. At the time, Nepal was a plum post for AID. We had been working there since the 1950s. I learned that it was not a plum post for the State Department. The State Department people were there on their first posting, or for some other reason. But it was a great place.

People were just in love with Nepal, so there were a lot of permanent expats there. There was one story of a female ambassador—some twelve years before I arrived—who had formed a relationship with a Nepali. It was time for her to turn over her responsibilities and leave the country. They couldn't swear in the new ambassador because the ambassador could not present his credentials if there was a previous ambassador in place. She wouldn't leave. Somehow the embassy people were able to cram her onto the plane and fly her off to Bangkok. The new ambassador presented his credentials. Then, she immediately came back and stayed for a while. It was a very interesting situation that I only got to hear about sort of third hand. This was 1989. Shortly after I got there, the ambassador was replaced by a lady named Julia Chang Bloch. She had been in Peace Corps, AID, and several other bureaucratic positions as a sort of a quasi political appointee. She came to be the ambassador in Nepal.

I was the deputy ag chief under Rob Thurston, who I had known slightly before. We'd participated in a workshop together. He was the person behind the idea of the project that I ran successfully when I was assigned to the S&T Bureau, the DESFIL project on fragile lands in Latin America. He had been in the Peace Corps in Latin America, then he was at AID. He'd done a brief tour in India. He was a strong LAC person, but he was in Nepal. He was very sharp. We had an excellent relationship, which has sort of continued via Facebook through to the present. That was the most marvelous office for both the Americans and the Foreign Service nationals there. The mission was in a former palace, Rabi Bhavan, on the south side of Kathmandu.

It was a wonderful place to work. I had the last office in the building, with a window that looked out over the city, all the way to Mount Everest. In all the time that I was there, the whole four years, we never had an internal squabble or a problem or anything in the office. Everybody worked together and enjoyed each other. A lot of that was due, I think, to the unofficial chief FSN, who was our admin guy, named Nirmal Thapa, the hardest working person I ever saw in my life. He still is. He's now migrated here, and is working for a consultant. The Nepalis and the Americans pulled together, and things went extremely well. I have lots of good memories of that tour.

Q: Would you like to talk about the projects that you worked on?

PLUNKETT: I'm going to talk about the projects. As I think I mentioned, the embassy was across town, so we didn't see any of the embassy people in the first few months, except for the fact that the commissary was located on the AID compound. The embassy was up in the northern part. With exception of the American Club and the International Lincoln School and commissary, we pretty much led separate lives. It was noticeable the first few months. My older son went to the Lincoln School, which was barely a five minute walk from our house. The other son went to a Montessori school, which was about a minute closer. I was able to walk to work every day.

My responsibilities were to take over the irrigation management project, and a project called the Institute of Agriculture and Animal Sciences. Also, I provided support to the overall administration of the Ag and Rural Development Office. We had, altogether, about a dozen people. Before I went out there, because I had experience as an evaluation officer and was going to be posted there, I went out before we moved there to conduct the midterm evaluation of the irrigation management project that we had reviewed and designed at Colorado State. It had been put in place, contracted, and running for two years and a bit. The project officer had been dutifully following the outline of the original design. The project wasn't working well, so he very wisely called for a midterm evaluation. A team of irrigation specialists, many of whom I had met either at Colorado State or in various irrigation workshops, went to evaluate the project. The project contractor firm had been fired by the project officer. There was a serious question of where the project was going to go. I was able to go around and see how things were set up and verify some ideas I had about how things went. The evaluation report came out shortly after I arrived on site. One of my first tasks was to figure out what to do with that irrigation management project. I also visited the Institute for Agriculture and Animal Sciences down in the Nepal Terai, which was my first exposure to that area; the flat part of Nepal that borders India, which is also where most of the economy is located. That's where the large irrigation systems are located. I was able to get some familiarity with that early on.

About the time I started dealing with the project issues, the country broke into an uproar. This was in 1989 and 1990. We had what they call the "Democratic Revolution," and I was in the AID office. People were rioting in Kathmandu wanting to throw out the king.

Before I get into that, my Potemkin village theme came up. Nepal, at that time, had a king and a royal family. It also had a prime minister, various ministries, and a government style described nicely many years ago by a British political scientist named Morris-Jones. He wrote about India's political idioms, and the fact that India was capable of talking—that is to say, operating—in administrative, parliamentary, electoral, democratic, republican, developmental terms, and at the same time, able to talk in terms of traditional status, caste, and ethnic culture.

Nepal was the same way. It had its king and the ministries because so much of their revenue came as foreign assistance. They had a set of Potemkin ministries, each with a cash window. Donors put the money through the cash window, and each of the ministries had a connection to some member of the royal family. For example, as I recall, the social welfare ministry was feeding revenue to the queen. There were several princes, one who lived in France, as I recall. He had a deal going with a former French ambassador, I was told, for shipping antiquities. That caused the United Nations [UN] and some other people distress. The Democratic Revolution began and disrupted this whole thing. As I remember, we were told to go home from the mission, so I walked home. Then I got a call from the embassy admin officer. She said, "You have been volunteered to come to the embassy to assist during this time of difficulty because you had experience with these things in the past, and many of our staff are new here." I said, "Okay, but you have to send somebody to get me because they're rioting in the streets and throwing rebar through car windows. I really would like to have some transport." I remember vividly what she said, "But our drivers don't know where *you people* live!"

Q: Oh, no.

PLUNKETT: I said, "Well, you'll have to figure that one out." I walked over not too far to the house of the AID deputy director because she did know where he lived. The embassy vehicle picked me up, and we had an exciting trip through the streets of Kathmandu to the embassy, where I stayed for many hours with a number of people, including the DCM Mike Malinowski, who was a professional and a very capable fellow; he later became the chargé d'affaires in the Philippines and the ambassador to Nepal. My job was to keep the line open to the State Department in Washington. Was it the Crisis Center?

Q: Operations Center.

PLUNKETT: Yeah—

Q: They have a crisis management section. They will often set up a task force.

PLUNKETT: Anyway, I was talking to somebody who I think was probably a junior person. As the situation evolved, I would pass the word by phone, as we heard anything. Of course, Nepal is a tourist center, we had lots of tourists, trekkers, and a school group, as I recall. There were also random callers who called into the embassy to see about

services to American citizens. I particularly remember one guy who called, and he said that he was supposed to catch a plane out. He was at the luxury hotel, Yak & Yeti. He was at the Yak & Yeti, and he was supposed to get to the airport. He couldn't get a taxi to come for him, so he wanted the embassy to send a vehicle to take him to the airport. I said, "I'm sorry, sir, we can't do that. Transport is blocked. In addition to that, the airport is closed, so there are no planes flying at this time. So, I strongly suggest that you stay exactly where you are and listen to advice there. We will inform you as and when we have information."

That new ambassador was at the Yak &Yeti, circulating and talking to the guests there. She had earlier made it clear to embassy staff that she didn't think that this was a serious revolution, because her sources told her that it was just going to blow over. It turned out that her main source was her cook, who had relatives in the palace. So, she was disinclined to believe what her professional staff was telling her at that time. I think she learned better over the course of her tenure. Later on, I worked very successfully with her, in coordination with my mission director. We had the civil disorder going on. We were stuck at home. My family was home with no communications and hunkered down, waiting to see what would happen. Because I could walk through a back alley, a smelly, yucky back alley, to the mission, I and several of my colleagues simply snuck over there where we could listen to what was going on, because one of our FSNs, Sribindu Bajracharya, was able to tune his radio to the police channel. We would hear them talking and sending orders. They would say, "*Tiitaar Bhiitaar*!," which means, "Fire off the tear gas!"

One of the terrible things that happened is that our FSN personnel officer, Chitra Rana, a wonderful lady and very competent, was at home when some young men who were running from the police managed to run through her house. Police came immediately afterwards, and either deliberately or accidentally fired off a shot that hit her and shattered her leg. The mission director, who was also very new, Kelly Kammerer, had just come to the post. He had come directly from Washington. This was his first post overseas after many years as legal adviser in AID Washington, so he had all kinds of network contacts. He was able to get Chitra onto a plane and over to the States into rehab, and to have her fitted with a high tech prosthetic. We were all pleased with how that turned out. She's since migrated and has been working in Washington for a consulting firm for several years. I haven't seen her in some time. But, every so often, the old boys and girls from Nepal get together for a picnic. It's the only mission where I served that has continued that tradition after we all came back to the States.

After the disorder died down, the so-called democratic factions took over and got rid of the king. I was in the midst of figuring out what to do with the irrigation management project. I had encouragement from Rob Thurston and from the Deputy Director Stacy Rhodes, another highly qualified and very sharp guy. I looked at the original design and got the evaluation report. I said, "This is not going to work." The evaluation report basically said, here's what all of the problems are, and go do more of the same. That didn't make any sense to me. I spent several nights sitting at the Wang in my office,

completely redesigning the irrigation project. I cited the evaluation report where the verbiage was appropriate but ignored what they recommended. As I had done in Washington with the DESFIL project, I wrote myself into the script thoroughly, and got rid of items that had gotten stuck in the previous project. For example, the construction of a training center in the town of Pokhara for training irrigation officers. I learned from my contacts that it was the brainchild of the secretary for Water Resources and the Irrigation Office director. They were going to make a mint off that.

So, I rewrote that out of the script, reprogrammed the funding for it, and ended support for the hill irrigation systems that were run by the government very poorly, not irrigating much. There were a lot of farmer organization-run irrigation schemes doing well in the hills. I got rid of the so-called research component, that wasn't adding value. I did a whole bunch of things that got the project refocused and reoriented toward using water user associations as managers in the scheme, and not focusing on construction and reconstruction, because that's where the irrigation engineers in the government were making their money by siphoning off resources. Focusing instead on operations and maintenance of the schemes guided by what the farmers and the users association said needed to be done.

I put them in charge of field management. It would change the irrigation operations from an engineering construction focus to a water management focus, as I had learned through my dealings with the irrigation specialists at Colorado State, Pakistan, and Bangladesh in the Water Management Synthesis project—one of the best things that AID ever did. So, I rewrote it, rewrote the script. I had to figure out how to get it approved because, at that time, AID was focusing on Eastern Europe. If you said, "Well, I want to reprogram funds," the mission had to go back to Washington for permission to amend the project agreement. The project agreement had to be cleared in Washington. Any money that went back to Washington, they would say, No, because the money was needed to go to Russia.

So, what do you do? I got into the handbooks and the manuals. There's something called a project supplement. So, I said, "We'll call this a project supplement, and it can be cleared and approved at the mission level, not in Washington." Well, this had good and bad aspects because first of all, Kelly, the director, was new and a Washington person. He had been told by the Asia Bureau Administrator, Carol Adelman, who was also a Washington person, that all of Asia was now self-sufficient in grains, and there was no need to support agriculture and irrigation projects in Asia. So, he didn't want to offend his boss. However, Nepal is very different from India and other places in Asia. It is much more like Africa in terms of its economy and situation. It needed effective irrigation, especially the big irrigation schemes.

So, I had to jawbone a lot and Rob Thurston had to jawbone and we had to move Kelly to agree to it. We finally roped him into it, and then I went with him to the Water Resources Ministry and we announced, We're changing this project. By the way, the construction project in Pokhara has now been reprogrammed. The research component of the program, which the previous project officer went along with, which meant irrigation officials flying

to places like Bangkok and New York City and so forth], is also going to be reprogrammed. All of this got put into place. Then, a total stroke of luck. Two strokes. One is a wonderful counterpart FSN, Prayog Pradhan, working with me. The other is that with the Democratic Revolution, they had to have elections. The chief of party for the local contractor associated with the expatriate contractor firm, Lakshman Ghimire, stood for Parliament. He won his election, and then was appointed to be the minister for Water Resources. He was someone who was totally familiar with the project, with what Prayog and I had been trying to do with the redesign, and was fully in accord with it. The new secretary of the Water Resources Ministry also was somebody we knew very well. He was, I think, a lawyer in the ministry. In fact, the computers from the Irrigation Management Project are what they used to write the new democratic constitution for the Republic of Nepal. I think he may have had an important role in that.

So, we had these two officials on board. We went through top to bottom, from the basic policies of the irrigation sector all the way down to the administrative manuals. In his own handwriting, Minister Lakshman Ghimire went through and struck out where it said, "canal project" and put "water management project," all of this in Nepali. As a result, all these changes got put into place. It started rolling along. We did this, and we did that. We moved the center of gravity of the project from Kathmandu down to the twelve thousand hectare irrigation schemes along the border with India. I had been at Colorado State University and met a bunch of irrigation professionals. I had done some wrestling with AID procurement. One of the issues I had to face immediately is—if you're redoing a project and its contractors, who's going to do the work? Do you want to have a year and a half break while we go through a procurement process? The answer is no.

I happened to know that one of the irrigation specialists at CSU had formed a consulting firm. He was a Chinese American. His father had worked for FAO [Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations]. So, it was a minority consulting firm where non-competitive contracts could go if you could justify them. I got creative with my memo writing and justified it. We got the contract. I was delayed by two months because the regional procurement officer went on leave and his replacement didn't know how to function. He was sitting in Bangkok and not moving my paperwork. But when he finally did, we got the contract in place.

I was in direct contact with the guys in Fort Collins. I was able to have them send out a series of top quality TDY specialists to talk about: first, the general objectives of water management as opposed to irrigation engineering; and secondly, to develop the training, develop the documents and policy material; and then, the field operations and maintenance handbooks that were developed for each separate irrigation scheme. That meant the technical specialist walking with the user groups and the government engineer from the tail to the head of the irrigation scheme, writing down what needed to be done, plugging rat holes, and what the timing should be for the irrigation cycle. All this really technical stuff got written up as a handbook for each of the irrigation schemes in Nepali.

It also included how it was managed and going to be paid for, because the revenue from the irrigation schemes was paid to the State through a series of collectors down there. The money went to Kathmandu and did not return to the schemes. The farmers were often able to avoid the tax by paying off the clerk who was supposed to collect it. The users agreed to pay a separate fee. Those fees were collected by and went to the user associations. We had to wrestle with the banking system because the banks didn't want to open accounts for these rural people. We had to bring farmers to Kathmandu, and get the banks to give them a bank account. But, once they had the account, they could put their money in it. We had accountability procedures so that they didn't steal the money. That was what they were able to use to finance some part of their operations, including paying things under the table to the irrigation engineer if necessary, which we had a blind eye to. Everybody was happy and things worked beautifully with the Irrigation Management Project.

In 2011, I was in Afghanistan. I was in Herat on another irrigation project, out of retirement, and a bunch of Nepali irrigation engineers were hired by the firm I was working for to work on the project. They showed up. With them, they brought their materials from what they'd been doing for the past fifteen years or so in Nepal. I looked and it was all in Nepali. It was my stuff! That project had continued. As far as I know, it has continued to the present day. I would love to have somebody go and do a follow up study. I'd love to go and look at it myself. But the understanding I have of it is that it has evolved, and it is still resulting in major changes. The year before we put the changes in place in one scheme, the ten thousand hectares scheme was irrigating only twelve thousand hectares. The end of the year after we got it in place, it went to over eight thousand hectares. This means the farmers were growing cash crops for the Indian market instead of growing subsistence crops on dry fields for themselves. I'm proud of that.

Q: You should be. That was just in one year, so who knows what happened after that—

PLUNKETT: Well, another thing that came through this minority firm is the manager, the onsite expatriate, David Molden, whom I had known at CSU as a graduate student. He came out to be the field manager. He was absolutely excellent, dedicated, and continued to have an outstanding career. He's now the head of the research institute in Kathmandu called the International Center for Mountain Development. He worked for many years with the International Irrigation Management Institute, so he's had a successful career. My counterpart on this project, Prayog Pradhan, migrated to Australia, avoiding the disruption that happened later as the Maoists attempted to take over in Nepal and caused a lot of disruption. IMP was an AID success story, which has been sustained. Every so often, I'll try to find somebody in AID, and try to convince them to send somebody to do a follow up study, as an example of something that actually worked. That was the Irrigation Management Project.

The other thing I was responsible for at the beginning of my tour was the Institute for Agriculture and Animal Sciences, which was down in the Terai. I had known about it. My friend in Bangladesh, Chuck Antholt, when he was a Peace Corps volunteer, had been at

that institute. It was funded by AID for over twenty years. So, I went down to see it. One of our FSNs was one of the graduates. Over twenty Nepalis had been sent for PhDs from the institute over the decades.

The Terai had been a malarial forest. Almost no one was able to live there because of malaria. It formed a very effective natural barrier between India and Nepal for many years. AID in the ’50s and early ’60s had a series of projects that resulted in its deforestation, and in killing off most of the mosquitoes as malaria control. That resulted in a lot of people migrating to the Terai from the hills, and thus that’s where the economy had shifted. With Indian encouragement and World Bank funding, they had built these large irrigation schemes. I should mention that the World Bank also had a big irrigation sector, as did the Asian Development Bank [ADB]. The World Bank was totally focused on construction. Whenever Prayog went down to the Terai on a field trip, he would take pictures of these vast parking lots of rusting construction and agricultural equipment that had been funded by the World Bank. We tried on several instances to see if we could get them repaired and put back into service, but they were rusted beyond repair. The Asian Development Bank also was doing irrigation projects, so as part of the negotiations in the sector, we had to deal with the major donors. The World Bank was very upset with what we were doing, but the Asian Development Bank actually got on board. When our project phased over, they took it up and put a huge amount of more money following, as far as I can, the same design and that’s how it was able to maintain itself. I’d love to know more, but I’ve never been back.

I went to do a site visit and they asked for more funds. The Institute of Agriculture and Animal Sciences had no funding and support from the government to speak of. It was all totally funded by AID, and it wasn’t producing anything of note. As times had changed over the decades, it was not doing what the project was supposed to be doing. At that point Washington told the mission, You’ve got too many projects for your portfolio, so you have to cut back. So, I cut that project. It was an unheard of thing for that AID mission. All I could do was say, “We don’t have the money and we can’t fund you anymore. Go to somebody else and see if you can get funded.” I learned a lot about their administration that came in handy in dealing with other institutes which were all part of the Tribhuvan University national system. I’ll come back to that later on.

Those activities took up most of my first tour, my first two years there, and as I came up on 1991, AID was in trouble. There was a lot of concern in Washington about what to do with AID: roll it into State? Get rid of it? There was a lot of opposition to keeping AID. It wasn’t doing what it was supposed to be doing, and there were a lot of questions about what was going to happen. I was extremely worried about it. I had managed to bring a guy I’d worked with on DESFIL, Toby Pierce, a forester, who had been a forester in Haiti. I was able to get him on board and to replace George Taylor, the person dealing with forestry, whose tour ended. Toby came out about the same time that Kelly came out. They had known each other in Washington because Toby was doing things there.

The Forestry Ministry had two projects in our portfolio. One of the parts of the forestry portfolio was a project the official name of which I forget, because everybody in the office just called it the Hatfield Trees Project. The story I was told is that Senator Mark Hatfield of Oregon had a constituent who called him up and said, "Senator Hatfield, I have fifty thousand seedlings of poplar trees that I don't know what to do with. Can you help me out?" So, Hatfield called up AID and said, "Put these trees out in Nepal. You've got a forestry project there." At that time, the environmental policies and AID were in favor of fast growing fuel and fodder trees that would help out farmers and rural families. The person in the mission, George Taylor, was a trained forester. He understood ecology, biology, and growing trees. He and the other international foresters in the country agreed that this was a very bad idea. First of all, they wouldn't flourish, and second, they might be bringing diseases and parasites that would damage other forestry products. But this cut no ice with the Washington people, so they started the project over George's written objection.

By the time I was out there, the contractor for it was Argonne National Laboratories—I think their facility is in Oregon. The Forest Ministry in Nepal did not want the project at all. They objected and blocked it as best they could. They refused to give a visa to the contractor in charge. He had to come up on a visitor's visa from time to time from Bangkok. The project developed forestry plots in two areas by commandeering the land from the farmers. They took it over with no compensation. This didn't cause anybody to be happy either. So, we had this nasty project that was backed by Washington, by a very influential senator, and thus it was not to be touched. George Taylor was a very good forester and had documented his objections in great detail. But the Hatfield trees were out there. That was one of the things that Toby Pierce had to deal with.

The scheduled midterm evaluation for the project came up and we said, We have to do that. AID mandated midterm and final evaluations. We evaluated it and verified that it was terrible. But Kelly, the director, had come from Washington, and he had actually been the person involved in negotiating with Senator Hatfield on behalf of AID. He said, "You will not kill this project. It will cause us all kinds of problems." So, we had to work around that. Argonne National Labs brought out someone who tried to sweet talk Kelly, because she knew very well what the rest of us were trying to do. She managed to alienate Kelly. He came around to our point of view. We worked on a very definitive evaluation report on how the damage had been done, and what could be done to save the project. We cancelled the Argonne contract and rolled the project over into an arrangement with the United Missions to Nepal [UMN], which was a consortium of missionaries that also did development projects.

As part of their takeover, the first thing UMN did was to go around to the farmers and say, We're not going to steal any more of your land. We're going to get rid of these trees. We illustrated the evaluation document with pictures of the Hatfield poplars after X number of years of growth, with local fodder trees next to them. The local trees are this high, and the Hatfield trees were this high, and were obviously not doing well. If left alone, they would probably just die off. We struck a very strong relationship with the

UMN, and were able to do a number of other activities with them. The Hatfield trees project converted into a community development project with several activities, not just the trees, and helped to establish UMN nicely in the field sites. I would love to go back and see how that has continued as well.

Nice things happened in Nepal. But we had some head knockers to get them done. Kelly was an interesting person to work with. He's placed his interview here. I'm hoping that ours will interweave. He had a Peace Corps background in Ecuador, and then he was a lawyer at AID, very responsible positions, but decided that he would like to have field experience, so he came out. He made a serious effort to learn Nepali, meet and become friendly with the FSNs, and to see the country. I think his Peace Corps side came out very nicely over the years. He turned into a very effective director, and that worked out in the long run to be good. He really didn't understand at first what I was trying to do with irrigation, and he wanted me to not do that. He came around and realized after. I saw him at a retirement function many years later, and we reminisced about that. I did a number of field trips with him; he was always extremely effective and interested and durable. At one point, Kelly, Toby, and a bunch of us got stuck in the high mountains in a place called Muktinath. The plane didn't fly because of bad weather, so we wound up having to trek six days back to Pokhara, which was great fun. Another time, he, John Gunning, who was the Nepal desk officer, and I did a trip to RaRa Lake near Jumla, in a non-tourist area. Boy, did we suffer! Our porters got lost. We got lost. It was rainy and snowy, and we had no food. Quite an adventure.

Q: So, you're doing these pretty important rural development projects at the time that there's a new democratic government, right? And so, did you feel like this work really contributed to their success?

PLUNKETT: It was hard to tell because the government of Nepal was very weak then. It didn't extend itself much outside of Kathmandu into the countryside. I think that, particularly in the case of the Irrigation Management Project, there were a lot of effective relations that were built between the bureaucracy and the people in the area. I can't document that in detail but judging from the fact that things continued, I think that was something that worked out well. In the same way. I was working on some of the other stuff.

On the health side, they were doing very traditional things with the bureaucracy. But I don't feel that they had a lot of field feedback on what they were doing, so it was very similar to what was going on in other projects in South Asia. Karl Deutsch many years ago wrote a book on nationalism and social communication that influenced my thinking a lot. If you look at the empires of the Moguls, the Chinese, or whatever, because of infrastructure deficiencies, the state didn't effectively reach very far. In Bangladesh, it was the guys that came out in helicopters and ate all the chickens. In India, the presence of the state was the guy who collected taxes, who was able to be bribed or run away from, and the police who came around and ate the chickens occasionally. Then, the very occasional visit by a politician. When I was doing my dissertation research in India, I

drove around with the politicians, visiting six or eight villages at a time and giving speeches.

In Nepal, at that time, there was one telephone at the district headquarters, so if you were not friendly with the district officer, you didn't get to use it. It's changed a lot with the growth of communication capabilities, but I don't know how that's changed things. I don't think there was a lot of feeling in the rural areas of being Nepali as opposed to being a member of a tribe, maybe not. Nepali is a kind of bazaar trade language that people speak, in many cases, as a second language, including in Kathmandu, where the local language is Newari.

The situation in Nepal gave me an opportunity to build on my skills and learn how to work around systems and get things done. It turned out to be a lot of fun. In 1991, Kelly called me and said, "We're told we have to cut back, so we're cutting the deputies' positions. You're going to have to go back to Washington for reassignment." I was having such a good time at my job, and AID was in such turmoil. I had concerns about feeding my family, and what I was going to do with myself. That was a very uncertain situation. At one point, I was on the phone trying to see what I could come up with. The personnel system was not effective. My colleague, Toby, had personal issues and had to leave. He went back to the U.S., and I took over his forestry portfolio in addition to whatever else I was doing. Since I was already familiar with the projects, I was able to expand into doing some things with the Institute of Forestry Project and the Forestry Ministry Project.

A couple of other things came up at the time—a special initiative came out of Washington that was added to our program. It was a competitive thing. Mike Calavan, our program officer, wrote a proposal for the special initiative and it got accepted. We're going to do micro hydro projects for electrification. That was a Program Office idea, and Kelly decided that our office should carry it out, so I got that dumped on my desk. I went off on field trips working with the Peace Corps, UMN, and a bunch of small organizations. We managed to do some interesting micro hydro projects that included one for the very famous major shrine for all Hindus in South Asia, a place called Muktinath near the border of Tibet. We would fly up to Jomsom and walk two days to get to Muktinath. I was up there several times. This very bright UMN Nepali engineer realized what we were doing at Muktinath, which is a tourist town for pilgrims, and they had electricity through a hydro facility there. By tinkering with it, we were able to double the capacity of the electrical output for the project. Meaning, the rest of the town was able to get reliable electricity.

These are Tibetan ethnic people, and they are very good at managing in a cooperative way. For example, when one part of the electric grid went down they turned off the whole system, so nobody would be disadvantaged. Anyway, they worked very well. They knew what they were doing and managed it extremely well. The engineer says, "What about this turbine? Water goes through and it's heated up. It's wastewater. So, why don't we just run it over and put it into a reservoir tank for showers?" Because this is right on the trekking trail, it comes down from a high mountain pass, and these foreign trekkers walk

right by it. So, we built this set of showers, and the trekkers could come down and for twenty rupees, I think, they got a five minute hot shower; the first one they might have had since they left Kathmandu. The last time I went up there, I went to talk to the guy that ran that facility. It was about two in the afternoon, and he had already received, I think, sixty-five people's showers. This money went into the common pot for improvements in the town.

Q: It sounds like a term I heard when I was in college—"appropriate development."

PLUNKETT: That's exactly it. The thing is the guy said, "Oh, turbine hot, hot water. People. Yeah." I was able to put it together. A bunch of other things like that happened. I want to talk a little bit more about working with the ambassador because that came up at the end of my tour. It wasn't in connection with an AID project, but in connection with a World Bank project.

Q: Was it the same ambassador the whole four years?

PLUNKETT: I think so. Again, I'm kind of vague about the embassy side of things until I get to my tour in Peru.

Q: When you're really on the country team—

PLUNKETT: One real regret I have is that I never quite crossed paths with an ambassador named Anne Patterson.

Q: Oh, yes.

PLUNKETT: Well, Anne Patterson's husband, David Patterson, and I were in Sunday school together. Anne was just a few years behind. I think her name was Anne Wood in those days. I had vague memories of her as a shy sophomore in high school. I did a TDY to El Salvador, when I was in the LAC Bureau, just before she arrived. I had to leave when she just got there. I never quite connected with her. She was in Colombia and a bunch of other places. She was one of the outstanding performers. I don't know where she is now.

Q: She's doing a lot of things, but she's on our board of directors of ADST [Association for Diplomatic Studies & Training].

PLUNKETT: If you ever get a chance to tell her, tell her Sherry Plunkett still remembers her from Fort Smith. David was in the Foreign Service for a while, but he left and was doing something else. He and I sat on these hard chairs in the Christian Science Sunday school together for some years.

Q: We'll try to get your message to her. You went to school with her?

PLUNKETT: No. She was behind a couple years. My memory is that David was a year younger. I could look it up in my high school yearbook. I do remember the Sunday school part.

I'm wondering whether my memory matches the actual person. But in any case, I will see if I can find my high school yearbook. Our reunion was canceled for this year. Otherwise, I'd have gone there. I could have picked people's brains.

Q: Okay, today is December fourth, 2020. So, Sher, I think you just finished Nepal.

PLUNKETT: Let me see if I can wrap up and then cover a few things maybe I didn't touch on there. I was in Nepal from 1991 to 1993. As the deputy chief for the Ag and Rural Development Office, I had direct responsibility for the irrigation project and I assumed responsibilities for the three forestry projects when the person who was managing those had personal problems and had to leave. At that time, AID was in organizational difficulties back in Washington—the question of whether to continue it, should it be rolled into the State Department, or what. We had the usual leadership problem in Washington. I was concerned about what was going to happen. The political appointee, Carol Adelman, I guess it was, had indicated that we had too many staff for the size of our portfolio and the mission. And so, I was going to be let go and reassigned. However, when Toby Pierce, the person who was running the forestry projects, announced that he would like to leave, I took over his portfolio.

So, I was doing just about all of the natural resources activities, forestry, irrigation, environment, that became increasingly fashionable in AID, and we had to respond by doing something of that sort. And so I stayed on until 1993. Part of the problem was AID was statutory. It had been established by Jack Kennedy. It always had this rather awkward organizational relationship. And it was always resented by the State Department, because we were Foreign Service and they were Foreign Service, but we had higher ranks than most State Department people did, because we were hired on a different basis. I took over the forestry portfolio. I had the Institute for Forestry, the Forestry Development Project, and I had the Hatfield Trees Project that I covered last time.

The main thing about the Hatfield Trees Project was it was politically imposed, not developmentally sound, and we had to figure out a way to get rid of it. And we were successful in doing so. I also managed to give a grant to the International Union for the Conservation of Nature. One of our officers' wives was a trained and credentialed natural resources, environmental person. So, we gave a grant to IUCN in Nepal, and they began doing small projects that expanded our activities in the environmental sector. The other thing I did while I was in Nepal, in my capacity as deputy, was we had a relatively new, first posting AID officer who was managing the agricultural research project. The agriculture search project had been rolled over and operating under the same sort of name for a couple of decades.

This project sponsored a number of agricultural research activities, including several field stations. When it came time to review it, I put on my evaluation officer's hat and realized that this had become a sinecure for the Nepali bureaucrats in the Agriculture Ministry, but it really wasn't producing anything. Very similar to something I'd dealt with when I was in the Science and Technology Bureau. For example, they had a sheep farm where they were supposed to be breeding advanced varieties of sheep, and this had been running for several years. Somebody—I think it was Dan Miller, who later joined AID and had a good career, but who was just visiting friends in Nepal—who visited there pointed out that the surrounding farmers who were raising sheep were not taking advantage of the sheep varieties from the farm. In fact, the sheep on the sheep farm were in miserable condition. The reason was that they were officially Nepali government sheep. That meant that they kept official Nepali government hours, from ten until approximately two. The people who were supposed to take care of them came over around ten o'clock, let them out to graze. And then put them back around two o'clock in the afternoon. And they were skinny and miserable and disease ridden, and the local farmers didn't want anything to do with them.

In the same way, they had a wheat farm for testing different varieties of wheat. All around the wheat farm, people had changed over the years and were growing something else. It was supposed to be the wheat area from Nepal, but they were not growing wheat there. However, the guys who lived on the experimental farm there were drawing salaries and growing wheat anyway. Also, there was really no sense in the ministry of the need for any kind of extension activities. This was similar to the project I'd killed with the University of Illinois back when I was with the Science and Technology Bureau, it was the same sort of thing. There was no sense that there was any need for any feedback or communication with lower status people. So, we reshuffled that project, but we kept it going. But I still remember the look on the face of the Agriculture Ministry official who had been basically responsible for the distribution of patronage through this project to his colleagues, when he found that his position had been eliminated from the amended new project.

Several other things were done to tighten it up and focus it and insist that there be connections to the purported clientele and feedback from them to manage it. This was somewhat educational for the new AID officer, Alex Dickie. I think this was his first posting, although he was a second generation AID person. His father had been a mission director in Africa. He was very ambitious and very capable. We had a very good time with that, which seems to have paid off in his later career. When I last saw him a year or so ago, he was the mission director in Mozambique.

The other interesting thing that happened while I was in Nepal was that we got word from the AID Washington political appointees that for the size of our portfolio, we had too many staff. We were supposed to do something about that. I got together with the Chief of the Ag and Rural Development Office Rob Thurston. Over beer on his patio, I said, "Well, in Bangladesh, I had this project called Technical Resources, and it was an umbrella and underneath it, we had a lot of 'sub projects.' But the funding came in at the

top to Technical Resources. We were able to act very flexibly with the activities below it. So why don't we kill several of our agriculture projects and develop a new single project?"

We did, and we called it SIRE, I forgot what that stands for. AID loves acronyms that are catchy. But we rolled up the agriculture research and irrigation and forestry projects into this one project and they became sub projects. I've forgotten the details of how I rewrote the documentation. But by doing that, we turned them all into sub projects. Oh, and one other thing about that. We had it managed with the Planning Commission as our counterpart, not a single ministry. We had an arrangement where the Planning Commission and the cognizant line ministry representatives would meet twice a year, and would determine the progress made by each of the sub projects, and that would determine their funding. What this did was give the Planning Commission some control. The Ministry of Finance also participated, and acquired some control over the line ministry activities on our projects.

And so, we suddenly had fewer projects from AID's point of view, more flexibility, and more control to be able to evaluate and guide and encourage the Nepali side of the equation to do more of the things that the projects were supposed to do. The SIRE project then became our main office project in the AID mission. On the ground, it was the same old thing. But as far as Washington was concerned, it was much more tidily managed. I was really proud of thinking of that with Rob, and helping to set that one up. My understanding is it continued for some time.

One area that we had in Nepal, I didn't get involved with. We had a separate, regional project, the Rapti Project in the Rapti River drainage zone. It was a whole bunch of agriculture and other kinds of things going on there that were separately managed by Chuck Strickland. I rarely got over to see or do anything there. I was only there a couple of times. The reason I mention that is because shortly after I left the Maoist insurgency began in Nepal and caused havoc for years and years there and they're still having to live with the problems that started in that Rapti zone.

One other thing—while I was in Nepal, I got a cable from the Science and Technology Bureau. I was the deputy, I caught the cables from that bureau. Various things happened, people would be coming out on TDY or something. I remember one person coming to study elephant genetics, who brought equipment that Nepali customs thought was a firearm. We had to jawbone a lot to get that settled so he could do his research. Another was a shipment of large Israeli goats, intended for breeding. Somehow, they disappeared once they got to the research facility—eaten, we guessed. But one of the requests I got was for buy-in to the Development Strategies for Fragile Lands project. I had designed and managed that project when I was in Washington, focusing it specifically on Latin America. Why? Because, a) the different regions have different needs and concerns and, b) you could easily communicate with Latin America due to the time zones. It was nearby, to get there between sunset and sundown, sundown and sunrise. You could call

them on the phone and be in touch. I left and the S&T Bureau handed the project over to somebody without any background or experience.

This was the first indication I had that the project that I had designed that was working beautifully was in difficulties. Because of the poor management of a nicely designed project, it died and was never successful in other parts of the world, other regions.

I left Nepal in 1993. Rob Thurston had left to become the agriculture chief at the mission in Indonesia, and Jim Gingerich—another friend from before—replaced him. Rob called me from Jakarta to ask if I would like to come be his deputy there. Despite my ignorance about Indonesian culture, I liked the idea of working with him again and accepted. Half an hour later, Rob called to tell me the mission had decided to cut that position. Then, half an hour later, he called to tell me the mission had agreed to keep the position, but only if it was assigned to a woman. I told him I was too old for a sex change operation, so couldn't make the change to take the job. I learned later that an FS-03 woman, with little experience, got the position, which was an FS-01 position. I had been filling FS-01 positions as an FS-02 for some time, and I think I would have done well in Indonesia, especially since Rob had to leave the post due to family health problems and I could have taken over as office chief. I understand that the person who took over left the agency fairly early. I was looking at other posts, and didn't see anything particularly interesting, but then I had personal reasons for going back to the USA—my father was very ill. I wanted to be close to the family, I wanted to be back in the States, and secondly, AID continued to have problems. As an organization, there was a question of whether it was going to be closed down or something was going to happen to it. We didn't know what, and the idea of being out in Nepal and unable to look around for ways to keep my family fed, clothed, and housed was worrying, because I had very little faith in AID's personnel management system, based on not only my own experiences, but other people's as well. So, I looked and looked. In 1993, I was able to transfer from Nepal to the Latin America Bureau.

Q: Before we move on, I wanted to ask you about a story that you hinted at. You indicated there was a story you want to tell us about the ambassador, a female ambassador in Nepal.

PLUNKETT: Julia Chang Bloch.

Q: *Yes, you hinted last time a couple of times that there was a story to tell about that.*

PLUNKETT: Julia Chang Bloch had been a sort of a power in Washington. My boss, the director, Kelly Kammerer, was very, very wary of her. I won't say he was frightened of her. But he certainly was wary of her and concerned about her, because not only was she the ambassador, but she was someone who, in her own mind, since she'd served in several different posts in several different parts of the government, considered herself an expert on development. She came out just in time for the democracy riots in Nepal. We wound up having her on the State side most of the time I was there. I went several times

with the director to meet with her and we traveled together. We would be in some other part of the country and she would come out. We actually struck up a fairly decent relationship, which turned out to be handy.

The World Bank was going full speed ahead to construct a very large hydro project up in the mountains. There was some concern about this in the Nepali government. They came in and said, Can AID have a look at this and see what they're doing? This was actually my contact in the Water Resources Ministry. A lawyer who was the secretary, and also, as I think I mentioned, the former local chief of party from our irrigation project who had become the minister for water resources. And this hydro project was being done through another agency rather than the Water Resources Ministry. It was being pressed very hard by the World Bank, a very huge loan. They were concerned about what was going on, and we had a good relationship with the Water Resources Ministry. I mentioned they used our irrigation project supplied computers to draft the constitution for the new democratic government of Nepal.

I used to meet with the water resources minister and water resources secretary. Occasionally, we simply had a regular breakfast together because their office hours didn't start till ten or eleven, my Nepali colleague and I from AID would meet our friends at the breakfast place near their office, and have a nice chat and breakfast. This was a tactic I'd learned in Pakistan and India, that you didn't try to talk to people in their offices about serious business, you talk to them before work or after work, but not during office hours. And in any case, they had used project-supplied computers for the new constitution. They said, "This has a funny feeling, there's something going on here." At their request, I was able to get a trained engineer who was also a finance specialist, to come out. We had him come on our irrigation project funding as part of the revised policy documentation that we put in place for the irrigation project.

He began looking at what was going on between the World Bank project manager back in Washington, and the Nepali organization that was doing the hydro project in the high mountains. He found that there was a whole bunch of funny business going on. For one thing, they had done the environmental impact statement for one pathway for the trucks and materials to get to the site. And yet, they were actually going to go in an entirely different way. I took his report to Kelly Kammerer, and he realized this is something we needed to deal with. We had a very, very good presentation by the TDY energy and finance specialist. Then we took it to the ambassador, and got her on board to block, at least temporarily, the construction of this very large dam using World Bank funding. Because for one thing, it was not going to do what they said it was going to do, and for another, it was going to be done in a way different from the way they said it was going to be done.

I remember working rather closely with the ambassador on that, and, and to some degree, we blocked it. We also pointed out that there had been studies of several different sites for hydroelectric projects to be put into place. Ultimately, we were able to delay it. I gather they finally built that project after I left. One of the things that happened was that through

our good relations with the Water Resources Ministry we were able to get revisions in the policies for hydroelectric power, and encourage other agencies including the United Missions to Nepal to construct hydro power sites, in different parts of Nepal. When I lived there, Nepal had a very small amount of available electric power. But as a result of what we did, a number of hydro sites were developed, and the supply of electric power in Nepal and, especially in rural areas, as I understand it, increased dramatically. I felt good working with Julia Chang Bloch on that.

Q: That sounds like a good result. So, what did she do? Did she report back to Washington and the U.S. government representative to the World Bank and talk about the problems there? Oh, did she block it in Nepal?

PLUNKETT: We blocked it in Nepal. We had the U.S. representative abstaining on the vote for that project. And ultimately, I guess the pressures built up and they went ahead with it. Not sure. But I remember coming back to AID Washington and seeing my friend, Toby Pierce, after he had come back, and we went to see Robin Raphel, whom I had known in Pakistan. At that time she was the assistant secretary of state in South Asia.

Her main concerns were Pakistan and dealing with the Taliban. We had a reminiscent chat and then told her what was going on regarding the World Bank project. I want to at least mention that aspect of our dealing, not only with the government, but also that we were able to encourage the United Missions to Nepal to do more in the field of hydro power. Did I mention the PREP project in Nepal? Some money was floating around in AID Washington, and our program office sent in a proposal. PREP was the acronym for Private Rural Electrification Project. UMN had a hand in that.

I left Nepal really concerned about what was going to happen both to myself and to AID. I was able to get the post of deputy director for the Rural Development Office in the Latin America Caribbean Bureau. I was there in 1993 and 1994. My main responsibilities were working as deputy to Wayne Nilsestuen. I had known Wayne when he was in his first posting as an AID agriculture officer in Pakistan back around 1975. When I was first in Pakistan, I was in the Agriculture Office and that was his first posting. We traveled a lot together and had some interesting times in the field in Pakistan. He was the office chief for the Rural Development Office in the LAC Bureau.

My job as deputy included overseeing a project that the office had been managing for some years, called LAC TECH. As it happened, LAC TECH was the Latin America project that had provided funds for my DESFIL project when I was with the S&T Bureau so I was familiar with the people in the office. I had several specialists, many on loan from the Department of Agriculture, and the rest on contract from Chemonics International. The LAC TECH project provided short term technical assistance to the missions in the Latin America and Caribbean region. We had people on an arrangement with the Department of Agriculture. We also had a number of people on a contract with Chemonics International. My job was to manage the LAC TECH project, and I realized that it could be managed in a fashion similar to the DESFIL project I'd run before.

I immediately started getting on the phone to the agriculture officers in the Latin America Bureau missions and checking to see what they wanted, when they wanted, explaining how they were supposed to set up buy-in capabilities to go with the core funding we had. That started running great because we had adequate funding, and we began doing all kinds of things. If you go to the supermarket in January, February, and start looking at the mangoes you'll see stickers that say Peru and Ecuador, and so forth. One of our LAC TECH staff, who was from the Ag Department, Pest Control branch, APHIS [Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service], was able to jawbone between the Environmental Protection Agency, the Department of Agriculture, and the various agricultural producers, the idea of importing mangoes. Agriculture said, You have to process them a certain way, so they will be safe, and they won't be carrying insects and microorganisms that will damage crops in the U.S. The Environmental Protection Agency said, Oh no, if you do that, that violates environmental issues, and God knows what will happen. Anyway, Bob Bailey was able to negotiate through this minefield, and get agreement such that we now are able to import, not just mangoes, but all sorts of fruits that now come up during the offseason in the U.S. from South America and Central America and the Caribbean. I felt kind of pleased about that.

Q: So, is that by using a water process?

PLUNKETT: I think it's a water bath with different kinds of chemicals. I forget the details. The LAC Bureau used LAC TECH and made a movie of what we'd been doing to support commercial agriculture development in Central and South America, including things like flowers from Ecuador, as I recall, and mangoes and sweet onions from Peru. So next time you're in the grocery store, just check the labels in the fresh produce and see where it's coming from. Oh, and coffee.

Q [MATTHEWMAN]: On mangoes. I saw that in Honduras. And I just left Guadalajara a few months ago and there was a big operation there. APHIS has like 150 people going around doing it. So, APHIS is a USDA [U.S. Department of Agriculture] agency.

PLUNKETT: Yeah, Bob Bailey was from APHIS, under an RSSA, I think it was, to the LAC TECH project.

Q [MATTHEWMAN]: *So, that was the start of those programs?*

PLUNKETT: Well, I think it was developing momentum before, but I think we got it going more effectively. I'll take a little credit for pushing that one.

That was in, anywhere from 1993 to 1995, somewhere in there. Then Wayne left. I was thinking I was going to move up to be the office chief there, but there was some politics involved that I was not part of, and another person was selected for the post. Frankly, my nose got out of joint about that.

Just at that time, Al Gore, Vice President Gore, was pushing a concept with President Clinton. They came up with an executive order. The first time I had ever heard of an executive order. It's now fashionable, I guess. It was for customer service. All U.S. agencies were required to develop a customer service plan and to act to improve customer service. Well, of course, this was a problem with the bureaucrats. And especially in Washington, because I remember many of the Civil Service people in AID said either that we didn't have customers or "Aren't our customers Congress?"

However, I had my root metaphor for the delivery of development services and goods. The one I mentioned earlier, I think, about the irrigation scheme going to the root zone of the plant. I was unhappy where I was, and this was coming up, so, I jumped ship, and became the customer service officer for the agency in the Management Bureau, part of a task force that was sponsored by the administrator. A small group of us looked at agency reengineering. Al Gore was arguing that we needed to re-engineer the government so that it would be more responsive and run better and more efficiently, and so forth.

So, there I was, a customer service officer, nobody knew what the heck that was. And nobody knew who the AID customer was. So I sat down, and I wrote out the customer service manifesto for the agency's overseas customers, and it became the official policy that our customers were the people at the end of the chain of delivery services for development, goods, and services. Whether these were commodities like wheat going to Bangladesh or technical assistance, like we were providing through LAC TECH or whatever. And the way that we would become more effective and efficient was by tracing the links through the intermediate linkages, NGOs, and host country governments and so forth, to see where the bottlenecks were, or see where the ratholes were, and to ensure that what we said was supposed to happen happened as a consequence of effective feedback from the customers.

Q [MATTHEWMAN]: *And Brian Atwood was the administrator?*

PLUNKETT: Yeah, your memory for that level is much better. The only administrator I can remember easily was Andrew Natsios, who did the Big Dig in Boston. He was effective. Atwood, I never thought was all that effective. But I never had much dealing with that level. We always had to deal through the political appointees. The political appointee in the Management Bureau was a very contentious fellow named Larry Byrne. Everybody hated him, but he saw what we were doing, and he pushed what we were trying to get done, so some of it got done. I worked with a number of other people on that. But my customer service approach got to be very popular. We redid the AID handbooks as a part of the re-engineering, as part of the customer service activity I wrote for the little newsletter we sent out with advice by "Uncle Sher." I went on several TDYs. They were extremely well received, because in missions, people said, Yeah, that's what we do. For example, I went to the South Africa mission and said, "Let's hear about your projects." There's a project, elementary education. So, I said, "Let's go find the root zone."

We went over to Soweto, outside of Johannesburg, and looked at the schools that were there and talked to the teachers and talked to the students. Then we went to the next level from that, and the next level after that, and so forth, all the way back up. Each time we checked what they were doing, what were the issues. And at the end, we had a customer service plan for that particular sector. I did training similar to that in Poland, and I did it in Jamaica, the Dominican Republic, and other places that had volunteered as "re-engineering labs," as part of customer service activity.

It's kind of sad, actually, what happened to it finally, because it didn't get cast in concrete in the documentation that the missions were supposed to provide. Instead of being an active plan created and updated by the line offices in the missions, the mission management said, Washington wants another document. Somebody in the Program Office writes a customer service plan, and we send it to Washington, and that's all that's required. The plans were concocted without more than the most cursory checking with the people that, in the links for delivery, actually were doing stuff in the line ministries.

When I was posted to Peru in 1998, I asked where their customer service plan was. It turned out that a person in the Population and Family Planning Office, who was known to be a good writer, had written up a plan and passed it directly to the Program Office to be sent to Washington. It was a document that was sitting there, but it was never shared around, much less made use of. It had no input from the line offices and project officers. Very common bureaucratic practice, and terrible management. It seems that most of the people who move into higher management in AID are out of program offices or legal, rather than the line, agriculture and health and so forth.

Q [MATTHEWMAN]: I know you didn't like being a program officer.

PLUNKETT: I found myself in the Program Office when I was in Pakistan, because I was the evaluation officer. Program Office is the staff side rather than the line side of the USAID mission. Instead of looking outward, it looks inward and backward, inward to supporting the activities of the mission director and backward toward providing the required documentation and reports and so forth for AID Washington. That means that they spend a lot of time looking at budgets and reporting on pipeline issues and drafting routine reports and cables and all the requirements that come from earmark concerns from Congress. Sometimes the cables will be drafted in the Line Office, but they go through the Program Office for clearance. When I was in Bangladesh in the Program Office I was the research and evaluation officer. So, I got all the cables that came from the universities, who wanted to do stuff with our money with the Science and Technology Bureau. My bailiwick was to respond to that sort of thing.

Q: *I have been listening with fascination, but something that bothers me about dams—Oh, I mean, for God's sake, a dam is not a small project, and we've been building dams for thousands of years. It must be somebody who evaluates these projects back in Washington. This is going to do what you want it to do?*

PLUNKETT: The thing is AID moved away from doing infrastructure projects. When I first went to Pakistan, I was at the Tarbela Dam, a very, very large project, billions of dollars of expense there. So, I had some familiarity with that. The World Bank and the other large agencies, the Inter-American Development Bank and the Asian Development Bank, took over doing those very large infrastructure projects. And it really wasn't AIDs official business in Nepal to do what we did on the hydro project, but we were asked by the ministry, by high officials in the ministry—I should make it clear—to look into something that was being overseen by another government agency in collaboration with the World Bank.

Q: *I am interested in the problems of bureaucracies, when they get involved in things, in many ways they get involved in things that are well, sort of beyond their competence. I mean, okay, you got this project, and you've got a dam. And so, you get involved with a dam, even though it's not your bag, and all of a sudden, you know, everybody's getting into the act, and things aren't coming out too well.*

PLUNKETT: I took a commissioning oath as a Foreign Service officer. Even before that, I felt that I was representing my country. If they were using my tax money for something, I had at least some responsibility to take note of it and to make clear that something was going on.

Q: Of course, you did.

PLUNKETT: So, me as a citizen, me as an anthropologist, I don't know. So, I got into it more than once, and I think that's why I got so interested in the whole business of service delivery in development. I wanted to do something that would make a difference, personally, with my life, and AID was letting me do it. And in the hydro project case, that was my tax money going to the World Bank.

Q: *Yeah.*

PLUNKETT: Oh, I should mention that in addition to that, I had several conversations with the Asian Development Bank representative in Nepal. When I left, we were able to turn over funding and increase the activities for the Irrigation Management Project. ADB took that over and continued it. Years later, I found the Nepali irrigation engineers in Afghanistan were still using what we had developed for the irrigation management project in Nepal, working actively with farmer organizations, not just through the bureaucracy, and not just doing construction and reconstruction and siphoning off resources as the engineers did previously.

I was involved with customer service for three years. The reengineering team developed a bunch of stuff, and we replaced the AID handbooks. In 1998 it looked like the momentum for the activity was disappearing. We had a lot of pushback because we were trying to encourage streamlining and improving the procurement process, and the Procurement Office violently resisted. So, it was getting to be much more difficult. I went

to the Latin America Bureau personnel officer I knew and said, "What do you have?" She said, "Well, you can be the deputy director in Jamaica. Or you can go to Haiti, or there's this funny job in Peru with the Alternative Development Program, which is State Department anti-narcotics money. In Peru, they've been complaining that something needs to be done, because they're not moving the money. It's a big pipeline."

So, I said, "Peru!" I jumped ship and that was my next posting. I went to Peru in 1998. And perhaps that's what we should take up next time. I may have some fill in later on the customer service thing, because I thought it might be of interest to you. The concept, I am convinced, is extremely powerful. I started learning all sorts of stuff that people learn when they do MBAs when I was doing it, to try to educate myself, and I found that when I went to Peru as the deputy in the Alternative Development Program we were able to do what I had been preaching.

Q: *Okay.*

PLUNKETT: Well, I'm kind of a hard head, not a particularly nice guy, and I'd get into affairs like the hydro project dam in Nepal. And plugging up the rat holes where people were siphoning off development resources is something that I always liked to do and specialize in. I was able to learn a lot when I was doing my dissertation research in India about how that kind of thing worked. And even before that, I was at Arkansas Boys State when I was in high school and heard the then Governor of Arkansas, Orval Faubus, talk about his response to people's concerns about patronage and clientage. That led into my interest in political anthropology, and that led to AID, and that led to Bangladesh and Pakistan and Nepal and Peru. If I think about it, there seems to be a thread there.

In Peru I had a lot of leeway, and a lot of resources. Because when I went down there, the mission management said, The problem is that we have this gigantic pipeline, it's State Department money, and it's not getting spent. State Department is not happy. So, this was when I started working closely with my State Department colleagues, and that made for a very interesting tour.

I have one question. If there is anything that you'd like me to emphasize or dwell on, please let me know. I'd like to make sure this is of interest to our audience.

Q: *Well, I look upon people, particularly about the projects and all about how you would look at a project when you came into it, and figure out was this thing working or not? You know, there has to be a kind of method. I mean, you look for nails sticking out or what?*

PLUNKETT: One little thing that happened in Bangladesh is, there was a project to dump a lot of money into the government of Bangladesh. AID projectized it instead of just dumping it, and called it the Bangladesh Rural Finance Project. The Program Office worked with the line offices to develop project papers. They were kind of sales documents to make a persuasive case for what was proposed as well as how we're going to do it. My job was to write the social impact, socio-economic impact section, on how

this project was going to affect small farmers or the intended end-users. I went to the project manager, who was an engineer in the Capital Development Office in the Bangladesh mission.

I said, "I need to know what the project is all about. What are you going to do?" He said, "No, you don't need to know any of that. Just write something." I was a little taken aback; I was still fairly new with this kind of thing. So, I sat down and wrote a section based on what I understood the project was for, and then indicated possible points where it might cause problems, as the guidance directed. I was writing from ignorance. I said, "This might affect small tradesmen," or whatever. The project manager was absolutely furious. Having not provided me with any information, he didn't like what I'd written, because it indicated that there might be a problem, and all this was a money dump. They had no intention of implementing anything, but they didn't want to say that. Very interesting bureaucratic politics stuff.

Q: *Oh, yeah.*

PLUNKETT: I learned a lot. Later on when we did the re-engineering, I was concerned to make sure that that kind of thing could not go forward. As a U.S. citizen, I didn't think that this was a good way to manage the U.S. taxpayer's money, without any accountability. I'm still kind of chuckling about that.

Q: *This is one of the problems that runs through, you know, talking to people who served in Iraq and all. How we could throw money. We'd hand out satchels of money. Yeah. That was it. We take care of our buds.*

PLUNKETT: That kind of job was offered to me. I had just retired in 2003 when Iraq came along. I had offers to go to be chief of party for contracts in Iraq, and I just couldn't see myself doing it in good conscience. I'm sorry I couldn't, because I would have made a lot of money. But I didn't speak the language, and I knew what was happening. I just couldn't see myself doing that kind of thing. And so it goes. A lot of people made money. I don't think it did the Iraqis much good. I'm sorry I didn't get the money. But I don't think I would have been in a position that I could have influenced things the way they should have gone. I got to see it in Afghanistan as well, in 2010. I did go there, but not as the chief of party. That's a whole other story.

Q [MATTHEWMAN]: It is December 11, 2020, and we are continuing our oral history interview with Sher Plunkett. So, Sher, right now you are in Washington once again, fixing all the mistakes that they made while you were away. Correct?

PLUNKETT: Don't I wish! That would have been so nice. This was the Clinton administration period, I got back to Washington in 1993. I was the deputy office chief in the Latin America Bureau Rural Development Office for a couple of years. AID was in difficulties, Brian Atwood, the administrator, went to Al Gore and offered the agency as an experimental lab for what Al Gore was pushing as the re-engineering of the U.S.

government. The Clinton administration issued a bunch of executive orders, one of which had to do with each and every government entity was to develop and implement a customer service plan: how do we serve the U.S. public? I know that the State Department had problems with the concept, trying to define who their customer might be. Because with the exception of American services in the Consular Section, it was a question of who they related to.

In the case of AID, Brian Atwood's initiative was trying to salvage the agency. It was obviously not a very efficient agency. It was extremely small. So, a re-engineering team was formed in the Management Bureau under the assistant administrator whose name was Larry Byrne. His wife was a legislator in the state government of Virginia as I recall. And Phyllis Dichter Forbes, a former mission director, was the head of the re-engineering group. There were several sections. We were supposed to look specially at re-engineering and improving the procurement system, the personnel system, and the budgeting system for the agency. Most of the funding went toward designing computerized management—it was a complete flop and wasted millions of dollars. Customer service was tacked in. I heard about a meeting where they were going to talk about customer service and invited myself to the meeting, just out of curiosity. I learned that they were trying to figure out what to do about customer service, because we had to have a policy and plans, and we had to do something. So, I volunteered myself. Because the other issue was the situation in the Latin America Office. My office chief, Wayne Nilsestuen, was moving on. And it was decided that I was not going to replace him because they had a person who was more part of the old boys' network in Latin America. So, I said, "Okay, rather than stay where I am, I will try to move on. I would like to come back and talk about the LAC TECH project," which was what I was chiefly responsible for as well as my duties as deputy.

Q: I don't think we talked about that in depth last time, so that's good.

PLUNKETT: LAC TECH was the support project for the Latin American missions. It was intended to provide immediate short-term support for activities which were high priority in the missions. I'd had previous experience with it when I was in the Science and Technology Bureau. In fact, LAC TECH funded the LAC Bureau's part of the DESFIL project. So, I set up a similar kind of arrangement. I had five or so technical specialists, mostly seconded from the Department of Agriculture. I got in touch with missions and proceeded to set up the same kind of rapid response arrangement we'd had in the past with DESFIL. That worked out extremely well. The LAC missions started putting their own money into LAC TECH support. We did a whole bunch of things. I think I mentioned the work that the APHIS specialist and his team did. I'm so proud of that every time I eat a mango in Springfield, Virginia. We put on a major forestry conference, which resulted in some serious forest policy changes throughout Latin America.

Q: Do you remember where the forestry conference was?

PLUNKETT: Yes, in a hotel in DC, I remember there were two project forestry specialists. There was a young lady who was the assistant to the forestry specialist. The forestry specialist left suddenly because his father-in-law started an enterprise that he wanted to be part of. He left saying, "Well, you can't do this forestry conference now because I'm leaving and nobody's capable of putting it on." And the very pleasant, modest, and competent young lady who was the assistant didn't know quite what to do. I said, "You can do it." She went ahead, put it all together, and she ran it. We had the major people in that sector participating. It was really well received. A lot of good things came out of it.

Q: Is it just AID people coming or was it people from the LAC countries?

PLUNKETT: These were forestry experts from all over—international agencies, LAC countries, UN and I've forgotten how many different places. All I did was keep a gentle push on her back because she knew more about the topic than I did, by far. She continued with AID and continued a decent career. Before I ran DESFIL, a project addressing steep slope agriculture, fragile lands. We did a lot of activities on biodiversity in forests and reforestation and forest management. Josh Dickinson was the DESFIL forestry specialist, a very engaging and very competent fellow.

Q: I was just wondering if there was any as part of that conference and the practices that came out of it or the projects whether they started to talk about financial techniques to try to encourage reforestation. Because Costa Rica is one of the most successful in the world at that.

PLUNKETT: Oh yeah, several things were initiated. One is fuel and fodder trees, fast growing trees, and the other is sustainable management of forest resources so you understand the timelines and the markets. When I was in Nepal, I took over the forestry projects there when my colleague had to leave. One of the first things we did was an evaluation of the Institute of Forestry project, which trained forestry management people. I was able to use the example of the disaster of another Nepali Institute to rejigger the management of the Forest Institute, and to some extent the Forest Ministry, to focus on operations and maintenance, as opposed to just dumping money in and for construction. I should mention that the vice chancellor of the university system in Nepal saw what we did to develop a strategic management plan for the Institute of Forestry. He insisted that the same thing should be implemented in the other institutes under the umbrella of the university system. I had to leave Nepal before that happened. I've always been curious how far that went.

The FSN, who started that, was our office manager in the mission, and a dynamo. This small wiry guy, Nirmal Thapamagar. He was the unofficial leader of the FSNs in the office. I sent Nirmal down to the Forestry Institute. He looked at things there and his initiative resulted in the development of a strategic plan. We found that several of the faculty were on deputation to FAO [Food and Agriculture Organization] and to other places, and not teaching. We had the institute start to charge any institution that took one

of their faculty an overhead fee, just like Colorado State University does when their faculty consults, and we looked for other ways to create revenue and effective management. Years later, the Dean of the Forestry Institute and I had lunch when he came to Washington on some business. He was going on and on and on about his strategic plan. So I said, "Yeah, you really worked out that plan well." There's a quote to the effect of, "The master doesn't talk. He acts. And when he's finished, the people say, 'We did it ourselves.'" That is the essence of what development is supposed to be like, I think. I was always proud of that. I always wanted to see what happened in Nepal.

I was now in the Latin America Bureau and had a LAC TECH contract with Chemonics. It also had advisors seconded from the Department of Agriculture Foreign Research Service. They were a lot cheaper. They were RSSAs. I forgot what that stands for. Their overhead was considerably cheaper than the Chemonics people. We ran into funding problems. In that period, everything was supposed to go to Eastern Europe. The LAC Bureau was suffering. And the LAC Tech project, even though we had contributions from the missions, was suffering. I was able to reduce our running costs and increase our services through the RSSA arrangement. Chemonics was not happy with me at all, but I figured that my customer was the Latin American Bureau and its missions.

I realized I was not going to take over as office chief. I'd been the acting deputy office chief in the S&T office, I'd been deputy in Nepal, and had been deputy in the LAC office. I had done well, and several of my bosses had been promoted. I'm not going to be happy here under a new office chief. And secondly, there's this reengineering thing going on. They're talking about something I think I know something about, so let me get into it. So, I talked my way into becoming the customer service specialist in the Management Bureau, under Phyllis Dichter Forbes, for the re-engineering team for the agency. All of a sudden, I was operating at agency level.

One of my tasks was to help to redo the handbooks that AID used for all its operations. Customer service planning was part of that. I got to write the policy document that defined the missions' duties for overseas customers. I did that simply by following my root metaphor from irrigation, that the plant root zone has to receive resources on time, in time, and with the right quality. I said, "USAID's overseas customers are the end users of its projects, goods, and services. And they receive those through a series of links, each of which has to be seen as an intermediate customer." It's like going from producer to wholesaler to retailer to the consumer. By the way, I should mention the farming systems project I killed when I was in S&T, I killed in part because it had only a one-way direction for improving farming systems. It had no consideration for input or feedback from the farmers. I was shocked when I learned that. So, over time, I guess I learned a few things and was able to put them into place. In this case, drafting the policy.

My official boss was Richard Byess. Richard and I had met when he came to be the program officer in Nepal. That's another story. But Richard and I had been neighbors and good friends and our kids had taekwondo lessons together in Nepal. Anyway, Richard and I hooked back up in the re-engineering office.

In addition to putting out documentation in Washington, I developed a working relationship with Liz Baltimore, who was the customer service person for the AID/Washington offices. She came from the AID Public Affairs Office. She and I had a great time working together because she knew lots and lots of the AID GS mafia. She was an African American so she knew lots of the African American secretaries and the people who remained around as people above them came and went. She and I traveled to Kenya once on a training mission. I put together a training plan for how to prepare a customer service plan, and how to implement customer service and build it into line activities. I went to Jamaica, the Dominican Republic, Poland, Madagascar, South Africa, to Kenya twice, once for the regional mission and once for the Somalia mission, which was located in Nairobi, and I may have missed a place or two. In addition Liz and I held training sessions in various offices in AID/Washington at their request. Our training was, basically, you go there, you say this is what we're talking about, and then say, "Where are your projects?" Then we would march with the project people to the end users for that project, spend time with them talking about what they needed, go to the next level up and up, and up. Basically, in organizations, mimic what the irrigation engineers were doing in Nepal. At the end of it, they had an operations plan for the management of those projects. The line mission staff loved it. They understood what we were trying to do, they liked the idea. So that worked for a while, and I had a lot of fun with it.

Q: Design engineering is what they call it now, but the really important part is to consult with the final users on the objectives and then on the constraints and things like that?

PLUNKETT: Exactly. And to identify the stakeholders, to get their feedback, and build that into the approach. These were missions that were designated by the administrator as labs for re-engineering. A mission that was in need of funds or had some reason to volunteer. We would go out and provide support. In addition to supporting the labs, we also issued a newsletter. I did a bunch of articles under the name of Uncle Sher, something like *Uncle Sher's Advice on Customer Service*. I was Uncle Sher in the re-engineering team. The interesting thing that happened about the reengineering experience, it was part of USAID culture and dynamics as an organization.

And as an organizational anthropologist, I found it fascinating. In the missions people took it over and went ahead with it. But the mission management saw customer service plans as something to be dealt with out of the Program Office rather than out of a line office. The main thing that was important to them is their documentation, which they sent to Washington every year. They had to have their customer service plan for the mission. And the poor devils who were in the line offices were not qualified to write those up, of course. So, the Program Office was designated as the place where the customer service plan would be written. It became a document to be produced and handed back over their shoulder to Washington, rather than operations-oriented for the line staff to carry out, preferably being done by FSNs as a regular part of their involvement with their counterparts, as I envisioned it, and based on what I'd done in Nepal and elsewhere. What happened is that time passed, and elections happened, and then it became '96, '97.

As I recall, Phyllis Dichter Forbes, who was our champion, was a controversial person in her own right, but very effective in getting the ear of people and getting things done. But she had to leave for personal reasons. Actually, she had twins at age fifty-two!

The initiative began to die. It was very clear that it was folding up. I was supposed to retire in 1998. I thought, I don't want to spend my time in a dying program. I went to the Latin America personnel person I knew and said, "What do you have going?" She said, "Well, hmm. You can go to Haiti." They were always trying to get people to go to Haiti, which I didn't want to do, because I don't like speaking French. And I didn't think I could be of much use in Haiti. Then she said, "There's the deputy director slot in Jamaica." And I'd been to Jamaica. I didn't like Jamaica as a place to be for a long-term posting. Then she said, "Then we have this program in Peru, it's kind of strange. It's State Department counter narcotics money. They are really desperate for a deputy director for that program." The program is in trouble because it has a huge pipeline. It's just not moving its funds. Nobody quite knows what to do about it. This is Peru, this was in 1998. Sendero Luminoso had just been more or less quashed. The other group, MRTA, Túpac Amaru Revolutionary Movement, had captured the Japanese ambassador's residence, and had taken a large number of hostages, including the director of the Alternative Development Program for USAID, Mike Maxey.

I had known Mike before from various agricultural meetings. I liked him, we got along fine. He's from Mississippi. We enjoyed making fun of each other, between Mississippi and Arkansas, of course. So, I said, "Oh, I'll take that." And she said, "Okay." The mission said, You have to do Spanish. And I said, "Well, I have training in Spanish." I had Spanish in high school, and still spoke it pretty well. The idea was that I would take the twenty-four weeks Spanish course at FSI. I said, "I've been kind of keeping up with Spanish, speaking with my wife, who was in the Peace Corps in the Dominican Republic. Since we met in Bangladesh, we went back and forth in Spanish because I really like it. So why don't you let me do this, do the test, and see where I am." They agreed to that and I took the test. On the strength of how I did there, they said, You don't need anything but a refresher. So, I signed up for the six-week training.

I went on a TDY [temporary duty] to Peru, so they could sound me out and I could see what was going on. That worked out pretty well. There was a slot in the embassy's consular section. They paid for my wife to take the consular course and held the job until she finished it. I finished my six weeks of training, took the Foreign Service language exam, and did a 4 speaking and a 5 in reading, which I thought was amazing. But I always loved Spanish, and I always wanted to work in Latin America. I had done a lot of TDYs there. I went to Peru by myself. The family stayed behind until the boys finished their school year and my wife finished her course.

Q: Okay, so the position that you were taking was—?

PLUNKETT: I was the deputy director for the Alternative Development Program.

Q: Okay. And the ambassador then?

PLUNKETT: I was trying to remember his name. Dennis Jett. He was replaced by John Hamilton. And I remember the person who was the DCM at the time, who was the person who chaired the Interagency Coordinating Committee for Counter Narcotics. That was Heather Hodges. She is a delightful woman, and Sheila—gosh, I am terrible on names anymore. She was one of the people in the political section, had been in the Peace Corps in Afghanistan, and was the roommate of somebody we had known and visited in Afghanistan. She was very fond of Afghanistan, and happened to live one floor down in the apartment building where I stayed until my family came. I'll remember her name at some point. I think she later supervised at FSI. She took it upon herself to educate me in the ways of the State Department, because she felt a lot of people in State thought AID people were uncouth. We were not sure where people were supposed to sit in the limousine, and things of that sort. We would go for walks around the neighborhood and talk. She introduced me to shops that she was familiar with and places to eat, and we had a wonderful time. The AID mission was located in a separate part of town, not on the embassy compound. The embassy compound was a Bobby Inman fort. There were plans to put the ambassador's residence and the AID office on that compound as well, but the ambassador didn't want to move. He had a very nice mansion not very far from the AID office downtown. He left, and John Hamilton came in, and they built the AID office and the ambassador's residence. But we only moved into that AID office about a month before my tour ended in 2002.

Q: Did you overlap with John Hamilton?

PLUNKETT: Yes, I did. He was a very nice man. A heavy-duty marathoner, I remember that. And when Heather Hodges left, Roberta Jacobson replaced her.

Q: For two years, right?

PLUNKETT: When I first got there, I settled in. First thing I learned was that the mission director and the NAS office chief were at dagger points for some reason. I never found out exactly why they didn't like each other, but they didn't communicate. So here we were, Mike Maxey and I and our staff in the AID office with a twenty-five million dollars a year program on counter narcotics alternative development. With the State Department money, we were responsible for making sure everything went smoothly. Mike was in the midst of finishing up his MBA at an institute in Costa Rica, so almost the first thing he did was to write a memo indicating that as deputy, I had full authority to do anything that he had authority to do. Basically, it was co-managing a twenty-five million dollars a year program. Mike was very personable and an ideas guy. He has continued to be very productive intellectually. He was recognized as a coffee expert. He recognized that Peruvian coffee was capable of being upgraded to specialty level with expert input. At that moment, they were just bulking the coffee and selling it for low prices for Folgers and Maxwell House coffee. The idea of specialty crops was part of our program. I learned an awful lot about coffee from Mike over the years. That's something else you probably

saw in Guatemala and Costa Rica and these other places, because that's also one of the things that AID pushed heavily.

Q: Especially coffee. Yes, Ray Waldron was my entrée into that.

PLUNKETT: Ray Waldron was my co-manager for a while for DESFIL back in the '80s. I still see him occasionally on Facebook. I'm sure we know lots of people, for example, Ray McGrath is somebody you might know. Ray McGrath was my wife's boss for a while in the consular section in Peru. We're still friends with the family.

In any case, there I was. I had to figure out why, what was going on. We had this pipeline problem, and we had a program with about eighteen different implementing organizations for Alternative Development, looking at economic activities, such as agriculture, looking at infrastructure, road maintenance and reconstruction in the areas of very high rainfall in the jungle side of Peru.

Q: So just to be clear, the reason it's called Alternative Development is that the idea is to give employment opportunities so that the farmers move away from growing coca for cocaine?

PLUNKETT: Right. We recognized that we could not compete directly with coca for price. Also, our activities were dependent on the other two elements in the program. The first of those was the interdiction program, which was fairly high profile. It was managed by interdicting flights by the narcos. They were flying the coca product from Peru to other parts of South America. It was processed from coca leaves to coca paste, which reduced the bulk to about 10 percent and raised the price by double or more. It was then flown out to Colombia and other places for final processing into cocaine. The second program was the eradication program, which was managed by the State Department NAS [Narcotics Affairs Section] in the embassy. That program had local workers who were put on helicopters with security guards, and they would fly to a coca area, land, and pull up the coca plants without compensating the farmers. Naturally, the farmers were not happy about this. There were a number of dodges that they did. The coca plant is good for maybe ten to fifteen years of good production. So, through various means, the eradication program was more or less directed toward the plots of old coca. Once they were eradicated, they could either plant something else or replant coca if people weren't watching them. The eradication program was very controversial, and caused a lot of friction with local people.

Our program, which was Alternative Development, tried to operate in areas separate from the eradication zones. The other thing about the eradication program is that it was a model that had been started in a very different area, different cultural area, different growing area in Bolivia. What worked in Bolivia was not as successful in Peru.

When I first got there, the AID director and NAS chief had problems. I learned that there was a meeting every Wednesday morning of the Interagency Coordinating Group that

was supposed to be attended by the mission director. He didn't go, and didn't want anything to do with it. This was State money, and this was AID. And secondly, if our program had been a mission in Latin America, it would have been a mid-sized mission. So, there was this thing that had been inserted into his operation that he had no control over and worried about because it was counter narcotics, and more politically visible.

What to do? I lived not far away from the embassy. So, I started on Wednesday mornings, instead of going into the AID office, I would go over to the embassy to the cafeteria and I would sit with the people who were having their breakfast before they went up to the office. Most of them were the DynCorps security guys for the eradication program. They were ex Special Forces and good old boys. I can do mil-speak. I can talk about guns, since I have always enjoyed shooting. And I can put on my Arkansas accent if I have to. So, I started having these chats. We would gossip about this and that, the benefits of the Beretta versus the 1911, et cetera. Gradually, they got used to me. I didn't ask anybody's permission to do it. Actually, I probably talked to Mike about it. He didn't mind because he understood the concern. So, I'd go and be the AID person at the weekly meetings.

Q: It made sense—

PLUNKETT: Because I needed to know what they were saying and what was being done. We had all the alphabet soup agencies there. That worked out pretty well because I became that much more friendly with the NAS people. Over time, they said, "Well, you know, we have such a small office, we can't really offer you your own desk for when you're over here with us. But you can at least have a cubbyhole here for mail and stuff that people want to leave." So, I would go over and every Wednesday I would make rounds before going to the AID office.

Q: And NAS stands for—?

PLUNKETT: Narcotics Affairs Section.

PLUNKETT: Al Matano was the State INL [Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs] person for Peru. I think he very rarely was able to come down to Peru, but I established liaison with him as well. They needed information, not just reporting. I learned that, in contrast to our operation, the INL and AID Alternative Development people in Bolivia did not get along. I thought, You can't function like that. Let's see what we can do to ingratiate ourselves in Peru. And we managed to have a pleasant relationship the whole time I was there. We helped them. For example, every year they had to send a periodic report. I helped to draft part of the NAS Periodic Report for INL. We fed them lots and lots of information.

There was a group that would come down from the Defense Department, a group particularly interested in the narcos but also in the terrorists. They would come down once a year. Everybody had a finger in the counter narcotics and terrorism pie. So, when they would come down, somebody said, "You're the official academic here. You go talk

to these guys, they are academics." I went over and had sessions with them and provided them with our information. One of our staff was the monitoring and evaluation person on the program. He had what would ordinarily be in my job. Donato Peña was very quiet, he never liked to use English, and so we never used English with him. We developed a monitoring and evaluation system for the overall program. We were able to feed the results on an ongoing basis, keeping our visibility up.

Q: Was he in NAS, or was he in AID?

PLUNKETT: He was an AID personal service program funded contractor like an FSN.

Q: So, the upside of development is always very sexy on Capitol Hill because you know, people would rather be funding for good purposes for development rather than for militaristic funds.

PLUNKETT: Oh yeah. Well, we didn't compete directly with coca. We couldn't. We had five areas where we operated. It was interesting. Here I was, an anthropologist with an interest in Latin America getting to fly in small airplanes over the Andes at regular intervals. We would fly in and visit sites in the Apurimac Valley, and around Tingo Maria in the Huallaga Valley. At one point a television station from Little Rock Arkansas wanted to know what Winrock International, who was our contractor for the program, was doing, because Winrock's headquarters are located in Arkansas. They wanted to have this series of presentations on TV shows about what Winrock was doing. They came down, and the director or someone said, "You're from Arkansas, so you go with them." (laughs) So I went with the TV team down to the Apurimac Valley.

We flew in, and the way you fly in there is that you go over the mountain, you go down, and then as you go to the airfield, you have to go up and over a hill, and you buzz the airfield to get the animals off. Then you fly around, up and over the hill again, and down and land in a cloud of dust. And the cameraman for the TV crew filmed all this. Then we went out and looked at coca fields and talked to farmers about our three programs, community development. I called it the "grain of sand" program. The team went back and put the shows out for ratings week in Little Rock. My relatives in Arkansas got to see me standing in the middle of a coca field talking about our program.

We did agriculture, coffee rehabilitation, coffee plantations that have been neglected. The same for cacao. Including working with the Chocolate Research Institute, particularly with people funded by the Mars chocolate company to talk with cacao farmers on upgrading their products and their activities. Then, in this area with very high rainfall, we developed programs or adapted programs for constructing and maintaining and rehabilitating the roads. Because all the stuff that they produced had to go out by road, except for the coca, which the narcos were happy to fly out. We had a couple of really qualified engineers, Alfredo Larrabure and Peter Deinken, who helped set up local road maintenance organizations, through the local communities. That provided some employment and provided for better roads. These areas would get just yards and yards of

rainfall in the rainy season. The third part of it, the grain of sand part I was talking about, had to do with the fact that the people had migrated down to grow coca. These were frontier areas, extremely sparsely populated, and people started coming down from the mountains of Peru, settling into growing coca. They were not related by kinship, or locality or anything much. They were kind of like the frontier in America except that they were mostly indigenous, mostly Quechua speakers.

The program provided the resources for constructing community structures like schools and community centers, which would enable them to do things in a centralized fashion. The Peruvian government stocked the centers with teachers and so forth. So, they came to the school and community center, and it was a place where people who otherwise didn't have a lot in common could get together and develop things in common. That was where we would talk about the coffee improvement or the road or this or that or the other, whatever was of interest to them. And so that part of it was also extremely effective. Another extremely capable local employee was Esau Hidalgo, who was from the area around Tarapoto. Through his initiative and that of a bunch of other people they developed a PVO, private voluntary organization called the *Asociación de Municipalidades de la Región San Martín* (Association of Municipalities of the San Martín Region). The acronym was AMRESAM. But in any case, that was an NGO, a private organization, made up of municipal governments. As an NGO, it was eligible for funding from us that didn't have to go through the Peruvian government. And in consequence, they were able to organize and to do all kinds of things to improve community operations in the municipalities all over the coca area of San Martín.

Q: San Martín was like a province?

PLUNKETT: I'd have to think about what the administrative boundaries were. But that was one thing we did. We had AMRESAM as one of the eighteen implementing organizations. We had coffee growers, and a whole bunch of different kinds of things going on. I was supposed to keep track of all of them, because Mike was away often. He was very effective when he was around. One of the things I had to do was figure out what to do about our program pipeline problem.

Q: Can you explain what a pipeline problem is?

PLUNKETT: The pipeline is the money that has been authorized and committed, but hasn't been used, or is not being used fast enough. Let me briefly mention what was going on. We had eighteen implementing organizations, and we had a twenty-five million dollars a year program. The pipeline of funds was clogged up. I started thinking about it. We wound up developing a strategic plan. I haven't even mentioned our counterpart Peruvian organization, which was originally called CONTRADROGAS [Commission to Combat Drug Use]. It later changed its name to DEVIDA [National Commission for Development and Life without Drugs]. We worked very closely and successfully with CONTRADROGAS. Especially, they had directors who were very responsive and very helpful.

We had this pipeline problem. We'll have to figure out how to do something that meshes eighteen implementing organizations. Most of them are grantees and not contracts, so that poses problems of how we can influence their operations. Secondly, we were dealing with two different fiscal years of funding, Peruvian and U.S. We were dealing with the annual cycle of rain and no rain. We're looking at five different areas of Peru. So, what do we do?

Q: I think it was Fujimori, there was a lot going on. Talk about what was going on in Peru while you were there and how it is now?

PLUNKETT: Oh yeah. I can get into that because that affected our operations in the Interagency Coordinating Group from counter narcotics. For the first time in my career I was regularly in and out of the embassy and made friends and contacts with my State Department colleagues. But I think, if you don't mind, I'll wind up here for now.

Q: Don't feel you are rambling on. People will be going to this for various things. And it might not be at the top of your list, or somebody might be particularly interested in one aspect. So, we don't try to limit ourselves to a particular topic, but mainly, we're interested in having people talk about their work.

PLUNKETT: I've been reading other people's interviews online, including some of my former colleagues. Some of the perspectives they bring to the same events, or the same time, are just very interesting and very worthwhile. I think it's good to have these different angles on the same thing. Maybe I can just mention a few of those little points as I see them later on.

Q: Today's date is the 18 of December 2020. Well, do you remember where we left off?

PLUNKETT: I was talking about my time in Peru, which was my last overseas posting with USAID. One thing I would like to mention, before I get into that—the posting before Peru that I had was with USAID Management Bureau's special reengineering team. The nice thing about that, is that it gives you flexibility. The sad thing about reengineering is that it was intended to deal with not just program operations, but also procurement, personnel, and funding. The major bottleneck in USAID operations overseas has been the procurement process, which is subject to general U.S. government regulations and subject also to special USAID procedures. The Washington-based procurement people successfully blocked any changes in procurement to enable us to become more flexible or speed it up. About the only thing I noticed after I retired was that indefinite quantity contracts were modified. They became a good deal more flexible—we used to call them indefinite quality contracts. But other than that, USAID, as far as I know, continues to suffer with a totally inadequate and dysfunctional and disconnected procurement system. Having seen that the reengineering effort going into a swift decline with its leader gone, with an administration about to change, and in general

USAID was continuing to suffer—actually the decline that began almost when I joined it back in the ’70s.

I jumped ship, as it were, with the assistance of the Latin American Bureau personnel people, and took the job as deputy director of the State Department. INL funded an Alternative Development Program in Peru. And this was the culmination of yet another dream of mine, although I had turned down jobs in Peru before, for various reasons. One was the security situation and the other was the fact that LAC veterans said, Well, Peru’s just a terrible place. It’s cloudy all the time, and miserable. That is to say Lima is. I learned that most of that came from Latin American Bureau people who’d spent their entire careers in Latin America, mostly in Central America, and had married Latin American spouses. Peru is very different because it was much more European. The weather in Lima was very much like that of San Francisco. It gets chilly and cloudy for a while, but you go out in the country ten miles or so and you’re back in the sunshine.

We went to Peru, and I had the most marvelous arrangement I’d ever had with USAID because I had an unlimited budget. People said, Oh, you know, this money is piling up. You have a pipeline of money. It was the State Department’s money and they are griping about it. When I got there, I was also fortunate in having a boss, Mike Maxey, as I think I mentioned last session. Mike and I had known each other slightly, but he was finishing his MBA [Master of Business Administration] in Costa Rica. So, he wanted to go back and forth to work on that.

And secondly—I was thinking about this—he had been captured by the Marxist group, MRTA [*Movimiento Revolucionario Túpac Amaru* (Túpac Amaru Revolutionary Movement)]. There were two terrorist groups active in Peru. Most famous was the so-called Shining Path, the *Sendero Luminoso*. But the MRTA, although smaller, had one sort of last gasp, where it captured a bunch of prominent people, diplomats, and others, including Mike Maxey, at the Japanese ambassador’s residence, and held them hostage for several weeks. Now, Mike was part of that. He and some others were released after six days. But that was a traumatic experience for him. Although he was a very capable person, he was still—I think—feeling the effects of that experience.

Anyway, he wrote a memo, basically saying that as his deputy I could do or sign or be anything that he was, which, as far as I know, was a unique situation. But it meant that I was able to oversee the day-to-day operations, without any hindrance whatsoever. And so, I was responsible directly to the mission director. And I also was active in participating in the Interagency Committee for Counter Narcotics. I mentioned how I insinuated my way into that last session. That worked out extremely well. I was able to find out what was going on in the country, what the other agencies were doing, and to work much more closely and cordially with the Narcotics Affairs Section.

One of the first things I learned when I took over the job was that the USAID and State relationship—in terms of counter narcotics and alternative development—was very tense. In Bolivia, for example, I was told that the two institutions were not happy with each

other at all. I was concerned to make sure that since we were using State Department funding, we were responsible to them as well as to the USAID mission. And we had a job to do as smoothly as possible. So, I started schmoozing. And having been trained as a social anthropologist, one of the things you try to learn to do is whenever you get into a field situation—and this was a field situation—your entrée should be smooth. You want to establish rapport with the people you're dealing with. And you want to clearly define your role, so that they understand what you're doing and what you're not supposed to do and how you do it. And preferably, that role should be one that is supportive and positive.

So I did my anthropologist thing and it worked out well. I mentioned the NAS office offered me a cubbyhole for my mail, and a place to sit and rest anytime I was there, and access to the information that they had. And lots of gossip with the DynCorps specialists on the properties and characteristics of firearms we both liked and things like that.

Q: The DynCorps specialists were in eradication. They were company contractors to work on eradication, which involved flying around.

PLUNKETT: Initially, I got in contact with the security staff in the embassy cafeteria, and then I would sort of follow them around and talk to the Foreign Service people who were doing the eradication program, and then with the other agencies who were engaged there.

The program had three major parts. Eradication was managed out of the NAS office with assistance from DynCorps and a large number of local employees. Their job was to go out in helicopters and land and use a tool that had been, I think, invented by a State Department person in Bolivia. Like a kind of a pickaxe shovel. Instead of using Roundup or something to contaminate the plants in the soil, they just pulled them up. The interdiction program was run out of another part of the embassy. And then we had USAID's work in Alternative Development. Very different approaches.

I think that's characterized by a meeting I had in the town of Tingo Maria, where the Peruvian police and other agencies were present for a meeting. As we were leaving a Peruvian police colonel asked me, "Well, you know the eradication program, they have the security people with them in the field. How many security people do you have for your Alternative Development Program here?" I kind of looked at him and said, "About a hundred thousand." And he looked at me and I looked at him. I said, "Yes, our procedure is to make contact with the farmers in the coca growing areas. The areas where we are working were the former coca areas. And we establish contact with them. And we are engaged in activities which they appreciate and help us to determine what is needed and how. And in case there is a security issue, they contact us in advance. We have never had any situations where we were in any kind of difficulty."

Of course, I should mention that in those days, cell phones had started to proliferate around the world. And in the rural areas, including the coca growing areas, many of the people had cell phones. They had our number, we had their number. And I was realizing

the value of this kind of communication. I had a lot of program funds. I was funded out of operational expenses. Mike and I had to wrestle to get approval to travel because we were direct hire. But our other staff were all on program funds. And they traveled anytime they wanted. And we had funds. So, I arranged that some of those funds went to purchase a batch of cell phones. Everybody had a cell phone, and it was always with them.

I recall one instance where I was in Tingo Maria again, and I got a call from the Regional Security Office [RSO]. And the Regional Security Office said, There's been a report of a problem in this other area. We had a group that was running their own boats down a river in that part of Peru to go to a meeting there. I was able to call on my cell phone to their cell phone in the middle of the river and tell them there was a security issue, and to turn around and go back. That worked fine.

Another time we had a Winrock employee who was not there on business for our activities, he was out actually drumming up other business for Winrock for another part of the AID mission. We didn't even know he was in the country. We were required to let the RSO know of people when they came into the country on our business. But he was there, and nobody knew he was there until I got a call about nine o'clock at night at home from one of our contacts. The coca farmers near Tingo Maria who were doing a demonstration—primarily because they didn't like the eradication program—had managed to grab Andy Martinez and were going to have a People's Court trial for him. Someone was able to call and say this was going on. I immediately called my counterpart in CONTRADROGAS. A retired police general, as I recall. I can't remember his last name, his first name was Ibsen, a very capable fellow. And he in turn, called his contacts, and they called the local police in the area. And they simply snuck into where they were holding the Winrock employee and eased him out into safety. So, the communication net that we set up was our basic security procedure.

Our travel into these areas, because they were low security areas, high threat areas, meant we had to get the approval of the regional security officer. That was another point where I had to insinuate myself. And we did that successfully because we had all these contacts, and they didn't, and I was able to start sharing information. This is what's going on in the Apurimac. This is what's going on in Tocache. This is going on in San Martín. This is what's going on in Tingo Maria. All of these were areas where not only narco traffickers were active, but also the Sendero Luminoso still had a presence. As I understand it, the narcos were hiring Sendero to manage their security and also to grab local people and force them to be laborers and carry the product around. By actively sharing what we learned, what my colleagues learned, with the RSO, this meant it became a mutual sharing of information. Whenever I went to the embassy, I would go to the RSO and find out what was going on and schmooze and so forth. And I could tell my guys what was needed. So, the RSO relationship was very cordial. Our last year at post, my wife moved from the consular section to the RSO. On 9/11, we had to evacuate the AID office downtown, so I went to the embassy and helped the RSO staff try to track events.

The INL representative for Peru, Al Matano, came down maybe once a year, but Mike and I were in contact with him. So, we contributed to the information that Al needed in his job in Washington. And unlike what the situation was in Bolivia and to my understanding what was going on in the much larger program in Colombia, we had a very active, cordial, and productive relationship all around. And we were able to make some significant results happen in terms of development of specialty coffee for the international market and other crops.

Q [MATTHEWMAN]: Last time you mentioned cacao. Peru is particularly important in terms of the production of cacao. And I know you mentioned there was a public private partnership where Mars was involved in trying to rehabilitate. I think one of the problems at that time was that the cacao had suffered a fungus or something, right? And there needed to be rehabilitation.

PLUNKETT: What happened was that the international chocolate producers were very concerned with the possible spread of the disease. Eighty or 90 percent of their cacao came from West Africa, Ghana, and Sierra Leone and places like that. Where, as you know, the political situation was pretty dicey. And also, the infestation— whatever the disease was—was a big problem. So, they were looking for expansion of production in other parts of the world where things were different. Peru at that time, under Fujimori, was relatively stable. Our program was doing well, and my boss, Mike Maxey, was a great spokesman for the program and was constantly in touch with the coffee and the cacao market entities. He was primarily the person who made it clear—and he did that before I even got in place—about the coffee and the cacao. So, we did have a pretty active program. I have no idea how far that's proceeded because you don't see the branded Peruvian chocolate. Well, that's not quite true. I saw one at a farmers market. One of the small vendors was selling Peruvian chocolates.

Q [MATTHEWMAN]: The reason I was interested, Sher, is that about six or eight years later, around 2006, I was in the Office of Andean Affairs in the State Department. Apparently, the cacao project in Peru was canceled. And so, representatives of Mars came to see me, very unhappy, you know, because they had invested a lot. At the time I thought it was a more recent program than one that had been done in the '90s. But they were very unhappy because development projects need time to provide results. Right?

PLUNKETT: Well, that's also part of the State-USAID relationship. And also, something I would love to know more about, but I've never succeeded in learning, is that after I left, the management of our Alternative Development Program, and the USAID mission changed drastically. I understood that the program fell into disarray. I had no idea what happened to it after about 2002 or 2003. I left in 2002 and the new USAID director had just arrived. One of my colleagues in the Alternative Development Program had known her in another mission and swore that if she came in, he was leaving. She did, and he did. She didn't last very long. Something happened there, but I was gone by then and never checked back to find out. But it sounds like the program continued to decline in Peru.

Also, things that happened politically there might have been a factor. But part of this also is the situation with the State-USAID relationship. In Peru when I was there, that was the closest I ever worked with the State Department as a USAID officer. It was very collegial and very productive, but it was clear that we represented different institutions with very different organizational cultures.

I don't know if I mentioned it, but at the end of my re-engineering assignment, at the time, it looked like USAID and State were going to be merging. I wrote up a little piece on mitigating organizational culture conflict. It became clear that USAID and State had extremely different recruitment, socialization, and operational cultures. Their basic objectives are extremely different. And not only that, but State was much larger. And even things like the culture heroes for the State Department and USAID were different. USAID people don't probably know much about, say, Dean Acheson, John Foster Dulles, or—I don't know—John Jay, Benjamin Franklin, the kinds of diplomats who represented us over the years. USAID culture heroes tend to be mission directors who've been able to get something done in spite of the system.

Of course, State is well established. USAID was a funny little organization that was established by Jack Kennedy, and never really had clear permanent status or authority. By the time I joined, it was already in decline. It got huge in Vietnam, but by the time I was around, it was small, it was subject to enormous amounts of influence by Congress. Individual congressmen would put down earmarks on specific projects. At that time there were some Congress types who had been in the Peace Corps, or otherwise had an interest in a particular country or a particular topic. And then the administration, whenever it changes, the focus of the USAID's program would change. They're suddenly going to deal not with infrastructure but with the small farmer and the alleviation of poverty. Then family planning. And then it went into development of private sector enterprise. And then it went into putting money into quote, "democracy and nation building." When I was in Nepal, I almost got into that because as a political anthropologist, I thought that might be of interest. But that mission made a decision that it would be run out of the Program Office.

In Peru there was a big emphasis from USAID Washington on democracy. The mission as a whole didn't have a lot of funding. The Alternative Development Program was well known for having a large amount of money. Mike told me to deal with it because I was the person who handled day-to-day signing off on what gets spent for what. I would get these initiatives from the Democracy Office. The Democracy Office had a bunch of activities that were primarily funding nongovernmental organizations in Peru. With my background in political anthropology, I looked at their portfolio and said, "These are upper class, urban people. They speak English, and they have U.S. degrees, and they want to be nice to poor people." They wanted nice offices and all that would go with that. They're based out of Lima, and they're not working in our coca areas.

I said, "We are working in five areas. We can do anything we want to, as long as we justify it in terms of the mandate we have from the State Department for Alternative

Development. If you are interested in doing something in Tocache, or Tingo Maria, or Tarapoto, or something like that—if there's something there that you want to do that you can convince us relates to our strategic objective, I'll be happy to work with you." That wasn't what they wanted. They used to get mad at me all the time because they wanted to do their program in Lima. It was the same in the rest of the AID mission. One day the admin officer came and put on my desk a purchase order for two Ford Expeditions. No, I'm sorry, two Ford Excursions, the next size up, to be purchased using Alternative Development money. These were to be armored for security purposes. Well, he wanted me to buy these two vehicles using our program money. It went into my pile and I put it on the bottom of the pile. Trying to do the bureaucratic thing of if you ignore it long enough, it will go away.

Because when I first got to Peru, I learned that my predecessor, or Mike's predecessor perhaps, had purchased thirteen Ford Expedition SUVs for the program and they were all out of service. No spare parts, no mechanics in the country knew how to fix them, and they were so delicate you couldn't even take them out of Lima. In fact, the one time I went on a trip out of Lima with one we got a little past the suburbs and it broke down. Lesson learned. USAID's other constraints were that we were required to buy American or write a waiver, explaining why, for whatever reason, we couldn't buy American. American vehicles do not do well overseas. And American motorcycles—we needed a lot of motorcycles in various missions because of what we were doing—almost didn't exist. Yamahas, Hondas, and so forth were much more suitable—and Toyotas. I love the Toyota King Cab pickup because it is extremely durable, could be repaired by local mechanics; spare parts are easily available.

I became a master of writing waivers over the course of my career. One of the first things I had to do was take those thirteen Ford Expeditions and turn them over to our counterparts, which was a mean thing to do. But they used them to drive around Lima as far as I know. Then I wrote waivers to get Toyota King Cab pickups, so we could do the work we needed in the coca areas. Then I got this request from the admin officer, who was a nice guy, trying to cope with funding shortages. Three months later, he came back and said, "Whatever happened about those Ford Excursions you were going to order?" And I said, "Oh, that's right here. I checked on that. Because of the weight of the Excursion with the armor, and because of the lack of spare parts, and no maintenance, there's no way I can justify using Alternative Development funding, because we can't use them in the coca areas." He said, "I didn't want to use them for the coca area. I wanted them so we could shuttle people around Lima." That is not a coca area. He was very unhappy with me. But that was my job, I wasn't supposed to be nice. I had a responsibility to INL, that if we were going to use the State Department money, it was going to go for something that we could point to as required for Alternative Development, and not have to worry about somebody getting mad at us about it.

Q: What were the key results? Or impacts that you were pointing toward? Did you have some in particular?

PLUNKETT: One of the things I did was to set up what I had been advocating in terms of service delivery monitoring. In our program, we set up a procedure for an annual review of all our program activities. A review that included not only us and our Peruvian counterparts, but also the institutions and the local people in the five coca areas. We sent out teams for the three major parts, crops, infrastructure maintenance, and local community development. They would go to the five coca areas, and they would interview a large sample of the participating users. Then they would interview each of the NGOs or the other eighteen organizations' representatives on site. These were interviews conducted not only on paper, but with videos. Then they would also interview the people who were involved in the road maintenance, construction, and local government counterparts. All that put together took several weeks out in the field, and very hard work by a bunch of people supervised by Donato Pena. They came back, edited the videos, put together the results, and produced reports on what was happening in each of the five areas. That rolled into our report. It also rolled into the NAS contribution to their annual report. And it was great fun because what we then did with the videos, was we went back to the coca areas, to the communities, and had a big meeting and showed the videos. The farmers got to see themselves talking, and if they had a gripe about the local representative of one of the implementing organizations that was right up there, for everybody to see. As a result, operations were certainly tightened up and we had information on results, and we had color commentary, which is always impressive in increasing the credibility of what you're sending back in the report.

Q: And great stories for speeches, right?

PLUNKETT: It really was very nice. I have no idea what's continued. I was looking at how we can get things to move more smoothly. And my image of this was like one of these seventeenth century clockwork spheres and all the different things going around. Two different fiscal years, eighteen implementing organizations, annual seasonal cycles with a major rainy season. I had the U.S. government's funding cycle, and the Peruvian government's funding cycle. The Program Office backstop for the program was Gerardo Arabe, who was a Bolivian with wonderful stories about growing up in Bolivia. He was a good program officer, much better than I. We sat together and worked out a strategic plan, where we looked at how these things mesh together. We had cooperative agreements with our implementing organizations, so the only time we could intervene was in their annual work plan review, where we could talk to them about what was wanted. One of the things that happened was that we realized that the infrastructure construction firms that we were dealing with could not operate during the rainy season. But the funding from the USAID fiscal year started in October. And somehow, they decided that because of that they should get their money and they should plan from October. But they never got their money. There were always difficulties because when they were trying to work they ran short of funds. I said, "Wait a minute. Fiscal year starts in October, but the money then trickles through the U.S. government. And it trickles and trickles and trickles to USAID and there's authorizations and then funding obligations. And the bottom line is, the money doesn't get to the USAID mission until—if you're lucky—around May or June. And then USAID has only that amount of time to put its

money where it needs to go before the end of the fiscal year. The effective end of the fiscal year is the end of August because our contract people will not do anything in September because they're always busy with whatever they're supposed to be doing to justify what they've done all year."

Q: It wasn't multiyear money yet, right?

PLUNKETT: Even if it was multiyear money, we still only got it in increments. Whatever the official system, what happens at the end of the line is what counts. As I pointed out years before that in Nepal, when the State Department decided all the other agencies had to set up their own pouch systems. And we didn't get our mail in USAID for about two, three months. And when we sent back the notice they said, Our records show that the mail was sent out on such and such date. And I just sent back a note as the official—what do you call the union equivalent rep?

Q: AFSA [American Foreign Service Association]?

PLUNKETT: AFSA. Thank you. I was the AFSA rep in Nepal. I told them it makes no difference whatsoever what your record says about when it was sent, unless it's received it doesn't count. And the same thing happens with AID program funding. So Gerardo and I set up a procedure where they started their operational work plan as of the end of August, because it was pretty certain we'd have money by August. So, our work plan went from August to August and the different eighteen implementing organizations suddenly were able to have money. The pipeline disappeared, because of the way we set it up. And strategic planning was key to our monitoring system. So, everybody knew who was doing well and who wasn't. And everybody had money when they needed it, and things worked pretty smoothly. I was not trained in management. I was not trained in marketing. It was all OJT [on-the-job training] as far as I was concerned. It certainly had nothing to do with the way that anthropology was supposed to operate. But I felt very pleased with how that worked. My last year at post, we had both an Inspector General's audit, and a GAO [Government Accountability Office] audit. Both of them because we had a lot of money, and by that time INL had upped our budget to, I believe, seventy-five million a year. We went through both audits without question. And I still am proud of that.

Q: You should be. Especially with the cooperative agreements because it's so much less control, right?

PLUNKETT: Yeah, well that's the thing. Where's the point of contact? One, you learn you can deal with the various systems. Two, you're actively engaged. And three, you're schmoozing. And it worked. And at the same time, USAID was continuing with difficulty. And Colombia had come in. In Colombia, a very different situation, lots more money, a lot of things that were different. We heard about what was going on there because the USAID was a cheapskate. The regional procurement officer for the mission—as I recall it—well, he had Bolivia and Ecuador. It seems to me he was also

responsible for Colombia. So, we had to wait for him to do any procurement activities until he was actually back in our mission. And he was all the time traveling somewhere else. Once he got stuck in Ecuador when they had a volcanic eruption, and couldn't leave, and that delayed our program until he could return. We had to figure out how to work around the horrible deficiencies of the USAID procurement process.

Q: And Fujimori had to leave in the middle of your time, right?

PLUNKETT: Fujimori had an evil assistant whose name I can't remember.

Q: Are you thinking about Montesinos? Vladimiro Montesinos.

PLUNKETT: Thank you. Montesinos. I have a book about that somewhere around here. But as I've gotten older, my ability to remember names is disappearing. But anyway, yeah. And so, Fujimori was in difficulty. I became familiar with Alejandro Toledo, who succeeded Fujimori. At the time I knew him, he was working across the street from our house at the Institute for Advanced Studies and Management, ESAN. They had free, really wonderful concerts there. Alejandro Toledo had been to Stanford, so I knew him very slightly. And then, as he succeeded Fujimori, we had a very cordial relationship with him, although not with his wife. His wife was, I believe, Belgian, also trained at Stanford, and she didn't like Americans at all. The one or two times that I met with her, she pretty much didn't want to speak with us. Some disruption came in with the Montesinos affair—there were some problems with people in the embassy who, because of the things they needed to have done, had dealt with Montesinos. When he fell from grace and Fujimori fell from grace, they also fell from grace.

Q: A lot of that story there that we won't talk about.

PLUNKETT: But it was what happens in these situations.

Q [MATTHEWMAN]: Sher, some of the countries I've worked in counter narcotics, when there's a change of government, sometimes there's almost a year pause in the counter narcotics activity. While the new government becomes more familiar with what the Americans are doing in their country. But with Toledo, you're saying he was pretty familiar with the Alternative Development Program?

PLUNKETT: What I was trying to remember about that is the head of what was then called CONTRADROGAS changed. They changed the name to DEVIDA [National Commission for Development and a Drug-Free Lifestyle], somewhere along there. Our relationship with that counterpart didn't change very much that I can recall. I do think that the head of it was removed. And as I recall, there were some lapses on that side. But all the stuff we were doing in the field, we continued to do. And the changes that took place were in the USAID mission and the program pretty much after I left in 2002. The mission director, Tom Geiger, left, and the deputy was acting as the USAID mission

director. We moved from our offices into the embassy compound. But I don't recall any real disruption in what we were doing in our program.

Q [MATTHEWMAN]: I remember last time you talked about the community development projects as being very important to the success of the overall program. And also, I think you implied that it was the road maintenance work that helped with alternative employment. Did I remember those two correctly?

PLUNKETT: That's correct. Well, all three were interesting in different ways. Let me talk about the roads first. Well, the areas where we were working are very high seasonal rainfall areas, something like sixteen feet of rain a year. And that means that maintenance for any kind of infrastructure is difficult. One of our staff, who worked on the agriculture activities, was an AID culture hero to the aggies, Tex Ford. He had worked for several years on Alternative Development in the Chapare in Bolivia and had lots of contacts there. In fact, he retired to Cochabamba and still lives there. He knew about this manner of constructing roads that was done in Bolivia. Basically, it's like a drywall construction of roads. And because they're like cobblestones, they're done with unskilled labor, as long as you have enough rock. And they are extremely durable and don't require a lot of maintenance. So, he took the lead to make contacts and we put that into play, and started having our program build that kind of road. I'd love to know at this point, how that's continued. That was one of the things we measured when we did our monitoring.

I recall once going down to the Apurimac Valley, flying in and setting up the preparations for a visit by Rand Beers, who came down. Somebody issued me a satellite phone. I think that's the only time I was issued a satellite phone. We didn't have them. They were big, clunky Iridium things. He came down and looked at the road and the way the roads were being made. As far as I can remember, he was favorably impressed by that. I hope that's continued, not only because of the durability of the roads, but also as part of it, we stood up a whole bunch of small private businesses. A lot of people got jobs with road maintenance on a seasonal basis. Including, because of USAID mandates, a fair number of women. They all had orange uniforms and we watched them do what they were supposed to be doing. I was quite taken with how that's worked out. I hope it's continued. So that was the road part.

The second part, the community development. I call that the grain of sand. By putting a community facility and with the cooperation of the Peruvian government, stocking it with teachers and equipment, not only for a school, but also for a community center. We developed community response among people who had no real previous kinship or other relations. That helped to pay off because that was where they really talked about the other kinds of things they needed to do. The big one was the Association of Municipalities in San Martín. That was not just at the local level. The reason it's called grain of sand is because if you have an oyster, and you want to make a pearl, you put a grain of something like sand in it, and it grows into something that's valuable. I was always talking about the grain of sand procedure. In the municipalities, they were able to get grant money from us to do things with their local communities. So, it was a second-tier

organization, which was the brainchild of one of our Peruvian colleagues, Esau Hidalgo. I don't know if this continued, but I certainly would like to know that it's still going on, because it would be nice to think that something like that happened elsewhere in Peru. For example, the Tingo Maria area, and around that area, which is a key narcotics area, was also an area that I thought had possibilities for that kind of thing, once we were working. But I left and Mike left, and I have no idea what happened after that. Next time I see Mike, I'll ask again. I was told that things fell into a hole after we left. If that's the case, I feel very bad about it. That's the way things go. But it's not something you want to have happen.

Q: Today is January 8, 2021 with Sher Plunkett. So, let's pick up after Peru. I think you may have been offered a position in Colombia? And you were the Nicaragua desk officer as you were getting ready to retire.

PLUNKETT: I would like to stick in a vignette about something that happened in Nepal. Fairly shortly after I got to Nepal, I think it was actually '91, we got an urgent call from the Dairy Development Corporation in Nepal—this was after the democratic revolution. They were kind of shaking out, but they were still trying to do things. They provided these small containers of milk, or made them available. What they did was they used milk powder when they couldn't get fresh milk. As you know, cows don't give milk year round. So there was a season when they were dependent on the milk powder. And they didn't have any—they were going to run out. They were going to have to close down, and this milk went to people who needed it, I gather.

They called us and said, What can you do? I said, "Okay, P.O. 480 provides milk powder." This was in the days before email, of course. So I sent a cable and we found that milk powder might be available. My boss, Rob Thurston, sort of dumped the task on me. We went back and forth by cable, and by telephone—telephone was difficult because of the twelve hour time difference. We were able to round up the milk powder, and we were able to get all the various permissions from the Department of Agriculture. I made contact with Rita Hudson in the Food for Peace Office, and we set in train the procedure for getting the milk powder shipped through to India and then up to Nepal.

However, the last phase of this had to do with getting a bunch of permissions, getting things signed off and getting things done very fast. At that time, a new director came in. He, being an ex-Peace Corps volunteer, was trying to do things right, and it was his first overseas assignment. He was in everything but the formality a political appointee, because he had been the head of AID's legal team for some years, and was still on call for doing all kinds of important things for them. But he wanted to serve overseas, and when he got to Nepal, he wanted to get to know the staff. So he called for us to have a retreat up in the hills, just outside of Kathmandu. No phone service!

Q: Oh, no.

PLUNKETT: I was in the middle of this time sensitive activity. I went up to the retreat, and the lady in the Food for Peace Office in AID would call my house at midnight. My wife would take the call and then she would get on the shortwave radio connection to the retreat and relay what was being said, and I would relay back to her, and she would relay back to the United States. It was kind of exciting and it all got done. My wife was ex-Peace Corps and ex-CARE, plus being a sort of a dynamo anyway. It got done, with the FSN, Niranjan Regmi, managing local contacts with the officials. The milk powder arrived, the gap was closed before it appeared, and we all shook hands and congratulated each other. The other thing was that we monetized the milk powder arrangement, and used that money to encourage private milk production in the Nepali Terai, the area near India where most of the population lives. We were able to, as I recall, extend the amount of milk that became available to people in Nepal who might've needed it, in addition to the milk buffaloes that people who could afford them had.

Q: It may be because a lot of the time the Food for Peace proceeds are used for very different purposes.

PLUNKETT: I had a failure. I realized CARE in Nepal had a problem with its local currency funding. The foreign exchange funding came from a variety of donors, and CARE had to use those funds to cover local expenses. There was a great need for butter oil, otherwise known as ghee in India. CARE in India and CARE in Nepal were closely linked. The Nepali rupee was tied to the Indian rupee. So I had this bright idea to ship in extra butter oil to CARE India, with the permission of the government of India, the U.S. government, the government of Nepal, and the embassy. Everybody was in favor of all this. The idea was that they were going to monetize the butter oil in India. And the money was then going to be converted to Nepali rupees, and that would provide local funding for CARE Nepal, which would allow them to greatly extend their reach in Nepal.

Q: Did the Indians let the money go back?

PLUNKETT: Oh, no, the Indians loved it, because they got more butter oil. What happened was at the last minute, the agriculture attaché in the U.S. Embassy decided that for some reason I never learned, he wasn't going to bother. I think he was going to go on leave or something. In any case, he didn't push his part of the paperwork. It never worked out. But if it had it would have been neat—one of those, the old baseball saying—Tinker to Evers to Chance, double play stuff.

Q: Oh, yeah, that would've been nice.

PLUNKETT: It still could be done if somebody wanted to because everybody still needs to do it. In any case, I finished up in Peru. As I mentioned, we had two audits my last year there, and we passed with flying colors on both audits, which I was very proud of. We had in place a strategic plan, an annual plan that funded everybody when they needed it, an effective annual monitoring procedure, and we reduced the pipeline. I had another failure, though. Winrock [Winrock International] had been running the program under a

Cooperative Agreement, and we had to re-compete it. Winrock, for reasons I never understood, came in with a proposal that wasn't responsive. I couldn't do what I wanted to do, legally. That is to say, I wanted to somehow or other make it so that Winrock would continue. I couldn't do it. And so they lost the agreement, and it was taken over by CARE. Just as I was leaving, CARE then dropped the ball very badly, in terms of what they said they were going to do and what they actually started doing. They had some internal issues.

As I was leaving Peru in 2002, we got a new AID director. I don't know what happened after I left, but things were kind of up in the air. My boss, Mike Maxey, had already left. I had several people who wanted me to go to Colombia to take over some aspect of their Alternative Development Program. I've forgotten exactly what I was going to do, but I think it was in the Program Office. I had kept my ear to the ground about other counter narcotics and alternative development programs. The Bolivia one was very different from the Colombia one, for example. Colombia was very high profile politically. It had a lot of congressional interest; a lot of what seemed to be self-interest. I learned from the fellow who was running the Colombia program that what I would be doing up there had nothing to do with what I felt was important for development work, and a lot to do with those little political intrigues.

It was very congruent with what I learned later about that program. I didn't want any part of it. My wife got mad at me, she wanted to stay overseas, and she thought we would do well in Colombia. We were going to have to go into a high security situation with one of our children. I was going to be involved in a program which had very little to do with development. And I said, "No, not me." The only good reason to do it would be that they would have extended me past my official retirement date.

So I said no, and came back to what I thought was a kind of a non-job. You know, what you do when you're about to retire. I was the Nicaragua desk officer, succeeding at least two people that I knew of who'd been pre-retirement in that same slot. I had a year in the AID Washington LAC Bureau. My job there was, as you know, the desk officer job. You keep track of what's needed between the Mission and AID Washington. We had a political appointee assistant administrator. He was a very pleasant fellow. But his main interest was in junkets to places like Rome for FAO [Food and Agriculture Organization] stuff and so forth. One of my jobs was to write briefing papers. I very quickly learned how to turn out briefing papers. The other interesting thing in that job was people kept asking how much money is going to Nicaragua from all the spigots. DOD [U.S. Department of Defense], State, everybody. I was supposed to find out who was providing how much almost on a monthly basis.

Q [MATTHEWMAN]: What I found as an economic officer in different countries that always had to answer those questions, there's always an AID guy who's the numbers guy, and he can divide up those numbers any way you need them, you know, obligations, whatever.

PLUNKETT: It's like the old story of the AID economists. You know, there's the mathematician and the accountant and the AID economist. You know, "Two plus two is four," says the mathematician. The accountant says, "Given this factor, and that factor it was probably more." Then the AID economist just looks at you and says, "Two plus two. Hmmm, what would you like it to be?"

Q [MATTHEWMAN]: The USAID economists were always really, really good economists. But there was always one guy in an AID mission who knew that these questions would be asked all the time. But in any case, welcome to our world of desk officers and briefing papers. That's what State Department people have to do.

PLUNKETT: It was a nuisance. I had to feed the LAC Bureau economists this information. I was able to somehow come up with a regular procedure for generating that figure. I don't know to this day whether it was accurate, but it was consistent and it was credible, and they liked it. They liked it so much that after I retired, the guy in charge of that office, who was going to retire, wanted me to come back on contract to run the office. I thought that was just so funny, because there's not a chance in hell that a poor anthropologist is going to be happy crunching numbers.

While I was on the Nicaragua desk I learned that after Hurricane Mitch, which was devastating in Central America, there was interest in setting up something similar to what had been put in place in Africa, called the Famine Early Warning System. The idea being that if you see that there's going to be a famine, you can mobilize resources in advance and be able to respond. The difference is that in Africa, when there's a famine, people die. In Central America, when there's a disaster, people migrate, and the number of people coming to the U.S. increases. I learned that this was in the works, and it wasn't going anywhere. I asked around, and they said, We just don't quite know how to implement this, how to make it operational.

By then I had renewed my contacts from my reengineering days in Washington, so I went around talking to various people. I went over to the Chemonics office, to the people who were responsible for managing the Africa FEWS NET [famine early warning systems network]. In fact, they had put it together originally. I discussed it with them, and then I came back to the person who was trying to work out a way to proceed and provided some advice. They wound up doing a noncompetitive add-on to the Chemonics FEWS NET program. As I recall, the result was that they were able to set up a modification of the FEWS NET for Central America so that they monitored not only environmental things like storms, but also cropping patterns and food prices. They also looked at employment, they looked at coffee prices, and so it was a very interesting modification. I don't know whether it continued, but I believe it did for a while and may still be in place. But the idea being, the next time something like Hurricane Mitch or its successors comes along that they were able to anticipate the issues that might be coming up.

One other thing I did when I was on the Nicaragua desk. I mentioned my adventures with the briefing papers and with providing information about the funding spigots. I did make

a trip down to Nicaragua, where my former boss in Peru, Mike Maxey, was the agricultural officer there. That was his last assignment. No, that's not true. He did a few more things with AID. He's an idea guy, but he was also a coffee guy. Nicaragua was very big on coffee, and Mike was active in doing the things with coffee that he had been doing elsewhere. I went down and he immediately grabbed me and we went off on a tour of the coffee area in northwestern Nicaragua, and had a very nice time looking at coffee producers in the area that had been the Nicaraguan Contras headquarters area. I got to see that on the ground. While I was in Washington, in addition to doing briefing papers and the other stuff, I had frequent visits to the congressional staff people. There were at least two people who had very strong interest in making sure that the NGOs that they'd helped set up for the Contras continued to receive AID funding, whether there was any justification or not. Very frequently, the office chief and I had to go over to a person in the State Department, a political appointee. And there was a congressional staff person who also had a vested interest, so we'd have to go over and discuss matters with him.

That was my exposure to what I always called the Mandarins. The people who, you know, had something going on beyond their official positions. And AID being a small, vulnerable and not well situated agency had to deal with them. So in my quiet, low level, grunt level way, I got to see some of that. I had seen a little bit on previous Washington tours. I think I mentioned that when I was on my first tour, I had to kill a project that required me to justify why I did it, in writing to—I don't know—senators from Illinois and a bunch of other people. Basically, reiterating that they simply weren't producing what they said they were going to do. We had a budget shortage, but rather than cutting every project across the board, to make it simple, we took the dead dog and chucked it out. That was not the usual way that was handled in Washington, and certainly was not the way that the GS [general schedule] employees handled things. But to me, it made sense in terms of managing the money that the public provided to us. And I did it. You don't make friends that way.

I did my time on the Nicaragua desk, and I had a farewell retirement party where Mike Maxey showed up. Mike is a great maker of amateur videos. He had a video of vignettes of my AID career, to the theme of Frank Sinatra's song, "I Did It My Way," which, I guess, was appropriate. I never intended to rise to the top levels of management in AID. I did intend to do interesting things. And I did intend to see if I could make a difference to the end users in the way that AID was supposed to. I figured I was part of the 20 percent. I think that Vilfredo Pareto originally said something about that. Jerry Pournelle said that, in any bureaucracy, only about 20 percent of the people are working toward the official objectives and the other 80 percent are working toward the internal operations and their own career. So, if I was a 20 percenter, fine. Some of the stuff I did seems to have lasted, and that makes me happy.

Since I retired, I have done a consultancy or two. I did some work on an irrigation project in Herat, Afghanistan, in 2010–2011. Up until a year or so ago, I was helping as the field manager, and sometimes role player, for the Foreign Affairs Counter Threat training, for not just the State Department, but for a wide variety of U.S. government agency

employees. I liked filling in as an actor. At first, I was an actor. I played the DCM for the imaginary embassy. I very carefully got out my blue blazer and put on my red tie, and stood up and said, I am the DCM for the Erawan embassy and welcome. Welcome to Erawan. And in the front row of the trainees there were three people I'd worked with in AID and they started laughing, because they knew me. But it was great. It was fun. And I think we did some useful things there. Because when I was overseas everything I learned about civil disorder and counter threat was on the job. As the world has continued to deteriorate since the end of the cold war, that becomes that much more important—it seems like.

Now, I volunteer. So I volunteer for CERT [Community Emergency Response Team]. I volunteer for the Medical Reserve Corps. I volunteer for the Office of Emergency Management, and I also pick up trash at Wakefield Park for the Park Authority and that covers my membership there.

I retired about the end of 2003. And I really wanted to keep busy. But I didn't actively do stuff before I retired to get going. I was going to take a few months off and fiddle around. Then the Iraq thing came along, all the jobs and all the money and so forth went to Iraq. I wasn't willing to do what they wanted me to do for Iraq, because I didn't want to be a designated blame taker, which is what the chief of party for a contractor is in a situation like that. So I was off the track. I helped with a long evaluation of a very large CARE managed program in Bangladesh, which was great fun, because I was doing it with two old friends, Tom Timberg and Clarence Maloney. We worked in Dhaka and in Bangladesh for six weeks or so. But then, there wasn't anything else going on. My wife got very tired of me hanging around.

Q: Right, I imagine.

PLUNKETT: And she went off on her own to keep busy. She's very active with the Park Authority at Wakefield. Five to seven every morning she's over there, on the front desk, letting people in. And then she has four or five of what I call lady classes. They all have different names, but they're all women lined up in rows and another woman at the front yelling at them. This horrible, horrible music and it's called yoga or this or that.

Q: Zumba.

PLUNKETT: But yeah, all the same stuff. I tried one thing at her insistence, which is line dancing. And the lady who does line dancing was very nice. This is a bunch of Oriental ladies all lined up, and an Oriental lady leading. But she started every dance on her right foot, and in the sixth grade, I learned that gentlemen start dancing on their left foot. I lasted four lessons. I was always out of step, and that was the end of that.

Robin, you said there were questions that you were supposed to ask.

Q [MATTHEWMAN]: Yes, we have a list of questions for USAID interviews we like to ask. And I know this one isn't an oral history that AID has asked us to do officially, but I'm sure they'll be delighted to have it. I identified about five of the questions that you may not have answered in the course of your interview, so I will go ahead and pose those. You answered the other fifteen extremely well over time. So, Sher, what recommendations would you give to USAID officers starting their careers?

PLUNKETT: For a while after I retired I was acting as a mentor for AID employees, not just new ones. This really only relates to the Foreign Service officers in AID, who are a distinct minority. They should understand three things very clearly.

One is the difference between foreign assistance and development. AID is a foreign assistance agency of the U.S. government. Anything that is intended in terms of development, which means improving people's income and quality of life, must be done in, around, behind, and over that foreign assistance mandate. That's the first thing.

Second, is to recognize that the essence if you're trying to do development, as I mentioned earlier, is development is delivery. You have about four categories. You've got money, you've got commodities, you've got training, you've got technical assistance. In all the instances, you want to trace how that goes from the origin down; and you trace it by going to the end user and working backwards to see first what the end user needs and can use and what the intermediate links need and can use and where the holes are, where things are going to be sidetracked. This is the key to effective service delivery. That is program management, not just designing a program and contracting it out. That's what I said when I was the customer service officer for AID. Somewhere in the ADS [The Automated Directives System], the stuff that I put in there goes beyond sending in a customer service plan from the Program Office to AID Washington, it should be part of your daily working life.

The third thing that they need to understand is something that the technical professionals may not pay much attention to. That is that AID functions via its procurement process. You need to know the ins and outs of the procurement process, about contracts, how to write a contract scope of work, how to deal with a grant, or a cooperative agreement. And be sure you know how to put in the trapdoors into a scope of work so that you have the flexibility to do what you need to do. When I wrote the DESFIL scope of work for my first project in AID Washington, I wrote in a trapdoor paragraph that allowed me and the missions I supported to acquire the technical assistance they needed, as fast as they needed it. I learned a lot about how to get around the terrible procurement system, and ways to do non-competitive procurement and get away with it to get quality project support rapidly.

The main job these days as an AID officer is not to be technical. They don't have much use for direct hire technical professionals anymore I don't think. Anybody who hires someone who has a degree in economics, political science, or agriculture, whatever, is not going to be able to do very much hands-on work unless they work at it. If you do the

hands on, it penalizes you in terms of your career. I didn't mind, and although I filled several FS-01 positions over the years and had a lot of responsibility, I never was promoted past FS-02. If that's okay with you, go ahead and be an AID officer. I will say that, if you work for an NGO, you have a very different set of constraints. And so you shouldn't assume that's a bed of roses either.

Q [MATTHEWMAN]: You worked with Nathan Associates in Bangladesh after you retired and you worked in Afghanistan on a water project, right?

PLUNKETT: That's correct.

Q [MATTHEWMAN]: So you did get to see what it's like on the other side?

PLUNKETT: I did it because I wanted to see the area and I wanted to work on an irrigation project. And—

Q [MATTHEWMAN]: I meant you had the opportunity to stand on the other side. Working at Nathan Associates especially.

PLUNKETT: —One of the reasons I was so wary about becoming the chief of party for a contractor in situations such as that of Iraq and Afghanistan. Actually, I was acting chief of party for the project in Herat several times when the official chief of party had to go somewhere for meetings. I was not the senior person, but I guess he trusted me. So instead of having one of the engineers, he had me doing it. There weren't any complaints about it, so I guess it worked out. But I'm an anthropologist by disposition. I'm a people watcher, and anthropologists are always most comfortable on the margins.

Q [MATTHEWMAN]: That's interesting. Well, you came into AID just as they were moving more and more toward contractors and away from technical expertise. This is a broad one and I think I tried to ask it once or twice through our process and probably then you didn't bite. Would you have any policy recommendations for USAID leadership?

PLUNKETT: First, it would be nice if there were AID leadership. That is something that's always been an issue. The policy—well, I think we tried to do that when we had re-engineering and tried to update policy through the ADS. We did succeed in installing program level funding for AID, that made a lot of difference. We also expanded the procurement of what we used to call indefinite quantity contracts—we always called them indefinite quality contracts. They were made a good deal more flexible toward the end of things just after I left.

In terms of policy, they need to make sure that the procurement procedures match the requirements. That's the way I think about AID's capability. Practically, because there's so much that can be siphoned off from AID programs, the Congress and K-Street crowd are not going to be very comfortable with that. But the idea is to make sure that things can happen when they need to happen, instead of going through an eighteen-month

procurement process by which time the regime may have changed. That's a critical constraint for AID. AID is horribly vulnerable, as you know, to congressional earmarking, and favoritism, and so forth and so on. And if there's any way that resistance to that can be bolstered up, so that the actual guidance to the field is consistent, performance would improve.

I remember that when I was on my first tour in Washington, all of a sudden the environment became the buzzword. I was told that the Sierra Club wrote into the Foreign Assistance Act amendments that made the environment a major topic. Basically, whatever it is, a political fashion is something that's deadly to AID. It has to figure out what it can do, and stick with it. In a political setting that changes with each administration, that's very difficult. In the early '80s or before, AID stopped using its own staff and started contracting. Then it reduced its focus in agriculture and economic development, in favor of democracy quote, unquote.

That started up in Nepal when I was there. I almost was transferred over to head the Office of Democracy in the mission of Nepal. Being a political anthropologist, I had some ideas about it. I said, "If it's needed, I'll do that because I'm the deputy in the Ag and Rural Development Office, and this will mean I become office chief—sort of a promotion." But that didn't happen. They kept that project in the Program Office. The democracy focus has sputtered along. I saw it in Peru, where the democracy staff kept trying to access Alternative Development funds for activities that did not relate to our program. I've always thought that it was based on some conception of high school civics as opposed to actual, Lasswellian, who gets what and how, kinds of political issues as they relate to democracy.

I think that AID needs to go back to what it is good at, or could be good at. And that is economic development, including some kinds of infrastructure. I think the health part of it has continued to get publicity. It seems to be doing okay. I never worked much on health. After Bangladesh, I certainly didn't. It does seem to be highly visible in today's AID. But remember, I've been retired for almost twenty years now.

I still look at development. I sort of keep track of AID, but I no longer mentor people. When I was mentoring, the only thing they wanted to ask me about was what they could do toward getting their next post. And I wasn't much help on that, I don't think. For somebody starting out in AID, look at the very, very different circumstances and organizations of AID Washington versus AID overseas. The field missions are small and shrinking, heavily dependent, as they should be on, their Foreign Service nationals. The GS employees in AID, when I was doing re-engineering, and probably to this day, didn't have a lot of actual knowledge of, or concern about, what goes on overseas. They have these entitlement projects with universities and other organizations. When we did re-engineering, we were asked to do an analysis of the Ag Office in the Science and Technology Bureau and found that they had absolutely no slack. All their money was taken up in entitlement projects going to universities responding to congressional interest. If that is going to be the case, then AID is never going to be that capable. I will say that

compared to the UN agencies, overseas AID functions much better. Compared to the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank, AID is more effective in reaching its actual intended clientele, but that doesn't say very much.

Q: Well, that was one of the questions I was about to ask. Did you develop fruitful relationships with other donors and international organizations in your time? Were some more effective than others?

PLUNKETT: In Nepal, one of the things I wound up doing was training the local UNICEF office people on program level management. This was before AID had program level operations, but our office was in the midst of doing it with what we called the SIRE project. And they, UNICEF [United Nations Children's Fund]—I think it was UNICEF, I've forgotten—in any case, they asked me to come over and explain it. So, I went over and spent a couple of days with them, talking about what it was and why it was useful. The FAO guy in Nepal, I never could find anything that he actually did. But he was Indian and used to go across the border back to his home in Lucknow all the time. So we used to get together and have tea and talk about Urdu poetry. He brought me back a nice Urdu dictionary. In Peru, the UN drug control people had their own program going, and they were quite happy to take credit for things that actually we had done in our program. We used to see their reports, every now and then, but they were very canny about what they would actually share with us. So when we saw the reports, we'd see they were taking credit for this and that. I have very little respect for those agencies. I'm sure they have little respect for me as well.

I always got a kick out of the World Bank, the way they operated, because they would send their experts out. In Pakistan, I was sent to accompany them because I could speak the language. They always wanted to go out to the nearby Potemkin village, or they'd go to the site, like the headworks of a dam. And they would stay there for the minimum amount of time, then go for a big lunch provided by the local officials, and go back and write the report. I remember mentioning to them that they operated on—and they didn't like this—I said, "You operate on two assumptions. One is that there's actually a government of the country that you're dealing with. And the other is that there's a relationship between the people in that organization and the population of the country." My view of this goes back to my early studies of the Mughal Empire, and the way that basically governments were central, and as they extended out they got weaker and weaker as they went out from the capital. And they had various kinds of arrangements, like warlords in Afghanistan. This is probably not a good way to get myself jobs as a consultant.

Q [MATTHEWMAN]: Did you follow a certain management style that you found particularly effective, especially in motivating and leading teams to achieve mission goals? So the way the question is written, what was your style of motivating people, your teams?

PLUNKETT: My first professor said, “Anthropologists are actually born and not made.” I was hired off the street in Pakistan. I was considered only one notch up from the Foreign Service nationals. I spoke the language, and I talked to the FSNs, and I realized how important the Foreign Service nationals are to operations in the mission. First of all, they know everything, they know everybody, and they know when things are not so good. Also, this is their rice bowl. So they may not be comfortable coming out and saying things. So my management style, if you want to call it that, was heavily dependent upon as much on contact and dealings with locals, both the FSN [Foreign Service nationals] and their contacts and local nationals. And that doesn’t mean just the professionals, the FSN economists, and foresters. It also means the drivers and security guys, and whoever else is around.

Secondly, my management style was, as I keep saying, to go to the root zone, go as far out as you can to the end users to find out what is going on, and then you work backwards. That management style meant not just for project design but also for general operations. And how do you do this? You do it by going way beyond the very minimum of education about local culture and language that most people seem to get. And I was lucky, I had it already. I had a director in Pakistan who appreciated it and encouraged it. So I continued that through every posting I had, including those in AID Washington.

Another part of it is what is called management by walking around. I spent as little time in my office as I could, and I would go around and sit on the corner of somebody else’s desk and gossip with him or her. Not just my own office staff, but people in other offices as well. I had an irregular arrangement in every country where instead of having my counterparts come to the formal AID office, which in many cases meant getting through our embassy and AID security, which was a nuisance for them and degrading, I would meet them in a neutral location. For example, in Nepal, I set up a procedure for having breakfast before my counterparts went to work, at this restaurant not far from where my counterparts worked. I and my FSN and counterparts went over and had our business discussion over breakfast. In Pakistan, it was dinners. In Bangladesh, it was difficult, I never was able to make the kind of connections there that I did elsewhere. And heaven knows in Peru it was wonderful. We were out doing all kinds of things all the time, and business and pleasure mixed.

So the management style I advocate is, first of all, get your education in local, not just general culture, but you know, local customs and culture. And not just for the elite. In Pakistan, Bangladesh, everywhere I went, I noticed the difference between the way I and some of my colleagues operated and the way my State counterparts operated. They never seemed to get down to the levels below the English speaking elite. And they never were able to develop the intel network that I did. That management style is absolutely essential, if you want to be effective. It doesn’t happen in a day. And the average eighteen month tour that the State Department people tended to have is way too short to get insight into what’s actually going on.

Organizational anthropology, put into practice, is critical. I don't know what's taught in—is it the A-100 class? I've never seen the curriculum for that. If I did, I would be curious to see how much encouragement people get to get away and out of what we used to call the privilege bubble. In the missions, where people circulated only among either their own kind of Americans and other foreigners, or the elite opposites, who were quite happy to cultivate Americans, because everywhere I went Americans were considered to be kind of dumb, but had a lot of money.

Q [MATTHEWMAN]: I think both in AID and in the State Department, there's been some growth and changes in the last twenty years on some of the really valid criticisms or critiques that you're raising.

Here is the last question. Your whole career, you were working to make it more effective and more valuable, the work that your AID missions did more effective and more valuable for the end users, for the people of those countries. But in your last substantive one in Peru, it sounded like you were able to really do it in a strategic way that you ended up having a chance. You knew exactly what your mission was. And you were able to strategically think through how you were going to use the resources at hand to make those fundamental changes. Is that right? Do you see it that way?

PLUNKETT: I think, by the time I got to Peru, I had had a lot of experience with AID's operations. I had the re-engineering experience, as well. I was absolutely fortunate in Peru, in that although I was the deputy, my superior was quite happy to turn over the day to day operations of the program to me. While he kept an eye on things, he was actually keeping the program visible and positive at higher levels. That opened things up until the very end of my stay there, when the director left and the deputy director was not enthusiastic about what we were doing as a separate program within the mission. Because it was tied to the State Department's counter narcotics program, we had a lot of money that the rest of the mission didn't have. But we couldn't use it for things which were AID priorities including particularly, I remember, democracy. They always wanted to get money for democracy out of us. I was happy to do it if they would do program activities in the coca areas. They wanted to do them in Lima. They wanted to use our money to buy things that they were going to use locally, vehicles and things like that. Not happy with me, because I didn't want to have an audit say that we were misusing the funds. That's why I'm so proud of passing two audits.

Q: *And that's what I was getting at, you had a clear focus; it had to be in those areas, it had to be for these development purposes.*

PLUNKETT: I think I hit probably the limit of my capabilities within the AID organization, because I never wanted to be a middle manager, which is what a director is. But I got to manage a program. I was able to do things that at the time worked out—I don't know what happened afterwards, I was told things kind of collapsed afterwards, but I was never able to follow up and see. I came away thinking that I had accomplished something that was worth doing. And a lot of people out in the eastern Andean jungle of

Peru may have been able to continue with what they're doing. Since they're still selling that specialty coffee in the markets here, I am convinced that what we did, Mike Maxey especially, in terms of the technical strategy that he came up with, and the work of our staff and counterpart organizations, a bunch of really good colleagues, we made a difference in people's lives. I helped make a difference.

My first tour in AID Washington, I taught a graduate applied anthropology seminar over at Catholic University in the evenings, just for fun. After I retired, I taught a couple of classes on globalization and development anthropology over at George Washington. When I was overseas, I did seminars, and I think I mentioned I helped to form the anthropology department at the University of Islamabad with an applied focus when I was there. When I was in Peru, I didn't do much in that regard. I've not done a lot of academic work, mainly because the academics have gone off into this social justice fanaticism, which is unfortunate, in my opinion, for anthropologists to not be able to distinguish between research and activism.

I have gone more into doing volunteer work. I have become a volunteer for the Community Emergency Response Teams, and the Medical Reserve Corps. And—what else—Office of Emergency Management. Basically Fairfax County volunteering, and as I said, I pick up trash at Wakefield Park in Annandale. That covers my membership at the recreation center there and I get to see the deer and the skunks. My wife and I also help manage the Wakefield Farmers Market in the summer. I haven't had a paid academic gig in quite a long time. I left the George Washington job to go to Afghanistan. And then, because I had medical issues, it took me a year to recover from surgery and so I never quite got back into consulting.

The other thing of course, is being mercenary. I made more in two weeks in Afghanistan than I did the whole term at George Washington University. Had there been more consultancies like that one, I would have probably jumped on them. The FACT [Foreign Affairs Counter Threat] training didn't pay a lot, but it was mostly for fun. I would love to continue doing that but, unfortunately, they moved FACT training, from Summit Point, West Virginia, down to Fort Pickett, way down in Virginia somewhere, about a five hour drive. They also changed contractors, and I haven't been in touch with the current contractor to offer my services. So I am what actors used to say, at liberty, which means I am unemployed. As I mentioned, last Saturday, I did thirteen hours as an Urdu interpreter at the Fairfax County Government Center for the vaccination campaign, and I am scheduled to do the same thing again tomorrow. So the U.S. government has gotten a lot of use out of the money they put into my fellowship as a student of Urdu back at University of Chicago back in 1960.

Q: So we will end here. I would say that in editing the transcript, more is better than less in oral history, because we don't know what people are going to be after. Please add any anecdotes, stories, but also, things that you may have forgotten to mention, please put in.

PLUNKETT: Well, I will. I have an ulterior motive as well. Because my sons, I have three sons, and they have been urging me—now that I'm old and decrepit—to do my memoirs. They keep saying, "Well, you did all this stuff, and so we want to have it, so we can tell the kids." They don't have any kids yet. I thought I would use this interview as a kind of a launching platform for my memories.

I've been reading other people's interviews online here, people I used to know, or still know. And I find that might be one of the things I would recommend to people, new Foreign Service people. Take a look at these interviews, see what people say and how they say it. I have looked at maybe six or eight of these interviews. And in each one, I find it interesting what they said, the different perspectives they put on the same time and place or event or whatever. You know, I was never going to be an academic. I always liked the idea of being a scholar, but as a different sort of thing. I was originally going to be a historian before I discovered anthropology. So I find this absolutely an essential thing that the State Department is doing. Not just for us folks, but for the record.

Q [MATTHEWMAN]: *Stu created this program and has put thirty-five years into this. Most of the interviews were done by Stu, right?*

Q: Yeah!

PLUNKETT: It was a good idea.

Q: Well, you know, I've done well over a thousand of these. And we're creating that as a—the thing is, people in the foreign affairs have very excellent experiences. Not only do people want to understand how the government works with one particular branch, but also a situation in various countries, and I'm sure that foreigners will be interested to see how we viewed the situation in various countries at various times. And it's, I think it'll be invaluable to historians and anthropologists.

PLUNKETT: If I were tasked to go back and do what they wanted me to do to examine the whole business of mitigating organizational culture conflict between AID and State, I think I would go back into these interviews, and see what I could find. It's a very different perspective that AID people have on the enterprise, on the whole foreign affairs thing. The recruitment, the socialization, the culture heroes, the rituals, all of the anthropological things that one can extract from these interviews. It's a tremendous corpus of material.

Well, the only reason I'm doing my memoirs is because I have a guaranteed audience. I wrote my dissertation on political middlemen in India, a political machine I studied, and as an academic, I wanted to get it published. This was back in the late '60s, early '70s. I hawked it around and the editor said they would be happy to publish my work, but I would have to give them, I think it was five thousand dollars, which was more than half a year's of my salary. So I said, "Forget that." A few years later, I was in Bangladesh, and my family was in India by then. I ran across a guy who had a publishing outfit in India, a

very small publishing operation in India. I traded him a portable typewriter and he published my dissertation. I still have a few copies. Instead of having to pay five thousand dollars for people to buy my book for twenty dollars, I got it done in India for a typewriter, and people could buy it in India for sixty or eighty rupees. The only people interested in it would be people like me who are South Asianists. If you ever want to read *Weaving the Web of Power*, let me know. This is about my Maharaja and his political machine. The Maharajah was the minister for public works and power in Rajasthan and his machine was how they dealt with the Gandhians and the other factions of the Congress Party in distributing patronage. Anyway, I had fun with my career. I keep saying that I had fun. I did. And I have every intention of continuing to do so.

End of interview