The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
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STEPHEN THIBEAULT

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Leaving Iraq
Reflecting on the experience

Washington, DC—USIA, Near East Office Public diplomacy, Iraq	1991
Chiang Mai, Thailand—Branch Public Affairs Officer Cultural performances Closing down the office Budget	1992-1996
Amman, Jordan—Information Officer Israel USAID public acknowledgement Economic development Media development VIP visits	1996-1999
Washington, DC —Congressional Liaison Office	1999
Washington, DC —Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Media Reaction Office	1999-2007
Retirement	2007
Rapid Response Unit	2007

INTERVIEW

[Note: This interview as not edited by Mr. Thibeault.]

Q: This is Dan Whitman, October 8, 2007, in McLean Gardens, Washington DC, USA interviewing Steve Thibeault, which for the transcriber, is T-H-I-B-E-A-U-L-T. This is our first interview of a series. I want to ask Steve at this point if he would be willing to start from the beginning. I believe you were raised in New England, at least part of the time. Tell us the type of upbringing you had, which drew you to towards an interest in the Foreign Service.

THIBEAULT: Ok. My upbringing provided background, I guess for the Foreign Service, but Foreign Service wasn't something that even occurred to me till I was perhaps 30. I grew up in East Boston, which, at the time, was a very Italian neighborhood. Later on, I felt very fortunate during the times of busing in the 1970s. Boston was a very polarized city due to the busing order for racial desegregation. I felt very fortunate at that time as an Irish person – French-Irish, that I'd grown up in an Italian neighborhood. East Boston

was a very heavy Italian neighborhood so that I didn't grow up with the chip on my shoulder against the blacks or the Brits, that might have happened if I had grown up in an Irish neighborhood like Charlestown or South Boston. So, I grew up in East Boston.

My father was an electrician; he worked at the Boston Navy Yard. I had two sisters, both quite a bit older. One was ten years older, one 9 years older. The second sister, Marcella, had cerebral palsy. So I grew up in a family under a lot of stress, as my father worked two jobs; and my mother devoted all her time to my sister, because as she got older she wasn't able to walk – she had to be carried to and from the bathroom, for example, and things like that. So, that was the household I grew up in. It was pretty much a working-class neighborhood. I think my dad made toward the late '60s, about $100 a week, or something like that – about $5000 a year. I was raised Catholic and was depressed about it. I felt the Catholic religion to be a very heavy presence and it seemed to be. The last time I went to confession, the priest sent me back out because I wasn't properly prepared – I should go back out and prepare. That was the last time ever I went to confession.

Q: When was that?

THIBEAULT: Probably when I was say 12 or something like that.

I mean it was Catholic to the extent that I was in seventh grade before I was in a classroom where everyone was not Catholic and this was in the public schools; this was not the parochial schools. So, in the public schools I went to seventh grade before I was in a class with a non-Catholic. So, I felt very depressed about the idea that I couldn't get away from this religion, so that was one of the factors as a kid…

Q: Let's focus on two things. You mentioned busing, earlier; I don't know if you are getting to that, as a factor later in your high school days.

THIBEAULT: It's later.

Q: This thing about depressing. Tell me about it. You said it felt heavy. Explain what you mean by that.

THIBEAULT: The Catholic Church is very much into rules. I didn't have an early confirmation, so I had a crisis of conscience because I became old enough to understand what it was. I had a crisis of conscience because I had reached an age, where if I were to be confirmed as a Catholic, I would have to believe in the doctrine. By that time I was old enough to know something about the doctrine, so I was stuck in a dilemma, because I couldn't sincerely be a Catholic.

Q: You say you were confirmed late; how old were you?

THIBEAULT: I was never confirmed.

Q: Never confirmed. What was the time we are talking about?

THIBEAULT: We are talking about 5th grade, 6th grade. What happened was that in the 3rd grade I was selected for what was called an advanced class. Boston public schools were trying to develop a gifted and talented class system through the schools and so I transferred schools and when I went to the new school, I told them that I was already confirmed. So, when we had CCD, the catholic religious instruction, I told them at the new school that I had already been confirmed so I wasn't put on a confirmation track. And about two years later my mother said, "When are you getting confirmed?" And I said, "No, I'm not." And she said, "I no longer then have a son"; which sounds a lot more ominous than it was. She repeated that about four years later, when she asked the same question. But, again, that was a heavy…

Q: Sorry, I have to ask about your mother's upbringing. Was she born in the U.S.?

THIBEAULT: My mother was born in Portland, Maine; Irish background. My father was born in Liverpool, England. His father was born on a little island off Nova Scotia called Arichat – I think it is near Isle Madame. As a young boy, he shipped out on a ship out of Nova Scotia. The entire ship was taken with a fever; many of the people died. He was let off the ship in Brazil. Being a Canadian, he was a British national, so when he recovered they put him on the first British ship out of port, which went to Liverpool. He arrived in Liverpool not speaking English, because he was French-Canadian. He was taken home by an official who worked in the docks. Brought home and grew up in an Irish-Catholic family in Liverpool and married the daughter of that family. So, that was my grandfather. So that's how my father came to be born in Liverpool.

Q: So, he learned English after going to Liverpool and whence the name Thibeault.

THIBEAULT: Yeah, whence the name Thibeault. He worked his way up in the docks, in the port of Liverpool. There was some kind of falling out and my grandfather walked out of the situation; packed up his middleclass family and brought them back to this god-forsaken island off the coast of Nova Scotia, with no running water.

Q: A falling out with the neighbors?

THIBEAULT: A falling out within the business, within the docks or port authority in Liverpool. He had an important position -- again, a very middle class existence. My father grew up taking Sunday bicycle rides in the park. In his youth the entire family was picked up and brought down several pegs to Canada and my grandfather then went back into the Merchant Marine. They eventually moved to Portland, Maine, where my father went to high school and met my mother. Shortly before the war they were married and moved to East Boston.

Q: Now, I ask because your mother clearly had a very devout approach towards the church which you had doubts in.

THIBEAULT: You know, the thing is, I don't think she was particularly devout. It's just

everyone at that time, from catechism on up, were taught the rules of the Catholic Church. It was still a time of not eating meat on Friday; Sunday church attendance was, of course, mandatory. And again, it was a very dour and kind of a negative upbringing, as far as the religion went.

Q: The striking sentence: "I no longer have a son", was this more of an expression of a social presence, that a religious presence?

THIBEAULT: I think this was just more dramatic than anything else. Our family was under a lot of stress and I think the whole church aspect of it fell by the wayside, which my mother was not happy about. Because my sister Marcella had this cerebral palsy, there was a tremendous amount of work that went into raising her. She had frequent seizures. I remember growing up just seeing my sister would go into a seizure at the kitchen table; it would last 2 or 3 minutes, then she would gradually come out of it. It didn't seem like anything remarkable.

Q: Were you old enough to play a roll in assisting?

THIBEAULT: No. I was still too much the little kid. By the time I was ten or so, using connections with Cardinal Cushing, who was the Boston Cardinal, we were able to get Marcella into a state facility – Monson State Hospital in Western Massachusetts. At that time there was a very large system of institutionalization for people who were mentally retarded and also for people who had psychiatric problems. There was a pretty big institution out in Monson. We were very fortunate to get my sister into this place because it lifted the burden off of the family.

But, the guilt associated with it was so severe that my mother had a nervous breakdown. I remember being in the house when the police came to take my mother away. I think there was a total breakdown in communication between my mother and my father. From what I understand in the family, my mother was telling him things that were going on – things that the neighbors were saying about us, etc. I think in the beginning he was giving credence to these things, but then at a point realized that my mother was fantasizing and was having delusions. And, given our circumstances, the option was to have the police come and take my mother away to an institution, which I think was Mattapan. I visited once when she was institutionalized. In retrospect and from what I have gleaned from other people, I think that this was a matter of guilt. I know that when she had a crippled daughter, the cerebral palsy, not only was my sister mentally retarded, but again, she also couldn't walk and it was difficult for her to feed herself. I think that there were people who believed that such things were the result of sins; that if you committed sins, it could lead to things like this.

Q: A couple of questions on that. First of all, CP in itself is not a psychiatric condition, but you were saying, there was also retardation?

THIBEAULT: There was retardation and, again, she had the physical handicaps. But, I think the state health system had these very large facilities because at that time, not only

were mentally retarded people institutionalized, but because without the psychotropic drugs, there was also a large system just for people who were psychotic. She didn't have those problems; she was physically and mentally handicapped.

Q: Your mother was institutionalized for how long?

THIBEAULT: I believe it was somewhere under a year.

Q: And you were what age at that time?

THIBEAULT: I was maybe in the fifth grade.

Q: Would you please describe the effect it had on you, if you can remember it?

THIBEAULT: I was just very gloomy I think and very withdrawn. I got along good with friends. I see now, looking back, that I was acting out in different ways. I think I might have beaten up a couple of girls or something like that – nothing awful. When I say 'beat up' I might have punched a girl or something. I got punished in the schools. I was playing hooky a lot: I would go hide. I had a hiding place. I would get halfway to school and then there was a place I could sneak off and hide and spend the day freezing in the winter, sitting outside – waiting for the end of school; waiting to hear the kids coming home from school.

Q: Sometimes people play hokey to have fun; that doesn't sound like much fun.

THIBEAULT: No, it wasn't much fun. I remember one time I was hiding down at the beach in the middle of the winter and a man came down. You would be very suspicious these days. He started talking to me, asking me who I was, etc. He went away. The police showed up about 15 minutes later. They took me down to the station; I gave them a false name and all sorts of stuff. It took me about half an hour to break down and admit who I was and where I was from. I remember coming home; my mother answered the door. My father worked a funny shift so he was home during the day. My mother said, "Edward, look at your son." And I was brought home by the police. Another time my mother caught me hiding behind a chair. I was going to go out to school that day and said, "Good bye!" and slammed the door and went into the living room and hid behind a chair. Unfortunately, that day my mother vacuumed and moved the chair and found me back there.

Q: Did you want to be found?

THIBEAULT: No. I just didn't want to go to school. There were many days when I didn't get caught. By the time I got to fifth grade, my homeroom teacher pretty much realized what was going on. So, I got caught playing hokey in fifth grade and got punished with the rattan, which was a reed or a whip. I forget – maybe something like four strokes on each hand or something like that. The Boston Schools still had corporal punishment. I remember at the time being happy they had corporal punishment: it was

something that would be done and finished, and I wouldn't have to talk to anybody about this. One thing I notice now is that whenever an adult says to a child, "Why are you acting like this?" – I realize that's the stupidest question ever to ask a child; that you bring in a therapist to explain why a child is acting a certain way. You don't ask the child; the child has no idea why it's acting out in a certain way. So I think that was a very difficult time.

Q: You said that one of the few positive things in this gloomy period was that you did get along with your friends.

THIBEAULT: Oh sure.

Q: Were they not children at school?

THIBEAULT: Children at school and friends; I never had any trouble socially.

Q: Yet school was very forbidding.

THIBEAULT: I never had any discipline, so I never did any of the assignments that were assigned. I always depended on my native intelligence to slip though somehow. As a result, I spent many a year with a pain in the pit of my stomach hoping I wouldn't be called upon because I had done none of my homework, none of the assignments.

One day, the teacher in the 7th grade was going to teach us about parliamentary procedure, so he had the class elect a president and a vice president and I was elected president. I was told to go to the library and research Robert's Rules of Order, which of course I didn't do. And, the following class the teacher called me up to the front of the class to explain Robert's Rules of Order, which I tried to fake. So, I was kicked out of being president of the class and the vice president assumed the duty.

Q: So this was not an entirely democratic procedure: the students elected you but the teacher reversed the election.

THIBEAULT: Reversed the election because I hadn't carried through the duties of the president. But, again, even at the time, I could see that none of my co-students thought any the worse of me, so, again socially, I never had any problems. But, school – I see a dramatic difference between my experience and my daughter's experience, because they're always prepared. Again, my parents never really had a direct interest in what I was doing in school. I think they just didn't have that tradition where the parents would be involved with the school.

Q: Sounds as if they had a lot on their plate with Marcella and with making a living.

THIBEAULT: Yes. There were times when I appreciated the fact that my parents weren't telling me what to do, etc. But, school would have been much more enjoyable if I had ever done my homework, if someone had ever sat me down and walked me through

things.

Q: Well, are you saying now, at this later date, it would have been good to have a mentor?

THIBEAULT: Oh, for sure. I just didn't have the ability to plan ahead, to work systematically on anything and procrastination has always been one of my problems. My darkest hours in the Foreign Service were not in crises, but they were in situations where my procrastination had just got me behind the eight ball with the administration and the bureaucracy in the embassy. Again, in my darkest hours in the Foreign Service, I just found it very frustrating that I was being the absolute most responsible that I'd been in my entire life and I was still not up to snuff on what needed to be done.

Q: Some of us who know you would dispute this. Let's go back. You were in the 5th grade; let's get you to the 12th grade.

THIBEAULT: The contrast in my academic life was between my intelligence and my performance. I remember seeing teacher evaluations of me, which referred to me as 'curt', 'brilliant, but chaotic'. I was always good at standardized tests. So, the Boston Public Schools had as their two top academic institutions, Latin School and Girls' Latin; so we had an all boys school and an all girls school. Latin School, founded in 1630, is the oldest public high school in the United States. I took that school exam and I took the test, as well, for Boston Tech. My uncle was a teacher at Boston Tech. I passed both exams and my uncle told my parents that I'd gotten the highest score ever on the Boston Tech exam. We were focused on getting into Boston Latin School. You can enter in the 7th grade or the 9th grade. I passed the test in the 7th grade and didn't attend. I went to another public school in Boston. I would have flunked out - I know for sure - if I had gotten in in 7th grade.

Q: The highest score was for Boston Tech.

THIBEAULT: Boston Technical.

Q: The intention was to go to Boston Latin, but you did not do that.

THIBEAULT: I'm sorry. The 7th grade test was for Boston Latin School, which I passed and didn't go. In 9th grade – they had again, - Latin School is a six-year school, so you can take the test in the 9th grade and I passed both the Tech exam and the Latin School exam.

In Latin School, my homeroom class freshman year…

Q: So you did go to Boston Latin.

THIBEAULT: I went to Boston Latin. My freshman class, or my freshman homeroom at Boston Latin School, was 25 students; 10 of us graduated. That was a typical attrition

rate. Latin School was a school that had really no discipline problems because discipline problems were resolved academically. If you violated the rules enough, you were suspended and you flunked all of your tests during that suspension period. So, anyone who was a consistent discipline problem would flunk just enough tests that they would end up leaving the school. A lot of students just left because it was too hard academically. We used to say that people also left for the leg show. Being in an all boys school, there was always that temptation just to quit, go to Hyde Park High, go to East Boston High, go to some place that had girls and so we did have that. We had people who left Latin School in order to be in a school with girls.

Q: So you survived this rigorous academic environment. What happened? This is night and day.

THIBEAULT: Well, we used to…Freshman year, whatever time school started, if school started at 8:20, I would come in at 7:50 and say, "Who has the Latin?" and I would copy someone's Latin homework, and then I would say, "Who has the math?" and I would copy the math homework. There was a culture of homework sharing that people did not see as cheating. You know when the teacher says, "You're just cheating yourself." – well, in a way you were, because when the test came, if you had copied the homework, you hadn't done your homework. So, I had a very tough time academically in the 9th and 10th grades. I remember in 10th grade I was called in by the guidance counselor. A 60 was a passing grade; Latin School prided itself on how low the passing grade was – that it was such a tough school. The guidance counselor called me in and said, "You're going to have to go to summer school. Because, you're flunking – well, you're not quite flunking math, but you're…well you're not flunking German either." So I ended up having a 60, a 61, a 62, a 65 and a 70 -- something to that effect. That was sophomore year. Junior year I got my act together.

Q: So you did go to summer school.

THIBEAULT: No. Despite all these rigorous rules and everything in Latin School was based on…it was almost like the Church as far as having rules for tests and grades; but I got through the sophomore year without going to summer school. In junior year, the nature of the academic work changed and it really lent itself to extemporaneous – what you would say "bullshitting". So, the type of courses I was taking started to fit my talents for drafting and synergy and putting ideas together, synthesis and things like that. Latin School, despite being very, very rigorous academically, had a philosophy that boys were late bloomers. So, as marks didn't count for class rank until you got to junior year, I had some pretty terrible grades freshman and sophomore years. Junior and senior year I did pretty well. I dropped Latin, which helped a lot.

Q: Latin was a big obstacle, academically.

THIBEAULT: Latin was a big obstacle academically because it required study.

Q: Memorizing.

THIBEAULT: Right. If I didn't understand it in class, I was never going to learn anything at home. So, Latin School was a tremendous advantage for me. It gave me a tremendous amount of academic confidence.

After high school, I went to Bates College in Lewiston, Maine, one of a whole group of small liberal arts schools in New England. When I got there, I went to my first classes and the professor would say, "In this class you are going to have two papers and two exams. The first exam is seven weeks from now." And after Latin School I couldn't believe there's not a test tomorrow. In Latin School there had to be tests everyday in at least two subjects. A college, again, fed into my procrastination to a bad extent; but at the same time just the academic rigor that people were expecting at this place was nothing new to me. I saw that the students at Bates who had more of a problem were students who had gone to high school and had gotten all As and then got to college and were dumbstruck at how hard it was. Whereas, my experience was again …there's no test this week? – so it was a very good preparation. The attrition rate at Latin School was so high, basically 2/3 of the students would flunk out. That just pretty much gave me a lot of confidence in anything that involved a selection process I would be able to come out on top.

Q: So in fact, your self confidence was boosted a lot at the moment of graduation from Boston Latin.

So, four years at Bates?

THIBEAULT: Three years at Bates. My father died my freshman year and we were living on civil service retirement and social security survivor's benefits. That was the only income coming in. I had a scholarship for about half of what it cost to go to Bates. One thing about Bates was that they had a three-year option. If you took extra courses in the fall and the winter and if you came to a special short term that lasted until the beginning of June, you could graduate in three years. The academic load was not difficult, so I graduated in three years, so I was 20 years old when I finished.

Q: 1972.

THIBEAULT: I finished Bates College in 1972. I always thought I wanted to be a writer. I had majored in English and I had majored in speech-theater at Bates. The reason I had majored in speech-theater is that I had discovered rhetorical analysis. Again, at the time and I didn't realize it, the rhetorical analysis courses I took at Bates were the most influential that I took in my entire life. What I do now – interpreting foreign media opinion of American policies, actions and personnel is totally based on what I learned at college. And, when I graduated from Bates, I thought what a shame it is that you can't make a living doing rhetorical analysis, because that's really what I want to do. I thought instead that I would be a journalist, so I went to Boston University School of Publication for a Master's Degree in Investigative Reporting.

So I came back to Boston; lived at home again; it is 1972. I started Boston University (BU). I was far and away the youngest kid in the class. We had a bunch of Vietnam veterans in there; people there were just older.

Q: I was there in '73 -'74 myself.

THIBEAULT: I was there '72 -'73. So, again, I was learning Investigative reporting – that's what the class was. No one in the class wanted to be an investigative reporter. Everyone wanted to write a column in the paper called: "What I think about that". So, the most difficult part of the experience was to go out and actually be a reporter: to just stop people cold and ask them about things, to try to investigate something. I went in to see former Mayor Collins, who was supporting President Nixon politically. I was determined to go in and ask how someone who was a democrat could support a republican, and he just picked me apart. I didn't really have an idea of what it was I was doing. I had some good story ideas, but I just didn't have the drive to go after information.

Q: Picked you apart? I mean, you asked a simple question and he took offense; is that the idea?

THIBEAULT: No. His rhetorical abilities to explain why he was right were just so much beyond mine.

Q: So he took an interview really as an argument.

THIBEAULT: Well, I went in with the mistaken idea that it should be an argument and that rather than finding what motivated this man, I was probably thinking to unmask his hypocrisy, or something like that.

Q: And that was clear to him, perhaps.

THIBEAULT: Perhaps, yeah.

Q: Now, everybody else in the class wanted to write a column: "What I think about that". Was that the case with you?

THIBEAULT: Oh, for sure. I think people were looking at journalism as a road to self-expression, rather than as a means of informing the public of what was going on. But, the hardball philosophy of investigative reporting – my personality was not suited to it. You're supposed to be able to go to a chemical company and say, "You're polluting the river and I have evidence of it; I can just write this story the way it is right now or you can tell me your side of the story." etc.

Q: Is this what BU was training students to do?

THIBEAULT: In an investigative reporting class, yeah. It's funny, because, again, I was very uncomfortable with this. This is 1973.

15 years later, as the gatekeeper, as the information officer or the press attaché at the embassy, I was the person who was to field these questions coming in from journalists. That was a much easier task to deal with these kinds of subterfuges when people would come in and say, "Well, I have to talk to the ambassador, because don't you think the ambassador would like to have his side of this into print."

Q: And this was easier for you because you had been trained to do the other side?

THIBEAULT: I think, and also because I was just a lot more mature. Again, I was then 20 years old.

Q: So, the master's degree in the communications school at BU unwittingly it really did prepare you for what you were going to do later, but you didn't know it at the time.

THIBEAULT: Yeah; I didn't know it at the time.

I had a very liberating experience in graduate school that most people wouldn't see that way. I took all the coursework. I got my grades. I'm sure I got mostly As and a couple of Bs. I had to write a thesis. I had written an undergraduate thesis that just about killed me; for someone who is a procrastinator to produce a credible thesis is quite a challenge. In journalism school, I had two factors. One was I had no belief that anyone would find anything that I wrote credible. I thought that I'd had no experience in the world; I didn't know anything worth sharing, as far as knowledge goes, which in retrospect is a very good judgment. I had three years to write the thesis; and, after nine months of carrying around 40 pounds of books wherever I went in my backpack while I was hitchhiking, etc., I decided that I would not write my thesis. I decided that I'd been torturing myself for nine months and that all I would do was torture myself for three years, pretending to myself that I would get this done and that it would be a good job. So, I decided nine months in that I would not write my thesis and I would be 'all but dissertation' or 'all but thesis' for my graduate program.

At that point, I had been pushing hard academically I guess for several years, but I'd been in school, as they say, for the 20 years of schooling and then they put you on the day shift. I finished journalism school. I didn't want to be an investigative reporter. My part time job or my work study job at BU had been to work in the Boston Public Library in Copley Square. I transitioned into full-time work there, and I think I spent the next 12 or 11 years at the Boston Public Library. I liked the fact that I had no homework hanging over my head; that I was getting paid. And, I was just in love with the city of Boston in general. To work for the city of Boston and to live in Boston was all I wanted to do.

Q: Were you working at the library outside of your academic program, or was that part of …?

THIBEAULT: It was my work study job in order to just make ends meet and then as I finished my master's program (it was a one-year master's program) I just got myself a

full-time job at the library.

Q: You were living where at that time – anywhere near Copley Square?

THIBEAULT: As soon as I started work at the library, I moved out of my mom's house.

Q: Was this in Boston?

THIBEAULT: By that time she had moved to Somerville. I moved in with some folks in Roslindale. So I lived in Roslindale for a couple of years with college friends. In my time in the library I lived mostly in Dorchester. I was the token straight guy in a gay household.

When I first went to work at the library, I was really struck by how tolerant everyone was. There were some very flamboyant gay guys at the library, and I just thought, "This is really remarkable how tolerant everybody is and no one gives them any grief." It took me about a year to realize that half of the people I thought were being tolerant were in fact gay themselves, and that probably at least half of the guys working at the library were gay. So, there you reach a point were there's no sensitivity to those concerns at all.

Q: Sorry, this was in the '70s, early '80s, at which time in some professions you could not be openly gay; it was perilous for your career.

THIBEAULT: In some, but certainly not in the field of library science. It was just pre-AIDS and so it was really a very wide open atmosphere. One of my roommates worked at the gay baths down in the "combat zone" in Boston, and basically it was just rooms for people to have sex for 15 minutes and move on, etc. It was really kind of wild. You know when people talked about work it was not your typical people complaining about their jobs. It was also that I knew very well the signaling systems that if you had a certain color handkerchief in one pocket it meant that you had one preference for sexual activity, etc. So, that was pretty much all of my years at the library.

Q: Did you have a professional specialty at the library?

THIBEAULT: I was not a professional librarian; I was a library assistant. I learned the now archaic skill of filing catalogue cards. As a library assistant I worked entirely with catalogue cards. Every book in the library needed to have a card sorted by the author's name, another card by the title, other cards by the subject matter so that you could cross reference them, and then another by the number of the book so that you could look in a catalogue and know how the books was lined up on shelf. This was called the 'shelf list'. So, I learned to file cards by shelf list number; I learned to file according to the American Library Association (ALA) rules and according to Library of Congress rules (LoC), which were needlessly complicated and were a test to show that you understood librarianship, rather than a system to find books easily. But, the thing was that we had some catalogues filed according to ALA rules and some by Library of Congress rules. It was a very complete and complicated structure that I totally mastered and totally loved

and trained people on how to file all of these systems over the course of the next ten years or so.

Q: Now, earlier you were describing how you resisted the discipline of rules in the church and in school. What happened to make you so masterful and to actually enjoy this aspect?

THIBEAULT: Well, I think the problem with the church is that there were philosophical rules that had to do with behavior and some very….that a lot of the Catholic Church was meant to tame natural instincts. The fixation with masturbation – the church had as big a fixation with masturbation as any adolescent had; so the church was always, in a way, thwarting your instincts. And, it had some shortcomings of its own, which were again – the people involved were very personal and very fallible.

But, the filing system just fit right in to… I think it was just a….

Q: It made sense.

THIBEAULT: It made sense to me. And, it was a very contained system; it's a lot like baseball statistics – you can define a universe. Library cataloging is that same kind of thing. And, the Boston Public Library had not only the advantage of having these systems that I could immerse myself in, but it also had an enormous holdings so that the catalogue for the research library was perhaps four million catalogue cards. As people filed into these catalogues, they made mistakes; patrons ripped out cards and took them home. So, I was responsible for what was called, 'Catalogue Maintenance'.

Q: Trouble shooting.

THIBEAULT: Yes. To make sure that the new cards went into the catalogue in correct order; to make sure that any filing mistakes were taken care of. If someone dropped a tray and all the cards spread on the floor, I was the person who'd come in and made sure it was taken care of. So, I started at that point at the age of maybe 22 or 23, as a supervisor and I found that what I excelled in and what I enjoyed thoroughly was the direct supervision of people doing something that I worked on as well. I think in labor terms it would be called a working foreman. Where I've excelled, in every stage of my career in the Foreign Service, in the Library, was in situations where I would direct people and teach people how to do tasks that I would be called on to do myself. So editing, cables, and reporting from the embassies, etc., putting on speaker programs, etc. – that's how I approached the rest of my life professionally – was to seek out a relatively small group of workers I could motivate, monitor, teach – with the knowledge that I knew exactly what they were doing, I knew the entire history of our relationship; I could distinguish between good workers and bad workers and maximize the benefit each could produce.

Q: A couple of questions about supervising people before then. About ten years ago in the <u>New Yorker</u>, I think it was Nicholas Baker who wrote an article you probably saw, about the loss…

THIBEAULT: …of the card catalogue…

Q: …of the card catalogue. What was your feeling? I take it you read that and may have had a reaction.

THIBEAULT: I read that. There's a lot of accuracy in his article in that to this point, on-line catalogues do not allow you to browse; they do not allow you to flip through a section of material and see a broad range. For example: if you were looking at narratives of Indian captivities. That's a subject heading relating to Americans who were kidnapped by Indians in the 1700s or the 1800s and then wrote a story about it. There's a subject heading called narratives of Indian Captivities. It is further broken down by tribe and by time, etc. And, in a card catalogue you can just flip through these cards very quickly; you can see how many are involved. You can see whether it's 200 books, or 15 books, or 7 books, or 5000 books on a given topic. On a computer screen you cannot. On a computer screen they force you to look at one book at a time. It's very difficult to flip through like that.

The drawbacks to the card catalogue are just tremendous compared to the online version; because I saw everyday that people misfiled cards. If a catalogue card was put in the wrong place, the book was essentially lost. Even though we had the book on shelf, if the cards representing that book were not filed correctly, no one would ever know. There were times when I was responsible – I was always responsible for making people file the cards from the newest books – to file them into the catalogue to make sure they were accessible to the public.

One day riding the trolley home, I sat down at the back of the trolley and found 400 catalogue cards thrown on the floor and recognized them as cards that I had assigned someone to file on a different day.

Q: Someone had gone postal.

THIBEAULT: Well, someone had just decided they hated filing library cards.

I remember before I was in the Foreign Service, I was at a party, and I was chatting up a woman and she asked me what I did, and I said I worked at the library and she said, "Oh, I worked at the library, and they gave me all these cards, and they told me to put them in order, and it was like the worst torture of my life." And she said, "And what do you do?" And I said, "I make people do that." The catalogue has a tremendous amount of information. It is very, very, very labor intensive. It falls into the valuable archaic systems of the past. For me, it is the clearest illustration in my life of obsolescence of talent – to be a great card filler is no longer…

Q: Obsolescence. Do you regret that this skill is now obsolete?

THIBEAULT: No. There are so many other things to regret in terms of the great Mandala

turning, that this is not one of them. The greatest regret, which I am not personally responsible for, is that as a child most of the broadcast and print material I saw about the natural world was about man's struggle to conquer the natural world. So, basically in the 1960s, we still had a 1930s view of the natural world; that it was something that needed to be conquered, when in fact we didn't realize right then in the 1960s, that we were destroying the natural environment. It was a realization. There were several realizations I made in the library. One was the realization of ecology and the biosphere and things like that. I remember filing the very first cards into the catalogue on ecology; there was no subject heading for ecology. The same thing when the energy crisis struck; suddenly cards were being filed in the catalogue for energy conservation.

Q: Who created the rubric? Was that you, LoC or ALA?

THIBEAULT: The cataloguers who were cataloguing new material and new books realized that there needed to be new subject headings because there was new material. It was a kind of paradigm shift, that now, looking back, people probably assumed that the environment has always been a factor when in fact the environment was not a factor until the early '70s. I remember reading about military operations in World War II in the Pacific. They discovered they could take coral reefs and grind them up and use them for runways for our Pacific campaign; this was a perfect solution from a military point of view and the words coral reef had no second meaning, no value otherwise.

Q: So, you are saying that whatever regret there may be about loosing…..

THIBEAULT: …something like the catalogue…

Q: …is minimal compared to the greater issues.

THIBEAULT: And really, the greater issue, I think, is the deterioration of the environmental balance and that's the one thing I regret handing on to my children. And, it was something again that was not even on the radar scopes until I was over 20.

Q: And we'll note for the record that it's now October 8th and it's unseasonably warm, today.

If you're willing to go back to the notion of supervising people….

THIBEAULT: Yeah.

Q: You got satisfaction out of this, and you had a degree of success. You implied that part of the success was due to the fact that you always thoroughly knew the subjects that you were asking people to do. In the military it was: don't ask people to do what you can't do yourself.

THIBEAULT: Right.

Q: What other techniques or approaches did you employ that you think made you a good supervisor, both in the library and maybe as it later occurred in you later career?

THIBEAULT: In my management style, the most important thing is morale, and that you have to have a personal relationship with the employees, and you have to have a supreme confidence that you can explain why you're asking them to do what you're asking them to do. I there's a difference between what there's expected between one employee and another you have a rationale to explain that. And, I learned this all at the library.

As we were transitioning from a card catalogue to an on-line computer catalogue, it was decided that all of the old cards would be put in perfect order. Then they would be photographed and we would have a hard copy of the legacy collection. Then, when all the new material would come in, it would be tracked in electronic form. So, we had an enormous project to put maybe 6 or 7 million cards in order. I had a crew ranging from 20-30 people who were responsible for this project.

Q: So this was like microficheing?

THIBEAULT: Actually, it was going to be put in a printed book, where all the cards were going to be laid out in order.

Q: A facsimile photographic text?

THIBEAULT: Yes. And so, it was a very, very nice intellectual challenge in that we had several million cards whose order needed to be verified and we had maybe two million cards that needed to be filed in ahead of the final photography. Because of the nature of the machines, any cards that were stapled together (one book might need five cards to describe the contents of the book) needed to have the staples pulled out in order for the photography machine to work correctly. So, I had a tremendous variety of work between extremely demanding intellectual work where you would have to make the same kinds of distinctions that a cataloger would make while you were filing the cards to make sure they were filed correctly, and then I had the most mindless work in the world of finding the staples and pulling them out. I found which of my employees I could trust to pay attention; which of those whom I would give the least demanding work. And, because morale was so important to me, I pretty much designated some people to entertain the rest of the staff while we worked. As we went through the catalogue, for example, we would see cards for bizarre books like 1950s Girls Dating Guide, or something like that. If it were an interesting book, we would call it up from the stacks and someone would find the most interesting parts of the books and read aloud while everyone else was working.

Q: Was this your idea?

THIBEAULT: Oh, yeah.

In the library we had a lot of gay guys on the project and so we found 1950s books on homosexuality. One of the students, or employees would read and say for example, that

homosexuality was caused in part by an overly-seductive mother. So, we would say, "Chris, was your mother overly-seductive?" And he would say, "Oh, yes. She would say, "Would you like some Lucky Charms?"" (Said in a pseudo seductive voice.) So again, the whole point was…

Q: So this is going on while people were…

THIBEAULT: ….while people are filing cards, putting cards in order, removing staples.

Q: This must have made a lot of mirth and fun. Sounds like it would have been a lot of fun to work in that unit.

THIBEAULT: Whenever I worked in an area where my staff has been mixed with other staff, one of my main rules to the staff was: Don't look like you're having a good time, because it makes other people resentful. But, in this particular job we had our own room.

We had a bunch of projects. The work we did was measured in trays: how many catalogue trays we would finish in a week. I took a very statistical approach to it. We would keep track every week. We had something called the 'tray-o-meter', which would measure the trays per hour worked, etc. But, it was all in a very light-hearted manner.

The project to remove the staples, again, was a very mindless thing. To ask an intelligent person to flip through a thousand cards in order to find seven staples is like having the drug dog not find any drugs. You know, there has to be something to motivate them. There had been an explosion at Mount St. Helens a few years before and so my idea was that we would take the staples and we would put them in a big pile called Mount St. Aple. We made names up for the staple extractors; we had little cups that were called staple accumulators where you would put the staples into the cups. We just made a big routine and kind of goofed on the system. It was a conceptual art project; I presented it to them as a conceptual art project to see how big a pile of staples would come out of these seven thousand catalogue trays or something like that. And, that was my way to motivate people; to maximize the number of staples they found, etc.

Q: The people working in this unit were educated people and many of them intellectuals. Did this not appear to them to be a contrivance just to get more work out of them? This was all your idea, I think…

THIBEAULT: Yes, sure.

Q: …to make this into conceptually a different thing, an art form, a game of some sort. Some intellectuals would respond to this by saying, "My boss is trying to convince me that this is fun. I'll never fall for it." But they did. How did you do this?

THIBEAULT: Well, again, you had a big crew. Again, some people wanted the most difficult work you could find for them and other people didn't want to work at all. Again, if they could entertain other people, then that was a…

Q: So, you played people's strengths.

THIBEAULT: Uh huh.

Q: You tried to match the talents with the tasks. For those who didn't want to work, was there ever an option of separating those people? Did you have the authority to hire and fire?

THIBEAULT: Yes. And the thing was I found that people who didn't want to work were the most likely to quit, and I would just not rehire them. And that's been my experience that the people who are the crankiest and the people who are the least likely to work are also unlikely to recognize that they have a good thing. So they have a job….again, these were mostly college work-study students. But, they have a job where everyone has a good time; it's not physically demanding, and I was not a bad boss and they'd leave. And, then six months later they'd say, "Gee, Steve, can I get my old job back?" And I'd have to say, "No; there's nothing available."

Q: Here's a reaction. You have described a childhood that was gloomy. When I first met you, Steve, in 1985, there were 24 of us entering the Foreign Service and you were certainly the most entertaining individual in that group by consensus. This is a huge transition from gloom to being the source of entertainment. When did this happen and how did this happen? And, did you do it consciously or did it just happen?

THIBEAULT: I think that this was kind of going in parallel to kind of the gloomy things in my life. I think that when I got into college a lot was lifted off my shoulders. I think the social stuff that I've done or my social tendencies were innate or instinctual and I had an idea of an organic method of working with people; it's not something I ever thought of, but, again, a lot of it came out of conceptual art. We used to do a weekly memo in order to document how much of the work we had gotten done. And, every week it would be written in the form of a parody of another kind of literature, whether it would be a parody of an Edgar Allen Poe story or a letter to the editor, or something like that.

Q: Did you wake up one day and suddenly have this idea? Did this come gradually?

THIBEAULT: The culmination of my time at the library was this big project that lasted maybe four year. It was just a great platform – it was a bully pulpit and my drawback at that time was that I was a supreme know-it-all with not much acknowledgement of my own failings, or the limits of what I actually did know. Marriage has been a great corrective for these ideas. Foreign Service officers in general believe that they have to provide an answer to any question, whether they know the topic or not. If they're asked a question, they feel they need to give the best possible answer. So, again, this form that I had with 20 people working there, the books involved, every possible subject under the sun, just gave me tremendous leeway to expound on social anthropology or just anything at all.

Q: You mentioned earlier the phrase, extemporaneous bullshit.

THIBEAULT: Exactly, yes.

Q: This was something that germinated maybe earlier in life and which found a means of expression.

THIBEAULT: It did; it did. Again, I see now that I was over the edge. I can see now that there were people who worked for me who resented the idea that I had an answer to everything, because if you didn't agree with me, I wouldn't berate you, but at the same time it was kind of obvious that you didn't know what you were talking about.

Q: In retrospect, do you think this was an effective management technique?

THIBEAULT: Oh, yeah. The thing is the pay that these people were getting was relatively small. Most of them were work-study students. I think it's a good management tack and it's been applicable. I've mostly had information sections at embassies and they've been this same kind of thing, maybe 10-12 people maximum. I've found that developing a group spirit with a very clear definition of all of us working together, and people knowing what they could expect from me.

I think it's very important to be able to take two people with the same job description and give one of them more responsibility and give the other one less, as long as when one of them says, "Why do I have to do this and the other person doesn't?" you know why. There was a time at the library where someone said to me, "Why does Irena get to leave everyday at ten minutes of five and we all have to say until five o'clock?" and I would say, "Well, did you notice this morning, when you were reading the newspaper, Irena was working; when you came back from break five minutes late, Irena was already here. That's why Irena gets to go home early. I can't let everybody go home early, because I can't let everybody go home early; I can let Irena go home early." If you have made your management decisions according to a rationale, then you can be honest with people about it.

Also, this experience, and my experience in the Foreign Service, tells me that my expertise or my strength is in supervision, not management. I can understand management; I can understand why an organization should move in a certain way. It's just not something I want to take the responsibility for because I cannot have that personal assurance with every employee that I can explain to them why they are being treated in a certain way or what their prospects are.

Q: When you use the rationale, this seems to be very, very basic to your way of supervising, was it ever the case that someone was insulted because you spoke so directly?

THIBEAULT: I don't think so. A lot of times people didn't question things, generally. People were kind of happy.

Q: Would you say that teasing and playing games were basic parts of your technique, also?

THIBEAULT: Yes. And also, ironic statements that I found that with a group of 20 people, when someone was engaging in a certain kind of behavior that everyone recognized – maybe they were showing off or something like that – I could speak right in their presence about their behavior and it would just go over their head. I'd be making a point to everybody about why we don't act this way.

Q: And this did not cause individuals to loose face or to resent you. You're saying that they did not even understand that this was directed at them.

THIBEAULT: Yeah.

Q: The others probably enjoyed it.

THIBEAULT: The thing is that people don't want to be exploited and they don't want to work hard when other people don't. And, what I was able to explain was the satisfaction that you get from working hard, and why some people didn't and some people did. It was amazing how direct you could be in saying that people with the poorest work habits don't tend to be very self aware. Everyone in the room would know what I was talking about except the person with the poor work habits. There was a tremendous amount of just, I guess, power to have your own little world.

There was a similar situation that arose in Baghdad after the invasion of Kuwait. I conducted daily press briefing for the Chargé, Joe Wilson, with the international press, and they could not use the embassy telephones to report their stories back to the states without my permission. So, I was able to conduct press briefings where everything was on background with the exception, if someone raised their hand and said, "Can we put this on the record?" we could stop the session, get the Chargé's agreement, put it on the record and if anyone violated the background rules, I would cut their telephone. And, it was a wonderful experience everyday. Everyone enjoyed it; they knew the ground rules and it was very similar to this type of thing.

Q: So, you understood, I think, at the Boston Public Library, that you had this talent.

THIBEAULT: I knew what I enjoyed. It was just my life; living it. Actually that's a very good connection to the Foreign Service, because we're reaching that point when I joined the Foreign Service.

I had a friend who was always taking Civil Service exams. I took one Civil Service exam in Massachusetts for some kind of manager job and I was told that the jobs went to people with veteran's preference. I hadn't been in the military. I had a friend who was working for the Civil Service Commission at the time, and he asked me what score I got on the test. I don't remember what the score was; if I said 93 or some such score. Well,

there was only one person in the state who got 93. So, I had scored number one in this test and it didn't get me a job, so I was not very enthusiastic about taking tests.

My closest friend told me one day, "I just took the stupidest exam." And, I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "Oh, they had these questions about like the difference between the balance of trade and the balance of payment." And I said, "Well, you know the difference between the balance of trade and the balance of payments, don't you?" And then he said, "They wanted to know which of these African countries had had a coup in the last five years." And I said, "Well, that's Ghana."

I realized that all of these stupid questions were things that I knew and so I took the Foreign Service exam, I think first in 1980, and only because someone described this to me. I had no idea that there was such a prestigious career that was open to anybody based strictly on an exam. I had applied for a job in the newspaper. I had found a job in the newspaper that I had applied for, because I was getting sick of working in the library. When I got my rejection letter, it said they'd chosen someone with a better background in economics. I thought, "They don't know what I know about economics." The Foreign Service exam was a completely different process where they sought to find out what you knew about American culture, American history, economics, foreign policy, etc. So, it really was, for someone with my temperament and at that time of my life, it was absolutely geared toward my preferences.

Q: So you took the exam before realizing really the nature of what this work was?

THIBEAULT: Yes.

Q: A friend of yours said, "Try this exam." and you did.

THIBEAULT: I never thought that you could be a diplomat unless you went to Georgetown. My experience with graduate school was not good because it would bring me up against the idea of writing a thesis and those old problems again.

Q: Before we get to 1985, when you came into the Foreign Service, any parting observations about the city of Boston or your activities in Boston or your professional/ personal evolution during that time?

THIBEAULT: I was in love with Boston, with Boston history and its topography. For a brief time I had a business called "Walking Escort" where I would conduct walking tours of Boston. The amount of money I brought in never matched the advertising costs I had; I was not very well organized business-wise; but, that would have been my ideal to conduct personal walking tours of Boston. One of the dilemmas of the Foreign Service is that you can live anywhere in the world, or you can live in Washington, but you can't live in Boston. I think that was about it. I had quit the library. It is interesting that in the summer of '84 this big project was winding down. I needed another follow-on job that was at least at the same level of pay.

Q: So, your job was linked to that particular project?

THIBEAULT: Well, in the end. My promotion had been linked to this big project, which lasted several years. So, I applied for a job at the same level and someone in management came down and said, "We've got something for you. Don't apply for that. We've got a job for you." So I didn't apply for it. And then, another job was announced. In the library you always have that circumstance of working on the opposite side of a stack of books from someone. So I heard two people on the other side of the stacks, and one said, "Did you see the LA-6 that just opened up? Are you going to apply?" and they said, "No; that's Steve's job." and I thought, "This is the future of these people looking at this job; this is a way for them to go forward and their definition of me, as the person who is standing between them and a promotion in a job that was made for me, that reflects the whole inside baseball kind of thing that's going on in the stacks, that it's who you know, etc., etc." So, I thought at that moment, "You know, this isn't important to me that I get my LA-6. Let these folks get their LA-6. I'm just going to do something else." So, I told the boss that I was going to quit. It's after 11 years. The director of the library calls me to his office and he says, "Steve, I understand you're leaving." And I said, "Yes, Liam, I am." And he says, "Is there anything we can do to get you to stay?" And I said, "Well, could you give me more money?" And he said, "I wish we could! I wish we could!" I said, "You know, could I have a three fifths job where I worked three days a week, I get three fifths pay, three fifths vacation, etc. etc." So I thought, "What is he going to offer me - window?" So, anyway, I left the library then. That was the fall of 1984.

I did not think I was getting into the Foreign Service. The first time I had taken the Foreign Service exam, I received a letter. The letter said, "Congratulation. You have been chosen as a career candidate in the Foreign Service." I went into work. I said, "Well, everybody. I'm leaving. I'm going to be a diplomat and it's been great working with you. I don't know exactly when I'm going." Then I called the Board of Examiners and I said, "Well, where am I on the Foreign Service list?" and they said, "Well, you are in the bottom third of all the lists." And I said, "Well, what does that mean?" And they said, "It means that you take the test again." So, I went back into the library and I said to everybody, "Well, I'm not joining the Foreign Service; I didn't get in." I had since then taken the test a second time; I hadn't passed the English part. I took the test a third time and the scores were pretty much the same as the first, so I had no great hopes of getting into the Foreign Service.

I quit the library in that summer. I got my grades back from the Foreign Service exam in the late fall. I called up the Board of Examiners and said, "Where am I on the list?" And they said, "What do you want to do?" And they said, "US Information Agency." And they said, "How about February?" And it was a total surprise and it's one of those points where my life changes. They said, "How much are you making?" So, I was in charge of at that time….no, actually I had quit the library by that time but most recently I had been making $15,600 a year. And, so they said, "You'll be making $20,500." – something like that." It was a new world opening, and I was ready for it; I was single; I had no attachments.

Q: So you had no hesitation; this was only purely good news when you got this news?

THIBEAULT: The best news in the world – the best news in the world and a pay raise on top of it, a big one.

Q: 33%.

THIBEAULT: Yeah. It was difficult leaving Boston. But again, as someone who was unattached, I just assumed that I would be spending all of my vacation time in Boston. I had a point between my tour in Egypt and my tour in Iraq where I had nine weeks of home leave and I took those nine weeks in Boston. I saw two complete Red Sox home stands.

It was an unalloyed good event to get into the Foreign Service. And it was a vindication of, again, my self image. One of the good things about working at the library was that I was able to – I think if you're looking at – I think Maslow has his hierarchy of meeting physical and psychic needs and the highest level is called self-actualization and that is where you feel satisfied with your accomplishments and with yourself based on your own criteria. You are not dependent on someone else to validate your talent. Having spent these years in Boston, working in the library doing a job that I think that most people would think was deadly dull, I had a very high opinion of myself making $15,000 a year. I think it was very good to then go into the Foreign Service with that frame of mind, than to have come in from the Georgetown School of International Studies or something like that, because calling myself a diplomat was not the source of my self-esteem.

I told you that story before about being at parties where you chat up a woman and you say you work at the library and they say, "Well, that's nice." Well, I had that same experience coming back from Egypt on my first tour. You would go to a party and you would chat up a girl and she would say, "What do you do?" and I would say, "I'm an American Diplomat." And they would say, "That must be very interesting!" It was so very clear to me that I was the same person I've always been and as intelligent before as after, as engaging before as after, but now I had this, this label of a diplomat on me and I was very happy that I could see through it.

There is a phenomenon in Boston: if you go to Cambridge and you eat in one of those restaurants around Harvard Square, at the right times of year, you can sit next to people who are Harvard undergraduates and you can just absorb their assumption that getting into Harvard was the one step that they needed in their entire life to validate their existence in order for people to take them seriously, etc. Sitting in the next booth was like Matt Damon in the movie Good Will Hunting, where he takes these sophists apart. And, so the thing is, I could see that the diplomatic label was in a sense the same thing; that a lot of people felt that that was a substitute for having to prove yourself.

Q: You saw this as an attitude of others; but, I think you're saying this was not your attitude.

This is the end of interview 1. Dan Whitman interviewing Steve Thibeault on October 8, 2007.

Here were are on December 9, 2007. This is Dan Whitman interviewing Steve Thibeault. A second track.

THIBEAULT: A second track.

Q: And we've just gotten Steve on his way, reluctantly, out of Boston, and onto the Foreign Service. Over to you.

THIBEAULT: Ok. I think that joining the Foreign Service was just a validation that my education and my talents were applicable to a professional career, even though I didn't have a piece of paper; that I didn't have a Master's degree in Foreign Affairs. I'm always a bit suspicious now when people do have a Master's degree; I tend to give people a lot more credit for two years in the Peace Corps, than two years at Georgetown, etc.

So, joining the US Information Agency, there was a period of about nine weeks of training. I see now, having just finished a retirement program, that the nine weeks were basically a cultural indoctrination of all of the various things that made up what we now call Public Diplomacy. It was a perfect job for a generalist; someone who could speak on cultural topics, or historical topics, or governmental topics or foreign policy topics, for cultural exchange programs to recruit people from any particular field to know enough to ask the right questions. I think that's what that selection process had done. And, again, that nine-week period was a time that allowed me to change my focus and identify with being a Foreign Service officer and identify with being a public affairs professional. It was a good time.

Q: You used the word 'indoctrination', which has connotations. Do you want to elaborate?

THIBEAULT: I was always struck in the beginning of my career with the US Information Agency as to how open people's ideas were, how people understood the idea of cultural relativism. I think that's the first thing you need to be in an interlocutor status with a foreign audience or a foreign population; that you have to understand that while ideals may have a certain universal character, the way they're perceived depends on people's circumstances and their history, etc. So, I was very impressed at how everyone in our class, which was about 21 people, seemed to have that as the basis of their career. I noticed that the way the test system worked, it seemed to favor people with life experience. The folks who were in there were my age (I think at that point I was 33) at joining the Foreign Service; we had probably two people who were in their early twenties: Dave Ballard and a young woman from Central America. What I saw is to get in at that point you had to be very, very sharp. And I saw a great deal of intelligence. The rest of our class, which was everybody from actors to waiters to…

Q: ….Russian professors…

THIBEAULT: Russian professors, former journalists – a very talented group.

Q: Radio announcers.

What about cultural relativism? I don't know whether we should make judgments here, or whether we should just tell stories, but do you feel that USIA at that time, the mission was…the phrase was, "Tell America's story overseas", the mission was not to absorb foreign cultures or to understand them, although many of us did. Do you feel that USIA at that time respected cultural relativism and if so, do you feel that the State Department still does?

THIBEAULT: Well, I thought at the time that it almost was a prerequisite for the job. I see now after the 20 something years that that I've put in that the major responsibility that we had was to, first of all, display empathy for the host culture and, again, the host history and the host point of view; to be an American who could empathize with their situation; that, if you have a country that has a poor human rights record, when you criticize someone for that record, you have to put it in a context where it shows that you understand mitigating circumstances, etc.

And, again, now I've come to realize that's the first step you do, because the second step is you want to encourage empathy for the United States. People don't identify with the United States – the United States is a perennial front runner. I may have said before, if you're a fisherman in Mexico and the United States determines how big the holes are in your net if you want to go catch tuna; given that circumstance, you're always going to have a job, first of all, to get people to understand where the United States is coming from and why we can make decisions that go against other people's wishes, but get them to understand, again, what circumstances would make us act in a certain way. And, I think that was just par for the course.

In my first assignment in Egypt, I set up an anti-drug organization. It was a parent organization to prevent their children from using drugs, and, one of the cultural lenses we had at that point, was that for the Egyptians alcohol was a drug and marijuana was like alcohol. Whereas, our American…I think the group was called PRIDE: Parents, Resources and Information for Drug Education – or something like that. It was very interesting putting together a program with American counterparts, who were ideologically committed to treating marijuana as a drug in the same way that heroine would be considered and dealing with an Egyptian counterpart that considered alcohol to be a drug to be considered on the same level as heroine. So, again, that cultural relativism if you're going to make this interaction between an Egyptian organization and an American organization do something positive and do something that makes a difference in someone's life, you have to be able to finesse that interchange.

Q: Let's get back to a chronology. Let's get you from Washington to Cairo.

THIBEAULT: I learned one thing in the bidding process. I had put Cairo down as my

third choice; and, I had, I believe, Bonn and maybe Berlin as my top two choices, because I had some German. I didn't realize that by simply putting Cairo in as an option,…

Q: …you would get it…

THIBEAULT:…that I would get Cairo, because it would be a difficult place to fill. After our initial training, I immediately went into 10 months of Arabic.

Q: Let's even dwell on that moment. Were you surprised, or disappointed not to get Bonn or Berlin? Did this come as a surprise to you?

THIBEAULT: No. It just was an epiphany realizing how the situation worked. I thought that the Middle East had a bad rap as far as how dangerous the assignments were and as far as how alien the cultures would be. I noted that if a bomb went off on the Champs Élysées and you went to France the next year, people wouldn't say, "You're not going to France, are you? You're not going to the Champs Élysées, I hope, because that's where the bombs go off." But just to say…

Q: Which was the case at that time. Yes.

THIBEAULT: But just to say you were going to work in Egypt, the idea that you would fly to the Middle East was considered a little bit crazy.

Q: What types of people expressed that idea? Your family, your friends from Boston; your colleagues – probably not.

THIBEAULT: No, although I think the colleagues – in the Foreign Service there is always a group of people who I think are looking for a way to get recognition and to find a way to live in Europe. Once you get that European experience, if you don't have the right passport, it's very difficult to work legally, and I think the same way that people with language skills often think, "I'll be an interpreter at the UN". I think people who want to live overseas, a lot of the times their first idea is they'll be a diplomat, so I think there may have been people who might have thought that there was a….

Q: Even among your colleagues.

THIBEAULT: I think so…yeah, that it's not the way they would have gone. But, I think fortunately you see in the Foreign Service that people gravitate towards things that interest them or things that challenge them so there was no shortage of people being sent to the Middle East. Like myself, I think a lot of them were just folks who didn't want to prejudge the same situation.

Q: As I recall, as I was a part of the same cohort, there were four or five or six people whose greatest wish was to go to the Middle East. You, though, were not one of those four or five who came in with that intention.

THIBEAULT: No.

Q: It just happened.

THIBEAULT: It just happened. The change in the circumstances from my previous job as far as having a career path to look at was so dramatic, that everything was gravy, I think. Being told I had ten months of Arabic ahead of me – some officers would not be thrilled about learning Arabic, but to me I couldn't believe I was going to be paid just to go to school and had that happened at undergraduate, I would have done a lot better in school.

Q: Tell me a little bit about those ten months. You were being paid – it was like from heaven, right?

THIBEAULT: Again, it was an ideal situation. I was tired of working and I'd been out of school for almost a decade.

Q: Studying Arabic is not working?

THIBEAULT: It was like I was doing schoolwork again. The classes were very intense: four people around the table with a teacher; no place to go; no place to hide. I think my experience in language in academia had always been counting how many students were ahead of me so I would know which question I would have to answer or which sentence I would have to translate. The experience at the Foreign Service Institute was very difference. The quirks of the teachers were paramount, because you only had four students with the teachers and the fact that you were speaking Arabic all the time.

I always find it ironic that the type of classroom situation we were in is something referred to by Americans as immersion, and it means that there is no English allowed in the classroom. To Americans learning a foreign language, the idea of immersion is very daunting. My wife works in English as a second language and the entire operation of English as a second language is immersion; that it doesn't matter what country you're coming from, this is an English language classroom.

After six months of Arabic full time, five hours a day, three hours of homework, six straight months, a teacher comes in one day and says, "Today, we're going to study the present tense." The six months full time is enough usually to get you qualified to go to post in a European language. The feeling in Arabic, that after six months your were just going to start learning the present tense, was very daunting.

After ten months I went off to Egypt. In my class, we'd had one student going to Morocco, one going to Tunis, one going to Damascus and myself going to Egypt. The dialects are very different in Egypt, Damascus and in the Maghreb, so we all learned Jordanian, as a compromise. I found that when I got to post, I could speak Arabic to the point that people would then begin speaking Arabic to me, which I wouldn't understand.

It was just that the amount of Arabic I didn't know was so extensive…

Q: So, you didn't have the extra year in Tunis before going to post?

THIBEAULT: No.

Q: You had only one year.

THIBEAULT: At that point the philosophy was that you would do a year or ten months in Washington. Do a job for one year or two years at post and then you would go on for your second year in Tunis. I think they may have changed that because there was a washout rate because it's very discouraging when you arrive someplace having put a tremendous amount of work in a language, only to find out how inadequate you are. When I first got to Egypt, my first day I heard this word 'delati'. I heard it more than once. I kept hearing the word 'delati', 'delati'. In Arabic I asked one of my colleagues, "What does 'delati' mean?" and they said, "It means 'now'." And I thought, "This is terribly depressing that I know two words for 'now' already and it's not 'delati'." So, 'delati' was the third word for 'now' I learned. I learned a different word for 'now' in Iraq.

So, what you find as you get fluent in Arabic, is you find that most of the common everyday terms have regional variance and you end up learning how to say 'straight ahead', for example, in Saudi, how to say 'straight ahead' in Egyptian, how to say 'straight ahead' in Jordanian. But, when you reach that fluency, it's a very liberating experience.

Q: Can you remember the day you landed in Cairo and what went through your mind?

THIBEAULT: What I wanted to do was sleep. I arrived in Cairo and I found that the philosophy with Junior Officers was to program them very tightly for months on end and so, my first day, where I would have wanted to go to the hotel and sleep because of the jet lag -- I arrived in the afternoon and it was Ramadan, and so I was invited to an 'Iftar' (breaking the fast at sundown), and so I went right from the airport to the hotel for 15 minutes, right back out, right to this hotel. We were with the U.S. Information Service staff, the USIS people, at a hotel with a beautiful view of the desert and the skyline and the pyramids in the distance, drinking a drink and looking out over this incredible metropolis that I would live in for three years. It was quite an experience.

I think the first time at post it's difficult not to be struck again and again by what it is you're doing, that you're inside the compound of the embassy; that you're on the inside of the walls; you're constantly pushing codes in order to be admitted further and further into the embassy; that you're sitting in what's called the country team meeting with the heads of all of the embassy sections, with the ambassador, so it really is a …it's very striking to be in that circumstance.

Q: Normally, a junior officer would not be in the country team. What goes?

THIBEAULT: In a way, I had a mentor, Marcelle Wahba, who came on a little bit into my tour – I would say probably about nine months into the tour. Marcelle had a very clear vision of what information operations should be: what the press attaché should do, what the assistant press attaché should do. So, I was an assistant information officer, assistant press attaché. She determined that it was important to have the press attaché, or representative of them, at the country team meeting. And, because I was working on public affairs for our AID program in Egypt, she made a case with the ambassador that I should be at the country team meeting. It was invaluable for knowing what was going on, and it was pretty much my experience for, I think, almost every tour I had. In Baghdad, when I ended up being the acting public affairs officer, that was the case. In Chang Mai, in Thailand, it was a much smaller operation, but, again, I was in the equivalent of the country team meetings through all of that time.

Q: Ok. So. We got you in Cairo, somewhat taken aback that your ten months of training did not quite hit the mark. You lived in a compound. Were you being assigned at the beginning to the public affairs aspect, or did that come later?

THIBEAULT: No. The U.S. Information Agency (again, USIA at home and USIS overseas) they had a system at the time that new officers overseas would rotate in positions and it was a tremendous opportunity to make sense of how the embassy worked.

The embassy in Cairo, at that time, had over 500 accredited diplomats; it was our biggest mission in the world. What you find at every given embassy or consulate is that there is a different configuration of the agencies, so there's no such thing as the typical embassy. In Cairo, for example, we had over a 100 diplomats who were AID program officers. We were giving them about $700 million dollars in development assistance at that time, apart from their military assistance. The two things together were well over $1 billion a year. The AID program – the part of it that dealt with actual projects – had a challenge to throw enough money. It was a challenge to spend money in a logical way, because so much money had been allocated to Egypt based on political reasons rather than the ability to use the funds efficiently.

Q: The Carter-Sadat meeting was in '78 or '79 or something like that?

THIBEAULT: '79.

Q: This was a tremendous change of direction in our relationship.

THIBEAULT: I believe it was. I followed foreign policy as an outsider, as a civilian, and it was only when I got to Arabic training that I began to focus on Egypt. We had this tremendous opportunity to do big quick fixes in Egypt. One of the things they did is using microwave technology; they really improved the phone system very dramatically. It's a little bit of an out-dated accomplishment now that we have cell phones. But, at the time, in the mid-1980s, the use of microwaves to be able to transmit phones without putting

new cables through Egypt, or particularly through Cairo, was a really big leap forward. The second thing was, the United States and Great Britain completely revamped the water and waste water system for Cairo, which was a city of 12 or 13 million people or something like that. So we really worked on some enormous projects there.

Once I had finished – again, if we're looking chronologically – once I had finished my rotation through the cultural section of USIA, the admin section of USIA, the press section of USIA, the political section, the economic section, the consular section, the foreign commercial service, then I focused on USAID. One of the things that was the most formative in my career was about a month and a half that I spent as the staff aide to the ambassador, which was part of the rotation. It must have been the PAO (Public Affairs Officer), who arranged to get me into the front office. I remember very clearly the DCM (Deputy Chief of Mission) after our first country team meeting where I had this position, the DCM wanted to know what the action items were from the meeting. I learned that day what an action item was. He had, fortunately, copied them down for me and it was my job to make sure that the sections of the embassy followed through on these action items for the ambassador and the DCM. And then he said to me, "I want to see your system for keeping track of issues. Let's talk in half an hour."

Q: So the DCM treated this as a pedagogical experience, I take it.

THIBEAULT: Oh, yeah.

Q: He understood that you came in without the expertise to do this, but he saw this as an opportunity to develop you.

THIBEAULT: And that was nothing that I would know at the time. I thought this is just what you did with the staff aides. But, at that time, I developed a system where I would number every single thing that I was supposed to follow up on and to make a 'things to do' list, and then, I would have a folder where I would put all the relevant papers dealing with each of these issues under a flap in this folder.

Q: I have to think, coming from the Boston Public Library, some of that experience was relevant.

THIBEAULT: It really was. I determined that anything I wrote on this list, that if I decided that it was overtaken by events, then I would write 'overtaken by events' and cross a line through it or if I decided 'forget it, I'm just never doing this', I would write 'forget it; I'm just never doing this' and I would draw a line through it. I kept a single numbering system through my entire tour in Egypt to the point where if I looked on my list and two months into my tour I still had number 11 that I hadn't finished, and if that were something like: Get the license on my apartment renewed – or something like that, then I would know it hadn't been done. That was a system I used for the rest of my career. It really served me in good stead, because if someone said to me, "Where are we on the city planning, international visitor program?" my things to do list was never more than three sheets of paper. I would find it and it would tell me under what tab all the

papers were. So, I really had the ability to look very responsive using this.

The other thing that I found in the Foreign Service, is that things would come back to haunt you two years later, three years later. Someone would say, "Well, no, Steve was supposed to settle this." I found that I had a great document system in order to find out how issues were eventually resolved, and I also had my own filing system so I knew where all the documentation was.

Q: Everyone out there has a different degree of ability in doing this checking. As far as I know, I have never met another Foreign Service Officer who really has a workable system of that sort. Have you?

THIBEAULT: I would share it with other people as I went along. In the end, my boss hated it. She believed that instead of doing things, I wrote things on my list.

[Laughter]

And one thing that I saw is that when I returned to Washington in 1999, when I returned to a nine to five job that did not have weekends lost to VIP visits and things like that, was that I no longer had to keep a list like this. But it really did reflect just how many parallel tracks you are working on at once, again, with the examples of a secretary of state visit or a secretary of defense visit. It is a little bit of a shame that all of the expertise that one acquires for these specific responsibilities, such as setting up a two-day secretary of state visit, is something that, unless you are in the State Department, is not applicable. But when you're there it really is the stuff of your responsibilities - the idea that the traveling press needs to have a way to file their stories. Back in Egypt, at that point, they needed to have a certain kind of jack on the telephones, things like that. What I remember about Egypt, is being a single guy, I had the ability and the leeway to work 70-hour weeks and not neglect anything – not neglect my family.

My personal life in Egypt was mostly walking the streets and studying Arabic. I would take out the newspaper and just read the newspaper with my dictionary and go out in the street and talk to people. One of the things that is quite different now than when I went out. I went out in '85. I served in Egypt from 1986-1989; I served in Baghdad from 1989-1990 (I was in Baghdad for the first gulf war); I served in Amman from 1996-1999. In all of those places and circumstances, when I talked to anyone on the street – If I talked to a cab driver and they said, "What did you do?" they would always be surprised that you spoke Arabic. They would say, "What do you do?" and I would say, "I work at the embassy." That's the difference between today and then. Today I don't know if I would tell someone that I worked at the American Embassy. I think that the security…

Q: Did you know Haynes Mahoney, by any chance.

THIBEAULT: Oh, yeah.

Q: Because he did that. He walked around and went to bars and stuff like that. He stood

out at the time as one of the few who really became very knowledgeable about the society. He was in Damascus, I guess.

THIBEAULT: Or Yemen.

Q: He was kidnapped a few months later.

THIBEAULT: He was kidnapped in Yemen, yeah.

Q: He became sort of a legend, as somebody who did that, unlike others who barely left their compounds. And I gather you were doing the same when you were there.

THIBEAULT: Oh, yeah. I always considered myself a city boy and Cairo was just a city. And, again, the gender difference or the gender experience is, I think, extremely important in the Middle East. It is much, much easier to be a male Arabist. People are impressed that you have learned the language, and, of course, we learn a little bit of an elevated version of the language, so they are impressed that you know words that they don't use all the time. It's very difficult as a western woman, just observing the experience of my colleagues and my wife. It's just very difficult to really mix in Egyptian or Jordanian society on a street level.

Q: I thought you said you were single when you went.

THIBEAULT: I was single when I went, but I'm thinking of my other experience in the Arab world. What I found has to do with the application of the language. When you learn the language, a lot of times you learn it in the form of dialogues in order to give you the vocabulary that you need for a given situation. What I found was that when you go to post and when you use your language, you come up with your own dialogues – the ones that apply to your daily circumstances: the getting in the cab dialogue, the buying the newspaper dialogue, etc. During those dialogues, I developed my basic empathy, discussion with Arabs. What I would do is tell them that I worked at the embassy. They would ask for a visa usually, or whether I could help with visas. My response for visas was, "Are you a journalist? If you're a journalist, I can help you, but if you're not, it's just out of my hands." And so, that was very good.

Then the second thing is that I would wait. Basically, the attitude that people have always expressed to me about U.S. policy in the Middle East is, "We love American so much; why do your policies suck?" or "Why do you have anti-Arab policies; we love America so much." I would let them articulate on this and they would usually come down to a couple of themes. One would be that the media portrays Arabs as terrorists and the media is run by Jews in the United States. So, usually, what I would do is I would ask them a question. I would say, "If you had ten hours of television, on every television in the entire world to make the case for the Arab people or for the Palestinians, do you think you could change the opinion that people had of the Arabs and the Palestinians?" And they would say, "Yes." This is after talking about soccer on the 40-minute trip to the airport or something like that; I would always arrange to have the last ten or five minutes to have

this discussion. I would say, "When you kidnapped or when groups kidnapped the Israeli Olympic team and murdered them at the Munich Olympics, that's what you got. You got ten hours on every television in the world identifying Palestinians as kidnappers and murders." I said, "When you machine gun people at Rome Airport and Vienna Airport on the same day; when you have pictures taken holding a gun to the head of a pilot; when you roll a man in a wheelchair off of a ship into the ocean, you're going to establish this image."

Q: When you said 'you', did they take offense?

THIBEAULT: No. Again, this is my Arabic version of it, which has a lot of honorifics in it.

Q: I mean, did they say, "I wasn't…. ."

THIBEAULT: No, no, no. And this was not meant and this was not taken as this is what you were doing, but this was to neutralize the whole idea of how one is covered in the media, etc.

Q: What was their reaction to this?

THIBEAULT: Thoughtful; usually very thoughtful.

Q: They had never thought, before your mentioning it, that these events might produce a negative image of them?

THIBEAULT: It was a different way of looking at the situation. Now, when I discuss these things with new officers at FSI, I recall, this is a two-way exercise in building empathy. It's not beating the other person's idea; it's not telling them that they're wrong. It's giving them a more sophisticated way to look at it, and making them more comfortable with the fact that at that time, that they did like Americans and they did admire the United States. So, that causes a little bit of tension. Again, when you say, "We love America; why are your policies so bad?" that's a cognitive dissonance situation. In retrospect I see that's a lot of what I would try to do when I was working. And, you find that using the language is the other thing that gets you so many points in the Middle East. When I would talk to people on the street, and I would speak Arabic (of course my Arabic is going to sound a little bit weird) and they would say to me in Arabic, "Where are you from?" And I would say, "What do you think?" And I remember one day the guy says, "Syria" -- because I've got red hair and I'm speaking kind of a northern Arabic.

Q: That's a great compliment for your linguistic achievements.

THIBEAULT: Yeah. So I said, "No." Then he said, "OH….you're Israeli!" And I said, "No, I'm American." Then he said, "Impossible; it's impossible that you're an American speaking Arabic." Again…

Q: What type of person was this?

THIBEAULT: Just someone on the street. You learn these just great expressions that you hear people using on the street and then find out. You go to your FSN (Foreign Service National – local employee at an American Embassy) and say, "What does this mean?" or "What does hrsh mean?" Hrsh is like hang it here or push it up, or that kind of thing. You learn these little expressions to use and you drop them on people and they just melt.

Q: Do you feel you have to be a closet sociologist to properly perform as a cultural bridge? You talk about empathy.

THIBEAULT: I think that's more organic and I think the thing is that it's only later….your higher studies oftentimes just analyze what you've been doing unconsciously and I think that was the circumstance with the way I worked overseas. You know, I think it is one of the things I try to pass on, again, when I am talking to people.

Q: You made reference earlier: "that's the way it was then; it may not be exactly how it is now"; we can talk about this later.

THIBEAULT: Yeah.

Q: In a way, you're describing a period when things were much easier.

THIBEAULT: It was easier but I don't want to say that it wasn't safe to be representing the United States in the Middle East at any of these times. My impression is that people were much more easily won over by the interaction and the language, etc., than they are now. I think there is a larger group of people who are in principle just very angry with the United States. The only way that you would really draw them into a conversation is to really go really out on a limb as far as what your were saying about the United States. You'd have to be very negative to be allowed into the conversation.

After September 11th, I talked to colleagues from the embassy in Jordan. They said at the time people would not come to the embassy for programs; they wouldn't come for a lecture, concert or film or things like that. People were turning down international visitor trips to the United States because they didn't want to tell their friends that they had taken an American Government handout. I think things could improve. Again, right now, it is more dangerous to be candid with people you don't know as far as what you do for a living. Of course, when I first went out there as a single guy, I had no concerns about implications for my family or something like that.

Egypt was a marvelous place to be. The air was terrible. The Egyptians have an expression: 'gahl helou', which means the air is beautiful. What they mean is: isn't it warm, because the air would be just terrible; you couldn't see the other side of the Nile. They were still using lead gasoline.

There are two observations about Egypt that I would make. One is that when I went there the conventional political wisdom, something you'd see maybe in the Economist, would be that (Egypt had recently had bread riots when the price of bread had gone up) Egypt was just a tinder box and just who knew how long this was going to last with this government that didn't allow freedom of political organization – really. I look up now, and this is over 20 years later and Mubarak is still running this country, and this is just the way it was.

Q: Is this a double message: it's still but it's still a tinderbox?

THIBEAULT: Having lived there, I just cannot predict. I cannot gauge the forces between the forces of inertia where people – again they're still getting their subsidized bread; you still can have a government job and do nothing but the government job doesn't pay enough so you need to have a real job some place. I don't know.

Q: You said you had two observations. One was the conventional wisdom that the place was going to blow.

THIBEAULT: The other observation I had was to do with my naïveté. It was that in Area Studies we had been told that the transition from Nasser to Sadat and then Mubarak was a transition from pretty much a police state to a little bit more of a paternal state and that the Egyptians were engaged in democratic reform; that the secret police no longer would listen to your conversations on the bus and that Egyptians could be more comfortable now that they weren't living in such an oppressive society; and there were opposition parties. And so that was the point of departure I would have in discussion with Egyptians or journalists who came to the country. Then Mubarak had a referendum on some constitutional issue. And, from being out and about in Egypt for a year or two, I thought, "Mubarak is a pretty popular guy and I wouldn't be surprised if this guy gets 68% in this referendum." Well, the referendum came in and he got 98 % or something like that and that's when I realized that this is not…no free election ever votes 98 % in favor of anything. So, that was, again, a little bit of a consciousness raising for me.

Q: Did the embassy see it the way you did?

THIBEAULT: Before or after?

I really wasn't a big reader of cable traffic. I didn't read the political cables. I read the newspaper and every morning we had a great press briefing by our cultural and press FSNs and I felt I pretty much knew what the issues were. I was not really following what people were reporting on the structure of the government, per se.

Q: 98 %, as you say, following conventional wisdom, had to be a cooked election. Did you feel your colleagues saw it that way?

THIBEAULT: Oh, yeah. We didn't have people who were wearing rose-colored glasses.

I had one telling experience. I felt very free to walk into almost any kind of neighborhood in Cairo. One of my tactics was simply to walk fast. I could see sometimes that I would get into neighborhoods that were so impoverished and saw so few westerners that I would just turn heads, but walking a good four miles an hour, you're down the alley and around the corner, etc., etc.

Q: Walk fast in order to avoid what?

THIBEAULT: I think, in my experience in cities, there are places where, when you attract attention, there are ne'er do wells who are going to take your wallet or do stuff. At that point, it would never have been a concern about being kidnapped or being identified as a diplomat. It was more like….

Q: Ambient crime.

THIBEAULT: Yeah….people who were so desperate. Again, looking like you know where you were going and things like that, were important ways to get around.

I've forgotten what my other point was.

Q: I think you said that the transition from a police state to a so-called paternalistic state was a little bit naïve once you saw the 98 % return from the referendum.

THIBEAULT: I worked very closely with the AID program and just by coincidence, I think, I was able to claim a big improvement in the way our AID program was depicted with the Egyptians. We were spending so much money in that country and the value of the Egyptian currency was so low that we had difficulty spending the money on projects. We were at that time probably building a nine-room elementary school a week, so we constantly had school openings and clinic openings. You're talking again, I think, about $700 million a year and when I would ask the AID program officers on the schools, for example, "So, how much is this costing?" The entire schools program would be in the order of $20 million over the course of five years. So, it was very difficult for us to actually find worthwhile projects to do that you could spend enough money on, that you could document how the money was spent so that it wasn't fraud.

We spent a long time trying to get recognition for what we were doing. So, for example, we would open a clinic that was completely paid for by the United States. The television crews would come. We would have a press release detailing what we had done to make this happen. But, then, the President's wife would show up as part of the ceremony and open the clinic and the television coverage would simply be "Susan Mubarak opens the latest of her local health clinics". There would be not a mention of the United States in the TV coverage. In the print media we had pretty good coverage. So, my job was to get the Egyptians to put more recognition into their broadcast coverage of what the United States was doing.

Q: Did you do this solo?

THIBEAULT: I depended so much on my Foreign Service nationals.

Q: I mean. You were the AIO. There was an IO.

THIBEAULT: There was an IO and, again, eventually was Marcelle Wahba. The PAO – I forget Dick's last name. Marcelle was very good at identifying objectives and deciding on what my job should be focusing on.

Q: Again, this was a pedagogical thing. You were being developed…

THIBEAULT: Uh huh.

Q: ….by people who recognized your potential and cared about making you more effective.

THIBEAULT: Yeah. I think the problem is that when you are becoming acquainted with these types of tasks, everything is a one of. Everything is "Well, now I did this opening of a clinic and now we'll do a local water-wastewater project" when in fact, the point is of a much bigger piece – is what you're trying to do. So, with the foreign service nationals who are all just so knowledgeable about the local media scene – and again, in Egypt the media scene tended to be a staid, quasi government operation, that even if they worked for private newspapers, they belonged to the journalist union, etc.

And, so we were able to make the case that Egyptians were discounting the importance of American assistance because they didn't see any results. And, so we were able to make the case with the Ministry of Information that the alliance with the United States looked like a sucker deal to the Egyptians because they weren't getting anything when in fact they were getting hundreds of millions of dollars worth of projects that the Egyptian government was taking credit for. And, as long as the Egyptian government took sole credit for these projects, people would think, "Why do we have a relationship with the United States?"

Q: At what level were these discussions with the Ministry of Information?

THIBEAULT: These are the Deputy Broadcasting Directory.

Q: From the U.S. side?

THIBEAULT: This is me. This is me with a colleague from AID talking about getting better representation for what we were doing. How I was able to say this is I was seeing it in editorials. I was seeing editorials criticizing the alliance with the United States because the Egyptian people weren't seeing any benefit for it so why were they compromising themselves.

Q: Now, in some embassies it would be unthinkable to allow a junior officer to have such

a meeting at a ministry, so I guess you were given a free hand. Was this done on your initiative?

THIBEAULT: No. Pretty much everything I did strategically like this would be Marcelle's idea. When you actually came down to the actual camera crews and the text of the coverage, the ability of the FSNs to take advantage of their long term relationships and the way they are so sensitive to the bi-lateral relationship and the atmospherics of the bi-lateral relationship – they are the ones who really can make it happen if it's obvious that there is support from the Americans.

Q: How long did it take before you saw a change for the better in the perceptions?

THIBEAULT: I think that it occurred within one rating period, so about a year. I think it was a matter of fortunate timing. If I had been working on this three years earlier, without being able to cite these editorials, that if this feeling wasn't abroad, I don't think we would have had any success.

Q: We'll go out of chronology for a second.

THIBEAULT: Yeah.

Q: When AID, ten years later, went into what they call democracy building and capacitation and empowerment, to the detriment perhaps of building schools, of building physical objects, what was your reaction? I mean, they really did change their mission.

THIBEAULT: I wasn't in a position to see. If my memory is correct, then all of the Middle East – now not in Iraq – in Jordan and in Egypt, we have always had programs of taking community activists and explaining how you would mobilize to address a given issue, or something like that. Democratic institution building was always a focus of our cultural exchange programs.

Q: How about AID?

THIBEAULT: Let me see? AID? No. I am not familiar with the AID things. Particularly after the fall of the Soviet Union I think there was a big…..

One of the things that was kind of distressing was that the amount of money that was going to development aid was so enormous – again this $700 million a year – that I think at least $150-$200 million a year was given to Egyptian Ministries in order to import American goods that they could use them in the operations of their ministries. I had an FSN in Jordan who always described American Aid projects in terms of how many Mercedes and how many jobs for my relatives and, so, I am sure in Egypt I am sure there was a big…

Q: It's another country that makes Mercedes…

THIBEAULT: You would see people – they would end up with Mercedes.

Q: That's what I'm asking. They were physical objects that you could point to and film like a school, which must have made the job possible to do, as opposed to invisible accomplishments. So in fact, there was a combination of events and circumstances that favored your mission – your personal mission.

THIBEAULT: Yeah. And there was no shortage of beneficial things that were being done, either in terms of highways or …

Q: Water.

THIBEAULT: …or water, or farm to market roads, etc. When we, as a country, try to move Egypt beyond these physical programs, these infrastructure programs, or schools, to the philosophical reforms and economic reforms, I think we have more difficulty. For example, there was a program that the United States made available. It was a very imaginative program where Egyptian workers who worked in a state industry could buy that state industry and take it private. The United States would lend the workers the money; the workers would buy the factory; they would then repay this loan out of the profits of the factory; and then they would own their own business. The Egyptians were very enthusiastic about this. They volunteered several state industries to have this done, everyone of which was a money-loosing turkey. So we had to impress upon them that a company needs profits in order to do this.

Q: Did the culture of Egypt at that time lend itself to entrepreneurial development, or was it so mired in habit and tradition that it really needed a different mind set?

THIBEAULT: The important word in Egypt is "wastah" and "wastah" is contacts, connections. I just think you could go to Weehawken, New Jersey, and find that all of the minivans that ran between Weehawken and lower Manhattan to take you across the river were all run by Egyptians. I saw many cases of entrepreneurs in the United States among Egyptians and my general impression was that everything conspired against entrepreneurs in Egypt itself. I noted that what you would aspire to would be to get the sole import license for a given western good, and that would be your ticket to success.

Q: It wouldn't be the only example of a country that lacks an entrepreneurial tradition, where the people who emigrate are the ones who do have an entrepreneurial spirit.

THIBEAULT: Or they just can believe the opportunities that they see. So, that was my experience there. I didn't see much in the way of self-made people in Egypt.

Q: Let's summarize your three years in Egypt and have it be the basis of this session.

THIBEAULT: Ok.

Q: You talked about walking the streets and getting to know the people. This is the old-

fashioned diplomacy that we now look back at with such nostalgia in our fortress embassies, where it happens so little. You did this because it seemed natural to you in your life, and, I think, because you felt it would make you more effective in your work. Any comments?

THIBEAULT: This is just the way I lived in the city. In Boston I was obsessed with walking. In Egypt it was just this remarkable ability to walk from my house to the wall of the medieval city and to go down the main streets of the medieval city or to walk out to the big blocks of the housing complexes out in Mohandessin, kind of the working class socialist neighborhoods that got built. That was my idea of what you would do: you walked the streets.

Q: Did you like Egypt from the start or did your feelings become more positive, the more you understood? What was the relationship between you and the country?

THIBEAULT: I really loved Egypt. There was no problem being enthusiastic about it at all, and enthusiastic about the Egyptians themselves. I got burned out working at the embassy. I was working probably about 70 hours a week.

Anytime you work in the Middle East, you're working with a local weekend that's either Friday and Saturday or Thursday and Friday or Wednesday and Thursday. In Egypt, the days off were Friday and Saturday. Friday was a working day in Washington and so, usually, VIP visitors would say, "Let's leave Friday, and we'll show up Friday night and we'll do programming Saturday and then we'll leave." So, the first obstacle or challenge you had with your Egyptian counterparts was to get them to set up all of these VIP meetings on their days off. That was the first thing.

Q: Was there no way of convincing visitors from Washington that this was not the way to do business?

THIBEAULT: Not when we're giving them $2 billion a year.

Q: I see.

THIBEAULT: I found this every place in the Middle East. It was the same thing with Jordan. Egypt and Jordan are client states in a certain way when we have military exercises. I think with either of these countries, basically we provide them with all the ammunition that they shoot.

Q: We give them money; they buy our stuff and...

THIBEAULT: …and then we have an exercise together. Yeah.

Q: If you were working 70 hours a week, when did you have time to walk through the city?

THIBEAULT: Well, I walked back and forth to work. We had an event….I think every one of my tours, there's been some kind of terrorist incident while I was there. When I was in Cairo, I would walk back and forth from my apartment to the embassy, which took about 45 minutes. One day, as the head of, I believe AID, was driving to work, a man on a motorcycle drove up by the driver's side, another car in front blocked the car (the driver of the car apparently didn't know anything was going on, because this is what Egyptian traffic is like anyway), and they drove up on the sidewalk. The man on the motorcycle shot into the car. When I got to the embassy we knew there had been a terrorist incident; someone had tried to kill American officers on the way to work.

Q: This was a van with several embassy employees?

THIBEAULT: No. I believe this was a personal car. I believe the people who shot at the diplomats thought they were shooting at people much higher – the DCM or something like that. But, when I got to the office that day and we started hearing reports of this, a group claimed credit for the attack and said that one of their soldiers had been killed by the Americans. It turned out that what had happened was that there had been another accomplice on the sidewalk and that the man on the motorcycle had shot through the car and killed his colleague on the other side of the car.

The next country team meeting we had, the ambassador said, "We need to be much more careful about our personal security," and he turned to me and said, "This is not a time to be walking to work." I didn't say anything, but my feeling was, "No, I'd rather be driving in a car with a license plate that says basically 'Shoot me; I'm an American'." Every single American diplomatic car had same the same four letter symbols to begin the license plate: CB13. So, I kept walking to work, surreptitiously.

Q: Every embassy I've been in, the DCM was certain that the diplomatic plates on American cars, did not identify them as American cars, whereas any beggar in the street knew and approached the diplomatic cars. It's incredible cognitive dissonance. It's just amazing. Even in Denmark we were targets.

THIBEAULT: I had a wonderful time in Egypt. My replacement came in. He had a pregnant wife and already two kids. When I was showing him the ropes, I remember being agitated that he wasn't picking up the phones and making calls and doing things because the only way I could get the job done was to be harried most of the time. I took my new job; he took my JOT position and at the end of the first week he said to me, "Do you have to be single to do this job?" Only later, after I was married, did I realize that probably you did need to be single to do that job.

Q: So, you were reassigned in Cairo?

THIBEAULT: He was replacing me as AIO as I was heading out at the end of my tour. So, this was at the end of 1989. I was very relieved to be going; I was so tired of Egypt.

Q: Wait a minute. You loved Egypt…

THIBEAULT: I loved Egypt; I was burned out by the Embassy. You work a five-day week. If you end up working the two weekend days, it becomes a 12-day week. If you work the next two weekend days, it becomes a 19-day week. Individually, each of the things was good. You could do a site visit – go to Alexandria, see where the Secretary of State would go, where they would walk, who they would meet, and set things up. But, again, there was always a reason to be working and I could do it because basically I didn't have a home life. I had a social life, but no home life.

Q: Did you ever go back to Egypt when you were not assigned there and just have fun?

THIBEAULT: I went back to Egypt with my wife and kids when we were stationed in Jordan. We did the Luxor sites and the pyramids. It was good to be back, although I felt a lot of tension between enjoying Egypt and the temptation of going back and seeing all of your old friends – I could have spent two days just reminiscing with people –

Q: Lots of fun.

THIBEAULT: Lots of fun.

Q: Let's get to…..it's 1989, I think.

THIBEAULT: Right.

Q: It was your first assignment. You were relieved to go, though loved and obviously became very immersed in the culture and the language. You managed to change perceptions of Egyptians about what Americans were doing with the AID money…

THIBEAULT: That's what it says in my EER (Employee Evaluation Report).

Q: At what point did you lift your head and wonder what was happening next?

THIBEAULT: One of the good things about the Foreign Service, one of the opportunities to just sit back with a couple of beers and fantasize is when you think about your next post. And, when I was in Egypt, there was an opening in Baghdad. I thought: the war with Iran is over, so there's no rockets falling on Baghdad. Iraq is a police state, so it's going to be very safe for me there. So, I bid on Iraq, probably in '87 or so, because with the Arabic language posts, they had to announce them so early. I was scheduled to go to Iraq and it was a good follow-on; it would be an Assistant Public Affairs officer. It seemed to make all the sense in the world. Between the time I made that choice and the time I actually went, I met my future wife and she had some more reasonable questions about why we were going to Iraq. But, it made sense career-wise and I would get my language pay.

One of the things that I was actually very proud of in Egypt was that, because I read the newspaper and spoke Arabic, I got through that awkward phase where people understand

what you're saying, but you have no idea what they're saying in response, I go through that phase and someone from the Foreign Service Institute came out to Cairo and I got language qualified in Arabic. So I was a 3/3 Arabist after the ten months of formal training, which meant 10 % extra pay. Of all of the incentives in my time in the Foreign Service, the incentive language pay is the one that made the most sense to me. It probably led me to retire at $20,000-$25,000 higher pay than I would normally have gotten. That was one thing about Cairo; I was able to immerse myself in the Arabic. So going to Iraq, where even fewer people have English, it was a good asset.

Q: Well, on that note of extreme suspense...

[Laughter]

Q: ...getting into Baghdad in the middle of the, I think probably the worst time that a U.S. Diplomat could ever have been there, I think we should save that for the next session.

THIBEAULT: Cool. Ok.

Q: It was a direct move – '89?

THIBEAULT: This is one of the times when things really worked out well for me. When I was working in the Ambassador's office, this incredible amount of overtime there in particular, I just was able to collect comp time because I was not a tenured officer. Due to that bureaucratic loophole and due to the kindness of personnel, they allowed me to take nine weeks off between the assignments and I think I saw three Red Sox home stands and it was a wonderful time.

Q: You spent the nine weeks in Boston?

THIBEAULT: Yes, yes.

Q: Fantastic, fantastic.

Let's leave that on that happy but suspenseful note. This is Dan Whitman interviewing Steve Thibeault on December 9th...

THIBEAULT: 9th.

Q: '07. A historic moment for me.

THIBEAULT: Thanks.

Q: So, it's December 16th and its Dan Whitman interviewing Steve Thibeault, who has just departed from Cairo; has spent some weeks reacquainting himself with America and is now on his way to Baghdad. I think it is 1980 something.

THIBEAULT: It's 1989. It's probably May of '89. One thing that everyone should think about when you hear anyone speak about the situation in Iraq ahead of the first war we had with Iraq. It's not the first gulf war. The first gulf war was the war of the tankers and then we had the war between Iran and Iraq, which may have been called the gulf war before the invasion of Kuwait.

Q: The war of the tankers was what?

THIBEAULT: The Iranians were attacking Iraqi oil tankers in the Persian Gulf and the United States allowed Kuwait and Iraq to reflag tankers with American flags, to justify protecting them against the Iranians with American warships. All during my tenure in Egypt, one of our big issues was the Iran-Iraq war. The United States had an important role in protecting Iraq's oil exports. It's something that's hardly mentioned now. I believe Kuwait was threatened as well – maybe it was Kuwait that was exporting Iraqi oil.

When you think about the eventual invasion of Kuwait and then the most recent invasion of Iraq by the United States, you must realize that you're looking at all of these issues in hindsight. At that time, we were living in the moment with the developments that had taken place up to that point. And, what you find is that after the fact, certain explanations are very comfortable and easy to use because they explain things, such as the idea that April Glaspie had somehow given the Iraqis approval to invade Kuwait. That gives the issue much more importance and that meeting she had with Saddam much more importance than it had at the time. This was not viewed at the time as something I think that you would even wake up the president for in Washington to tell him that this spur-of-the-moment meeting was going to take place. We'll get to that later.

Q: Let's pin down some of the specifics here. You say that if we don't see this in hindsight, we miss certain key elements.

THIBEAULT: I think if you look at it totally in hindsight, you tend to emphasize things that you know did happen afterwards.

Q: Like what?

THIBEAULT: Such as the invasion of Kuwait coming after the meeting that April Glaspie had with Saddam Hussein.

Q: Let's go back. You were talking about the tanker war and the fact that we had a mission to defend the export of Iraqi oil – I think that is what you said.

THIBEAULT: Yeah.

Q: What is it about that that confuses the observer? Is it that we were more committed to the defense of Kuwait than we said?

THIBEAULT: There was a moment when the United States was defending the interests

of the Arab world against the Iranians. And, similar to our intercession on behalf of the Muslims in Bosnia at another time, these are two very concrete policy decisions and important strategic acts that the United States took on behalf Muslim populations or, in one case, on behalf of Arabs. That tends to undermine the stereo-typed images that we had and we'd encounter when we were in the Middle East. When I was in Egypt, for example, there was a very common interpretation of the Iran-Iraq war that the United States simply wanted the maximum number of Muslims killed and therefore we were trying to extend the war and make it as gruesome as possible. That fit if you believed that the United States was basically an anti-Muslim power taking anti-Muslim actions.

Q: Ok. Crazy hypothesis. Let's say our policy was to get Muslims to kill one another. Why, however, did we support Arabs more than Iranians, or is that unknown?

THIBEAULT: I guess I have gotten on the wrong track because I think I am too low an official to have such a big sweeping vision of how things are going.

But, I think Iran and the United States each have their own basic historical narrative of the events, of the hostage taking at the embassy and of the years of the Shah. So that until those two countries are able to work through and come up with an acceptable interpretation of what happened that is acceptable to both sides, there is always going to be American-Iranian conflict. So even at that time it's not unusual to see the United States aligning certainly with Kuwait on that issue.

Q: One last time. Since 18th century Europe don't allow anybody to be the major power, the hegemonic power, there is the argument that Iran could be much more powerful than any other country in the region. Is that not a reason why the U.S. seeks to frustrate Iran's objectives?

THIBEAULT: You know, there could be a big geo-strategic reason, but when you're dealing with the publics in the United States and you're dealing with the publics in Iran, you have to give them a narrative that explains why their nation has not been humiliated. The Iranians, I believe even pro-American Iranians who would like to see a different governmental setup or a different societal setup in Iran, they still resent the fact that they see the United States as having supported a despot over them. The American public still sees the occupation of the American embassy and the taking hostage of our diplomats as an international crime that needs to be admitted and apologized for, at the very least. And, perhaps, when enough time passes, it will be possible to fudge that.

Q: Thanks for this parenthesis. Now we'll get back to the main story.

THIBEAULT: It's 1989. I arrive in Iraq. My boss, Jim Callahan, I think is the third public affairs officer since diplomatic relations have been restored with Iraq. I'm working in an environment where we are trying to increase cultural exchanges between the United States and Iraq. We're trying to get more, what's called 'American studies content' into their curriculum.

Q: It's just Jim Callahan and yourself?

THIBEAULT: It's just Jim Callahan and myself – these are the American Officers here. It's a very, very suffocating programming environment. In order to leave Baghdad, you need to send a diplomatic note to the Foreign Ministry one week ahead of time telling them where you're going, what the license number is of the car, who you're going to meet with and then you formally need a diplomatic note to leave Baghdad.

Q: ….to leave Baghdad to go elsewhere in Iraq?

THIBEAULT: …to go elsewhere in Iraq, so that makes it very difficult to work with universities, to try to do anything in the way of cultural programming. Our big cultural break-through was to bring a one-man band to Basra, where he played pop music. We also had a program at the American cultural center. The Iraqis refused to give permission for us to fly from Baghdad to Basra so that our one-man band could do a performance at a hotel there. When they refused, the State Department invoked reciprocity and threatened to prevent Iraqis serving with the UN Mission from flying to Detroit, which has a big Iraqi community. Once this was done, our travel to Basra was approved by air. So, we had to use all of our diplomatic strength, in order to allow us to have a concert with a one-man band.

Q: At what level did that reciprocity take place? Was it with our consular people? Do you have any idea of how far up this took place?

THIBEAULT: I don't know. I just know that the approvals came in and that it was a matter of reciprocity. When we had a cultural exchange program, for example, where we wanted to find Iraqis who would be influential or have influence in certain cultural exchange fields, either in academia, or in journalism, or in city planning, or any issue like this, in order to pick them for international programs in the United States with their counterparts from other countries, we had very little leeway in choosing our candidates. So, basically what we would be forced to do was to submit a list of criteria and then the Iraqis would provide us with candidates. The cultural mismatch between the embassy and the Iraqis on this was just enormous. On, for example, for a program designed for 20 youth leaders from around the world, the Iraqi candidate was 48 years old, and he was a high official in the Youth Ministry. So, that was typical of how stymied our programs were.

Q: Tell me a little about the discussion with Callahan about how far you were willing to go to insist on having your own freedom of choice.

THIBEAULT: Jim Callahan had a tremendous amount of experience in all areas of cultural exchange programs, Fulbrights, and things like this. When he sized up the operations in the country, he saw one area that had tremendous possibility for getting a bang for the buck - literally, a bang for the buck and that was the English teaching program. So, in some ways, we were going through the motions on some of these other projects. But, the cultural center which the Iraqis allowed us to open when we had an

agreement made, perhaps a memorandum of understanding, reestablishing diplomatic relations between the countries, which had only happened a few years earlier, there would be the allowance for an American Cultural Center. And, the American Cultural Center was able to take advantage of the official Iraqi exchange rate to multiply budget and the program through the use of an English teaching program.

Q: Are you saying that the official exchange rate was not the real exchange rate?

THIBEAULT: The exchange rate for the Iraqi dinar was a driving factor in our daily lives and our professional lives for USIS because we had this cultural center.

But our daily lives as well -- I'll give you a quick anecdote. Those who arrived at the embassy when we did were told that we were strictly observing the official Iraqi exchange rate for the dinar, which was about $3.20. The value on the street of the Iraqi dinar was about 30 cents. There were times I would go to an Egyptian baker, who I felt comfortable with because we were speaking in Egyptian, to get my dinars. At the embassy cashier, $100 would net you basically 30 dinars – something like that. At Abu Dahab's bakery, $100 would get me 300 dinars. So, there was a factor of about 10 to one between the real exchange rate and the official exchange rate. In most cases, this just screwed us to the wall. I gave in and went to a restaurant one day because I thought I might as well just go to a restaurant and have a meal even though I am going to pay ten times the official price. So, I bought a pasta, or something like that, for maybe six dinars, so it was going to cost me $60 or something like that – maybe it was a little bit less. The thing that struck me though was I asked for butter and I got two pats of butter, each at a dinar apiece, so I paid $6.40 for two pats of butter. So, this kind of hampered one's private life for the new arrivals.

But, for the cultural center, Jim Callahan saw right away that using the English teaching program that was part and parcel of everything that the U.S. Information Agency did overseas – it was a standard program with a tremendous amount of support in the United States. There was a system wherein English teaching programs overseas…

Q: Recyclable?

THIBEAULT: Yes. ….could bring in funds for English teaching; take a certain service charge to oversee the operation, the financial operations in the States, such as depositing checks into the American bank accounts of American teachers who were working overseas in these programs. This type of facility was a tremendous advantage in recruiting teachers from the United States to work in Iraq because it really cut down the paperwork they had and the problems would have had converting Iraqi dinars into American money.

So, USIA had this program in place, but the impossible exchange rate – the mythical exchange rate – we had one circumstance where it worked to our favor. The embassy needed to pay all of its bills to the Iraqis in hard currency or buy Iraqi dinars with hard currency. The English teaching program, by teaching English to Iraqis, was pulling in

tuition in Iraqi dinars which the embassy could use to pay local expenses and put on the books at the official rate and at the same time generate enough revenue to import American teachers to teach English to Iraqis, to buy computers and equipment for the American Cultural Center, which taught English, which was basically what the Iraqis allowed us to do. The Iraqis were allowing us to do the very most effective thing we could in their society, which was to bring Iraqis into classrooms with American teachers to teach them English in an institution, in the American Cultural center, where one of its basic objectives was to insert American content into the English teaching program. The fact that the very reasonable tuition that we charged in Iraqi dinars converted officially into quite a good tuition stream for the cultural center benefited the cultural exchange program immensely while we were there. Callahan saw that this was kind of an Achilles heel to the whole Iraqi effort to keep us bottled up in the embassy and not let us get out. That, pretty much, was the big success we had officially, I think, while we were there.

Q: Did the Iraqi government catch onto this at any point?

THIBEAULT: No. The Iraqi government, I think, was very, very used to the idea that foreign diplomats would work the exchange rate for their personal advantage. But, I don't think that it occurred to them that the embassy would be able to work the exchange rate to their advantage. We were to the point, at the time of the invasion of Kuwait, I believe we had three or four teachers directly hired from the United States. We also had…. There was always a community of American who had married Iraqis and there were still some of those available in the community to do English teaching, as well. My wife, as well, worked in the English teaching program. And, amazingly, just in this past week, she was contacted by an Iraqi, who, through a tremendously harrowing story, had escaped from Iraq. At the time he learned English in the American Cultural Center in Baghdad, he determined that his goal in life was to move to the United States and succeed here, because he saw that it was so different form Iraq. Now, 18 years later, he called my wife out of the blue, and said that he's been looking for us for the past 15 years, and that the course that she taught in English was the most important thing that had happened to him, and that he had left behind all of just about his entire life and goods in Iraq when he fled, but he kept some mementoes from his English program at the Cultural Center.

Q: Let's give this person full credit by citing her full name. Your wife.

THIBEAULT: This is Connie, Constance Thibeault.

Q: Constance Thibeault. Amazing. And this man is now where?

THIBEAULT: This man's in mid America finishing up his medical degree. And he will become a doctor. In his flight from Iraq, he went through refugee camps, etc.; he was an asylum seeker in Denmark, etc. His experience in refugee camps led him to commit himself to become a doctor to help people like that.

Q: I was in Denmark at that time, actually.

THIBEAULT: So, that's just kind of an aside.

Q: How did he get out?

THIBEAULT: We have a 20-page narrative of the steps. He literally crawled out through a mine field into Jordan. That was only the beginning of what he had to do. It's another story. Really, this has just happened in the past two weeks and it really focused my attention on the effect that this English teaching program had, not on a national level, but as far as being able to do something in basically a police state that connects with people. It was a very effective mechanism and it would not have been possible if there had not been this English teaching recycling program that allowed the U.S. government to facilitate teaching with American teachers overseas.

Q: So give and take. So, you allow the government to have more say than you want in choosing exchange visitor, and in exchange you got a relatively free hand in doing EFL (English as a Foreign Language).

THIBEAULT: That was the first most effective thing we could do. We probably could have gone to the mat somehow over choosing international visitors, but to maximize the progress that could be made with two American officers in this country at this time, that was the thing to do. The prior public affairs officers….When you first open a post… The two prior public affairs officers – Jim Bullock – I've forgotten the second guy – they had to acquire property, hire Foreign Service nationals, make the very first institutional contacts with the Iraqis, etc. and when Jim and I were there, this was the area that could be exploited and institutionalized. Had we not descended into war, the American Cultural Center in Baghdad would definitely have been a more important institutional presence, than the U.S. embassy, as far as the people in the city were concerned.

Q: Just a footnote. We were talking about people in the Iraqi government catching on or not catching on, or overlooking or minding the exchange visits. Who were these people?

THIBEAULT: The Iraqis….once we had this cultural program or once we had this cultural exchange agreement – actually I believe there was a formal cultural exchange agreement – once we had that and there was high-level approval to allow the embassy to open a cultural center and to teach English, that just, I think, allowed everything else to go forward. Iraqis officials were very reluctant to approve of anything or to interfere with anything. They just wanted to keep their heads down. One other thing about the programming environment in Iraq and the representational environment in Iraq (when we say representation we mean informal gatherings, usually meals with host country nationals), they were absolutely impossible – no Iraqi would ever agree to come to your house if you were an American Diplomat. I went to functions at the Ambassador's residence where no Iraqis attended.

Q: They were being watched.

THIBEAULT: They were being watched, and they were terrified of having some kind of

contact they couldn't explain, with American diplomats. I went out and about in the streets to a lesser extent than I did in Egypt, because in Iraq there were not that many destinations. And I found when I spoke to Iraqis - again if I took a cab - I would explain that I worked for the American embassy. The responses fell into two categories: a category of persons who would never want to be seen with you again, and that was most people, and a category of people who wanted to follow up and ones who wanted to get together. My assumption was that anyone who wanted to follow up on a chance meeting with an American intended to report on their meetings with Americans. It seemed like that kind of people would try to follow up. If anyone called you back or wanted your phone number….

Q: For the layman like me – the person who merely reads the newspaper, we have the impression that during the Iran-Iraq war, we supported Iraq. Now, how much time had lapsed between the end of that – if that's wrong let me know – but we were the friends of the Iraq regime during that war. When did it go the other way?

THIBEAULT: I don't think you could call us friends. And, I do believe, again just from what I know in the newspapers, I do believe that in the beginning of the war, when the Iraqis were making great strides against the Iranians, I have read that we helped the Iranians gather their defenses through this intelligence sharing. And, later in the war, when the Iranians were threatening an enormous breakthrough, we certainly helped the Iraqis with intelligence information as far as troop formations and stuff. And, again, this is entirely from what I have read in the media.

Q: So the impression that we wanted Muslims to kill Muslims, while it may be wrong, there is some reason to think that.

THIBEAULT: You could make that case based on information, without any knowledge of the intent on the part of Americans.

Q: Perhaps it was more a balance of power thing.

THIBEAULT: Up until the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States was very loathe to support the dissolution of any state, regardless of the borders. So, the idea that either Iran or Iraq might split apart was a worst case scenario.

Q: So, the enemy of my enemy is not necessarily my friend.

THIBEAULT: No, no. I think that with the Iraqis, in a way, when I was there, I felt there was a cultural affinity between Iraqis and Americans. With Iraqis a two o'clock meeting was a 2:00 pm meeting. I think due to the war or due to the police state they had, the oil wealth had not been used in a way that would dissuade Iraqis from engaging in any kind of business. So that Iraqis collected garbage. Kuwaitis would not even supervise garbage collecting. Iraqis would collect garbage in garbage trucks; Iraqis would be truck drivers; Iraqis would be farmers if they weren't in the army. Hundreds of thousands of Egyptians were brought in to work Iraqi farms.

A big difference in the Iraqis we saw was there was a relatively high level of education and technical expertise. I think that this is an impression that may have factually been much truer when I was there in '89 than in 2003. In 2003, I believe, there was still this idea that Iraq had a very sophisticated cadre of technocrats, who would be able to run all sorts of fields. With the very limited contacts we were allowed with Iraqis, you still got the idea at that time in 1989, 1990, that they were institutionally or technically pretty sophisticated. A lot of time foreigners would say to me, "Yes, Saddam is a dictator, but really, you know, the Iraqi people have it pretty well. Their medical care looks good; the food rations they get are acceptable." And this next door to a country like Kuwait, where the average Kuwaiti has a $200,000 home on an interest-free loan and has free education and free medical care. Saddam, if he had used the excess oil money for national development - that would have been a good model.

Q: I'm told that at the time of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, 25% of the population of Kuwait was vacationing in Costa del Sol and labor was done by Filipinos, so it was very different.

THIBEAULT: It was very, very different. And again, I think that that led to a certain cultural affinity between official Americans, and even non-official Americans, with Iraqis. You'll see, when we get to the hostage situation, that there were a lot of non-official Americans in the country, almost entirely working for foreign contractors, under Iraqi contracts – either oil or other kinds of heavy industry things. And, they had pretty good respect for their counterparts and their counterparts' technical capabilities.

Q: At that time was the State Department encouraging or allowing Americans to….was there not a travel advisory?

THIBEAULT: No, not at all. I don't think there was a formal travel advisory. As far as consular affairs, Iraq went from a country that was so tight-fisted in allowing foreigners into Iraq, or Iraqis out of Iraq, that I believe the consular issues were rather simple and didn't involve that much judgment. As an illustration, there was an Iraqi employee who was dismissed for allegedly selling visas to go to the United States. The reason why it was such a sweet scheme is that anyone who wanted to travel to the United States needed to get an exit visa from Iraq. If you were well-enough connected to get an exit visa from Iraq, that the Iraqi government thought you were going to come back when they had usually your family members to be held hostage – if they thought you were coming back, it was a good bet you were coming back. So the issuing of visas to travel to the United States was not a very harrowing decision to make. I think the Iraqi employee in the Consular section knew that anyone who applied was almost certain to get a visa and therefore he could pretend to exert influence in the visa process. And, again, when we go back to wastah (influence, inside contacts) the idea that someone working in the consular section, who claims to be able to get a visa approved, is going to have a lot of status.

That's illustrative of how everything was screwed down very, very tightly and that was the environment we lived in before August 2, 1990.

Q: Shall we go to August 2nd. That was the day that the Iraqis went over the border.

THIBEAULT: Right. That was the day the Iraqis went over the border and not only was a quarter of Kuwait on vacation, but I'd say probably half of the American officers at Embassy Baghdad were on leave as well out of the country. So, I was acting public affairs officer.

We knew that the Iraqis had moved military forces to the border with Kuwait and there was a sense this was some kind of crisis brewing. But, again, I believe in retrospect, everyone in the world who was sleeping through all of these days leading up to August 2nd now looks back and believes that everyone thought we were heading for a war and that was not the feeling at all. The idea that Iraq would do something to Kuwait – occupy an oil field, make some kind of hit at Kuwait's oil facilities or something like that – that seemed very possible, but the kind of thinking that went on with people who are all kind of knowledgeable in human nature, was to game out an invasion of Kuwait and see that it was a loser's deal. It was very tough to really believe that Saddam Hussein would try to wipe out a country; to take a member state of the UN and claim it didn't exist. So, in that sense, we were caught, I think, as flat footed as the rest of the world was, but I'd like to emphasize that the rest of the world was caught flat-footed by this as well.

Q: Now, August 2nd, 1990 crisis. You were there. At what point did you understand that this was a much bigger crisis than had been depicted?

THIBEAULT: In the morning, our Iraqi employees who would brief us on what was in the newspapers included a man from the political section, who was very gloomy…..

Q: Sorry, what morning – the morning of the invasion?

THIBEAULT: I guess the second or the third.

Q: Not prior to that?

THIBEAULT: No. This is probably the third. He was talking about what he knew and what had happened and he brought up an anecdote – and I'm trying to remember the year, I don't know what year this was – whether it was '57 or '58 – some year of tension between the U.S. and Iraq – he told a story of American diplomats being pulled from their car and ripped apart by a mob and this kind of struck home.

We immediately invoked the emergency action committee (EAC) when we knew that Iraq had invaded Kuwait.

Q: Now 'we'. Who was at the embassy?

THIBEAULT: Who was at the embassy? The ambassador is not there so Joe Wilson, the DCM is the Chargé; Jim VanLaningham is the admin officer; Melvin Ang and Nancy

Johnson were in the political section; Melvin also did consular work and Lee Haas was admin. We had a station chief and we had a military attaché, Colonel Ritchey. And that was about it.

Q: And Jim Callahan was out of the country.

THIBEAULT: Jim Callahan was out of the country.

Q: Anybody who was out of the country on that day did not come back.

THIBEAULT: They were not able to get back in. Our first objective was actually to draw down to an emergency staff.

Q: So, how many Americans – approximately- were there?

THIBEAULT: The normal post, including the military attaché, was 25 diplomats. At the time of the invasion, I would say it was more on the order of maybe 14 or 13 of us, or something like that.

Q: So the EAC and drawdown.

THIBEAULT: So the EAC – I had attended Emergency Action Committee meetings before, but I was very impressed that when this whole thing went down, that Joe Wilson simply opened this book to the correct page and it basically had a step-by-step guide as to what we were supposed to do in this emergency circumstance. One of the first things we wanted to do was to evacuate non-essential personnel, which meant the remaining family members and anyone the post management determined to be non-essential. During the initial period of time after the invasion of Kuwait, it was very difficult to figure out what the facts on the ground were, both in Kuwait and in Iraq. American citizens were very concerned about leaving the country, but the Iraqis had closed the borders.

Q: Concerned about getting out safely?

THIBEAULT: Yes; concerned about their ability to get out. Anyone who is in a country that required an exit visa must approach the authorities to get an exit visa, even though they have a valid reason to get in the country.

Q: Can you guess how many Americans were in that circumstance?

THIBEAULT: My guess is probably around 200 or something like that. So, very early on, I remember we would have meetings for American community members. Embassy personnel were such a small group of people that you were drawn into so many different aspects of the operation of the embassy that you normally wouldn't be. We had a meeting with… I am assuming Joe Wilson was there for this meeting – for American Citizens. The American citizens wanted to know first of all where they could leave the country. Our information was that the borders were closed. One of the Americans said, "I

understand that if you have already had an exit visa, you can go out through the land border to Turkey. Can you confirm this?" I said, "If the United States Embassy calls the Iraqis and asks them if American citizens can leave via Turkey, I am afraid they're going to close that border to you. We don't have a good relationship with the Iraqis and I don't want to spoil your chances. I can't tell you what the case is."

The questions started to come up very early on: "Can we come into the embassy?" Very shortly after the invasion of Kuwait, Saddam Hussein announced that citizens of five nationalities were subject to being taken hostage. They were calling them 'guests of Iraq'. The five nationalities were: American, British, French, German and Japanese. So, anyone of those nationalities was subject in Kuwait to being taken hostage.

Q: In Kuwait?

THIBEAULT: In Kuwait.

Q: Which he now said was Iraq.

THIBEAULT:…part of Iraq, yes.

So, that was the first thing we knew. So, the American citizens were very concerned that they might be taken hostage and some of them wanted to know if they could come into the embassy. My response to them was, "In Iran, would you have wanted to be in the nest of spies when the students took over the embassy? Would you somehow want to explain why you were in the American embassy at the time?" And also, there were so few of us, that we were not in a great position to take of this American resident population. So, that was initially what we saw.

Q: And the Americans said?

THIBEAULT: They went back home to their apartments or their villas. Almost all of them were sponsored by an American company such as Bechtel, who were working with their Iraqi sponsors. They had a great deal of faith in the sponsors, in most circumstances. But, if we could have waved the magic wand and gotten them out of the country, I think almost all of them would have gone right at the beginning. And that was good judgment, as it turned out.

So, this is at the very beginning. First, we have doubts about who can enter and who can leave. The second thing that there's questions about is food. Because international sanctions are beginning to be applied, Saddam Hussein says that everyone will be given rations and that all Iraqis will be entitled to some kind of rations. The Americans and the other foreigners immediately recognized that there's no provision for foreigners to draw rations. So, they are prevented from leaving the country on the one hand, and on the other hand they get concerned that they might not have access to food.

Q: Now, Hussein was clamping down on us because he feared or knew that there would

be an American reaction?

THIBEAULT: I think that this was simply a case of the kind of military confusion that takes place when you have a big change in events. The country had gone to war, and so there may have automatic rules that kicked in or there may have been special rules. But, part of what Saddam was doing, is that he was conducting his own public diplomacy campaign internationally. So, if he thought of a brain storm, sometimes you could see that he would follow through on an initiative that if he had a public affairs officer, the public affairs officer would never have approved it. So, for him to be talking about rations and food, is similar to his taking hostages.

Q: In a way he was really threatening the citizens of those five countries. Was he doing this as a pre-emptive measure to make sure that no one would bother him?

THIBEAULT: No. One of his big themes was to portray the Iraqi people as starved and beleaguered by the outside world. So, his consideration of the few foreigners or the few westerners who were living in Iraq at the time, that may not even have been on his mind. What I was seeing with these American citizens was that they and we in the embassy would look at every public announcement as to how it affected us as much as we would look at how Saddam is portraying himself in the world, etc. So, we got focused on this food business and I don't know who else was really focused on the food business.

I remember at the embassy, I only took part in one of these operations, but at one point – this may actually be a little bit into the invasion of Kuwait – that the military folks and the station folks, and other able bodied people had made arrangements to pick up stockpiles of food throughout the city. I remember going out on one trip one night and going down some alley and going into a building and hefting all of this food out of this building into trucks to take it back to the embassy so that we wouldn't be starved out. We were nowhere near that circumstance because not only did we have all of the food in all of the houses of people who are on vacation, but we all had our little commissary where we had trucked up food from Kuwait just to have a commissary.

Q: Just the sign posts here. Invasion – August 2nd. At one point did the western countries say something belligerent indicating that they didn't approve of this?

THIBEAULT: Again, I think the obliteration of the UN member, that's going to get attention the first day and that's going to get condemnation that first day.

I will give a hypothesis that may have some accuracy to it or just may be my projections. But, I think with Saddam, he was ready to bargain and he seems to have had a lot of confidence that we would settle for a pragmatic resolution of this situation. If you go back and look at the series of justifications he gave for the invasion of Kuwait, the first justification was that there had been a revolution in Kuwait and the revolutionary command council in Kuwait had then asked Iraq to come in and help them out. All of these men are dead now, I am assuming. No one in the world believed this. The next thing he said after a brief period of time was that the United States had been planning to

invade Kuwait and that the Iraqis had thwarted that. Nobody bought that one. The next thing he said was, "I'll sell you the oil." This is about oil. "I'll sell you the oil. Don't worry. I'm not going to have a boycott of the west or anything like that." And, again, he was looking at big geo-strategic pragmatic decisions that it was the oil that was motivating us. And that didn't fly.

Q: It sounds odd. Why would he think that people think that the U.S. would invade Kuwait? Was he just stupid?

THIBEAULT: At the time, if you remember, there was a big concern that this action by Saddam might trigger a general revolt of the have-nots within the Arab world, because the strike against Kuwait wasn't, in one case, a grab at oil resources, but in another, it was a class action against a wealthy upper-class that was living much better than the rest of the Arab nation.

If you remember, Iraq invaded Kuwait at a point where Saddam had the highest positives, got the highest regard across the Arab world of any Arab leader. This was because, in the previous six months or so, he had made some very provocative statements. He had made a statement that the Arabs have the right to whatever weapons their adversaries have. Well, everyone says Israel has nuclear weapons, why can't the Arabs? He didn't say, "We have the right to nuclear weapons." He said, "The Arabs have a right to whatever weapons our adversaries have." Then, a brief time later, he said, "If Israel attacks us, we'll use chemical weapons on them." Then he backed up a little and he said, "Well, if they use nuclear weapons, we'll use chemical weapons." But Saddam Hussein was talking about war with Israel; he was talking about military confrontation with Israel in a way that ….

Q: …got him prestige.

THIBEAULT: ….got him prestige and it was kind of credible after that war he had just had with Iran, so he was flying very high internationally as someone who was standing up to Israel.

When Iraq invaded Kuwait, one of the things that is in the record is the scale of the U.S. diplomatic drawdown throughout the Middle East. American officers were pulled out of Jordan; the press section in Jordan was led by the senior FSN. There was no assistant press attaché, there was no press attaché; the senior FSN was running that section. I believe in Saudi Arabia the drawdown may have been more discrete because of the sensitivities the Saudis have of being depicted as an unstable place. But, our first reaction was to drawdown American officers throughout the Middle East, at least in the public diplomacy sphere. So many officers had been called back from these embassies that they were falling all over each other back in Washington, at least in the Near East office.

But, Saddam Hussein was seen as a very charismatic and very powerful person and then he invaded Kuwait.

And, then again, when he invaded Kuwait, there was this fear that this just might trigger something bigger. Again, as I spoke of Egypt before as a tinderbox, there is always this uncertainty as to where the line is in these authoritarian Arab societies. There are the authoritarians who keep you in line with surveillance and bureaucracy and those who keep you in line with perks like free education and free medical care and things like that. There is always this uncertainty as to how much people will take before they will lash out. The invasion of Kuwait was viewed, I think by some, as "perhaps this is a triggering event that is going to make changes in a lot of places".

Q: So, the drawdown in the region was the result of a general anxiety or was there some knowledge, do you think, of what was coming?

THIBEAULT: That's really beyond my knowledge.

Q: Well, somebody decided to drawdown. They just saw an alarming situation and from prudence…

THIBEAULT: Yeah. And, so, that's the circumstance we were in.

So, he invades Kuwait and he takes American hostages in Kuwait. He puts the American embassy in Kuwait basically under siege – no one can come in, no one can go out. That's partially where we got this food fixation in Baghdad, I believe, since the American embassy in Kuwait had been cut off and therefore they were living on their supplies of food. The idea whether their electricity or their water would be cut off was a daily concern. You could see all of these things happening.

So, he invades Kuwait. Our first objective is to get our dependents and non-essential personnel out of the country. So we spend days with the Iraqis – days, maybe weeks, maybe two weeks, negotiating with them to allow American dependents and non-essential personnel to leave. There were going to be two evacuation convoys. They get the diplomatic permission for the first one. The first one goes out and that one was for family members.

Then we had the drawdown to essential personnel; we were going to draw down to eight. However, I had a lot of complications, because the American Cultural Center, as I said, had brought in direct hire American teachers. We had brought in a director. We were negotiating with a direct hire director of English teaching services and she had come to the country. While she was there getting settled and negotiating her contract, Iraq invaded Kuwait. We said, "We are going to have to evacuate you." So, as the acting public affairs officer, I was responsible for getting all of our teachers from the Cultural Center out of Iraq in this evacuation. She said, "If I leave Iraq, am I going to get paid for the next year?" And I said, "No, we don't have a contract for you. We'll get you out of Iraq." And she says, "Well, I'm not going to leave Iraq unless I can be compensated for next year's pay, because that's what I was counting on." I said, "You don't have a contract." She said, "Well, then draw me up a contract." I said, "They won't approve a contract that allows you to be paid (laughs) after you are evacuated. I'd have to get this contract

approved."

Q: In a neighboring country this would be called chutzpah!

THIBEAULT: So, we had that. We had two teachers, who refused evacuation. One was a very airy, fairy kind of hippy itinerant English teacher who just thought that we could all just talk together and everything will be fine; so, she didn't want to let the Iraqis down. Then we had another American, Charles, who was a close friend of mine. He just felt that he had gone to ground so much in Iraqi society and was so well-connected and because he didn't look American, that he could get by somehow. He was later taken hostage. The teacher was taken hostage as well. But, they refused evacuation at that time.

I expected to be on the second evacuation.

Q: Who was making the decisions about the drawdown?

THIBEAULT: Joe Wilson, the Chargé, I am sure. Jim VanLaningham was the admin officer, and so Jim would have been carrying these things out.

Q: But you were explaining this in town meetings to AmCits (American citizens).

THIBEAULT: Yeah.

Q: Were you explaining decisions that had been made by the Chargé, or did you have a relatively free hand in improvising this?

THIBEAULT: No. I was strictly public affairs. I had no decision-making authority.

When we opened up the Emergency Action Committee book on disasters, the drawdown list of the American who would stay together at the end to run the embassy did not include a public affairs officer. This reflected the situation in Iraq prior to the invasion of Kuwait: no foreign journalists were walking around in Iraq prior to the invasion of Kuwait. So, the idea that after or in the midst of an emergency we would need a public affairs officer hadn't occurred to anybody when they made this list. So, I was to be evacuated with the second evacuation convoy. I went into the office one day and found I wasn't on that list anymore and that I was essential personnel. I think that the criteria for the essential personnel was people who could work the best with Joe Wilson. I think he made his decisions based on how he felt his management style would go down with people, rather than strictly looking at what people's positions were.

Q: Meanwhile, your spouse was already evacuated, I suppose?

THIBEAULT: This is another extended terrible event. Connie and I got married in January of 1990. After our honeymoon in Weehawken, New Jersey, I brought her home to our little house in Baghdad, Iraq; to a place whose language she did not speak and to where almost no one spoke English and where, and, as I said, in order to leave the city,

you needed to file a diplomatic note a week ahead of time; and our phones were tapped. Often, there would be a little police car with an eyeball painted on the door, sitting outside our house observing us. So, it was quite a dramatic shift from Boston, where she had just graduated from the University of Massachusetts. We moved to Iraq. She worked at the cultural center; she taught English.

Q: She had six normal months, sort of…sort of.

THIBEAULT: She had six kind of normal months. We went on R&R (rest and recuperation) that summer and because the cultural life in Baghdad was so limited and because we didn't have children at that point, she decided to stay in the States longer and I came back to Iraq before August 2nd; I don't remember how soon.

She was returning to Iraq on August 1st. As her plane flew to London, there was a loud ripping sound and the plane plummeted for a minute or however long. It righted itself, but it was obvious that the plane was pulling on one side and that it was working against something; apparently, the wing had ripped in a certain way. They were going to make an emergency landing in Ireland at Shannon Airport. So, they make the landing. It was a long trip from the time that the damage happened to the plane to the time that the plane landed in Shannon. During that whole period of time she was on a plane that was obviously damaged and was limping into an airport. They landed at Shannon with the fire trucks and the foam and all that kind of stuff. The airline put her up in a hotel. She had a few drinks that night to go to sleep and the next morning she woke up and the front page of the newspaper said, "Dramatic Landing at Shannon; Iraq Invades Kuwait".

[Laughter]

My poor wife was stuck in Shannon trying to get to Iraq. It was not clear whether the Iraqis would open airspace. Just the way their borders were closed, their airspace was closed. Her next connection was to Frankfurt. So, she went to Frankfurt and waited to see if she could get in.

I had worked in the Third World; it was only my second tour, but having worked in Egypt I considered it just common sense that if an American spouse had ever called the embassy and had said, "I'm at the airport and I can't go to my destination. What should I do?" that the embassy would dispatch a driver and she would stay at the public affairs officer's house or the information officer's house, or something like that.

Q: In Frankfurt?

THIBEAULT: In Frankfurt. She called the embassy. I don't know if she got the duty officer; they gave her a list of hotels and she was only 24.

Q: So, did she know that she was not going to Baghdad?

THIBEAULT: No. She was still trying to get back to Iraq. We didn't know what the

situation was. She eventually spent perhaps a week in Frankfurt and then headed back to the States. We had no home. She didn't know anything about the State Department bureaucracy. The State Department hadn't figured out what it was going to do in terms of providing separate maintenance for the families of people who were in Iraq; none of the decisions had been made.

Q: Was she able to contact you?

THIBEAULT: She got through on the phone on the second day. I had no idea what to say. The things I was looking at in front of me were so compelling and the way that the situation was so grave and feeling bad that I couldn't help her in her situation. It was just very difficult. I just felt like I wanted to get off that phone because I had no idea what I could possible say.

Q: Were you hoping that she would get to Baghdad?

THIBEAULT: No, because I could see that our first objective was to get people out – or that became clear very soon. Our priorities in the office had been to get our teachers out. There were no more dependents for the USIS people because it was just me, as Jim and his family were not there.

We were going to close down the cultural center. A big part of my duties was to start officially, step by step, closing the center, transferring money and things like that.

Q: Because this is such a crucial period – August 2nd invasion: was the EAC the same day?

THIBEAULT: You know, I really couldn't tell you.

Q: Or very soon?

THIBEAULT: Very soon; very soon the decisions on draw down. Now, there are so many things that went on, that took us over for a day and the crisis was past. At the very beginning the Iraqis were monitoring the embassy and could see when we were on the secure telephone to Washington and they cut the phone line. The embassy then called perhaps Bonn or London. They called a different American embassy and got patched into Washington again and reestablished the secure contact. The Iraqis would eventually track this down and they would cut off that line. This perhaps is anecdotal; at the time I certainly wasn't in the room. But, this is one of those times when Joe Wilson went to the Iraqis and laid down the law and said, "Can you possibly want us to be out of contact with our government at this moment?" and then the phone lines were re-established and they didn't do it anymore. If Joe Wilson is asked, he'd probably have a lot more elaborate take on this thing. But, there were certain times when he did step forward and basically called the Iraqis' bluff and they would back down.

Q: Because he is such a famous character, we will leave him in the narrative as

appropriate, but did you feel that he was quickly and effectively making correct decisions during that crucial time?

THIBEAULT: Yes, from everything I could see. We'll talk later about the public affairs aspects of it. He took over some of the public affairs duties, for example when the high-level journalist came in – Ted Koppel or Peter Jennings.

Q: How were they getting into the country?

THIBEAULT: Suddenly, in a big turn around, the Iraqis let in a wave of foreign journalists. Initially, these high-level anchor people were all stacked up in Jordan waiting to come in. The Iraqis made a public diplomacy decision to let them in.

Q: Were they potential hostages?

THIBEAULT: No. As a matter of fact, there is a little anecdote about that. I dealt with journalists. Once the journalists came in (they came in in a wave) we had perhaps between a dozen and two dozen American journalists at any given time in the country. And I remember a journalist asking me (this is probably closer to the end of August or the beginning of September), "Do you really think it's dangerous here?" I said, "You're an American citizen. If you were not a journalist, you'd be a hostage right now." He said, "Yes, but this place – it seems so normal." And I said, "You know, Russia would seem normal under Stalin. These are the conditions that these people live under and they just go about their business."

Once the journalists were let in – they were let in at a time when hostages had been taken and I haven't addressed hostages being taken in Iraq. But, at the very earliest part, the Iraqis let these anchor people get in and I was pretty unaware of it. Now, with my sensitivities as a public affairs or public diplomacy specialist, I would have been livid at the time. Joe Wilson took the anchors to meet the hostages without checking with me. That's the only thing that I will talk about in his management, because that's the part of it I got to see, otherwise I can't point to anything that he did wrong during that period of time.

The whole narrative, my whole impression of Iraq is just colored by the issue of hostages.

Let me address the issue of the hostages.

Q: There was ambiguity. Saddam says they were guests; nobody believed that.

THIBEAULT: While we were trying to get our family members out and our non-essential personnel out, it became obvious that they were taking hostages and…

Q: Are we still in August, here?

THIBEAULT: We're still in August. We know he's taking hostages in Kuwait. I'm

trying to think of the sequence here. Let me refer back to the point where American citizens asked if they could come into the embassy. We reached a point where we called them and offered.

Q: Was this through the phone tree?

THIBEAULT: This is through the phone tree. I don't know if people know. American embassies are always set up with a special structure to help Americans. One of the highest priorities is to be able to evacuate American citizens, or protect American citizens or represent American citizens. So we have a phone tree, which is a voluntary system where, if Americans want to be contacted by the embassy, they will be called in a circumstance that comes up. We had, as I said before, decided not to take American citizens into our diplomatic properties, because it seemed as if they were doing just as well outside as they would with us and we would have been responsible for them.

Q: Was there any dispute over that? Did they accept that reasoning?

THIBEAULT: I believe, yeah. No one felt that they could force their way into the embassy.

Q: Did they understand that their chances were just as good or better not to be in the embassy?

THIBEAULT: We didn't really talk it through. There were levels of privilege and safety; and, as a diplomat accredited to Iraq, I was in the safest group, down to people, again, who were regular Americans with no diplomatic protection, were the most vulnerable.

We heard one night, from someone in the Canadian embassy that the Iraqis were going to hotels and making lists. This is within Iraq now; this is not Kuwait. They were going from hotel to hotel within Iraq and making lists of five foreign nationalities: the French, the Germans, the Japanese, the Americans, and the Brits. Now, having seen that Americans were taken hostage in Kuwait, we could see that the same operation was going to take place – or there was good reason to believe that it would take place in Iraq. So, we went through the phone tree and we offered Americans who were in Baghdad, "If you want to come in, we'll come get you tonight." We told them to pack light and using the phone tree, through the night embassy vehicles went to hotels, went up to appropriate rooms, took the Americans in our vans, with just overnight stuff, and drove them to the ambassador's residence. And, of course, the ambassador was not in the country. So, the ambassador's residence was pretty big. It had a pool; it had a cabana. Our commissary was there. So, it was a much more sensible place for these people to stay than the embassy. We brought in about 40 people – is my guess.

Q: Were you confident that the physical space of that building would be respected by the Iraqis?

THIBEAULT: No. The Iraqis were very inconsistent about honoring the niceties of

diplomatic conventions on the one hand, and then at some other point just doing whatever they felt like they were going to do.

So, we brought these Americans in. Then, over the next few days, we went out, and, using their hotel keys, emptied out all of their belonging from all of these hotels and brought these belongings to them at the ambassador's, so they could pretty much take up life there.

Q: Were the hotel staff cooperative?

THIBEAULT: The amazing piece of cooperation was among the Foreign Service Nationals. Iraq was a country where most of the men had been in the military for a decade. There were not a lot of Iraqis available to serve as drivers in the motor pool because of that long war with Iran. So most of the people in the motor pool were third-country Arabs who got to work that exchange rate to a tee. I have no idea of the real figures, but if the average Iraqi driving as a driver or a chauffeur made 5000 dinars a year, the real value of that would be about fifteen hundred dollars a year; but at the official exchange rate, they would be making about fifteen thousand bucks a year. And, because they were third country nationals, they could get their pay deposited in their home country in hard currency. So, this was kind of a dream job for a lot of Tunisians and Egyptians, etc. to work for the embassy. But, because they were not Iraqis and they were not diplomats, they were not protected by us at all. And so, really to see the dedication of our employees going out in the middle of the night to rescue people from becoming hostages when they certainly knew that what they were doing was at odds with what the Iraqi government wanted them to do, was a very brave action on their part.

Q: Did the American community or embassy ever properly recognize that?

THIBEAULT: I don't believe so, no. And, it's something I always think of that it would have been a good night for someone to call in sick. The Iraqis, to my knowledge, never engaged in any retribution against them. But I've a feeling that it just fell through the cracks. There were so many people that the Iraqis were out to get at that time, that they forgot our FSNs.

So, we brought these people into the Ambassador's residence and suddenly we had 40 people that we were responsible for. Here's the point where Joe Wilson brings in the anchor people and I had no idea. I slept through these things completely and I had no real idea of what went on. But, there was at least one show where these Americans we had brought into the ambassador's residence were put on camera and they were interviewed by the anchor person. And it's amazing that, in my experience, the Americans that I met who were literally hostages (and I met many of those) and the people who were threatened with becoming hostages like the people we had at the ambassador's residence - the first thing they would say is, "I'm ok. I know this is bigger than me." And something to the effect that America has to do what it has to do.

Q: Was this survival on their part or was it naiveté?

THIBEAULT: No. I think it was just recognition that this really was bigger than they were. However, because we were protecting 40 people at the embassy (ambassador's residence) and all 40 of those people had relatives in the States, and all of those people saw these television shows, every time any American said, "I'm expendable" or something to that effect, it would be very traumatic for the relatives watching this, because they were worried about their loved ones.

Q: Did they say they were ok, but then give the impression that they understood that they were expendable?

THIBEAULT: In the course of a 20 or 30 or 40 minute show or interview, the one or two lines that someone says of the noble sentiment is what is focused on. I saw this in this circumstance. I conducted a televised interview myself. I set it up with another of these people at the ambassador's residence with a foreign camera crew and that person basically said that same sentiment. And again, my point is that….

Q: They came to the residence for safety.

THIBEAULT: Right.

*Q: At what point was it understood that they really **were** hostages?*

THIBEAULT: Within about a week.

After this initial phase with – again, I don't know whether it was with Ted Koppel or Peter Jennings – I know we had at least two of these anchors that Joe Wilson worked directly with. After that it dawned on me that I was the Press Attaché and suddenly I had between 12 and 20 journalists that I was contacting every day. They were desperate for interviews with hostages, because they all had their Iraqi minders and were all trying to do their Iraqi stories, but here we had Americans and they could speak to Americans.

Within the embassy itself, when we eventually drew down, we got down to eight American officers. And so, out of those eight American officers, I could speak to the press because I was the Press Attaché and Joe Wilson could speak to the press, because he was the Chargé. All of the other Americans were under Foreign Service discipline; they were not allowed to speak to the press without permission and without background guidelines, etc. So, the journalists were desperate to speak to the Americans who were at the residence.

The Americans who were at the residence were a little leery of being exploited by the media just to get a good story; a good number of them were employees of Bechtel and as Bechtel had a policy on whether people could speak to the press, they were against it. So, we had this circumstance the very first few days when we were protecting these folks but no one had been taken hostage yet in Iraq.

And, we had two prominent people among Americans in Iraq. They decided not to come in. The felt perfectly safe in Iraq and they were willing to say so on camera. So, I took CNN to a man's house, where they set up the interview with him. He said, "I've been living in Iraq for years. My Iraqi sponsoring company has been taking very good care of me. I don't believe that this is a problem between the American people and the Iraqi people, and I feel perfectly safe living where I am." The next day, he was taken hostage.

Q: While we are absorbing that amazing anecdote, two questions. The press attaché and the Chargé were free to speak. Was there a tacit or explicit understanding between the two of you who what say what to whom when or did you just both go out?

THIBEAULT: No. The thing is that once the horde of American journalists came in, Joe and I would conduct a press conference every day.

I had more power in that press conference than Tony Snow (G. W. Bush press aide) ever has, <u>because</u> the American journalists in Iraq were all dependent on phone connections to the outside in order to file their stories, because the clunky Iraqi international connections from the hotels were very unreliable, were cut off haphazardly. We were allowing the American journalists to use the USIS offices to file those stories using our telephone lines. We kept a log of who used them and we would charge them for the cost of the call whenever the bill came in. And so, when Joe Wilson spoke to the press, I was able to say everyday: "The Chargé is speaking on background as a western journalist; and, if you would like to attribute something to him in a direct quote, stop the procedures, ask for permission, and we will say, "Yes. You can quote him as Joe Wilson saying this or that; otherwise you cannot quote him that way." At other points, we could say that something was being given to them strictly, basically on deep background. And, 'deep background' would be: "You can use this information to make sure that your story is accurate, but you may not attribute it to anybody. And…" (I did not say there, but I would say with the journalists) "…if you violate these rules, you'll never use our telephones again." And so we had a great situation where we could get out whatever information we wanted to get out. We could have a candid relationship with the journalists and if they violated the ground rules, we could punish them very clearly, which I never had to do.

Q: They behaved ok?

THIBEAULT: They behaved just fine.

Q: Now I have to ask also, it just seems so bizarre in that you have American citizens in different categories. You have diplomats; you have local hires; and, you have journalists. Some…

THIBEAULT: It gets worse.

Q: …are hostages and some are totally free to come and go and this seems nuts. Journalists, for example, apparently had total freedom…

THIBEAULT: ….total freedom to go around with their minders, yes.

Q: It makes no sense, does it? People of the same nationality. Was it because the Iraqi regime thought that they could use those journalists to their advantage?

THIBEAULT: Oh, yes. Oh, certainly.

There were so many assumptions that you can decide the Iraqis made, based on their behavior and we were wrong. I personally was wrong about the assumptions I made about how they would behave in relation to Kuwait, so I was wrong about that. But, the other things as far as letting the journalists travel. The other technique they had was to bring in foreign peace activists and to have them act as human shields at different places. He went back to these tactics repeatedly.

So, to return to the guy who did the interview on CNN, who was kidnapped, a very close friend of his was so incensed, he said, "I'll go on camera and say that they kidnapped this guy." And so, it was a great story for CNN, because on one day they showed the guy saying he felt perfectly safe and the next day they could show his friend saying, "They kidnapped the sucker." He didn't want his face to be shown. And, again, we went to a neutral place with the CNN crew and the second potential hostage and he was filmed in outline with a little black outline and his voice was distorted. CNN did the story and all of the foreign broadcasters had to use an Iraqi satellite uplink at that time in order to get their stories out. So, the Iraqis, who I don't believe engaged in pre-broadcast censorship, but what they would do is they would stop a broadcast that they didn't want to go out. And CNN was able to get this broadcast out and I was told by the CNN chief there that the Iraqi minders were yelling, "Who was this man?" so it was a little bit of a coup to get this thing out.

Q: Just in time.

THIBEAULT: The book Live from Baghdad by Bob Wiener ended up being a movie by the same title. Bob Wiener was someone I worked with closely. I noticed when he wrote the book (I had a very brief brush with fame.) that he used me in the book to say unpleasant things about other people. He would say, "Well, Steve Thibeault told me that this guy was crazy." or something to that effect. It was very nice and very informative to just have a little taste of how you can be misrepresented in the media. It wasn't anything fatal.

So, again at this point, we are dealing with hostages. I had some terrible experiences. My friend Charles, who was one of our English teachers, stayed on. I didn't want him to be out in the community. I was trying to get him into the embassy. By that time we had other people in the embassy who had been evacuated from Kuwait and some of the Military types could have used a chef. So I called Charles and said, "Charles, I think I might have a job for you. Would you be interested in being a chef?" And while we were on the phone, he says, "There're people here from the Interior Ministry and they say they're here to protect me from the enemies of Iraq."

Q: He's where – in a hotel?

THIBEAULT: He's at the American Cultural Center, at that point. And, that was the last I heard of Charles for months. He was taken hostage right at that moment.

I received a call from a man named John Thompson, who was working with some Iraqi ministry. He called and he said, again, the people from the Interior Ministry were there at his job and he was supposed to go with them. And so I got directions to his office and I arrived there and confronted his boss and said, "Has this man violated the law?" and he said, "No, no, no." I said, "Well, can he go home?" and he said, "No, they want to keep him here. He needs to stay here." I said, "Well, I'm from the embassy; if he has done anything to violate the law, you need to deal with me, you need to explain it to me." Again, his boss was in a very tight situation; you could see that he was under pressure. I didn't see the people from the Interior Ministry, but they were there and they were looking for John Thompson.

Q: And, where was Thompson at this moment?

THIBEAULT: We were all in the same room. Me and him and his boss were in this room, maybe on the 3rd or 4th floor. And again, this is in Arabic and I am just saying, "Has he done anything? If he has done anything, tell me what it is and then the embassy will work with you on this. Has he committed any crimes?" And he would say, "No, he has not committed any crimes." "Then he can leave, yes?" And then he asked, "Well, why are you doing this?" and I answered, "Because I represent American citizens." This was the most tense I have ever been in my life. I was kind of brow beating them. I took Thompson to the window and said to him, "The white van, that's our van. If they let you leave this building you go to that van and we'll take you to the ambassador's residence. And, that's eventually what happened. Eventually we talked them into releasing this guy. We took him to his house; we took his personal possessions. We loaded them up and we took him to the ambassador's residence.

Q: What convinced his boss to back off – just the strength of your bluffing?

THIBEAULT: He couldn't explain what he was doing; he couldn't articulate what was really happening; he couldn't tell me.

Q: Was there any sign that the Interior Ministry people allowed him to do this?

THIBEAULT: I have no idea. I was just winging it. From the timing of that story and taking Charles, it tells me that that happened after the evacuation of the embassy in Kuwait. This is such a condensed period of time that I may go forward and back a little bit.

People in the embassy in Kuwait had been trying to get permission for their dependents to leave and for their non-essential personnel to leave the country.

Q: There was an ambassador…

THIBEAULT: There was an ambassador and DCM in Kuwait. The Iraqis are making the price for drawing down the embassy a recognition that Kuwait is part of Iraq. And, of course, we can't recognize that Kuwait is part of Iraq, because it isn't. There's extended negotiations on this, and the compromise that is worked out is that the non-essential personnel and the dependents will be allowed to leave the embassy in Kuwait, but they must travel in a motorcade to Baghdad; then their passports will be stamped as exiting Iraq or as resident in Iraq or something, and then they would be allowed to go overland to Turkey and they could leave. By this time, we've drawn down our personnel to eight diplomats.

Q: Did they stay good on that agreement? Did they allow…

THIBEAULT: No, no. To the point where Jim VanLaningham, the admin officer, was sleeping at post one because they needed someone to answer the door. The Marines had been evacuated as part of the second draw down, the theory being that if the Iraqis wanted to take the embassy, six guys with shot guns were not going to prevent it. The gunny, the marine sergeant who headed the detachment, was very unhappy about being evacuated.

Q: This was the management officer's decision?

THIBEAULT: No. The management officer, as I said, at least on one night, was the man who slept down at the front door in case someone rang the bell at the embassy.

Q: The Chargé decided to evacuate the Marines?

THIBEAULT: I can't say the Chargé personally, but the decision was made that the drawdown would include the Marines. So, we drew down to eight. Again, we had to have a communicator. We had the Chargé; we had the ambassador's secretary, who stayed behind; Jim VanLaningham; Mel Ang, and the station chief and the Military Attaché.

Q: And the PAO.

THIBEAULT: And the PAO…the Acting PAO.

So, we'd drawn down to that stage and at that point the Iraqis allowed the non-essential personnel to evacuate from Kuwait. This was 108 people in a convoy driving overland from Kuwait City to Baghdad. It took all day; they had breakdowns; they lost a car or two. The day they came to Baghdad was the worst day in my life.

At this point, I was doing the press conference every day with Joe Wilson.

We were closing down the American Cultural Center. The bureaucracy goes on. You can

be in a war situation and you still need to close down the cultural center and do all the paperwork and get the cable traffic back and forth. I had been on the phone with the PAO, Jim Callahan; Jim had two things he wanted me to do (both got incredibly screwed up). One, he wanted his maid, Nita, to be able to leave the country. She was a Filipina; and, since the Callahans were not going to be allowed back in anytime soon, because of this whatever state of emergency we were in, he wanted Nita to leave. So our admin person in USIS had Nita go to the airline office to buy a ticket out of Iraq. I believe Jordanian Airlines was flying at this point. The only airline that resumed flights in the end was Jordanian – Royal Jordanian. So, Nita went to the ticket office and they refused to let her buy the ticket in Iraqi dinars. If you are a resident in Iraq, you can qualify to buy things like plane tickets with their phony bologna money at the official rate. So, buying a plane ticket in dinars is only 10% as expensive as buying it in real money. When the call came to me and Hinda, our admin assistant said, "They're not letting Nita buy the tickets in dinars; we have to force them to." I said, "Forget about it. In the safe, I saw $300 – three one hundred dollar bills; that must be Jim's money. Take that $300 and buy her a plane ticket and get her out of the country."

Sometime later I get a call: Nita was arrested for passing counterfeit money. So, I went with the driver. Neffi and I and maybe one of my FSNs. We went to the police and I explained to them in Arabic that Nita was not intending to use counterfeit money and that I had supplied her with the counterfeit money….no. I'll tell you. First thing I did was I went to the ticket office and I called them everything I could think of and accused them of having this person thrown in jail because they wouldn't accept their own phony bologna currency. They referred me to the police station. So, then, when I went to the police station, I basically gave a deposition and said I presented Nita with the money; that she had no intention of using counterfeit funds. The Iraqi police officer showed me the money. There were three hundred dollar bills. I recognized them because they had some kind of stamp on them and two of them had no fibers in them – no red and blue fibers. I could see that two of those three bills were counterfeit.

Q: Substituted?

THIBEAULT: No, because, again, I recognized the bills because they'd been through some kind of banking procedure and had a stamp on them, so I knew those were the bills. And, when I examined those bills, I could see that two of them indeed were counterfeit bills.

Q: From the safe?

THIBEAULT: From the safe, which Jim had gotten from the embassy cashier in Kuwait. So, now I had the boss's maid in jail. Again, I explained the whole situation; explained that it was my fault. And, the only question they had for me was: and so you're a diplomat? And I said, "Yes." And they said, "Fine, we'll be in touch with you." This was in August 1990. Nita remained in prison until the summer of 1991. I spent time the following four or five weeks, every day, trying to get her out of jail, with the Philippine embassy, because she was a Philippine national. So that happened.

As soon as I came out of this meeting, I had to go to a highway on the outskirts of Baghdad.

Q: Do you remember the dates? Sometime in August?

THIBEAULT: Well, whenever the evacuation from Kuwait took place….

Q: Ok.

THIBEAULT: Because, after leaving the police station I went to a highway on the outskirts of Baghdad to await the convoy coming in. So, eventually I meet the convoy. We drive the convoy to Marine House. And at Marine House, the people that we're protecting at the ambassador's residence – the 40 or so – have put on a big barbecue for all of the dependents and non-essential personnel evacuated from Iraq. It had the most bizarre appearance.

Q: Normality.

THIBEAULT: Yes. And the thing is, that being in Iraq, one of the things that was strange was that we had 25 American diplomats and only three children. Jim Callahan, the PAO, was the only person stationed in Iraq who had children. Then, the embassy in Kuwait gets evacuated up to where we are, and the Marine House was swarming with children. It was just so strange; such a big change. So now we have 108 people on diplomatic passports from Kuwait in Baghdad.

It's late at night, I was probably drinking and I went to sleep. I was supposed to get up the next morning at five or so.

Q: Sorry. You've got 40 people in the ambassador's residence, and all of the embassy Americans from Kuwait who went to the Marine House – to the empty Marine House.

THIBEAULT: Exactly, the empty Marine House. Because there were only eight American diplomats stationed in Baghdad now, the 47 or the 40 plus Americans who were at the Ambassador's residence, made sure that there were sleeping arrangements for all of these people coming up from Kuwait.

Q: Was the Marine House adjacent to the residence?

THIBEAULT: No. It was the one place we had that had space still. The idea was that they would over-night in Baghdad; the Iraqi authorities would process all of their passports and they would get back in their convoy, drive to the Turkish border and exit Iraq.

This was the worst, longest day of my life.

I went to bed late and I was supposed to get up early in the morning – five o'clock or something like that, to then put all of these people back on the convoy and get them out and they'd be out of our hair. I woke up at whatever time I was supposed to wake up and someone told me there was a glitch. And I said, "What do you mean?" They said, "There's a glitch; they're not leaving." So, instead of having eight Americans with diplomatic status, we now had 116; and, of the 116, 108 of them – the ones from Kuwait – now were in a bizarre status that they were diplomats accredited to a country that Iraq thought didn't exist, so we in fact created a fourth category. You had the people who were literally hostages, you had the people who were subject to being hostage, you had the American diplomats without diplomat status, and then you had those of us who were accredited to Iraq and then you had the American journalists who were walking around at the kindness of the Iraqis.

Q: Five categories.

THIBEAULT: Yeah.

So, suddenly, the place is swarming with people. Once I knew that the convoy wasn't leaving, I went home to my house, rather than the Chancery and I slept. I probably slept for a day.

I went into the embassy the next day. So, it was the night they arrived, the following morning they didn't go; I don't think I went back into the embassy for 24 hours.

So, I come into the embassy in the morning and I have a twilight zone experience. I go to the ambassador's office and in front of the ambassador's office there is a secretary – I have no idea who she is. In front of the DCM's office, there is a secretary – I have no idea who she is. Someone steps out of the DCM's office – I have no idea who this is. The staff from Embassy Kuwait had come up and re-staffed the embassy while I was sleeping. So now, instead of having a skeleton crew, we not only were a fully-staffed embassy, but we were falling all over these extra folks who really had no jobs to do: all of the military assistance program people from Kuwait, where we had a big military assistance program. There were folk camped every place. This is the point where I thought maybe I can get Charles a job cooking for some of these extraordinary people. So, we were in that circumstance.

This is about the time when Saddam changed his hostage approach, letting women and children free. Again, my insight on Saddam's hostage taking is that this was….

Q: …public diplomacy…

THIBEAULT: This was public diplomacy in a way, but I think more it was a strategic decision on his part. A crucial part of this whole operation. The Iraqis, prior to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, always made public statements that Americans didn't have the stomach to take casualties. Prior to 1991, when we liberated Kuwait, one of the Iraqi representatives had said basically that we'll drown in our own blood. That was one

assumption that I believe that they were making about the Americans: that Saddam thought that he could make this all work. The second assumption was that we'll do anything to get hostages released.

Q: We the Americans.

THIBEAULT: We the Americans. That, if you look back to Lebanon, when President Reagan was involved with Iran Contra, I have no documentary evidence of this, but I find it hard to believe that Saddam Hussein didn't look at that incident and say, "If President Reagan is willing to provide stuff to Iran in exchange for five hostages, what will he do for 200 hostages, what will he do for 300 hostages?" So, I think the hostages were a critical element…

Q: Of the five, I believe three of them were killed, by the way.

THIBEAULT: Before they were released?

Q: I believe that the five hostages in that early incident, while the money was paid, that the delivery was not made. But, that is something to research.

THIBEAULT: The whole gist of Iran Contra, or the whole gist of the negotiations was to get our hostages out. One could see that both presidents – certainly President Carter – became so focused on hostages from the embassy in Iran to the detriment of his other duties as president. So, I think Saddam had a lot of confidence in this.

I want to make one point about the absolute importance of Saddam Hussein's judgments. If you take a sample of the decisions that the Iraqis made over the years, you can see that there was no professional input that had any ability to sway Saddam Hussein. So, for example, taking the hostages. In taking the hostages, he not only took women and children initially, but there was a show that they showed on Iraqi TV that was extremely spooky called "Guests News" and they would have stories about hostages we had seen in our consular activities and there they were on TV meeting Saddam Hussein. The most iconic image is of Saddam Hussein talking to a little boy who is eating his breakfast. I believe it was Mel Ang, who was a consular officer, while we were watching this show said, "There's the Basner boy". That Saddam, if Saddam had a public affairs officer, that public affairs officer would say, "Don't run this film. This little boy looks terrified to be in your presence." Not allowed.

Another example: Babylon. The ancient historic site – Babylon. Anyone with a knowledge of archeology would have quit their job rather than approve the construction of a replica of Babylon on top of the archeological site. That's cutting off any excavations in the entire palace area by building a new palace on the ruins of the palace. So, those are just some examples of the idea that Saddam made the decisions and it was very likely that any kind of professional advice was ignored.

Q: A couple of questions. You said this was the worst and longest day of your life. Was

that the day that you slept?

THIBEAULT: No. That was the day that Nita was arrested and when I met the people on the outskirts of the city.

Q: Understanding that at that particular time you didn't have the resources to help them, you went to sleep.

THIBEAULT: I think I had been up for so long a period of time.

Q: Secondly: where was Joe Wilson?

THIBEAULT: There was just a lot going on. I would see Joe Wilson for the press conference in the morning. I can't remember if we had regular country team meetings at the time. I know that I would see Joe in the Chancery at night; sometimes we would sit with journalists and just have sessions at night. I think the number of people was so small, that if you had an area of responsibility, you just focused on that responsibility.

Q: I cannot not ask; I have to. What was the degree of Joe Wilson's equanimity and clear thinking? You've said that you understand he apparently made correct decisions, but you were such a tight-knit community and there were so few of you and there is so much interest in this individual, tell me something about him – at that time, anything.

THIBEAULT: Let me see; let me see, let me see.

Q: Was he cool and collected?

THIBEAULT: Yes, he was cool. He was a little bit bigger than life. Again, when you would meet him in an informal setting with the journalists, he was likely to have his feet up on the desks, smoking a big cigar and probably sharing a whiskey with them. Again, this is off-duty hours, if anything is off-duty. He had a flair about him. Again, I'd say he was bigger than life. He came into a press conference one morning wearing a noose around his neck.

And so the journalists said, "Ok. We bite. What's the noose all about?" We had received a diplomatic note. I'd love to see it. It's a hilarious document, because as a diplomatic note it starts with all of the formal greetings. "The Socialist Republic of Iraq sends its greetings to the Embassy of the United States of America and takes the pleasure at this time to inform the embassy that assisting foreigners to avoid the residency laws of Iraq is a capital offense." So, this is a reference to the 40 Americans we were protecting at the ambassador's residence. And, so, Joe, again – it's basically a death threat. For myself, and I think for Joe…

Q: No recognition of diplomatic privilege here or anything.

THIBEAULT: What they were telling us was we were thwarting their efforts to take

American hostages. But, again, I think myself and I think the others in that room just saw it as another example of the Iraqis just trying to yank our chain and that they were not literally threatening to kill us.

I had been on the phone to my wife almost every day. And that's another story. At that moment, there was something wrong with the telephones and they were down for about a day. And, I didn't think twice about this interview or this press conference where Joe wore the noose. And one of the journalists had a laptop or some ability – it's hard to keep the technology straight – but they had in front of them on the screen a newspaper article from the United States and the headline was: "Iraq Denies It Will Execute Foreign Diplomats". And I thought, "That means yesterday's headlines were: Iraq Threatens to Execute Foreign Diplomats" and that's what my wife saw. So, the next time I had a chance to speak to my wife the very first words were, "No. There's no problem." It was a very difficult situation.

So, as I said, Joe was bigger than life. Saddam reached a point where he allowed women and children to leave the country. He started going down a list and looking at ways to make hostage-taking more palatable and one was women and children and another was Arabs – even Arab-American or French Arabs, because people had started to I guess make noises about this saying, "Why are you keeping French Arabs hostage and why are you keeping American Arabs hostage because they're Arabs." So they decided to let women and children leave, which meant American women and children in Kuwait could leave, as well.

But, the American diplomats in the embassy in Kuwait could not leave the embassy or they would be subject to being taken. So therefore we sent Mel Ang, who was our consular officer. He went down to Kuwait City. This is one of those weird circumstances where the Iraqis pay attention to some diplomatic niceties – they let Mel go down to Kuwait and in cooperation with the U.S. Embassy, they arranged for American women and children to take evacuation flights from Kuwait City, once again, to Baghdad. And, in Baghdad their passports would be processed in order to confirm Iraqi sovereignty over Kuwait. But, how do you get all of these women and children onto the planes with no American men. And you can't have people from the embassy do it. It was Canadian citizens. Canadians were not subject. They were not on the five nationalities list. So, it was Canadians who helped Mel Ang organize all of these American women and children; to get them out of Kuwait on these evacuation flights.

Mel gets to Kuwait and he finds this interesting social situation where American mothers have all sorts of children who do not have American passports. Many of them have birth certificates. But if you think culturally, if an American woman has a Kuwaiti husband and were to say prior to the invasion of Kuwait, "Honey, let's get an American passport for our kids." the response is likely to be, "A Kuwaiti passport is not good enough for you? Why do we need an American passport?" So, they needed American passports.

As I may have said before, we in the embassy in Iraq and I believe the embassy in Kuwait, had destroyed all of our passport-making equipment, so that it would not get into

the hands of the Iraqis if the embassies were taken over. So, Mel Ang finds himself in Kuwait, preparing American citizens for an evacuation flight and maybe 50% or more do not have passports. So, Mel produces travel documents.

The first evacuation flight leaves Kuwait and flies up to Baghdad for the processing. We and diplomatic representatives of the other four nationalities – or actually the three, because the Japanese were treated completely separately, traveled to the airport to meet this plane to facilitate our nationals leaving the country. And, when the plane arrives, everyone gets off the plane from Kuwait and then they have to go through customs. And, then, you could see the Iraqi officials as they begin processing American citizens stopping when they come across a travel document; then the next child has a travel document; then the next child has a travel document – they decide to put these families aside. So, we reach a situation where on some of these flights over half the people have been set aside because the Iraqis weren't recognizing the documentation.

The other thing that they were doing was brow-beating the American mothers and they were saying, "Who is the father? If the father is Kuwaiti, there is no Kuwait anymore; the father is an Iraqi citizen and Iraqi children may not leave the country without the father's permission. Where's the father?" So, the Iraqi customs people were trying to browbeat the American mothers into turning in their husbands or acknowledging that their husbands were now Iraqis and therefore these kids couldn't leave the country.

Q: Was there an element of sadism (pardon the pun) or were they simply following order?

THIBEAULT: Again, everyone in Iraq is very afraid to approve something that shouldn't be approved. When I saw them doing this, at times I thought they were engaging strictly in consular practices…

Q: ….as directed….

THIBEAULT: As directed. Yeah. This, again, is one of these cases when Joe Wilson stepped forward and made things happen. He was on the phone in this area when we let him know what the situation was and he was on the phone to the Foreign Ministry using very salty language, telling the Foreign Ministry that there were camera crews from ABC, CBS, CNN and NBC and if he, the Foreign Minister, would like Joe Wilson to go to those camera crews and tell them that the Iraqi government was not allowing American children to leave the country, that's what he would do. Within 15 or 20 minutes, the Iraqis start stamping these travel documents and everyone goes out. This happened flight after flight; there were probably about eight evacuation flights.

We would go out for the drill and after the first one, we knew. We would take the American mothers and we would say, "They're going to want to know if the husband is Kuwaiti. When they ask you the nationality of the husband, you tell them the husband's American." And the wives would say, "But 'Shabazi' is not an American name." And I'd say, "Ding Ho is an American name; anything's an American name. Your husbands are

American; that's the answer. We'll get you out; we always get you out." This went on flight after flight.

And then we hit a flight where the Iraqis didn't budge. They had maybe 40 or 50 names and they just wouldn't let these people go; Washington was very taken aback when we informed them that these people weren't allowed to go. My interpretation was that in an effort to get contacts out of Kuwait some names had slipped onto the list that weren't legitimately American citizens or really did not have that claim to American citizenship or family member of Americans. This was a very unusual evacuation where an American child could take his parents to the United States, even if they weren't Americans. So, this was a very special circumstance but we went too far in accommodating, I think, our Kuwait contacts. So, not only did some people with some pretty suspect credentials make that flight, but, because the Iraqis got so suspicious, they bumped off a lot of people who were totally entitled as American citizens to get out of there.

Q: So, strictly speaking, Iraqi customs people were following their own rules.

THIBEAULT: Yeah. And I believe they may have caught some people who weren't American citizens. And, as I said, someone somewhere had pushed this just a little bit too much.

I believe we've got at least 60 people now in a hotel, all wanting diapers and things like that. We had our embassy personnel from Kuwait. Even after women and children were allowed to leave among those embassy personnel, we still had a rump of dozens of embassy Kuwait men who were stranded. So, we had ourselves, we had the embassy Kuwait men, we had the people we were protecting at the ambassador's residence and now we had these people in the Palestine Hotel who were calling us saying, "I need medicine for my baby."

At this point, I remember going to the ambassador's residence and someone says to me, "Steve, did we do something?" And I said, "What do you mean?" And they said, "We haven't seen you. Where have you been? Have we made you mad?" You just…..felt you had all of these people you couldn't help.

Let me talk about the people in the ambassador's residence. When the Iraqis said that women and children could leave, the people we were protecting in the ambassador's residence had their own little psychology going on because they were certainly in a privileged position, but they were still being held. When women and children could leave, we went to the people in the ambassador's residence and said, "We can go with your wives and children and take them to the residency office and we'll get them their exit visas." Some people said, "This is fine. Here, help us." Other people – three men, who I believe worked for Bechtel – said, "No. Our Iraqi sponsoring company says that we should go to the residency office with our families and they will get the exit visas. And, so, we're going to do that instead." So, these three men took their wives and children to the residency office with their Iraqi sponsor. The wives and children got exit visas and the men were taken hostage. And that's the only case where I think people we

were protecting became hostages.

Q: What happened to the hostages?

THIBEAULT: All the hostages were released….

Q: I mean, where did they go physically?

THIBEAULT: The American hostages were never allowed to congregate in the same place. You would never get more than two or three, or perhaps a little bit more than that, in one place. The Iraqis, from the beginning, seemed to have been concerned that the Marines would swoop down out of the sky one night and free all of the Americans so the Americans were all salted in a million places.

Q: Dispersed.

THIBEAULT: They were dispersed. Some of them at some time were at a beach resort on a lake. Some were on the work floor of an ammunition factory and had to put their sleeping bags down right there among the equipment. Charles ended up living in a chicken coop next to a big natural gas storage tank.

Q: Human shields.

THIBEAULT: Yeah. They were being used as human shields. He told me that he and his suitemates had a riot at one time when they heard that they were going to be located even closer to the tank. The Iraqis had some idea that if they put them even closer, they'd be even better.

I got a much better idea of the hostage conditions when my role changed pretty soon after this. U.S. hostages were moved around quite a bit. They came into contact with each other. I had some names that I was familiar with, because in the beginning Mel Ang was the consular officer, and so Mel had the day-to-day contact with hostages whom the Iraqis had taken in Kuwait. At some point, the United States PNG'd (made persona non grata) three Iraqi diplomats in the UN. They expelled these three Iraqi diplomats from the United States. In a tit-for-tat move, the Iraqis expelled three American diplomats and Mel Ang was one of those diplomats. I believe I was the only person left then who had decent Arabic among the original Baghdad diplomats.

So, in addition to doing the press conferences every day, I took over Mel's duties as hostage liaison. The Iraqis would kidnap Americans in Kuwait. Somehow, the American Embassy in Kuwait knew the names of the kidnapped Americans, and we would get that information via Washington. So, I would get a list of names of American who had been kidnapped in Kuwait.

When I replaced Mel Ang doing the consular duties, I would go to the Mansour Melia Hotel twice a day, once in the morning and once in the evening. They were using the

Mansour Melia Hotel as a trans-shipment point for hostages. They'd be picked up in Kuwait; they'd be taken to Baghdad to this hotel; they'd stay in this hotel for three or four days, and then they would be distributed to these human shield sites and things like that. What you could see right away was that someone's name would be on the list of people kidnapped in Kuwait and within two or three days you would see them right there in the hotel in the flesh, in Baghdad. So, I would go into the hotel everyday at about noontime after I did the press conference with Joe and I would basically say, "Do you have any Americans?" and they might say, "Yes. We have three Americans." I'd go see them. I would see these people for 4 – 6 days and then they were gone and they would be replaced by new Americans. So, I would go up and I would get their information. I would ask them if they had any letters that they wanted sent, if they had any messages for their loved ones, if they had any medical needs, if they needed any medicine, and if they had any money. I told them they should keep whatever money they had as they were probably going to need it. As I said, I would go mid-day and I would do that and then I would go back to USIS and again see institutionally how we were proceeding with closing down the cultural exchange operations.

Then, at the end of the day, I would go back to the Mansour Melia Hotel with a bottle of gin, a bottle of vodka, a bottle of cranberry juice and a bottle of orange juice and I would sit with the Americans and the Brits in this roof-top hotel, in the Mansour Melia, looking out over the skyline in Baghdad, drinking with the American and British hostages – who were trapped in this building and were going to be taken away. Everybody really held up well. Everybody was rational. Everybody….they were taking things as they came.

At this point, Saddam's latest gambit had been that he would release all of the hostages if only the United States would promise not to attack Iraq. So, I remember talking to British hostages, and they would say, "Why don't you just promise not to attack Iraq?" And I would say, "Well, first of all, you're hostages. There's no reason…you should be released; you should simply be released." They would reply, "Well, no; but once we're released, then you can attack Iraq." I would say, "Well, I don't think we can do that." So, that was one environment up there, night after night. If I have ever drunk in my life, this is when I drank.

Q: Well deserved.

THIBEAULT: Well, this is the one time I have had a car leave the road and go in the air and that's when I realized that I was drinking too much at night. Not during the day; the work just went on.

Q: So, you were doing this with the groups. You'd see them three or four days and not again.

THIBEAULT: And then they'd be gone.

Q: And they kept coming in.

THIBEAULT: And they kept coming in.

It was a bizarre environment because you had the four nationalities were being up there. The fifth nationalities, the Japanese – I have an anecdote about that. I was at a press conference and a Japanese journalist says to me, "How many American hostages?" And I said, "I think about 160." And he said, "Aaah. Only 160?" And I said, "Well, how many Japanese hostages are there?" And he said, "Aaah. 200, maybe more. Why so many Japanese? Not so many American hostage?" I said, "Well, in Kuwait, did the Iraqis tell the Japanese all to gather in one spot?" He said "Aaaah!" I said, "Did they?" And he said, "Aaaah." I said, "That's why there are so many Japanese hostages."

From what I learned from the Americans, people would inform the Iraqis that there were Americans living in a given apartment building. Someone would knock on your door; the Iraqis would come in; they would take everything of value that you had in your apartment; they would take your car keys and look out the window and they would tell you to point to your car in the parking lot so that they could drive it away. Then, they would take these people away. They would first gather them in Kuwait and then take them up to Baghdad.

The entire hostage situation completely evaporated at the end of November when Saddam made the tactical mistake of releasing all….maybe it was not a tactical mistake, because in fact he did live to see another day; he did live to fight another day.

Q: I remember. It seemed illogical.

THIBEAULT: To take hostages and then let them go – you know it'd be like a bank robber inside the bank then letting everyone go and then still thinking they had anything to negotiate with. He eventually released them all at the end of November. It may have been due to a steady stream of VIP visitors, who came into Baghdad and Saddam would dole out hostages to these visiting dignitaries. I remember being in the Mansour Melia…

Q: A deliverable, so to speak…

THIBEAULT: A deliverable.

Q: I mean he got the tacit recognition of a VIP visit.

THIBEAULT: Yes. He got the tacit recognition and he got to make his case.

I was in the Mansour Melia one night when there was a party of 20 Brits, who were celebrating because they had all been brought in from hostage sights and they were going to be released with former Prime Minister Heath (Edward Heath), as part of his visit. He was going to take these 20 hostages home with him. The very same night 20 new British hostages were brought out and the shelves were restocked, so that he had new British hostages to give away.

Jesse Jackson came to visit during this time. He came to the embassy and he said, "What can I do?" So, we…Again, I overstate my importance in this, but just listening…he was told that we had a list of Americans with serious medical conditions whom we knew were in Iraqi custody and if he could get those people released, then that would be a good achievement, because then we'd know that these people were no longer being held hostage. So, Jackson had his meetings with the Iraqis and, indeed, they offered to let him take a certain number of hostages. He presented them with the list of people that we had. The Iraqis came back and said, basically, "You can take 14 people, but you can't take anybody that we're holding." So, that left the 40 Americans at the ambassador's residence. So, Jesse Jackson is prepared to leave the country, perhaps the next day. He's leaving the country the next day; he's got the chance to take, I believe 14 Americans with him. The Iraqis will not give him any of their hostages and so the embassy has to decide, among the 40 people we're protecting, who are the 14 who get to go. So, it's almost like…

Q: Sophie's Choice.

THIBEAULT: Almost like, yeah, Sophie's Choice or Ed McMahon showing up at the door and saying, "Congratulations! You get to leave Iraq." And, so 14 people were chosen; they were put on the plane.

After that, the others at the ambassador's residence – Jim Thompson was one of these guys who got to go out – people said, "Why did these 14 get to go?" We answered for one, "Oh, this guy's mother is on her deathbed." And some said, "My mother is on her deathbed. Why wasn't I chosen?" And, I saw repeatedly, the embassy was kind of I guess naturally the scapegoat for decisions. We had another circumstance.

Q: In fact, what was the criterion for that?

THIBEAULT: It was things like that. It was humanitarian. It was health. It was youth. There were some boys who were not young enough to be considered boys and therefore they weren't allowed to leave. So, that's just an example of kind of the crazy stress you get put under.

So, we go to the airport with Jesse Jackson. It's just a point I remember. We go through customs; we go to the gangway down into the plane; and the hostages go, and Jesse Jackson; and I realize I'm on the other side of customs.

Q: I was just going to ask. Were you never tempted to get on that plane?

THIBEAULT: I was <u>so</u> tempted to get on that plane. I knew I couldn't do it. But I thought, "If I get on this plane, I'm outta here. "

And, at this point, I should tell you. My expectation for this…. I spoke to my wife every day on the phone and she would say, "When are you coming home?" And I would tell her I was due for R&R in February, or something like. But, it was the equivalent of being in a

fire. You can quit the fire department when the fire is over; you can quit the Foreign Service when the crisis is over. So, I didn't get on that plane with Jesse Jackson.

Q: Would the Iraqis authorities have allowed you to? Were they clumsy enough?

THIBEAULT: Well, again, we were through customs. We were right there at the gangway. As soon as I walked away, that plane just took off.

Q: So, let's make it very clear. You had an opportunity to get on that plane and you decided not to.

THIBEAULT: Right. It's no particular bravery. You have those situations where, again, you can walk away from the fire or you can walk into the fire. That was one of those moments for me.

Again, the ambassador's residence. There were incidents that, again, pointed out the Stockholm Syndrome situation. Saddam had arrested Shia pilgrims – we had… American and British citizens, at the very beginning after the invasion of Kuwait were picked up as foreign nationals. And, here they are, they're Muslim pilgrims being held by Saddam. It's something I wanted to say, but I didn't one night when Cat Stevens came walking through the Mansour Melia. I was very resentful of him allowing himself to let Saddam use him for this publicity. But, in retrospect, he wasn't doing anything different than Jesse Jackson or anyone like that. But the idea that Saddam had taken Muslim pilgrims hostage along with everyone else just because they were American citizens, just really struck me.

So, this man who was American, and his wife and their children were picked up. They were pilgrims. Eventually his wife and children got to go when the women and children got to go and he was left behind. He was a doctor. And, when Saddam Hussein said, "Anyone who's an Arab may go." this guy perked up, because his father had been born in Zanzibar and so he could make the case that his father was an Arab. So, he contacted people in the States and we got a copy of his birth certificate sent all the way out to Iraq and I took him down to the residency office for him to make his claim that he was an Arab and should be released. When he came out of the meeting he was upbeat. And so I asked he what had happened. And he said, "Well, they looked at the birth certificate and they said, "This is good that your father was born in Zanzibar; now if you can just get your father's birth certificate, we might be able to let you go."" It was odd to see that this guy was upbeat about this; that he was identifying with the positive news from the Iraqis. At the same time, I do believe, when the 14 people were released from the Jesse Jackson flight, this man was not on it. And, his wife complained that he was not on it because he was a Muslim. So, I don't know. It was a very difficult situation- almost a no-win situation.

Q: All of these decisions were being made by Saddam himself?

THIBEAULT: I don't know – who knows, who knows. I think the idea of invading

Kuwait, taking hostages – all of these big picture things, I am sure he was very involved with, but the day-to-day operations – you just have no idea.

As I said, we had a situation where we had diplomats like me; we had those from Kuwait, we had the people at the Palestine Hotel who had been kicked off the plane; we had the real American hostages I'd see everyday, we had the people we were protecting and we had the journalists. Everything really revolved around hostages.

One thing I haven't said at this point and it was one thing I could not tell my wife on the phone was that I could not envision how I was getting out of Iraq. Based on the experience of the war with Iran, I was convinced that the Iraqi army would simply surrender to the United Nations, led by us, because, in my discussions with Iraqis, when I was able to have discussions with Iraqis, like my veterinarian, (again, as I said, the opportunity for speaking to Iraqis was very limited), I would hear statements like: "We don't want war; you don't know what war is; I know what war is." after which he pulled up his pant leg and showed me his artificial leg. Iraqis would tell me, "Those Iranians went to war with a letter to God in their pocket," rolling their eyes at what crazy people these Iranians were. And yet, Iraqi soldiers did surrender to Iranians. And my thought was, "If the Iraqi army would surrender to these crazy Iranians, they'll surrender to the United Nations en masse; and, when they do, this regime is going to take us hostage and go up in the hills, or something like that. And, the fact that we were protecting American citizens at the ambassador's residence, I could not envision how it was we were supposed to leave this country before this war started. I couldn't see us going to the ambassador's residence and saying to these American citizens, "We're leaving now. But, don't worry; this is diplomatic property; just lock the front door and *we'll be back in two months."*

Q: I propose that we take a hiatus in this incredible story. Let me just mention that I was in Madrid at the time.

And, Steve, I couldn't imagine how you were all going to get out and I thought about it everyday during that same period, as the planes were going through the U.S. base over my head in Madrid going towards the gulf every night with the tremendous roar of the C130s. I thought about you every night and I was not optimistic.

THIBEAULT: I'll leave you with one last anecdote. Very early on after the invasion of Kuwait, I was walking from the embassy to Mel's house (I was staying at Mel Ang's house, which was close to the embassy) and I heard the birds singing and I thought to myself, "Funny. You never hear the birds singing." And I had a very frightening epiphany. In Samurai movies there is a moment just before they cut your head off where you see the butterfly flitting by and you realize only at that moment the beauty of the world. And I thought to myself, "Oh, my God. I'm having these kinds of moments because I'm in this kind of situation." I guess that's that for now.

Q: That's that for this interview. This is Dan Whitman interviewing Steve Thibeault on December 16, 2007. The next time we meet, I'd like to start by reminiscing about the photo where you…..

THIBEAULT: Do you have this photo?

Q: Of course, I do.

….are talking with a group of Iraqis in the street. I'd like to start my next interview by expressing my extreme admiration of what was happening at the time of that photo. And I will start the next interview by asking you what the hell was happening.

THIBEAULT: That's Ok. That one's seared in my mind as well.

Q: It is January 23, 2008. This is Dan Whitman interviewing Steve Thibeault.

Steve, in our last session, we were talking about a situation that for you personally was getting worse and worse, because the scenario that might show that you might leave Iraq in tact, was failing to be visible. Jesse Jackson came and managed to get 14 people out; Cat Stevens came. Picking up from that point, tell us what happened next.

THIBEAULT: I think in this situation, the thing that made you think about an end game, was that I was very certain that we were going to attack Iraq. That didn't seem to be the opinion held by colleagues in other embassies; but I think within the U.S. embassy it was very clear that when the United States bring half a million troops half way around the world, they're not just sending them home. And, Saddam Hussein was not savvy enough to somehow head this off. One of the things about being there is that you could see that he was not a very savvy interpreter of what's likely to happen. Saddam had a tremendous advantage in being an absolute ruler, so his mistakes didn't count: his successes counted and his mistakes didn't.

There were two things about reporting on Iraq that I thought people in the West always got wrong. One was that Saddam was just a fox or he was a genius. The guy led his country into this tremendous devastation, repeatedly. And, on the rare occasion where he would make the United States appear somewhat uncomfortable, people would say, "What a fox; this guy's just amazing!"

The second thing about…

Q: Well, wait. So, you're saying that he was unwittingly a fox; that he wasn't really – that circumstances made him lucky.

THIBEAULT: No; that in fact he was terribly, I think, unlucky as far as his country goes. Personally, he did just fine. But, repeatedly he caused this tremendous devastation personally and collectively to the Iraqi people, but the outside narrative in viewing Iraq was more as a one-on-one kind of image with the United States, the same way Chavez (Hugo Chavez) tries to develop this one-on-one adversary roll with the United States. But, within Iraq, it was only the fact that he had this absolute power that allowed him to make these repeated mistakes. I'm just saying that the view of his expertise from outside

of Iraq, I think gives him more credit than he really deserved.

Q: Explain when you said, "Not savvy enough to head this off." You mean he did not understand the 500,000 troops was not a bluff. Is that what you are saying?

THIBEAULT: Yes. He also thought that if the Americans encountered any serious casualties, they would sue for peace. He made statements to the effect that, "I'll sell you the oil; don't worry about the oil. I'll sell you the oil; I'm not going to boycott you guys." Again, he was looking at this as a big power strategic play not realizing that the United States has an internal dynamic that wouldn't allow the country to just brush off this event after sending all those troops out there.

Q: Let's dwell on that for a minute because critics of Bush senior were saying that it was all about oil. What was the other dynamic?

THIBEAULT: The other dynamic is to wipe out a country that was in the United Nations. This simply was not something that could stand. For him to think it was simply a deal about oil is one of his big miscalculations, equivalent to the miscalculation of attacking Iran, in the first place. That kind of stuff.

So, just this idea, again, that he was just this remarkable man when dealing with the outside world and had all these successes; he totally devastated his country.

Q: Just dwelling on this issue one last time. Again, critics of Bush senior said that the matter of Kuwait disappearing from the map was a terrible thing, but there was a double standard. Because it was an oil region, our principles of maintaining UN countries took a greater importance than it would have than if it hadn't been.

THIBEAULT: Certainly; certainly that's the case.

Q: That the two dynamics were at play.

THIBEAULT: There is something to be said for that being what energized the international community and the United States to be able to take this on. If it were simply a matter of U.S. access to oil, you wouldn't have Syrian troops involved; you wouldn't have Egyptian troops involved. The accomplishment being situated in the middle of this big diplomatic effort that was going on prior to the conflict with the liberation of Kuwait -- that really was a mobilization going quite in parallel with the mobilization of the Military. But, I wasn't expert on that at all.

Q: Drawing you even further into things that you did not witness. James Baker – you were not there.

THIBEAULT: I was out totally by that time and so I have no idea what the….

Q: Leverage

THIBEAULT: ….intentions were with the negotiations with Iraq.

So, that's just a general misperception people have about Saddam Hussein that he was really quite crafty.

And the second thing, I think I have already said, is it's obvious that many of the decisions he made were not based on advice because they were so against a rational decision in that area that it was obvious he had advisors that would not overrule him: for example, building a replica of Babylon on top of the archeological ruin so that you couldn't excavate it because you had built a replica on top. What archeologist would ever recommend something like that? His use of hostages on television was so ham-handed and so counterproductive that you couldn't think of any public affairs officer who would have advised him to take roles like this.

Q: You are referring to the young boy who was obviously afraid?

THIBEAULT: Yes. The boy was obviously afraid. Saddam asked him if he liked his cereal, or something like that.

There are many instances where he takes moves that you can't imagine a professional advisor in that field advising him to take.

Q: Do you think he was disregarding advice or that his advisors were afraid to advise him?

THIBEAULT: I'm certain they were afraid from just the whole tenor of the country.

So, those are two things about him.

There's one other thing about the perceptions of any kind of reporting from Iraq during Saddam's regime. When there were any man-on-the-street interviews from Iraq, CNN and the other western networks would put a caption under the interview and it would say, "Cleared by Iraqi censors" to indicate that there was a chokepoint where these broadcasts were going out through an Iraqi satellite uplink that they could cut off. And, so they would say, under these Iraqi man on the street interviews, subject to Iraqi censorship or something like that. It should have said, "Scared for his life." That any Iraqi whoever spoke publicly to the western media had to be scared for their life, and so therefore what they said had no validity. They may have been saying something that was sincere, but there was no way to tell that.

Q: Well the man's picture on the screen and it said, "Scared for his life." – would that not guarantee that person being arrested and executed?

THIBEAULT: [Laughs] There's a journalistic dilemma for you. That would have been a good one for an ombudsman to deal with.

Another advantage that Saddam always had with the international media -- and he continued to have this advantage all the way up through the search for weapons of mass destruction -- through that entire phase the way the media would cover a given event was to interview Iraqi spokespersons only on questions that they would answer. So, when you would ask the Iraqis why they don't pull out of Kuwait, they would say they're there to protect the holy places from the American invaders. So, they wouldn't answer their questions. So, what ends up happening is you don't want to ask them questions that they won't answer, because you're not going to run that as a news bite: "Iraqis refuse to answer again." So they were able to have someone coming in, listening to a given sound bite, who could think, "That's just a reasonable thing the Iraqis are asking for." For example, on baby milk and things like that, when we were accused of keeping the baby milk away from the Iraqis' children.

Q: So, it was just dumb luck on the part of the Iraqi propaganda machine?

THIBEAULT: No. I think it just shows that when you are covering something in the international media (again, I probably said this before), you should never confuse what anyone in a news context says about an issue with their personal opinion if they're representing a client, a government or anything like that. So, when you're asking the Iraqi ambassador to the UN whether he thinks something is fair or not, he doesn't give you his personal opinion.

Q: How would this be different from any other nation?

THIBEAULT: Not at all; not at all. The advantage that the spokespeople have, particularly in a country like Iraq, is there's no way around their non-cooperation, that if they simply refuse to talk to you at all, you have no story. If you continue to ask them questions, they give you an answer to a different question.

Q: Now that we're on journalistic questions, journalism schools now tell students, "You should probably get the quote of the spokesman, but that's a small part of the story. You should go and verify; you should ask other sources." Now, in a country where there are no other sources, because they are afraid for their lives, what should journalism do?

THIBEAULT: Really, the best consistent performance under these circumstances is John Burns. He was writing for the New York Times. He was in Iraq when I was in Iraq and he was in Iraq all the way in the lead up to the 2003 war. He would come out every two or three days with very pertinent observations on the state of mind of the Iraqi people, on their living conditions and on the state culture, that was embedded in the martyr monuments, for example. He would find ways to go with a minder -- because, again, that was one of the limits. Before the 2003 invasion, all the outsiders who reported on Iraq had to have minders with them who would take them places but also listen to everyone that they interviewed. So, again, when you had these interviews on the street, even if it was someone just identified as Ahmed, when that interview took place, there was an Iraqi government official there.

Q: Did you think Burns played brinksmanship? If he inferred cultural elements to the cultural monuments and if he approached the truth that would embarrass the Iraqi government, was he able to discern that he could not go past a certain point?

THIBEAULT: The ironic thing about the situation was the Iraqis who had the power to cut off his oxygen, basically, weren't sophisticated enough to see the real meaning of his reporting. There is perhaps an anecdote about this. I remember being told this. One of the reporters said that he went into the Iraqi Ministry of Information for an appointment and he saw that CNN was on the closed circuit television. So here he is in the Iraqi Ministry of Information and CNN is up there in English broadcasting and he said to the receptionist, "Wow. I didn't realize that you folks can see what's going on all over the world." And the receptionist said, "Well, if you're high enough up to get the CNN, you don't understand English."

The Burns coverage that I saw in all of these different phases was that he would go after what the man in the street was thinking based on the way they were acting and the way they talked about non-political things.

Q: Well, again, at the time, the western press was saying, "Saddam Hussein, the crafty fox, was so clever that he was using CNN to get out his message." Was this just a ludicrous over-estimation on the part of the west?

THIBEAULT: I think he was using CNN because of the limitations of the way the news is covered.

Q: But he didn't understand English.

THIBEAULT: He didn't understand English, but he understood rhetoric pretty well. So, again, the idea of "Why are you occupying Kuwait." You say, "Well, I am protecting the holy places and just look, there are American soldiers in this country that is the protector of the holy places." So, he could come up with very powerful arguments.

He had two very powerful arguments prior to all of this house of cards coming down and it made him the most popular and the most powerful motivator outside of Iraq in the Arab world. The demonstrations in Iraq were canned; they were almost humorous, because the groups that would demonstrate in favor of Saddam were often the people who were being victimized by Saddam. So, one day at the embassy you'd get a Kurdish demonstration in favor of Saddam, and the next you'd get a Shia demonstration or you'd get a tribal demonstration. Again, they were all canned.

Whereas, outside of Iraq, once he had occupied Kuwait, he took an approach, again kind of similar to Chavez, in saying that this oil wealth belongs to the Arabs – not to the wealthy Arabs, not to the ones who just happened to have been born on the right side of the line. Born ten miles one way, you're a Saudi citizen; you have free education, you have free medical care; you have a guaranteed job; and, you have a no-interest loan for

your mortgage. Born ten miles the other way, you're a Jordanian and you get 30 dinars a month in free bread; and, if you want to go to graduate school, all you can study is pharmacy. So, he made an appeal like that. From my understanding, because I was in Iraq and also when I got out, what I saw was that the big pro-Saddam demonstrations were in places like Morocco. The further away you were from the actuality of his rule, the more appealing his message was. Again, as a rhetorician, he had a good grasp of his audience. He had a terrible grasp of us (the U.S.) and the way we would react, and it's a basic cultural misreading. If his target audience was the 'Arab street', as they say, he's for saying the right things.

Q: But you're saying there were two Arab audiences. There was the population of his own country, which he was manipulating and just guided by fear, whereas the support in Morocco you're saying was genuine. Were they quite different audiences?

THIBEAULT: Yes. Because the audience in Morocco – he was saying things that, because of circumstances, other people could not say. Egypt had a peace treaty with Israel. You had the Arab Summit in July 1990. At that time, the big hype was that he had made two very flagrant statements. One was the Arabs have the right to any weapons that their enemies have, which must mean nuclear weapons and Israel must be the enemy. So, he was saying they have the right. Egypt wasn't saying that. I don't think Syria was saying that. The second thing he said was that if Israel hits us, we'll use chemical weapons. This was a leader who had just threatened Israel with a weapon of mass destruction. It was a very electrifying statement. The people in Iraq, however, would be the people who would need to follow through on whatever this guy had up his sleeve. Again, in one of my few, very few direct contacts I had with Iraqi people where I thought they were speaking candidly, my veterinarian said, "We don't want war. The United States must not push us into war. We do not want war. We know what war is like." at which point he pulled up his pant leg and showed me his artificial leg.

Q: From the Iran-Iraq war.

THIBEAULT: From the Iran-Iraq war. And, so I think inside Iraq there was a completely different feeling about these provocative statements.

Q: Is it possible that the further they are away geographically from the conflict, the easier it is to want the conflict?

THIBEAULT: And to intellectualize it.

Q: Yeah.

THIBEAULT: There was a very striking example of his power over Iraqi opinion or what people would accept. The war with Iran had gone, you know, very badly. When I was in Iraq, people were very happy with the stalemate, I thought at the end – not that they were happy that they didn't win, but they were just happy that that war was over. And, when I was there, after the invasion of Kuwait, a certain announcement was made. Your FSNs

would tell you that there was an announcement that Saddam Hussein would make a statement this evening; so, you would wait till the time, till nine o'clock or whenever it was. Then it was never him. He never came on and gave a direct speech. It was always someone reading (said in a pseudo deep voice) in a deep voice reading the words of the president. And so he announced that the war with Iran was settled.

Q: The person who was not Saddam.

THIBEAULT: Right, but this was Saddam's message to the Iraqi people. And the thing was, number one, that the border would be the same old border from before this whole war, that Arabistan – this one part – the same way that Kuwait was part of Iraq in Saddam's ideology – well, this corner of Iran, Arabistan, where all the Arabs lived, this was part of Iraq. Well, no it wasn't. According to this treaty, it was going to be part of Iran. And then…

Q: According to the negotiations?

THIBEAULT: According to what he announced. They'd go back to the old border. So, this Arab land that Saddam was fighting for and Iraqis were loosing their lives to reclaim - this Arab land, which just happened to have a lot of….

Q: …was lost…

THIBEAULT: That was lost; that was apparently part of Iran.

Q: And this was said on television?

THIBEAULT: Yes. This was said on Television.

The next thing that was said was the sweetener, that Iran and Iraq would begin to exchange prisoners from their war. I believe a thousand prisoners were to be exchanged each day. And that's how it would work. And, so, on Iraqi television they showed buses of Iraqi prisoners of war returning home. Some of these people had been in captivity for seven or eight years, and there had never been demonstrations in Iraq: Bring our Boys Home. You waited until the government told you that your loved one was returning. So, every night there was coverage on television of a thousand Iraqis going one way and a thousand Iranians going the other way. And one night, it just stopped and it stopped because the Iraqis ran out of Iranian prisoners. And, the Iranians, meanwhile, still held tens of thousands of Iraqi prisoners. And, there was not a single person holding a plaque or saying: Bring My Boy Home. That was a very strong indication to me of people being resigned to whatever they were allowed under the Saddam regime.

I remember one night….Again, my conversations with Iraqis that I felt weren't canned conversations were so rare…but I was waiting at a checkpoint with an Iraqi soldier and I was talking to him about the invasion of Kuwait and I said to him, "So, what about Kuwait?" And he said, "Well, Kuwait is part of Iraq." And I said "Ok. But you know a

lot of people in the rest of the world think that you just invaded Kuwait just to take it over and to take its oil." And he said, "Well, no. Kuwait has always been part of Iraq and now it has been brought home as part of Iraq." And I said, "If Saddam Hussein said, "For the peace of the world, Iraq would give up Kuwait as a gesture to peace." would you agree with that?" He said, "Oh, yes."

The thing about Saddam Hussein is that he was like Stalin: he could make any move he wanted. He could have done that. He could have said, "Oh, my goodness. The world totally misreads what I've done. I'm right now pulling Iraqi troops out of Kuwait." It would have left us in a very awkward situation, again with those 500,000 troops. I believe we would have….I don't know, if Kuwait had been liberated, I think we would have attacked, but that is….

Q: That's a ….I'm nonplussed. If Kuwait was the casus belli, right?

THIBEAULT: Yeah.

Q: And if the casus belli had been removed, you're saying that our distaste for this individual would have moved us to…

THIBEAULT: I'm saying that the momentum toward military conflict would have moved us toward military conflict.

Q: What the Prince (Machiavelli) called the logic of war.

THIBEAULT: Yes. A lot like the call-ups in World War I. The sequence was in place, and if you hesitated the other guy…So, it was something I think…

Q: Is this a type of process that you think, knowing history as you do, would have happened in any case or was it driven by the personalities in the White House?

THIBEAULT: No. Again, all along, Saddam Hussein just played it the wrong way: by taking hostages and then releasing the hostages so you identify yourself as a hostage taker. In the lead up to the 2003 war, every international organization in the world was trying to throw this guy a lifeline, some kind of face-saving device: here we'll have an international commission, etc. etc. and he totally misread everything or didn't act on anything.

Another thing that was very striking at the time…

Q: They did not do that in Gulf I. On the contrary, they joined the alliance with James Baker's encouragement; they did not throw lifelines. Well, we'll get into that later.

THIBEAULT: Yes. But, I do think that had he played all of these international contacts differently, he might have, but it would have had to start very early before we were in this tripwire situation with these troops ready to go. Because, someone who has just used this

very formidable military machine – that's the way it was perceived at that time because they were counting total number of tanks and actually combat veterans and things like that, – the Iraqi army at that time….

Q: Third or fourth biggest in the world, or something like that.

THIBEAULT: Yeah. ….if it were simply to back up and to go into Iraq, I think that would have come with big demands for degrees of disarmament and international peacekeeping and things like that.

One other thing that I don't think I have addressed, which was very striking in Baghdad, was the looting of Kuwait. I think I got three hostages released earlier than they would have been. All the hostages were released; but, the sum total of my efforts was that I was able to get, I think, three people out of Iraq earlier than they would have.

Q: Of what nationality?

THIBEAULT: All Americans.

One was a young guy who was Palestinian-American. He got stopped at a checkpoint. He was insulted for carrying an American passport, "Why are you holding the enemy's passport?" He said, "Whenever we come, we're an Arab, but I'm an American; that's all I can say." So, he was taken hostage for being an American. After that Saddam, playing to his audience, realized that taking Arabs, even if they were of American nationality, or French nationality or British nationality, wasn't playing too well in the Pan-Arab view. So, he made the statement that Arabs will be released, even if they are among the five nationalities. So, when I met this guy as a hostage I said, "Mike, why are you being held? You should have been released." And, over the period of about a week or ten days, working with the Jordanian embassy who had their Palestinian contacts, we were able to get this guy released.

Q: He was a hostage where and how?

THIBEAULT: In the Mansour Melia Hotel. Again, when the hostages were taken from their houses in Kuwait, they were taken to a hotel in Kuwait as a staging point. Then they were brought up to Iraq and they were put in Baghdad in the Mansour Melia Hotel for a period of two days, or a week or two weeks if they had medical conditions. I had a guy who had an ulcer condition and he stayed for quite a while – a Vietnamese-American. But, mostly they were there three or four days, and then they were sent off to a target site.

Q: In Iraq?

THIBEAULT: In Iraq. Yes.

Q: As human shields?

THIBEAULT: Right. As human shields. So, when this one Palestinian guy came through, again, I tried to get him some contacts to get him out. And, again, the Jordanians were very helpful on this and could make the case of the guy being an Arab brother much better than I could, as an American. But, his family followed him from Kuwait. His mother and his little sister followed him up from Kuwait, because they knew he had been taken and had been taken up here, so they were in Baghdad at the same time. And so I took them to see their son and brother at the Mansour Melia. So, he is a hostage and I brought them in and while driving there with the family, the little girl, pointing out the window says, "Oh, Mommy, that's my school bus." And, indeed it was her school bus that had been looted from Kuwait and brought to Baghdad. Anecdotally I have been told the traffic signals were taken. Pretty much anything that could be picked up and taken was taken.

What I thought, and what I advised as part of a public diplomacy campaign against the Iraqis, was to treat them as thieves, to ask them why the price of an air conditioner had dropped by 50% -- because all of the air conditioners had been looted from Kuwait and there was a supply. You would go into a store in Iraq which had always had the same kind of crummy brands for everything because Iraq was not a wealthy country because it was so impoverished by the wars – but they had a selection of brands. Suddenly, you'd have Kit Kat bars and there'd be new products. So, after the invasion of Kuwait, there was a period of time, where going to the store, there were always new things in the stores because they were emptying the warehouses in Kuwait.

Q: This was a bold strategy. There you were in a host country proposing to treat them as thieves. Was this strategy of yours approved by other Americans in the system and did it work?

THIBEAULT: I just kind of threw out ideas from where I was to USIA and, at that time, I was so focused on hostages and people we were protecting; closing down the cultural center – there was just an awful lot going on.

Anyway, those were kind of the observations that, off the top of my head, that I don't think I have covered before about Iraq. Before I had said it was 13 weeks and had I known…

Q: 13 weeks between what?

THIBEAULT: Between the invasion of Kuwait and the time I set foot in Heathrow Airport in England. And, had I known that it was going to be 13 weeks – If I had a mental image of myself sitting in the hotel in London watching Cheers and not being in Iraq, it would have changed that experience dramatically. It was basically an open-ended experience where, as I've said, you don't know how it's going to turn out. If I had known it was going to be 13 weeks, had I known that none of the hostages would be killed, had I known that all of the embassy employees and our FSNs would eventually get out, it would have been kind of a peak experience.

Q: I suppose this was not the plan, however. I'd be surprised if Saddam or his government had sat and said, "We're going to get them out in 13 weeks."

THIBEAULT: No. I was out in 13 weeks. This lingered long after I was there. And, there are phases that this situation went through.

Q: I mean, there wasn't a plan unknown to you? There was no plan, right?

THIBEAULT: No. I don't think that there was a plan and I haven't read anything that has come out about a supposed Iraqi plan. Basically, I think we were supposed to cave; I think that was the plan: that the West was supposed to cave -- kind of the way Iraq was supposed to cave in 2003 and then the rest of the world was supposed to line up.

Q: The mother of all wars. Your sons will all go back in body bags.

THIBEAULT: The mother of all battles. Yes.

Q: Did this frighten the West?

THIBEAULT: I can't speak for the West. I can just say there were some moments. There were some moments of singular attention that you pay because of what the Iraqis were saying. One of them was very early on. When he invaded Kuwait, there were people who were caught like in a twilight zone episode – just caught at a particular moment in their lives. As I said before, the British and the American Shia pilgrims just happened to be in Iraq when this happened and they were taken hostage. And, there was a flight transiting Kuwait with a little American girl, Penny Nabokov (some relation to the novelist) – maybe she was nine or ten, something like that. So, she's just on a plane transiting Kuwait. Four days later, because of the way things work, she is sitting in the embassy in Baghdad. We have this little girl with us and it's our job to get her out.

And I remember that night they said there was going to be an announcement, and that Saddam Hussein was going to make an announcement. And, again, you just never know what it's going to be. I remember sitting there with a small group of people, including Penny. The reader comes on and is going to read this statement from Saddam Hussein, and his first words are, "Mu'manin." which is like: "Oh believers!" And, I thought, "Oh my god, this man, who is a socialist, who is more indebted…he is like Stalin with no Lenin – it's a country that has horseracing on Fridays, of all days. It's the only Arab country where I had no trouble finding liquor stores. Here is this guy, his announcement to the Iraqi people begins, Mu'manin, the believers. And in this speech, he declares jihad on the United States. I know jihad has been worn out. I would say that the awareness of the word jihad among Americans is probably over 50% -- that they have an idea what jihad is. Well, as someone who had come out of area studies several years before, and it was still pretty fresh in my mind and as someone who had lived in the Arab world, again to hear this inveterate, brutal, totalitarian, secular dictator invoke holy war -- it was a little bit chilling to have that come down.

Q: It sounds like he was coming home to his real beliefs….

THIBEAULT: Nah.

Q: ….or was he just being erratic?

THIBEAULT: It might have been plan b. I think he goes with his inspirations. Given his peculiar psychology, he would be a good guy to have on your debate team in the Arabs vs. the West debate. Again, he knew what his audience liked and if it was time to declare a holy war – I think he always probably had something like that in the back of his mind. So, I think he had some very effective rhetorical arguments. The 'Arab Street' has not risen. This is just a mystery.

Q: Arisen against…?

THIBEAULT: Arisen against their local government; arisen against American supporters of the Zionists. There has not been some crazy unleashing of all of this anger against the United States. Again, when I arrived in Egypt in '86, a thread of the writing about Egypt was that the place was just going to explode at some point. The population was going up like crazy; you couldn't keep giving people free bread as it was bankrupting the country; the oil was going to run out, etc., etc., etc. And it was a powder keg and this is twenty years later.

Q: This is wisdom, passivity or indifference?

THIBEAULT: You could write your PhD dissertation and take any of those arguments, but there was this concern about a mass unleashing of pent-up anger targeting American business, and targeting symbols of western influence; again, in terms of the 'Arab Street'. Because, I think that we had this image of social mobilization that people would just take to the street and they would have had enough, and would have bread riots and things like that.

When we went in in 1990 in liberating Kuwait, there were consistent drawdowns in American personnel throughout the Middle East. Now we would interpret a dangerous situation in this part of the world to indicate massive explosions, targeted assassinations, and drive-by shootings. At that time, the worst case scenario was some mass unrest and the overthrow of governments that we depended on. When we were looking at 2003, one of the scenarios that kept coming up was the scenario of the Arab Street rising up because enough was enough. And, it's just an observation. I have just completed a 22-year career, including seven and a half years in the Middle East and I haven't seen anything like this. Again, I can't go into why it hasn't happened. It's like the big earthquake in California. I'm not saying it wouldn't happen, but it's something that you don't hear too much of anymore, as a matter of fact.

Q: Of course, the argument used in 2003 by those thought it was time for an invasion was that we would be greeted as liberators in the region. I heard the argument myself. So,

what you're describing is the people who disagreed with U.S. policy.

THIBEAULT: I just taught my daughter about kinetic energy and potential energy and the Arab Street is one of these potential energy businesses. What do you need to set it off? What kind of spark? Like, if you look at U.S. domestic unrest, what set off the Watts riots? What sets off domestic disturbances? I think there was an intellectual case made that a lot of this same kinetic energy represented frustration with unresponsive authoritarian government, which was something that the United States could see itself working against, and hence the ideas we could release some of this energy in a positive way to give people choices they'd never had. It's a little bit like both of these types of energy. The idea that first of all this energy exists – this pent up unhappiness, which I think public opinion polling hints at, but whether that can actually measure that visceral energy…

Q: This has been articulated. I was in a room with this very senior official in late 2002, who said that the invasion of Iraq will be speedy, successful and democracy will be established in a 14-day period and will inevitably spread throughout the region. I remember very clearly; those were his exact words. I guess that draws on your notion.

THIBEAULT: It's not a crazy, illogical avenue to go down. As with everything, the world is very, very, very complicated and you can't consider all the possible complications in a PowerPoint presentation. There could be something out there that makes this kind of 'take it to the streets' event less doable. When I was thinking of 1990, what was in my mind was Iran in 1978. That seemed to be that kind of release – to release that pent-up energy.

Q: Now, let's return to your personal experiences. May I now look to the photo?

THIBEAULT: Oh, ok. I haven't talked about this? Ok.

Q: Let me describe the photo as I saw it from Madrid, at the time. It was an AP photo. We think it was in November of 1990. Let me just describe it. It is the most remarkable photo I have ever seen of Public Diplomacy in action. There is a hostile mob in front of the U.S. embassy in Baghdad, I think chanting 'death to America' or something like that.

THIBEAULT: …. 'down, down Bush'…

Q: …. 'down, down Bush'….. Everyone looking very angry, except the first three or four rows who were within hearing distance of you, Stephen Thibeault. They have smiles on their faces and appear to be laughing. And there you are, possibly dead meat, out there in the street. I think many people would have been afraid to go out in that street to be the only representative of an enemy government. There you are joking with a few dozen people who seem to see some humor in the moment. Can you describe what was happening?

THIBEAULT: The U.S. embassy in Baghdad had an alley that separated the two halves.

One half of the compound was the U.S. Information Service where we had our press office and we had our cultural exchange programs. We may have had some other functions over there – perhaps commercial – I don't remember exactly everything there. Across this alley was the chancery where you had the ambassador's office and the consular office, etc. So, this little alley was very busy at times with people lined up ready to go in to get their visas. This is a small alley.

After the invasion of Kuwait, the Iraqis had consistently directed demonstrations against the American embassy.

Q: You say, very often with people who in fact were victims.

THIBEAULT: Exactly. You might one day have a Kurdish demonstration; another day you could have mothers of soldiers who had died – things like that. And, they would disrupt our activities. The Iraqis – it was their country – would march these people right up into the compound between the two halves of the embassy.

Q: They – this the Iraqi military?

THIBEAULT: No, these are these demonstrations.

Q: You say 'they' took them up there. Who took them up there?

THIBEAULT: This was a public street, and so, they were allowed to make this corner and just demonstrate between the two halves of our embassy.

Q: Are you suggesting they were coerced to do this?

THIBEAULT: Oh, the people who were demonstrating – sure. Again, this is totally supposition on my part. The way these things worked it was just your part on a given day to go out and demonstrate or the students would go out and demonstrate on a given day. This is part of the big mobilization similar to getting the foreigners to come in and volunteer to be human shields. You would have domestically….

Q: Foreigners were duped. Local citizens…were they also duped?

THIBEAULT: This is just a part of the mass rally, a portion of being a citizen in Iraq. If it was the day for the journalists to celebrate Saddam, the journalists would celebrate.

Q: Sorry to dwell on this, but you mentioned Stalin earlier. The Baath Party. You joined the party because you had to. Is it similar in that sense?

THIBEAULT: I think it is similar in that sense. And who knows: if you're receiving a government check for some reason or you have a job – lots of people work for the government.

So, these demonstrations come in and you would be in your office and you'd just hear them outside and you'd look outside to see what it was and who they were. There was a feel in this police state that things were under control. So, unless you had some reason to believe your basic situation in Iraq had suddenly changed that day, these weren't a threatening phenomenon.

But, I remember on this day I was very harried. I had been in the Chancery and I was coming from the international media press briefing that we had every morning. We held a press briefing for Joe Wilson. And, as I was leaving the Chancery side, there was a demonstration that was turning into the little alley. And, I was, as I said, very harried that day. After I would go to USIS, I would need to go to the Mansour Melia hotel to see if there were any new American hostages. I just had a long day ahead of me of trying stuff.

Q: This was in the morning?

THIBEAULT: This was in the morning.

So, this demonstration turns the corner and I think this was one about baby milk, so we had mothers who were complaining about why weren't we allowing Iraq to have baby milk. This was because prior to military action against Iraq, there were sanctions in place. So Saddam was claiming that there was this situation; that children were dying because they didn't have baby milk.

And, it just ticked me off that here they were again; they were disrupting my day and they were coming onto my compound to demonstrate. There were cameras following this demonstration, because that's why they were having this demonstration in order to have the international press show the Iraqi citizens demonstrating against American policy, yelling 'Down, down Bush!". So, when they came to my spot on the street, as I was walking to the other side, I just stopped and they stopped and were yelling "Down, down Bush!" So, while they were chanting in Arabic, I just started my own chant, which was, "Laysh, laysh, laysh, laysh, laysh, laysh, laysh, laysh, laysh", which is "Why? Why? Why? Why? Why? Why? Why? Why? Why?" and so they shut up. And so I said, "Why, if Kuwait was part of Iraq, did you invite the Kuwaitis to the Arab Summit last July as a separate country?" This was a woman's group, but I believe there was a male handler, who was the person leading the group and I think influencing what they were supposed to chant. And, so when I said that, "why did you invite them to the Arab Summit?", they began to chant, "Kuwait is part of Iraq! Kuwait is part of Iraq! Kuwait is part of Iraq!" So I again said, "Why? Why? Why? Why? Why? Why? Why? Why? Why?" And then, when they shut up, I said, "If Kuwait was part of Iraq, why did you have an embassy in Kuwait?" Oh, "Kuwait is part of Iraq! Kuwait is part of Iraq! Kuwait is part of Iraq!" and then they said something about the milk and so I said, "Why? Why? Why? Why? Why? Why? Why? Why? Why?" and then they shut up. And I said, "Why do the Iraqi soldiers have milk, then if your babies don't?" So, at that point, they were waiting for the next one – what was I going to say next -- because these were things that people couldn't say and they were getting in the situation where, I think, the people in the demonstration who were close enough to hear me wanted to know what this crazy hwago was going to say;

what was the next crazy thing he was going to say. So I said, "You know, in the United States, there are a lot of people who don't want to have our soldiers here and they're demonstrating in the streets against American policy. Do you know about that?" So, they listened to me. I don't know if they said anything back. And I said, "Why? Why? Why? Why? Why? Why? Why? Why? Why? in Iraq there's not even one person who demonstrates against Saddam Hussein?" So they said something to the effect of, "We speak all in one voice! We speak all in one voice!" And then I said, "Not even in the family, do we all speak with one voice. There's always a difference of opinion." And at that point the minder took the demonstration away. And that was the end of that demonstration.

Q: You were being too effective.

THIBEAULT: I was getting a chance to say things that people couldn't say. And the CNN guy was like, as this was going on he was saying, "Do this in English! Do this in English!" I knew that if I did this in Arabic – and my Arabic is not all that great – but I was saying very simple things. I was saying, you know, very much what we learn in Arabic at FSI: "the prince and the ambassador met at the airport" – this is the kind of Arabic I was saying: "Why did you have an embassy there if it was part of Iraq?"

Q: Explain why in the photo it is very clear that two dozen women are laughing. What's this all about?

THIBEAULT: I think….I've got the photo. I don't think they're necessarily laughing; I think that they're engaged. This is not what they were expecting.

Q: Did they consider you an amusing freak?

THIBEAULT: I have no idea. I have no idea what they thought. It is one of the few times I just really spoke heedlessly. I spoke heedlessly a lot with the journalists because it was very clear to me that I was not going to be quoted in some way that would mess me up.

Q: Now, the western journalists said, "Do this in English." Did you ever have a chance to do that?

THIBEAULT: No, because I didn't want to do it in English, because I didn't want it to be parsed back in the States. I didn't want to inadvertently say something, that if you took a sound bite it would sound wrong and I had certainly not prepared; I had no clearance to speak.

Q: Did you not feel physically threatened? It was a pretty ugly looking incident in the photo. They were all women.

THIBEAULT: No. The presence of a minder and the knowledge that these demonstrations came like clockwork – that if you knew the schedule, it would arrive on schedule and when you are in this situation – I think this is probably toward the end of

October that this happened – I'd been in that situation long enough and had heard the way the Iraqis were portraying things that it was just pretty….these things had occurred to me anyway – just how ludicrous their basic case was, that it wasn't a country and they didn't bother to like bring this up until they invaded them.

Q: Their own arguments were persistent; they were dogged; and, maybe a bit mindless. Do you think that on this occasion you got some of them to think, did you get through to them?

THIBEAULT: I doubt it. There's too much context. The thing is that if you're living in a society, on the one hand you know how bogus everything is, but you just assume that that's the way governments are.

Q: Do you think that the people in the street were mesmerized or were they stupid or were they disciplined or were they coerced? What was it that caused the uniformity of their reactions?

THIBEAULT: I think they were just doing their civic duty and had not expected it to come down into any kind of situation like this where people were exchanging ideas. And again, to hear someone say something that questioned your government publicly, in front of other people, with a minder and with cameras is just such a novel situation, I think. The only other stuff that I've done like this had been scripted and cleared in Jordan, where I was the press attaché. We built an embassy on a hill according to the Inman standards, so it had…

Q: …security…

THIBEAULT: …it had very thick outer walls. It had a very big setback between those outer walls and the actual offices. The offices had triple glass, shatter-resistant glass – things like that. You could look out the window in my office and see a demonstration coming a mile off.

We knew there'd be demonstrations on a particular day in Jordan and you would see it, again, coming a mile off. I would let the Deputy Chief of Mission know that I was going to go out and speak to this group because they were presenting a petition protesting something the United States had done or asking the United States not to do something, etc. In those circumstances, I would come to the front of the embassy; I would meet them in the street; and, I would say, "On behalf of the United States of America, I will take this petition that you have given me and I will make sure it is sent to the White House and that…" etc., etc., etc. All of the most polite things I could say and it was always a very genial exchange.

Q: I did the same in Denmark, but it's quite a different dynamic in Denmark than it is in the Middle East, I think.

THIBEAULT: Yeah, I would say. But, I never felt the Jordan events were threatening,

either. It was something, again, that we knew was happening – particular unions.

Q: In Baghdad, do you think it was not threatening because – is that you? Can you imagine anyone else in that circumstance that would not feel threatened?

THIBEAULT: It was very under control. The acquaintance with the way things went in Iraq – things were very under control. These people weren't coming to the embassy to do us harm; they were coming to the embassy because they were told, "Arrive at congregation point A at 9 o'clock and let's go to the embassy."

Q: So this was a routine; you were accustomed to it.

THIBEAULT: I tried not to speak publicly – particularly on camera, because I had no clearance to make any kind of case and I knew that anything I did say publicly, because of the scarcity of hard news coming out of Iraq, anything I did say publicly in front of the cameras would probably end up on the news and that wasn't my objective.

Q: You talked about hearing the birds sing. Was this before, during or after that you felt that the scenarios were limited for getting out?

THIBEAULT: The thing is right at the very beginning. You've got plenty of time for your head – to try to figure out this game how it's going to work. So, right at the very beginning, it was pretty clear to me that this was not going to have an easy resolution, and it was not going to be easy to get out. This was before all of the troops were assembled in the Middle East; so, that aspect of inevitability wasn't there. But, just in the beginning, the idea that you're in a group of 25 people in a country of 50 million people and you're suddenly on the wrong side and it's going to be very difficult to get out because of circumstances. That was very early on I had that feeling and had that epiphany.

Q: Again, other, may I say, lesser people, with that crowd and in that street, knowing that the scenarios were grim, would have been terrified. Are you just a troublemaker, a defiant person?

THIBEAULT: I think I am just cocky in front of a crowd. I have never had any trouble in front of a crowd. 90% of that is just showing up.

Q: Again, before we leave this topic, I have to say it's the single photograph that I've seen that best demonstrates public diplomacy at its best, face to face contact; creating a reaction, which in this case was laughter and it is clear in the photograph. When a person laughs, I think it disarms their obstinate views – I think it does.

THIBEAULT: I think there was a template for this. The background information that you get from other USIS officers, public diplomacy officers, and different operations that we had heard of pretty much set the tone for how you were expected to behave in these circumstances.

You had this situation in Korea. For many years in Korea (this is my understanding; what I got through the grapevine) was that the government…

Q: Are you talking about when they burned the USIS center in Korea?

THIBEAULT: Well, no, before that, when they would occupy the USIS center in Korea as part of a ritual that would allow people to show dissatisfaction with their own government without demonstrating against their own government; taking a provocative public action against the one institution that they could be sure would defuse the situation – and if that institution was anything, it was the U.S. Information Service. So that by occupying that building and then being in a situation where the U.S. would defuse the situation and the students would not be thrown in jail. My understanding was that this act was not the most uncommon thing. This had happened more than once in Korea.

Q: According to the template, would the crowds themselves have realized, "We'll go to get the most vulnerable thing." or do you think they were manipulated to do so?

THIBEAULT: In the Korea case, I think, it was a strategy that the demonstrators had realized could be do-able, that they could make their point without going directly against the government, which might escalate into something, but still do a provocative act.

Q: Going outside your own personal experience, during the cartoon wars, do they go to the Swedish and Danish embassies because they knew the Americans would blow them away and the Danes wouldn't?

THIBEAULT: Well, in these other countries….

Q: Well, this is an unfair question. I withdraw the question, because you weren't there.

THIBEAULT: That's kind of the situation that was in my mind. Simply having an anti-American demonstration…they're not all the same and they're not all rock and bottle tossing mobs. Again, as in Jordan, when these demonstrations came forward, the social aspect accepting a petition and assuring people that their voices would be heard, whatever their deep-down belief of the truth of all this, it was a social interaction and these were the proper things to say and the people on the other side seemed to be very satisfied that we were taking their petition and that we were being civil to them. So, that's really all we were led to expect.

One of the things that was scary about Iraq is that there was a circumstance where American diplomatic personnel had been victims of a crowd or of demonstrations. I think it was in '58 or something like that. Again, I thought that the terrifying reality in Iraq was the end game and not the day-to-day activities. Again, it was a police state. Everyone knew pretty much what everyone else was doing; the authorities knew who you were and what you were doing.

I read recently the book, A Bell for Adano, which involved American occupation forces in Italy. One of the advantages the American leader has in the particular town of Adano, is the very first thing that his intelligence office does upon arriving in the town is go to the fascist headquarters and get all of the secret police files on everyone in town. So, immediately the American officers have a complete knowledge of who's good and who's bad and they just need to flip the folders: that the bad people are now good and the good people are now bad. And so, in Iraq, I think there was this same wealth of information that was kept on everybody. Your chance of being a victim of some kind of freelance violence in Iraq, for someone like me, who I think was watched, I think wasn't serious at all.

But then again, reading that book, I thought, "boy, if our first thing to do when we landed in Iraq was to find as much as the secret police files as much as we could, it might have made a difference; it might have sped things up a bit."

Q: You mean in '03?

THIBEAULT: In '03.

I've read in the media that in fact some of that looting that went on in that initial period, was the destruction of these files by people who knew where there own offices were and knew they needed to get there and destroy these files while the Americans were getting themselves oriented.

Q: This will be a finite thing. Shall we focus on the 13 weeks? Do you have time to do so?

THIBEAULT: I think I may have gone through this topic. I don't know what else there might be to say.

Q: We have gone through it. Let's lace it together chronologically.

THIBEAULT: Ok.

Q: 13 weeks from the time of the invasion to the time you are in Heathrow.

THIBEAULT: August 2nd is the invasion.

Q: 1990.

THIBEAULT: 1990. August 2nd is the invasion. There is an initial period of confusion: Are the borders open or are the borders closed? Then, there is the notification that there are five nationalities that may not leave and, in Kuwait, are going to be subject to being guests of Iraq. There was then an Iraqi statement about rationing of food, which got us in the diplomatic community thinking, "Iraqi citizen have ration cards; we don't. Where are we getting our food?" So, there was a period of time we were consolidating our food resources. Eventually, that went away.

In addition to the five nationalities, there were hundreds of thousands of other foreigners in the country, who no longer really had a purpose. When you were driving around, you would see these encampments of say two thousand Pakistanis, who had been in Iraq on some kind of contracts. But, everything was now being shut down, etc. So, that is, I'd say, the first couple of weeks.

We get our dependents out. There weren't many dependents at all. It was not a big post to dependents. In addition, a lot of people had been on vacation. So, the dependents and the people from the American Cultural center, the teachers that we had went on that first convoy. Then non-essential left and with non-essential personnel went the Marine Security guards. We drew down to a staff of nine Americans. We had communicators, we had people from the station, we had the regional security officer, the admin officer. It was a very, very small staff.

Q: The reader might think that the marine security guard would be the last to go. What was that about?

THIBEAULT: The logic behind that was that anything that happened to us in Iraq would be a decision of the Iraqi government and five guys with shot guns was not going to make any difference. Again, the assumption right there is we're not going to be in a mass demonstration scenario where we need to hold out until the Iraqi government comes and saves us, because if we were in a threatening scenario, it would be the Iraqi government behind it.

Q: Was this Joe Wilson's decision or was it a country team decision?

THIBEAULT: I don't remember that decision being made. The initial draw-down list had been set up by the emergency action committee. I was (I think I've probably mentioned this before) initially not essential personnel, but then things had changed. So, then we were down to eight.

At that point – and I don't know if that is three weeks in; I honestly just don't know – initially I was very focused in those first few weeks on closing down USIS and getting my teachers out. I may have mentioned that I had a director of courses, someone who had come in and auditioned for this job and then demanded a contract for a job that was not going to be available because we were closing.

Q: Yes, yes.

THIBEAULT: So, it was very difficult. First, we got those people out. That was my prime concern. I don't know when it was that the foreign journalists began to come in. Once the foreign journalists came in, then I was very busy doing daily press conferences and acting as a public affairs advisor, both for the embassy, but also for Americans we were protecting at the ambassador's residence, acting as an intermediary between them and the American networks and the network correspondents. I was first of all responsible

for making sure what the U.S. government wished to say, was in the media. So, that was mostly Joe's press conference everyday. Then, secondly, I would provide support for any American who might want to speak to the press, any of the civilians.

Q: There were how many, approximately in the residence?

THIBEAULT: We had about 40 at the ambassador's residence. That went down to probably closer to about 20, as different groups were released.

And then, lastly, to try to get the best stories we could for the American media, because we're there to facilitate them.

After that, the United States kicked some Iraqi diplomats out of the UN for conduct unbecoming to a diplomat and in response, the Iraqis kicked out three of our folks, and one of them was the consular officer. The consular officer had been the prime contact with the American citizens who were being held hostage. So, I think I was the only person left with decent Arabic, so that became my job.

Q: So you went from eight to about five?

THIBEAULT: Yes.

Q: Wouldn't being kicked out be a ticket to not being killed?

THIBEAULT: Yeah. I remember coming into the embassy – it was a Saturday. I came into the embassy and I went into the front office and there's a diplomatic note. Again, I was reading the Arabic and it said, "The Socialist Republic of Iraq (I forget what they called themselves) has the honor to inform the United States of America that the following individuals need to leave the country as soon as possible." I so hoped that my name was on there, and it wasn't. So, that's when I picked up the hostage liaison duties. Let's say, perhaps, this is halfway through. I don't know. I did this for several weeks.

Q: Was checking on the hostages a daily task?

THIBEAULT: It was a daily task, twice a day. After I'd do the press conference in the morning, I'd go to the Mansour Melia and see if they had any new American hostages. If they had any new American hostages, I'd see them. Then, I'd come back at night at 7 or 8 o'clock and all of the hostages of all of the nationalities would all be up in the Skyline lounge. Then I'd meet with Americans then and basically hang out.

Q: Some were at the hotel and some were at the residence.

THIBEAULT: The ones at the residence were people who had been living in Iraq and when we were sure that they were subject to being taken hostage, we offered to let them stay at the ambassador's residence. So, those were the ones at the ambassador's residence. The ones at the Mansour Melia were hostages picked up in Iraq who were

being held at the Mansour Melia hotel for processing for a brief period of time. When Saddam said that women and children could leave, we supervised a series of evacuation flights that would go from Kuwait through Baghdad. Eventually, in one of those flights, we had a large number of people that the Iraqis wouldn't let leave because they suspected they weren't American citizens. I think these were all people traveling on improvised travel documents; that they didn't have a legitimate U.S. passport. We weren't able to give them one, because we'd destroyed our passport equipment. Those people ended up in the Palestine Hotel and that was probably 60 some odd people. So we had maybe 40 at the residence, 60 at the hotel and then, at any given time, six or eight Americans en route to hostage sites.

Q: Will we ever know how many human shields there were at the peak?

THIBEAULT: I don't know. I suspect 200 plus. That was the figure we would use.

So, we had those people.

The agreement made to evacuate the U.S. embassy in Kuwait came after a long negotiation. The agreement was that the non-essential personnel and the dependents would exit Kuwait; they would travel to Baghdad via convoy; in Baghdad they would have their passports processed to show Iraqi sovereignty over Kuwait; then they would travel overland to Turkey. But, when they got to Baghdad, the deal broke down and we had 100 people stranded. At that point we were at eight embassy staff, before we went down to five. So, we hosted them. Soon thereafter Saddam said women and children can go. So instead of 106, it went down to something more manageable like 40. But, with the personnel from Kuwait, our embassy in Baghdad was double-staffed compared to what it had been prior to the invasion of Kuwait. Ok, so that's that situation.

Then we got the hostage visits, the celebrities who come in and get to take home some hostages. Jesse Jackson was one of them, I believe. I am trying to think if there were any other Americans who got this privilege. Other nationalities did it. I remember, again, former British Prime Minister Heath.

Then at the very beginning of November, Joe Wilson called me in one day and said, "When can you be ready to leave?" and I said, "Tomorrow." It wasn't quite possible to leave 'tomorrow', because of the paperwork and stuff, but it was within a couple of days.

Q: How was he able to get you out?

THIBEAULT: Well, I was accredited to Iraq. I was a diplomat. There was nothing about my status that was dubious, according to the Iraqis. I may have said this before. There was a very tense time in that beginning right when the Iraqis had declared jihad against the United States when I noticed that my visa was expiring in my American passport. Under normal circumstances, I would turn this passport in to the Iraqi Foreign Ministry and then they would update the visa and give it back to us and it would take a week or so. And I went into Joe Wilson and said, "What should I do?" He said, "Send it to the

Foreign Ministry." So, I had a week when I had no American passport, which was very, very scary. But, again, the Iraqis processed it. So we go through this period of time.

There is something that may or may not be a coincidence. There were stories that mentioned me or featured me in the Washington Post and the New York Times that were not too long apart, maybe a week or two weeks or something like that. The journalists who were covering the embassy had a dilemma in that they couldn't speak to any of the American diplomats, because we were all under the Foreign Service discipline, meaning you don't speak to the press without clearance from the public affairs officers. So the press couldn't interview those folks and that left them only the public affairs officer and Joe Wilson. And, so, there were a couple of stories about me in the media and lo and behold I was asked when I could leave the country. So there may be some relation between my getting publicity and getting out of the country. I don't know about that. We had a party at my house the night before I left. It was just one of those other-worldly events. I mean, it was no different from a million parties with people drinking. But, the fact that the international media and film crews were there. It was what they were doing that night. There were people that we were protecting at the ambassador's residence. It was just so bizarre to mix with these folks in my house in Baghdad, knowing that I was leaving the next day.

Q: This is February 3rd, 2008. This is Dan Whitman interviewing Steven Thibeault.

Steve, at the end of our last episode, we had you with an expiring visa in Baghdad and the opportunity to depart. Can you pick it up from that point?

THIBEAULT: Yes. The visa situation had occurred relatively early after the invasion of Kuwait, and that had been resolved, although it was kind of a tense ten days when I was not holding a passport.

Jeanette Pina, who was accredited to Iraq and who had been on leave when the invasion took place, came back into the country specifically to replace me. We went to the Mansour Melia Hotel, because I was going to show her the rounds and show how we, show how I dealt with the hostages…

Q: Sorry to interrupt, but Jeanette Pina had been accredited to Iraq previously?

THIBEAULT: Yes. We had probably 25 American officers in the embassy; and when the invasion took place, I'd say approximately half of them were out of the country just because that was the time we'd take vacation. So, she came back in, and I took her over to the Mansour Melia to do the noontime routine, just where we would check with the Iraqis to see if they had any new American hostages. And, we came into the parking lot and they were loading a van with hostages to be taken to target sites, hostage sites. I'd brought something in, maybe a magazine or a game or something like that for one of the hostages and I handed it to him as he was getting onto the bus and I'd never seen this before. Intellectually, I knew that the Americans were being taken away. Some of them were put up in strategic locations like armaments factories, natural gas tanks and things

like this and so I knew it was a dangerous thing intellectually, but to actually see them leaving it really hit me. Again, the day before I was supposed to leave the country, here they are being put on a bus and taken away. And, Janet said to me, "Is this what the job is like?" And, it occurred to me at that moment, yes, this is what the job is like; but, I hadn't been recognizing it; I hadn't let myself understand.

Q: Did you have any sign or did you intuit what was going through the minds of the hostages?

THIBEAULT: No, I didn't intuit and I didn't think. I think in retrospect, for them this was not a great change to go from this hotel in Baghdad to some unknown place in Iraq.

Q: Did they understand how they were being used?

THIBEAULT: Yes. They did. Again, they had been picked up in Kuwait, held in a hotel there, brought up to Baghdad, held in the hotel in Baghdad and then were heading off someplace else. I just think this moment for them, when they stayed in a hotel in Baghdad, didn't seem to them particularly safer than any other situation they'd been in. So, for me it was striking to see that they were actually being taken off, that in fact they were hostages and that I was seeing kind of the dirty side of it. It's like being in a hospital. One day you see the bed is empty, but you don't see the patient dying. I would come into the hotel and I would see that these Americans were gone, but I hadn't before actually seen them taken away against their will.

Q: Did you have a chance to communicate with these folks before or as they were being taken away?

THIBEAULT: Well, again, this one man – whatever I brought in for him. I'd promised to bring him a book or something like that and I just was able to pass it on. It was a telling moment.

It was a city full of people who were displaced or unable to leave or unable to afford a flight out of the country or unable to get the right documentation to leave the country. Again, I may have said that in my neighborhood, what had been big open fields, like athletic fields, had thousands of Pakistanis and Indians who were camped out in these fields because the economic life of Iraq was coming to a halt and all of these guest workers needed to go home but the flights in and out of the country were almost non-existent. Each embassy was responsible for arranging some kind of evacuation of its citizens, whether it was the Egyptians, or the Filipinos, or the Indians or the Pakistanis.

Q: Pakistanis, Indians – they were there as guest workers. Did the Iraqi government want to keep them or get them out? Did they care?

THIBEAULT: You know, the Iraqi bureaucracy moved ahead so slowly. As far as I understood, the diplomatic personnel from every individual country was pressing the Iraqi government either for permission or for action that would allow them to get their

citizens out of the country.

Q: Which countries were more active in trying to help their citizens?

THIBEAULT: I didn't deal with that on a daily basis. I just know that when we got together with other diplomats, this was a common theme. Most of the diplomats I dealt with I met during the evacuation flights of women and children. Again, when the Iraqi government allowed them to leave Kuwait, it forced them to fly to Baghdad from Kuwait in order to be processed. And, during that time, we would charter a plane and we would have spaces on the plane on a space available basis, to our allies. So, the French women and children, British women and children, and the German women and children. The Japanese were treated separately and were kept…

Q: Again, the five countries chosen by the Iraqis to not leave were …

THIBEAULT: The U.S., UK, France, Germany and Japan. So, again, I didn't deal very much with the other consular type people, except on these evacuation flights. The Europeans tended to be less alarmed by the situation and less apprehensive that there was going to be a military conflict.

Q: Why?

THIBEAULT: I think they had confidence….no, maybe not confidence. I think they had the idea that the crisis could deescalate, whereas I was pretty sure that the United States would take military action.

Q: Were they blind to what was happening or did they have a genuinely different take on what was going on?

THIBEAULT: I think they had a different take. I think they didn't understand the mechanics of the U.S. political system. Again, if you prepare for military action overseas and lay out the ground for it, it would be very difficult at the last minute not to carry through.

Q: Europeans? Their whole history is filled with incidents like that. This is how World War I began.

THIBEAULT: Right. These Europeans were post-World War II Europeans where they had this long period of faith in international action and peace keeping and things like that.

Q: Well, I don't mean to suggest they were naïve, I guess. But, I guess they were very wrong.

THIBEAULT: Ah, yeah. Again, this was just my impression just talking to them, because it was weighing very heavily on me -- the inevitability of a military conflict. I remember going out to the airport for one of these evacuation flights with the station chief and on

the way to the airport he pointed to a date palm grove and said, "That's where I'm going and that's where the helicopters are going to get me out of here."

Q: Helicopters can land on top of date palms?

THIBEAULT: Well, it would land in that area. It didn't come to that. We all were able to leave the country three days before the action. Of course, I left in November, but the U.S. diplomatic personnel left, I believe, January 15th and the bombing started January 18th.

Q: Meaning the entire group of accredited Americans was out three days before the bombing?

THIBEAULT: Oh, yeah, yeah.

Q: What about the human shields?

THIBEAULT: All of the human shields were released in November. There had been a long series of VIP visits, which I discussed previously in terms of the hostages that were awarded to these international representatives. I remember now Ramsey Clark was one. I'd mentioned Jesse Jackson before. Ramsey Clark was another American who was a part of this. I think that the consistent message, from what I had seen in the media, of these VIPs to Saddam is that he should release the hostages as a prerequisite for then deescalating the situation diplomatically. I think that he basically was fooled as, in fact, the hostages were protecting him, I believe. Whether, in the end, the presence of the hostages would have prevented the U.S. from initiating military conflict, I don't know; but once they were released then there was nothing keeping the United States from attacking.

Q: You've talked about this a couple times in previous interviews: Saddam's miscalculations. We're just guessing here; conjecturing. Do you think that Saddam Hussein, just by having these celebrities approach him, did this feed this ego? Do you think he was misled by his ego?

THIBEAULT: Yes. He had a very high international profile. As I said, before the invasion of Kuwait, he had had a very high profile within the Arab world. And then, with the invasion of Kuwait, he basically was depicted as the most dangerous man in the world. I think he liked the idea that he was directing the course of history at that time. And, when you looked at the Iraqi papers, as with many of these authoritarian and in this case totalitarian, countries, if you looked at the newspapers in Iraq or watched the news, of course it was 100% revolving around Saddam Hussein. And, then to get apparent confirmation from prominent figures in the world of his importance, I think this was a peak period for him.

Q: When he said, "Mother of all Wars", "The Sand will flow with the blood of human soldiers", did he believe that?

THIBEAULT: I think he believed that the United States would cave, that we weren't capable of taking mass casualties because the opportunity hadn't come up since Vietnam.

Q: Do you think that he thought that he was able to inflict mass casualties?

THIBEAULT: I believe so because of the experience with the war with Iran. And, if you remember, at that time, the Iraqi armed forces were portrayed as one of the largest and more competent military forces in the world, so nobody was predicting a walkover. My firm belief was that the Iraqi military was so demoralized after this tremendous war with Iran. People we did talk to were so distressed at having to reenter the military after having just got out after eight years that I was pretty certain that the Iraqi military would jump at the chance to surrender to an international force.

Q: Just the sheer numbers. I think I remember hearing that it was the third largest military in the world, or something like that. Just the sheer numbers must have given Saddam the sense that he had a real military machine.

THIBEAULT: And also to have the ability to order people to do things that you couldn't order another army to do. I think he had firm confidence that he instilled the fear in the entire society and that they would carry out his plans.

Speaking of his view of the world. Living in Iraq, which is a place he rarely left – there may have been individual trips that he may have taken out of the country but I think he was almost entirely restricted to Iraq. There are two things I would like to point out: within Iraq, his picture was so common that we used to play a little game with my boss's kids. When we would drive in a car, we would guess how many seconds it would be until we saw a picture of Saddam Hussein. And, people would guess 20 second, or 12 seconds, or a minute or something like that. And, once everyone had made their guess, someone would say 'go'. And, driving in the car, within four seconds someone would say, "There's his picture in a shop window; there's his picture on a billboard; there's his picture in a taxi." You literally could not go 10 feet down the street without seeing his picture.

Secondly, I went to the Saddam Art Center. We were thinking of using the Saddam Art Center as a venue for an embassy show of some kind. And, when I went to the venue to see what it was like, there was currently a picture exhibition and it was an exhibition of Saddam's trip to the north. And, it was hundreds of photographs of every event, practically every handshake. His trip to the north was documented minute by minute with photographs of Saddam doing the most mundane things and it took up half of the exhibition space in this art center. It was just an illustration of how no one could question his judgment.

Q: We may well edit this out, but I cannot help but to compare this with the corridor in the State Department leading to the cafeteria. It just seems so similar.

THIBEAULT: Which is frozen in a period of time.

Q: Um huh. Which used to be a display of historic achievements on the part of the Diplomatic Corps.

THIBEAULT: Um huh.

So, I think there was a psychology that drove Saddam to do what he did. He definitely did not have the little angel on one shoulder whispering the voice of reason into his ear. He totally had maybe two little devils – one little devil on each shoulder whispering into different ears. And, I believe he had a tremendous amount of confidence, which I think he retained right up to the end.

Q: Again, we've probably said this five or six times, but was he a smart guy? He made some dreadful miscalculations.

THIBEAULT: Who knows what his intelligence level was, but I really believe that the decisions he made for his nation were just disastrous. Why he didn't simply use Iraq's oil wealth to develop his country and build on the already impressive educational and health achievements that they had, I don't know. People would come to Iraq – of course they would go to Baghdad primarily – and they would be impressed by the health infrastructure. It would irritate me to hear people say this because with the amount of oil wealth that the country had, it should have had a decent health sector. I don't think it's an achievement to spend money, and that's basically what he did.

I think his specialty was the police state. As far as having a handle on how to run a police state, how to intimidate your staff and how to thwart coups, I think he was very proficient at that and that was his prime objective. It's a similar distortion that you have with democratic government. Saddam's fixation was preventing someone from overthrowing him, and, if he could do that, he was a successful leader. And, I believe you see the same thing in democratic nations, where rulers believe if they can get a majority in parliament or if they can be reelected or elected in the first place, by definition they're a good leader. So, I think, for example in Israel, if you question the policies of an Israeli government and the response is, "Yes, but they have 62 seats in the Knesset," that must mean then that it's a good government or they wouldn't have 62 seats in the Knesset. So, it's a shortcoming of democracy in the same way, that you mistake staying in power with doing what's right for the country.

Q: So we have totally different values here, but we have similar flaws in each system. In the one system, which does not claim to be democratic, if you are in power, you must be good. And an analogous flaw in democracy. There are now studies going on relative to Kenya and other countries, a study called "Phony Democracies".

We are getting pretty far astray from your experience, but this is too interesting not to mention. Let's now return to your own personal circumstances. I think you were given a day to leave.

THIBEAULT: Again, I said I could be out in a day, but I think it probably took three. I had to sell my car.

Q: You were given an opportunity to leave gracefully. It was not an evacuation in that sense.

THIBEAULT: No. It was not an evacuation. Again, I was accredited to Iraq. There were flights to Amman that were allowed. Even though Iraq was not allowed to have international air flights, because it suited our purposes in fact there were flights to Amman and Royal Jordanian was given special permission to make these flights.

So, it took me a couple of days. I'll make one last statement about the exchange rate. When I entered the Foreign Service, there were still people who were using their diplomatic status to make money off of vehicles. For example in Egypt, diplomats were allowed to import cars duty free and then within their tours they could sell that car on the open market for what it would get. And, the difference between the actual retail value of a car internationally and the value of a car inside Egypt was enormous. So, people could make a $40,000 to $50,000 profit on a BMW, or something like that…

Q: Even though the buyer had to pay tax, when the diplomat did not.

THIBEAULT: I think there was a loophole in that. Again, at this time, we are talking 20 years ago.

And so there were people in the U.S. mission who had made as much on their car in a given year as they had made working for the U.S. government. So, the government had cracked down on this and had passed laws saying you could not use your diplomatic status to make a profit. But, there were other fiddles going on as well. The one that applied to us in Iraq dealt with official exchange rates. And, as I've said before, the completely artificial exchange rate that the Iraqis used, we were able to manipulate and use it to fund our English-teaching program, because our English-teaching program collected Iraqi tuition in Iraqi dinars and we were able to treat that at the official rate. When you were leaving the country, because you'd been dealing with this artificial exchange rate, you were able to cash in Iraqi dinars at the official rate through the sale of personal property.

So, this is a good one. I had a car that cost me $9000. I sold it to an Egyptian Diplomat for, I would say approximately 8000 dinars. And so, the 8000 dinars at the official exchange rate would be about $25,000. That was the limit that I was allowed to cash at the official exchange rate. So, I sold my $9000 car for 8000 dinars and realized $24,000. So, between the $9000 I paid for the car and the $24,000 or $25,000 I got in return, I declared that as a capitol gains and paid taxes on it. The Egyptian diplomat who bought the car from me for 8000 dinars, paid approximately $2500 for the dinars at the black market rate.

So, you had – it's a tremendous illustration of the distortion you get. So, the Egyptian

diplomat buys a $9000 car for $2500. I sell a $9000 car for $25,000 and it's the same deal.

Q: And the Iraqi government actually gives you the official equivalent in dollars of the dinars; that's how nutty the system is.

THIBEAULT: That's how nutty the system is because in every other way they are making it hand over fist, by forcing people to exchange at the official rate. And this was one of those things where we were able to work the system.

Q: Was the Egyptian diplomat happy to be staying on?

THIBEAULT: I didn't talk to him. If you were selling property, people would tell you who was buying. So, that was that circumstance.

Q: There were something like 5-6 of you left, at that point.

THIBEAULT: We had gotten down to nine. I believe, again, the official U.S. diplomatic staff accredited to Iraq was at that level – eight or nine. But again, after the personnel from Kuwait had been stranded in Baghdad, we had perhaps another 30 personnel, military assistance people from Kuwait and then just diplomats from Kuwait who were there. So, even though we had eight people from embassy Baghdad, we had a couple of dozen more at least from embassy Kuwait.

Q: Now, you more than paid your dues through this unbelievably stressful time; it wasn't certain you would get out at all. Any thoughts about the Americans you were leaving behind.

THIBEAULT: My main thoughts were for Jeanette Pina, because she had come in under Foreign Service discipline. She had been rotated in to replace me, coming into a situation, again, where I couldn't see what the end game was that would allow us all to leave safely. So, I was very impressed that she had come in and was giving me a chance to get out.

In addition, a lot of TDY people had come in and out during this protracted crisis. The invasion took place August 2nd and we didn't start military action until mid-January, so this was a long period of time. I can't emphasize too much how uncertain and obscure the situation was most of the time to really know what was going on. The Iraqis certainly weren't being very up-front about what their assumptions were. I was very focused on the bureaucratic affairs of the U.S. Information Service, closing down the English-teaching programming, dealing with hostages, running press conferences and things like that, so I wasn't thinking a lot sometimes of the big picture.

Q: Was Joe Wilson the last to leave?

THIBEAULT: He was in the last group. I don't know how many people were left by

January 15th or so. Someone else would have to give an account of that time.

One of the things that I found out at the time was that the State Department basically can do whatever they want with personnel. The idea that there are certain rules that you have to follow…. In a crisis situation they can reward employees as they wish. So, despite the fact that I had just taken an R&R that summer, over the phone in Washington they said, "What would you like?" and I said, "I would like to take my vacation time." I had a lot of it built up. And, that was fine with them. Or was it vacation? It might have been home leave. "I'd like to take my home leave."

Q: Which normally you'd have to wait for a year.

THIBEAULT: I'd wait for a year. But, they sent me travel orders and I returned to Boston. I met my wife. She had an apartment in Brighton. So, we just lived in Boston for the months of November and December. We just spent using all of my accumulated home leave…

Q: And your $21,000.

THIBEAULT: And my $25,000 or whatever my profit was from the sale of my car. It was very difficult because we were newlyweds; we had been married in January, and this was November.

Q: You'd lived together for no more than six or seven months since that marriage.

THIBEAULT: No more than six or seven months; from January to July we had been together. I was in no mental condition to deal with my wife's anxieties. She didn't have any contacts in the State Department; she didn't have any long term friends; she didn't have any experience with State and didn't know whether I would come out of this alive. And so, to be married with someone and then face the prospects of losing them within six months – I just had no idea of what her experience had been and I was fixated with my experience, which she didn't really want to hear about it – because I needed to work through the thing; and so, it was a really awkward thing. I think I put on a bunch of weight. I was very happy to be out; but, I think my entire focus was on doing what I couldn't do when I was in Iraq, which was basically goofing off and eating things that I couldn't get there.

Q: Did you feel, after being through this trauma, that nobody could really understand what you had been through?

THIBEAULT: No. The thing is that I was fixated on explaining what had happened. It didn't occur to me what the underlying effect had been on me. I think I really didn't appreciate it until just recently, when I left the Foreign Service, that it's only now that I am not subject to being sent someplace like Iraq, that I'd been thinking about the circumstance of basically being trapped in a country and, at the time, I don't think that was on my radar.

Q: We're not doing psychoanalysis here. However, this is 1991 and we're now 2008; you're saying it took over 15 years for you to rid yourself of the demons of this horrible experience?

THIBEAULT: I don't think it was passage of time; it was the change of my circumstance. In the Foreign Service, you are worldwide available, which means that you are willing to serve in any country in the world. There's another promise you make and that promise is to serve in any capacity, any diplomatic capacity anywhere in the world and as long as I was under that obligation, I don't think I thought about what my situation had actually been in Iraq. My last day in the office, when I came home and realized that I could no longer be sent to these dangerous places, suddenly my experiences and my feelings from Iraq came back and I was able, I think for the first time, to feel that sense of being trapped and having no options. And, at the time, in Iraq while the process was going on, that just wasn't something that was beneficial to think about. Also, in that time, my circumstance in Iraq was so much better than all sorts of other groups of people that I wasn't thinking about my own circumstance.

Q: So, survival mechanism: in order to survive, the sense of the real perils was in fact suppressed.

THIBEAULT: Yes. Oh, yeah.

Q: And this is what got you through?

THIBEAULT: Yeah. And this is what got me through, and I think it would have gotten me through January, but I don't know how much greater the impact would have been on me and on my wife. Our marriage was definitely front-loaded for the stress, that we really had the stress that first year.

Q: For readers of this transcription who might be interested in this issue: what does this type of stress, separation, and uncertainty do to a marriage? Now, in your case, evidently, you are still married. Does this have to do with the individual strength of the individuals involved? Is there a pattern that any person should be aware of, or is it always different?

THIBEAULT: I just have my unique circumstance. Where we were in our marriage, which was very early on, and when you have weeks of separation in kind of a life and death situation, when you've only been together for six months, it really is a big factor. If you compare it to military marriages, I think that my experience probably pales in comparison to the anxiety that military families have to go through. But it was a tremendous stress on us. And, again, it was something neither of us, I think, spoke about what we felt during my time in Iraq. It was very difficult for me to understand my wife's predicament and I think explaining my predicament to her was more from a surface analysis, rather than the way I really felt. You know, we're still talking about it. When we came home from Jordan in 1999 is when we started to talk about things from the

beginning of our marriage, things that we hadn't discussed.

Q: Well, let's get from 1991 to 1999. Putting Iraq aside just for a moment – I'm sure we'll come back to it. In fact, what happened?

THIBEAULT: At the end of 1990, I come back from Iraq. In 1991, I arrived in USIA, and worked on, as everyone in the world practically in public diplomacy was working on, some aspect of the confrontation with Iraq. I worked a bit on the public diplomacy themes to be used against Iraq.

Q: What assignment were you in?

THIBEAULT: I was probably over complement in the Near East office of USIA from January to about May of 1991. Again, it was mostly on public diplomacy themes to counter the continued Iraqi assertion that we were denying medicine and food to their children and things like that.

Then, in May of 1991, I started my Thai language training and that was a very good time. We had from May to the following February, 10 months. I studied Thai at the Foreign Service Institute, which was in Rosslyn. Connie and I had our first child in September, sort of halfway through language training. And, that training was a marvelous experience.

Just as with the Arabic, I was very impressed with the commitment of the U.S. Information Agency to develop and maintain language skills among the personnel. When USIA was integrated with the State Department, there was a task force to identify best practices from the two agencies under the theory that when there were differences, the best practice would be adopted. And, I think for all sorts of reasons, probably financial, the language rubric used in USIA was not used with State. Consistently, every time there is a study done on the capabilities of the U.S. Foreign Service, people are always shocked at the limited foreign language capacity of the officer corps. Not that they don't have foreign languages, but of a given diplomatic representation at a post, if you have 25 diplomats at a post, it would not be surprising if only four of them were language qualified; that there were judgments made that people who are in charge of the General Services office, or people who are in charge of certain types of visas, other administrative things, or military liaison, don't need language. Whereas the default setting for the U.S. Information Agency was that four out of five officers did indeed need the language training. So, I was in Washington learning Thai, which was a marvelous experience and that took me up all the way through 1992.

I think I got a promotion in the end of '91. My experience with promotions shows me that they're not based on some inherent capability in the officer; they're based to a large extent on circumstances and the ability to perform in trying circumstances and your ability to display your talents. When I was in Iraq I was told that the head of the Information Agency was very impressed with the performance of the young officers in the field during the crisis with Iraq, which I thought was funny, because I think I was 38 or 39.

Q: This is Wick?

THIBEAULT: No, I think this might have been Gelb. So, the idea that I was a young officer at 38 was..

Q: You were a new officer, new…

THIBEAULT: Relatively new. So, I got promoted in 1991.

Q: Wait, wait. This is supposed to be a promotion panel independent of the thinking or wishes of the director. Do you think the director had some say in this?

THIBEAULT: No, not at all. I think the point I wanted to make was that the circumstances are where you get to demonstrate what you're capable of and it just simply might not come up. So, here I was in a circumstance where I was dealing with American hostages, I was dealing daily with the international media, I was doing important consular work, doing some reporting cables on what approaches to take in public diplomacy and things like that. Probably, any one of those activities would have gotten me promoted.

So, out of curiosity when I was promoted, I sent a message to the promotion people which asked where I ranked out of this group of candidates. I believe that the piece of paper I got back said that there were, say, 123 officers who were considered for promotion. Perhaps 40 were recommended for promotion and 20 were actually promoted. The number candidates who were actually promoted is dependent upon empty slots at that level, or empty positions within the structure, so that the structure maintains a distribution at all the different grade levels. So, they said out of these 123 officers, I was ranked number one. So, again, you know it's very rewarding to think you were rated number one out of everyone who is in your competing class.

The thing is, if I were that kind of officer, if I were that number one officer, you would just expect that it would be three years and I'd be promoted again. And, at that time in USIA, there actually were information packets or memos that were sent around pretty much every year that told you the average number of years between promotions. So, I'd been promoted to be a two. At that time, I think, the average number of years between a promotion from a two to a one, was probably about four years. I stayed a two for fifteen years. It's a difficult situation for outsiders to appreciate; it was certainly difficult for my wife to see that year after year I was not promoted. Three years in Jordan; on the front lines of our big cultural clash in the world, no promotions; come back to the United States, no promotions. Part of it was USIA was in constant financial straits all through the 1990s. Every year there was a 1% budget cut exercise or a 2% budget cut exercise. I personally closed down our office in Chiang Mai, Thailand, which had been open for 40 years. It was a time for cutting back in terms of public diplomacy.

The second thing was that I think a little switch went off in my head where I put my family first, ahead of my career, and I did not go seeking those kinds of experiences that

would be on a promotion track. And really, I think that it is very reasonable and understandable in the Foreign Service, that the fast track to promotion lies through these very stressful situations that I think deserve reward.

Q: We are making a distinction between circumstance and performance. Those are two separate things.

THIBEAULT: Performing well in a high profile circumstance, yes.

Q: Performing perfectly in a low profile circumstance is non-promotable, it seems.

THIBEAULT: It's not necessarily promotable, no. Although, I do have anecdotal evidence making the case that as you approach the end of your eligibility for promotion, the promotion panels look a lot more positively on your circumstance. They certainly don't want to lose officers who have performed well in every position they've had, just because they haven't been on the front lines. So, I think that had something to do with my eventual promotion to a one.

So, we're back. I am promoted to a two in probably December of '91. I finish up my Thai language training in probably March or April of '92. And, Connie and I and our daughter Valerie go off to Chiang Mai, Thailand. This is the end of the summer in '92. And, the next four years are definitely a peak experience. As I said, my marriage was kind of front loaded with the stress because of what happened in Iraq, but the Foreign Service, or the great Mandela, or whatever forces there are in the universe, made it up to us in four years in Thailand. We had a great experience with another culture in which the people were not resentful of American policy; they were not resentful of American culture. We had the freedom to travel wherever we wanted in the country. Program-wise, I had just an amazing circumstance, because as the branch public affairs officer in Chiang Mai, my immediate boss was the public affairs officer in Bangkok. And it is just a wonderful thing to have your boss 600 miles away.

I did a very active cultural performance schedule. We had a little auditorium that seated maybe 150. We were co-located with an English-teaching program. We had a library of maybe 5000 books. It was just a wonderful little operation because of the local pay rates. It was a very inexpensive operation to run. Probably, the most senior of our Foreign Service nationals made $10,000 or $12,000 a year because of the local wage rates. We worked a lot on city planning with the people in Chiang Mai because the city was expanding at such a crazy rate. We worked on grass-roots democracy programs. We worked on pollution. A lot of the focus was on study in the U.S.

One of the failings or shortcomings, I believe, of the State Department or USIA and the State Department is that the value of studying in the United States was never realized. From an economic point of view to get someone to commit to four years study in the United States could easily add $150,000 to $200,000 to the U.S. economy. Someone coming in and going to school in the U.S. So, it was very disheartening to see that my operation in Chiang Mai was closed. And, it was the one operation in Thailand outside of

Bangkok that would advise students on how to attend college in the U.S.

When Connie and I arrived in 1992 at the airport in Thailand, the executive officer said, "We've just been told to shut down Chiang Mai, but we'll find a way to keep it open." Again, as I said, during the 1990s, my experience with the U.S. Information Agency was that every year there was an exercise to determine how the agency would take a 3%, 2% or 1% budget cut.

There was the general perception that a lot of the public diplomacy information programs, the cultural exchange programs, were somehow bloated. So that many of the USIS (U.S. Information Service operations overseas) many of them had what was called bi-national centers or cultural centers. At this point in time, they usually had an American director. So, you had an assistant cultural affairs officer whose job was to run the bi-national center or run the American cultural center. So, in Bangkok there was a process, first of all, of spinning off the cultural center, so that it would be run by a Thai organization. That would save the United States money on rental of the building and it would save on salaries of the FSNs and, all importantly, it would save an American slot. So, that's the first thing they did in Bangkok.

Q: They did this in many countries.

THIBEAULT: Yeah. This is all very relevant to the current debate over soft power when you have Defense Secretary Gates saying that billions of dollars should go into the projection of soft power and his saying that he has no objection if the State Department's budget is augmented in order for the State Department to carry out these activities. If one looks back at the circumstance that the U.S. Information Agency had at the beginning of the 1990s, that we did have an extremely robust operation for information programs and for cultural exchange programs and we had the venues such as the bi-national centers and the cultural centers and the libraries and the active English teaching programs, that if you were to brainstorm and think, "How do you engage with foreign publics in a non-threatening way, in a non-adversarial way?" pretty much, the U.S. Information Agency had covered the waterfront in these types of efforts.

After the consolidation into the State Department, I've seen the undersecretaries for public diplomacy enter their jobs with a conception of public diplomacy as simply correcting the lies that are being told about the United States. Because, from an American perspective, and we had some very interesting and very clear statements from President Bush on this, that the unpopularity of the United States from his point of view and from others who have an American domestic context, the only reason people could disagree with us and have a negative opinion of the United States is if they don't understand us. And that must mean that foreigners are not being told the truth about America; and that somehow the implication is that the bureaucracy is falling down on their job, in terms of public diplomacy, the public diplomacy folks are not doing their job. But, when people had been in the job of undersecretary for a period of time – I believe it happened with Charlotte Beers, it certainly happened with Karen Hughes – that once they are in charge of the information and cultural exchange program for a period of time, they come to

realize that the non-direct soft programs are in fact the most useful. To bring someone like a city planner to the United States for a month to see how city planning is conducted in America is also to give them a month of in-depth study in how the U.S. really works.

Q: There is something missing here. Gates of DOD says we need soft power. Are we not hearing this message from the organization that is supposed to do soft power – the State Department?

THIBEAULT: I think Gates was saying this for the sake of Congress. Congress has a record of not putting its money where its mouth is on cultural exchange, public diplomacy, the importance of connecting with foreigners and helping foreigners empathize with the U.S. They will say how important this is, but they won't allocate money.

Q: Wouldn't it be normal for the State Department to be doing this to Congress, more than DOD?

THIBEAULT: My belief is the State Department does not have much in the way of traction in convincing Congress to allocate more funds for this.

If you look back at the last big enhancement of State Department funding and personnel it was under Colin Powell. He had a tremendous influence in Congress, because he was a military officer associated with the successful Desert Storm, Desert Shield. He was able to get significant increases in positions and funding and I think it was not because he was Secretary of State and the Secretary of State had asked for it, but because he was the former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. And again, Gates, I believe, is making a similar case that would not be persuasive from Condoleezza Rice to Congress; she would be asking to line her own pockets, I think. Whereas, Gates asking Congress to line State Department's pockets is more persuasive. I don't think we'll see it.

Q: Does this seem to be very extraordinarily insightful on the part of Gates to be pressing an envelope other than his own?

THIBEAULT: No. I think what has happened is that the Defense Department, over the last five or six years, bureaucratically had supreme confidence in its ability to analyze difficult problems overseas and follow through with a can-do attitude. I think there was the general perception that the Defense Department was a can-do organization; that the State Department was a can't-do organization; that the State Department was very expert in telling you why things wouldn't work; whereas the Defense Department was determined to find the way to make things so that they did work and that the Defense Department took on much more than they could chew. And now, I think it is very sensible for the Secretary of Defense to say that this is something the State Department needs to handle and that more money spent in that way would make the military's job easier. That's just my guess.

Q: Possibly not so much magnanimity, as this is someone else's responsibility – let them

do it.

THIBEAULT: So, generally in the context of my career what I saw in Thailand was basically a holding action where the post, every year, would grudgingly give up another two Foreign Service National positions, another American Officer position and by the time I had been there three years, they indeed did decide to close down the U.S. Information Service branch in Chiang Mai.

We were lucky in Thailand to have a partner organization in the form of something called the AUA, the American University graduates Association, or something like this. This had been a Thai organization that taught English and Thai, because it was not an American organization. So, it had very good cross-cultural connections and made very good cross-cultural sense. So, this is the organization that took over the American cultural center in Bangkok and it took over the USIS offices in Chiang Mai and the library.

One of the sad things was that the residence, my residence in Chiang Mai became the Australian Cultural Center. So, as we were closing down our shop, Australia was opening up a brand new operation in Chiang Mai and one of its main objectives was to facilitate study in Australia by Thai students. It was a frustrating thing that the simple economic case for helping people study in the United States was not recognized within the U.S. government, because this was something that obviously would improve American competitiveness and would be a tremendous help with our relations with foreign countries.

If we look at a U.S. government program, such as an international visitor program – let's take a country like Egypt. When I was in Egypt between '86 and '89, we probably sent between 30 and 40 Egyptians every year to the United States on international visitor programs. Whether it was on anti-narcotics programming or whether it was on curriculum development – any topic that fit with what was called our country plan – we would send each of these people to the United States for roughly a month. The advantage of that program is that the participants in it were specifically chosen as future leaders in their field. And, so it was a strategic plan to take future leaders in Egypt and to make sure that they had at least this one month in the United States in a program designed to acquaint them with how a democracy worked and with how the United States functioned so that they would understand us better in the future and maybe carry some of our 'water' for us in their own discussions with people from their country. If you compare this to someone studying in the United States full time in an American University, it's just a drop in the bucket.

So, you have this ironic situation where we are trying to get 40 Egyptians or 23 Thais to understand America better, and at the same time cutting back our support for educational counseling, which could result in a thousand Thais going to the States and spending four years. And, in addition, each of them spending between $50,000 and $200,000 for the privilege of going to the States – it just was remarkable that this wasn't grasped at higher levels.

Q: So, Australia, a friendly country, was taking students, as South Africa does and the Erasmus system, that we have lost.

THIBEAULT: And the British Council – that all of these organizations understood the importance of recruiting foreign students, both for economic purposes and also to establish this empathy with the hosting country.

Q: Not a happy outcome for us and pretty bleak prospects because, although the education advising function still exists, its resources have been cut to almost nothing.

THIBEAULT: Right. When I had left the educational advising had moved to Bangkok. So, yes, that was a disheartening thing.

A big part of what I did in Thailand, which was completely different from what I did in other countries, was to fill our auditorium with cultural programming. It was very easy to find concert-quality pianists, violinists, small chamber groups who were in the region and to offer them very modest performance fees - $100 per person per performance.

Q: These were target of opportunities…

THIBEAULT: These were totally target of opportunities.

Q: ….originating from ECA.

THIBEAULT: There were programs originating from ECA, for example a program that was a night of Gershwin tunes, or something like that. Those were wonderful programs. We had bigger ones. For example, there was one called Plains and Pueblos, which featured native American performances, which did very well in a moderate-sized venue of 1000-2000 people. We also were able to grab a performance of South Pacific, which was in the region performing in Singapore.

And, most of my value-added was to be able to match this American performance group with discounted or free hotel rooms, so that in some cases, the performance was not even put on by the American embassy, but by a hotel that had a performance space and what I would use in all cases, whether it was a pianist and violinist or whether it was a 30-member cast of South Pacific, what I would bring to this is I would promise the American performers that they would go to the elephant camp, that they would see the jade factory, that they would see the waterfalls. I would take them to places they wouldn't see in a tourist package. Again, it was very satisfying. This is something, again, as opposed to the educational counseling where there was such a blatant economic benefit to the United States with that, where I would be questioned about these programs, as to how this was helping the United States economically.

Q: Who questioned it - The PAO?

THIBEAULT: The PAO would wonder why I was spending all of my time or much of my time on things like this.

Q: I had the same experience in a European country.

THIBEAULT: So that was a big part – it was a very different experience.

Both in Thailand and in Jordan we had presidential elections. One of the most enjoyable aspects of being in the U.S. Information Service is that we would do election programs. This is just before the penetration of the international broadcaster, so that the results of American elections were still rather spotty overseas. If people wanted to know who was leading, what the implications of the elections were, the best place to come was USIS. We would hire a ballroom in a big hotel. We would invite either Egyptians or Thais, depending on what country you were in – to come and enjoy the election reporting. It gave you a great opportunity to talk about how our system works, about the imperfect democracy we have (I don't know if anyone has a perfect one). And, of course, we would have a big board where we would color in the states as the reports came in.

This is similar to the yearly Fourth of July program. At every embassy, the Fourth of July is the time for the friends of America to come visit and the time for us to invite and try to bring in people who aren't necessarily our friends and we would like to make a good impression on them at a big party. And, so, the election program was a wonderful way to do this. I enjoyed setting these things up quite a bit.

Q: On the performances, which genres do you think the audiences reacted to or did they like everything that you brought to them?

THIBEAULT: Well, the Native American things played very well. And, we had for the smaller ones that were very modest maybe a pianist and a violinist who would do two performances. It would cost me $400. I would get them a deal on their hotel. It would be a very modest program. We would get maybe 100 people each night and that audience would be 50/50 between American expats and Thais. And, if you were to look at that and say, well this is an awful lot of effort to get 100 Thais in, but at the same time much of the urging, many of the urgings that you get as an officer are to get out of the embassy and to meet people from the host country.

Again, these types of venues are very good to engage host country nationals in a situation that's not overtly political, but gives you a change to just discuss everything under the sun. We had a very active information program, as well, so that you would be doing a lecture on intellectual property rights on a Tuesday and on a Friday night a concert. And, again, it provides a more well-rounded image of the United States and it cost peanuts.

Q: The phrase sometime used as a 'place of intellectual comfort' where people did not feel they were being challenged or where they felt no efforts were being made to persuade them of something. It was just an appealing place to go where America had engagement. That's the word you used. Do you feel we've lost it?

THIBEAULT: You know, I've been in the States since '99 and I'm not sure what the programming environment is overseas. I do know that in my experience the public affairs officer had a great deal of leeway in crafting the program the way they wanted it. And especially, if you are in an attractive place like Chiang Mai, it was very possible to recruit good representatives of American academia, the performing arts, the business community on a shoestring, because people wanted to be there. It was almost equivalent to representational activity.

Q: This was the case in attractive countries like Thailand or South Africa, and not so much the case in the Central African Republic or Burundi.

THIBEAULT: Right.

Q: In these other countries it is not as easy to do these programs cheaply. But, when Americans what to be there, it makes the programs infinitely cheaper to arrange.

THIBEAULT: Right. One thing that the U.S. Information Agency would help with is they would let us know targets of opportunity. Also, neighboring posts would let us know they had sponsored a certain performance group and that if we were willing to share a certain amount of the basic costs, we could tag on.

I just want to emphasize that your activities in any given country are very country specific. They're very targeted to, again, the Mission Program Plan, or the country plan as we used to call it with the U.S. Information Agency, that there was a specific goal to direct cultural and information programs. You had specific goals to address in a year, and they were related to our bilateral relations. Things are very systematic. If a country presented a problem in terms of violations of intellectual property, you could know that the speaker programs, the international visitor programs, the Fulbright programs would all have something to do with those issues. It was a very rational program.

My experience was the same with our aid programs. In my experience, when our aid to a given country was determined by practical considerations, the aid was very well targeted. It seemed to be very well monitored to make sure we were doing what we said we would be doing and it addressed identified needs. So, for example in my later experience in Jordan, in the areas of population growth and economic growth, AID focused on three things: curbing population growth, increasing economic growth and preserving Jordan's water resources. Again, it was a very rational approach.

The difference in Egypt, my very first job, and Jordan was that the scope of the Egyptian program was just so enormous that it was practically impossible to target the entire AID program in a rational way. That spending $2 billion – actually, the economic assistance was, I think about $800 million – but to spend $800 million with USAID officers monitoring each of those programs was not practical.

Q: You have worked in three countries at least that have had AID programs. Do you feel

that they were following the MPP (Mission Program Plan) closely?

THIBEAULT: In Egypt and Jordan, they certainly were. Thailand had graduated very recently from US. assistance when I'd gotten there, but that is exactly what I saw. In all of the countries that I worked there was a very close relationship between all of the sections of the embassy on the country team. USIS knew what the Foreign Commercial Service's priorities were; the Consular Section knew what the political section's priorities were, etc. And, they were all outlined very clearly in the Country Plan, Mission Program Plan.

Q: Do you think this is a question of good management in the posts where you were, or was this universal practice?

THIBEAULT: It was part of the bureaucracy that there were deadlines for the State Department to have the Mission Program Plan ready and there were deadlines within the U.S. Information Agency to have Country Plans that reflected the Mission program Plan. I mean, this is all very, very dull bureaucratic coordination, but in fact it seemed to work. The idea that there's no focus to our diplomatic efforts in countries – I think that's not reflected. My experience with the day-to-day operations was that we were very focused on specific goals.

Q: Again, anecdotally. Any highlights or lowlights in your four years in Thailand? Any personal voyages of discovery? Any disappointments?

THIBEAULT: The disappointment was the closing of the post. In order to defend keeping Chiang Mai open, I was told that the only way to keep it open was if I could convince Washington that Chiang Mai had a crucial influence on decisions made by the government in Bangkok. My response to that was to ask the desk officer in Washington to send me proof that Sapporo had influence on Tokyo's decision-making. I was frustrated because I knew that Japanese FSNs in Sapporo were probably making $110,000 a year, as opposed to my FSNs, who were making $12,000 and I simply felt, in terms of bang for the buck, Chiang Mai was the place to spend that money.

Q: Why does U.S. policy and diplomatic practice always address countries in hierarchical fashion as if all countries were perfectly organized, which we know they're not; as if the decision made in Bangkok were really the only important ones?

THIBEAULT: I think it's a matter of bureaucracy; the head post is in the capitol. I remember while the first Gulf War was going on, after the invasion of Kuwait, when I returned to the United States in 1991, I attended a meeting at USIA in the Near East Office. Again, it was a budget cutting exercise and they went around the table and they were identifying ways to meet a certain budget cutting goal. It involved, if I remember rightly, closing reading rooms in India. USIS-India had an enormous library operation and they were using PL-480 money, which was money that India owed the United States, which the United States agreed to spend in India. So, in India, we had this enormous amount of money to spend on cultural and information programs, which built up an

enormous infrastructure. It was decided that certain reading rooms would be closed, certain positions would be cut, etc., etc. So, during this meeting everyone made their case; there was agreement now on what programs, positions and facilities would be cut in order to make this budget target. Once that was done, the person leading the meeting said, "Our next agenda item is: we have received money to further the U.S. strategic goals in the Middle East through public diplomacy. What should we do with this money?" Well, the first person says, "Let's open up these reading rooms again?" and the answer was, "No, no, no. What we've decided to cut is by definition low-priority and now we have this new money, which we must use on new initiatives." This was a USIA person.

Q: This appears to be nuts.

THIBEAULT: Well, it was, again, very bureaucratic and he was going to be the PAO in Riyadh and not surprisingly, this new money went into an assistant information officer position in Riyadh.

Q: How astonishing.

THIBEAULT: How astonishing.

Q: We don't need to know who it was. Was this person the head of NEA?

THIBEAULT: I think he was probably, within USIA the head or the deputy. I may have said this before, but in USIA, the regional office directors were the princes and princesses of USIA. Perhaps, to go along with that would be the head of IIP, the information programs, the head of the exchanges, ECA. At some other point we'll talk about the consolidation of USIA into the State Department and these princes and princesses were completely dispossessed in that process.

Q: I can affirm that since I was one such person.

THIBEAULT: On the one hand, the bureaucratic procedures, I believe, kept our activities focused in the big picture, kept our eye on the ball. There were always determinations made as to what the prime diplomatic, bilateral, regional objectives were in a given embassy. And, the embassies' activities did indeed revolve around these activities.

Q: This is because USIA existed?

THIBEAULT: No, because, in the field, if you had a good ambassador and a good front office and they used these regulations correctly, you could 'herd the cats' and you could get all of the different agencies at post pretty much working in the same direction. And, in my experience they did. In my experience the consular section, the Foreign Commercial Service and the military Attaché took the process of selecting international visitors seriously, that they looked for the best of their contacts to tell us who it would make sense to send to the U.S. for a month, and things like that. I found the collegiality and the inter-office workings just to be very good.

Q: Implying that we've lost something, what have we lost and how did we lose it?

THIBEAULT: Again, I'm not sure if we've lost it overseas. My experience with consolidation has been entirely in the United States. Overseas, I don't the consolidation was a significant change in terms of the State Department being the lead agency. I think the ambassador has always been the director of operations in my experience; and so, whether USIA was a separate agency was not relevant as to whether the U.S. Information Service was on board. At embassy, we were always on board.

There were other bureaucratic effects, in terms of after the consolidation, what happened to the grade levels or positions that had historically been USIA. That's a different matter. I think the results of the consolidation were more like a hostile takeover. Not that the State Department was looking to take USIA over, but when it did happen, definitely USIA was the looser.

Q: Was even an email circulating a year after consolidation saying, "No more promotions in sight for PD officers." This was an email that was very open and that went to hundreds of people.

THIBEAULT: So let me see. Yeah. I think that kind of gets us through Thailand.

Q: Before leaving Thailand, I want to squeeze the juice out of this. You mentioned elephant camps, traveling around the region, and Sapporo. Did you go to Sapporo?

THIBEAULT: No, I just used Sapporo as an example.

Q: It was a great example. How did being in Thailand enrich your life?

THIBEAULT: I think for my professional life it was very important to experience work in a country where we were not reviled, where both American policy and American culture were not perceived as threats. Otherwise, my entire overseas experience would have been in the Middle East. And, in the Middle East, we're always running up against the unpopularity of our Middle East policy. And, there is this undertone of resentment of western culture and western….when I was there it was western commercialism, of sexual mores. Really, we weren't on the right side of very much for a lot of people in the Middle East. In Thailand, this was completely different.

Q: A question. Our current administration says that our enemies hate freedom. Is this a fair statement?

THIBEAULT: I'd say yes, but it's kind of irrelevant. I think that if we identify our enemies as Al Qaeda, or if we identify our enemies as the former Saddam Hussein regime or something like that, definitely they hate freedom. They definitely don't want people to make decisions, etc. But, we always have this dichotomy of saying, "There's a small minority of crazies out there who are dedicated to destroying us."

But, the negatives attitudes toward America are not limited to this small minority of people who are committed to violent acts against us. It extends into friends of democracy and friends of freedom.

I think about four or three years ago, one of our initiatives under MEP – the Middle East Peace Initiative, which did not make a big splash, because when the Middle East Peace Initiative was initially rolled out, I believe the figure was something like $24 million. People in the region look at a figure like $24 million and compare it to a cost of a single F-16, or something like that, and they know it's a symbolic show. So, under the Middle East Peace Initiative, one of the things that we were advocating was the spread of grass roots democracy in the Middle East and the evolution of authoritarian regimes into democratic regimes and there are a lot of people in the Middle East who advocate things like that.

So, we had a conference in Morocco, I believe, probably three years ago, say 2005, on this very subject. And, the editorials we saw from the region made the point that the United States advocates democracy in the Middle East, but aligns itself with anti-democratic regimes, that the so-called moderate regimes, Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, are also, unfortunately, anti-democratic regimes. That's one problem we have, that our allies in this campaign for democracy are not so thrilled about democracy.

The second problem we have is that the people who actually are grass roots democracy advocates in the Middle East are extremely alienated from America and our policies. So, here we were; we were doing the right thing in advocating this, but we had a structural problem which prevented it from having any effect.

Q: Just a foot note. Editorials from the Middle East said this and this sort of implies a certain freedom of expression, at least, in the very countries that the editorials said were repressive.

THIBEAULT: Well, no, some of these editorials could be from the pan Arab papers in London, England and also, yes, I think there is a certain amount of leeway in all of these countries, in Jordan, for example, to make a reasoned argument against U.S. activities and U.S. policies. These were not articles in Egypt criticizing the Egyptian government. These were articles that basically made these points. One of the great things about the media reaction office, formally in USIA and then in the Bureau of Intelligence and Research, is that all of these editorials are accessible right now and we could go look and see exactly what they had to say about this. There is no lack of information.

Q: Thanks to the media reaction office.

THIBEAULT: Yeah.

Q: It's all there on line and any American official can look at it.

THIBEAULT: Well, actually, the archives aren't on line, but they are electronic and they can be accessed. There has not been a great interest in accessing this information.

Q: In the times of Carlucci, NSC evidently, was hungry, hungry, for media reaction and this hunger seems to have disappeared.

THIBEAULT: The big structural problem in public diplomacy, which I see, is that because we are a representative democracy, American spokes-persons want to represent the wishes of the public and are very concerned about domestic opinion, even when you're talking about foreign policy. So, that when the president is going to speak about a foreign policy issue, there is always someone in the room when the message is being discussed who can say, "Mr. President, if we say this, it's going to kill us in Florida, or it's going to kill us in Utah." But, there is no one in the room to say, "Mr. President, this is going to kill us in Turkey. It's going to hurt our effort to get Turkey's support in issue x or y."

Until you have an undersecretary of public diplomacy who has the ability to change the draft of a message that's going out to the world, then the rest of the system doesn't work to full efficiency. So, if you take for example, the use of the term 'Islamofascism' – I'd say this term started to be used publicly in 2006; the president used it in a couple of circumstances. The rapid response unit, which processes the media reporting from embassies overseas, along with the media reaction office, the rapid response unit immediately saw evidence from the embassies that people in the media were taking exception to the use of this term, "Islamofascism'; of course it was from the media in Islamic countries. In this case, apparently Karen Hughes did get that message and did make that case to the president and after a couple of fits and starts the use of that terminology did go away. And, if monitoring foreign opinion had that kind of follow through and that kind of effect on a regular basis, I believe it actually could prevent us from shooting ourselves in the foot with foreign audiences or saying things that counter our own self interest with foreign audiences.

Q: Beginning to wrap up for today. We'll just say that we're now the 3rd; we've now lost Karen Hughes or gained her absence – whichever -- about one month ago. Maybe next time we talk about how well she did; the jury's still out on this, I guess.

THIBEAULT: Well, my area of expertise, since I've been back, is, again, monitoring foreign editorial opinion on U.S. policy initiatives and U.S. action, etc. and trying to have an influence on what messages were going out from us to the world in order to address these concerns, or again, in order to ameliorate the negative impact that these things have had. And, it's a very big issue. And again, the shortcomings are almost simple and structural. The same way, as I said, that we don't have an undersecretary of public diplomacy who has the ability to grab the people at the top before they say the damaging sentences, there are some other structural things that prevent public diplomacy from playing this role.

Q: You're talking about clout here.

THIBEAULT: Clout is a big one, yeah. It think it is natural for democratically elected officials to be very focused on domestic public opinion because you're trying to represent the constituencies and trying to do what they approve of. But, it's a hindrance in both carrying out foreign policy and doing what's best for the country. It's also a big hindrance in speaking to foreign audiences in a way that's the most effective in getting empathy and support.

Q: Maybe we're in a new phase where we can no long escape in our country the importance of what happens overseas.

THIBEAULT: I think there is also a tremendous difference between now and when I first went overseas in the immediacy of information transfer and the saturation of the world with information. When I first went overseas it was very possible for the Egyptian government to control what 95% of Egyptians saw in the media, in terms of the print and broadcast media, with the exception of Voice of America and the international shortwave broadcasters seeping into the media environment of a given country.

Now, starting with Al Jazeera and then the Internet, it's a very different world. We can't depend on our allies to control their media environment. In the old days, if there was a clash between Egyptian soldiers and Palestinians, and there were some terrible photograph of some Palestinian being killed, or mistreated, or dogs being set upon them, It was quite possible for Egypt to report on that in the Egyptian media without any provocative photos. Now, that's strictly impossible.

We saw, last year, some interesting juxtapositions of photos. Secretary Rice was on a trip to the Middle East. In more than one Arab publication, the story of the Secretary's trip to the Middle East, which was a factual story very professionally done, the story was accompanied by pictures of Israeli soldiers using attack dogs on Palestinian women. There was no connection between the two stories, but we noticed that these pictures ran consistently with the Secretary. Again, in the past, that would not have happened in countries like Egypt or Jordan and Saudi Arabia, unless the government deliberately decided to include that photo. Now they have no choice. It just seeps in through the internet.

Q: This is Dan Whitman interviewing Steve Thibeault on February 17, 2008.

Steve, in our last conversation, we were talking about the saturation of information that the world has now and how this has changed the profession of public diplomacy practitioners. We were also talking about, previously, how repressive or semi-repressive regimes were able to model the message in their own countries, and now that's a little more difficult – it's a mixed bag.

Now, with the freer flow of information that the whole world has now, what implications does this have on practitioners of public diplomacy in 2008?

THIBEAULT: With this great volume of material that is now accessible over the internet to everybody, it's possible for people in the United States to find significant amounts of provocative material. There's very little information, I think, on the actual impact of all of these provocative web sites. So, because our detection capability is so much better now and the amount of material out there is so much, you can get a high volume of material and not know what kind of strategic communication threat it represents.

Q: You are talking about the foreign publics?

THIBEAULT: You can monitor; we can't, the U.S. government. People who are concerned about the persuasive capability of Al Qaeda-like messages. They're worried about the persuasive ability to recruit suicide bombers. This is where the 'rubber hits the road" on this issue. Why can't you stop people from becoming suicide bombers? A lot of material on the internet comes up in terms of practical guidance for people who would like to be suicide bombers; ideological support for and religious argumentation in support of this subject. You can find a lot of that. But, trying to quantify how influential this is, is very difficult. So, there's a desire on the part of decision-makers in the States to somehow push back and quash this material in a way that stops people from becoming suicide bombers. It's an easy thing to articulate, but a difficult thing to ever conceptualize how you'd address it.

Q: When you say 'quash', you mean literally like 'buzz', or interfere with the actual website that we don't like or counter it with our own?

THIBEAULT: I think counter it with some kind of 'magic bullet' strategy. Again, there's a 'magic bullet' kind of aspect to this**.** [Transcriber's note: This might be an obscure reference to the silver bullet that is said to kill vampires. E.g. "a quick-response statement that would eliminate the opinions currently circulating on an issue".] Sometimes you can apply a certain principle and it will improve the media monitoring in a certain way. For example, the rapid response: the idea that you would send messaging to the field doesn't prevent people from having negative opinions to the U.S. and our policies, but it's a good principle to respond quickly and clearly and let people know where the United States stands and to give your people in the field a heads up what our current attitude is on a give issue.

Q: Do you have any idea -- publics looking at websites encouraging people to become suicide bombers. Do they ever look at our stuff?

THIBEAULT: A lot of people conceptualize some studies that will measure influence. You can measure hits and we can put ideas out into chat rooms, and things like that. We have U.S. people identifying themselves as State Department people who will engage in dialogue in chat rooms.

Q: What about material – and there's lots of it from DOD, for example – that does not identify itself as DOD?

THIBEAULT: That's something that I've never come into contact with.

Again, I don't see the link for the decision-making process, again, to specifically become a suicide bomber. I think there is no message.

Q: Message to counter?

THIBEAULT: I don't think there is a message.

There are three ways to look at any issue. You can look at a thing from a logical point of view; you can make logical arguments with people. You can make ethical arguments; arguments that this is right or this is not right. After 9/11, we had some American officials who would make public statements about Islam being a religion of peace and that certain activities were against Islam. The people who were making these statements on behalf of the U.S. government were not Muslims. So, that the idea that a Christian American's words on the essence of Islam would have an effect on Muslims is just faulty logic.

We had a mirror situation about four years later. Osama bin Laden, in the course of an open letter to the American public, questions the Christianity of what the United States does. In the context of his letter he was being very consistent, but the idea that Americans would somehow listen to Osama bin Laden speaking about Christianity is the same as Muslims would really take on board what a U.S. spokesman said about Islam. So, again, sometimes we get these messages that we think we just need to let these people know that we respect their religion. For example, with the shared values program that Charlotte Beers had, to emphasize to Muslim audiences that the United States had a very open and tolerant attitude toward Islam and that Muslims in the United States were very successful. The response in the rest of the world was, "What's that got to do with anything? Who said Muslims in the United States were mistreated? Do you think that's the problem with the United States and the Muslim world?"

Q: It was an irrelevant message.

THIBEAULT: It was a good idea to establish empathy with an audience. That wasn't the worst approach to take with a foreign audience. But, the idea that these approaches, no matter how many channels we send them through, are going to flip opinion….

Q: Right. We said, like a mantra constantly, "We respect Islam. We respect Islam", while at the same time we were being told, by our government to fear Islamasists. Is this kind of a semantic game? Is there a real distinction here? Were Americans not being subliminally told to fear this religion, while at the same time we were saying we respected this religion?

THIBEAULT: I think this is just a natural cultural response to the circumstances involved with 9/11 and involved with the public. Public statements about the United States, not just the public statements, but again there are very evocative images that really

stay with the public and they identify for the people who are alive during that news cycle a certain set of images with a certain story line will create a very solid hook for the public on that issue.

So, for example, the six-day war – little Israel fighting off this group of adversaries: this was a very positive image for Israel to get. Prior to 1967, Israel was routinely referred to as a country that didn't need U.S. assistance. It was brave little Israel out there fighting. So, 1967 you had brave little Israel out there fighting, winning and didn't need the U.S. help. And, in addition to that, the public Arab rhetoric at that time was absolute rejection of Israel's right to exist. So, if you were given a choice between pulling lever A, for 'Beleaguered Israel', and lever B, 'Push them into the sea, those damn Jews', you'd pull lever A and that image was very well-established in the United States.

The image of holding guns to people's heads in a cockpit window; the mental image of rolling a man in a wheelchair into the Mediterranean, and machine gunning people at ticket counters, and things like that, these were extremely successful images for getting the world's attention and to establishing a strong link in people's initial reaction to these groups. And, instead of drawing the attention of the world to the plight of the Palestinians, which was the objective in this terror campaign, of this terror diplomacy campaign, through what they believed was some kind of strategic communication to the world calling attention in theory to the plight of the Palestinians, what they were doing is establishing in a straight forward sort of way, that these people who were carrying out this 'strategic communication' were actually murders, especially as their targets were almost random targets.

Q: Are you saying that they were unsuccessful?

THIBEAULT: From what they state their objectives were, and what might have seemed like somehow reasonable objectives in this whole framework of liberation movements, what might have seemed like perfect straightforward logic internally, pretty much just established the link between Arabs and Palestinians and terror and murder.

Q: There's the purposeful use of imagery to try to create sympathy and then there's the unwitting use: I didn't mean to.

THIBEAULT: The United States, right now, with our deliberate public diplomacy strategies, have to overcome to long periods of unwitting alienation of audiences.

Q: Let me be provocative here. You say 'unwitting alienation'. Shortly after 9/11, the president went to the Cathedral and declared war against the 'terrorists' or the people who did 9/11. At the same time, we were condemning Imams for using mosques as a platform for political messages. Does this make sense? Is this intellectually consistent for us to slam Muslims for using mosques to create war while at the same time our president is doing exactly the same thing in the National Cathedral? A leading question.

THIBEAULT: Again, we come down to the conflicting priorities of domestic messaging

and international messaging and I just see that as something that was part of the domestic orientation. I think that when you think about communicating with Muslim and Arab audiences, just audiences outside the United States, it is almost a deliberate effort that there's a special meeting held to talk about Arab and Muslim opinion and to deal with that problem.

If there were an important structural role for the undersecretary of public diplomacy in this strategic communication process, it would be to think about these issues on an issue-by-issue basis; that as a particular foreign policy or international or economic issue were being discussed, that there would be someone in the room who would be thinking about the implications of the given message with a variety of audiences. There are issues that are resonating with foreign audiences and there are issues that are not. Sri Lanka does not resonate. It doesn't matter. Nepal doesn't resonate. Chavez resonates for Venezuela and because of that Bolivia does. There are people in Latin American who are watching the developments of some countries and ignoring others completely.

An undersecretary of public diplomacy, who is in on what's going to be said that is going to reverberate internationally, could say, "Take out this point, it's not that important; we shouldn't emphasize it" or say, "You know what's important to people in Africa, it's the chance to be self-sufficient in food, and therefore, Mr. President…." -- to be able to draw the strategic communicator's attention in most circumstances; that would be the role.

Q: In our last discussion, you said that you thought Karen Hughes had succeeded to some extent in doing exactly that.

THIBEAULT: I think yes, pretty much, although with one remove. It's a little bit like pre-publication censorship. The President or someone, other people in the U.S. government, could begin messaging or addressing an issue in a certain way. Then media monitoring, embassy political reporting would indicate that certain messages weren't playing. If we go back again to a classic example we have, the renditions and the secret prisons issue. The renditions and the secret prisons issue is very similar to Iran Contra, because there are elements of it which contradict our public policy.

Q: Well, Karen Hughes was very outspoken that renditions and secret prisons were killing us in overseas audiences. Do you feel that she was successful in making that point, or unfortunately made it too late, or do you feel she failed to make the point when it really mattered?

THIBEAULT: Concerning the renditions and secret prisons – I don't believe that there was any pre-thinking. There was not a prepared public diplomacy aspect or strategy on that issue prior to it coming out. You had at least a week or ten days when we didn't have anything to say on renditions and secret prisons. No one had thought, "Now, if this question is asked, what's the proper way to respond?" If we go back to Watergate analogies, 'the modified limited hang out route', or some particular way to address an issue that you might not want to address.

When European media began to report on European airports and air space being used for rendition flights, and the allegations that there were secret CIA prisons in Eastern Europe, American spokespersons, up to the Secretary's level, had no specific responses on this. The initial responses were, "The United States does not torture and the President has said the United States does not torture." This is called "Arguing from Authority" and we heard from the field that this was very unsatisfactory. Again, I liken it to Iran Contra because there was our prohibition on selling arms to Iran, and that was apparently the crux of this.

Q: Terrorists, yes. Or negotiating with terrorists.

THIBEAULT: Right. Or negotiating with terrorists.

So, the thing is, with the renditions, I think that was an issue where I would have been surprised if a bureaucracy had thought ahead of time about how to prepare for a certain issue.

Q: Again, not to put words in your mouth. You're talking about media monitoring. I think I'm hearing two things. One is media monitoring is crucial in sensing what foreign audiences are thinking, and secondly, I think you're saying that our attention given to media monitoring has improved in the last couple of years.

THIBEAULT: I think going up to the undersecretary level it has and I think that is a big difference between previous undersecretaries. I think Karen Hughes did value having a clear idea of how issues are being depicted in the foreign media. And then also, she clearly valued the idea of picking the correct short messages for particular audiences.

Q: Does it appear to you that she had some influence over our actions in foreign affairs?

THIBEAULT: I think that she may have on certain issues, but I think it was really on the level of terminology. As I said, Karen Hughes is the ideal undersecretary of public diplomacy at one remove that she still is not in that loop.

Q: Conversely, when Charlotte Beers said, "We respect their religion," the intent was to create some sympathy in foreign public, was there any sincerity in this statement?

THIBEAULT: One of the first revelations about Arab-Muslim opinion about the United States that dawned on decision makers and strategic communicators in the United States was that some people saw American policies and actions as being entirely consistent anti-Muslim actions which informed the choice of which countries were hit by cruise missiles or which countries the United States even considered military action against. There was a strong editorial sentiment that you could just find repeatedly in the frameworks that people used to set out issues in the Middle East. One of the planks that a lot of people used was, "Of course, the United States is against Islam and is working in a war against Islam" so the emphasis, say the United States is not against Islam, that we respect Islam – that probably was a good thing to say officially at that point just to kind of get that on the

table: “Folks, this is kind of a ridiculous thing that you’re saying about the United States”. And, if you again say, in that context, as Charlotte Beers says in the Shared Values campaign, “As a matter of fact, our country is full of Muslims and they’re doing just fine, so this is not where we’re coming from.” Maybe that was not the worst message in the world to focus on. But, to get the idea that that would change the way people think about what we do in the world is just too simplistic.

Q: Our defense of Bosnian Muslims in the late ’90s – why did the Muslim world pay no heed to that?

THIBEAULT: It was a good argument for a long time. Still, there are certain times when people following the Mid-East from the Arab side, say, “Oh, I remember the United States did something great once.” And people think, “Wow, when was that?” “You remember Eisenhower didn’t let Israel and France and Britain take over the Suez Canal.” And then they say, “Yeah that was right.” And they think and they think and they think.

You could put the former Yugoslavia into a different framework and say, “You know, as a matter of fact, whether you’re Muslim or not, that’s not the point. The point is you need to be safe from genocide; you need to have a certain amount of self-determination and whatever the pattern looks like, that’s the way we’re thinking. We’re not thinking Muslim-Christian, as you can see here in Yugoslavia.”

Q: The way you’re positing this, circumstances make it extremely difficult to know what the right thing to do is. You can transcend religions and ethnic differences and say all human beings deserve to live in peace or you can address a given problem, because you must on a domestic level. This is troubled guidance for the future public diplomacy practitioner. What are we to do?

THIBEAULT: There are certain things you can do, which make good things better and bad things less bad. They are simple human ones. We are talking about empathy. And, so, a lot of times, candor is disarming. Again, going back to the renditions, we floundered on the renditions until Bellinger (John B. Bellinger III) – I don’t know the formulation of these things, but Bellinger was the first person I saw going public. Bellinger, I believe, is one of the legal people at State and he was going public to say, “We are faced with trying to protect all of our citizens and all of your citizens (you – Europeans). This is the way we’re going about it. If we tell you exactly what’s going on, it could like blow the whole thing. This is extremely difficult for us because we have never dealt with this kind of crazy opposition before who have no respect for innocent life and we’re very concerned.” And, so, it was a call for empathy. It was not satisfying to Europeans, who wanted instead investigations and shutdowns and etc., but the issue pretty much simmered away.

Q: Because Bellinger did not play games; he just said it the way it was.

THIBEAULT: He had created a construct of a non-malicious activity that was being done out of necessity and that we understood just how unpleasant it was from a standard civilized, civil liberties participatory democracy. That’s basically what he said. He said,

"Let's look at that in this framework." Secretary Rice then went with that, and then that became the way we would address this issue. Again, this was basically an issue with the European media and once that response was out there, pretty much people knew that's where we'd come back from anytime we'd hit that issue. And, as new revelations came out, they tended to focus more on, "Well, how much did the Europeans facilitate all of this?" and "How much are our governments actually complicit in this?" And, so, what seemed to be a very black and white issue when it was first brought up, again, I thought that that was a very successful approach.

Just recently, a week or two ago, in testimony, I believe the current head of the CIA said that the United States had employed water boarding on – was it three people?

Q: Yes. It's in today's Post.

THIBEAULT: …that water boarding was performed on a very limited number of people and it had not taken place since right in the aftermath of 9/11. So, here is this piece of information which we have been keeping the details of close-hold now since whenever it took place – 2002 or 2003 – during a period of time when there were implications about the way the United States was treating a very large number of prisoners with Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo – and there are still tens of thousands of prisoners in U.S. custody in Iraq. With that number of detainees and the absolute pinnacle of bad treatment being this water boarding. People were alleging we were water boarding and that everyone knew that we had tens of thousands of prisoners. The information coming up now is that we said, "Yes, we did water board, you're worst fears are realized; the United States engaged in this technique you think is horrible. But, we only did it to three people and we haven't done it in years. We did it to three people we thought planned 9/11 or were about to carry out another attack like that." The narrative on that has both ethical and logical elements.

The difference between a super power torturing three people, and a super power potentially torturing tens of thousands of people is a very different rubric. So, when I saw that information released….Again, one of the things about my position in public diplomacy is I do not have access to the secret information that may be at the basis of all of these stories. I'm strictly concerned with how to get the greatest empathy for United States actions. To allow people to put our actions into a context that is not Machiavellian, into a context that is human – is what we want. What we want is to have people say, "Jeez, I would not do what the United States just did, but I can understand where they're coming from." There's no easy textbook to that.

We conducted a series of analyses of given issues that were very big. We analyzed them in a quantitative way as far as which issues were raised in support of a U.S. position and which issues were raised against the U.S position. It's not like public opinion polling. You can't take editorials and say that our positive has gone from 15% to 20 %, but what you can do is rank order the arguments people use. What is the most frequent argument used for missile defense? What is the most frequent argument used against it?

And, so, one of the things we saw in missile defense in Europe when people wrote about

it, consultations were either the first, second or third thing that people always brought up. That, "If the United States intends to get rid of the ABM treaty and they intend to have a missile defense, they should consult with us. They should consult." Again, you look at the basic things that should be part of a strategic communication public diplomacy: it's this consultative part, it's this idea that we're listening and that we're taking your view on board, whether it's reflected…

Q: You're saying, what for example, the Europeans, what they demand and wish of us. Is it your sense that we are meeting their demands?

THIBEAULT: Again, that's something that a lot of times the public opinion polling people can tease out if they can ask just the right question. With the media monitoring you just get an idea what people are pulling into their arguments. With the United States, after 9/11 and also in Iraq, people would say, "We owe it to them." There would be a certain sentiment where people would say, "We just owe it to the United States."

Q: About 20 years ago, or after the INF situation of 1978, 1979 and 1980, apparently, media monitoring, public opinion survey were intensely embedded in the formulation of U.S. foreign policy and less so after that.

THIBEAULT: And when is this; what period is this?

Q: During the Intermediate range Nuclear Force.

THIBEAULT: Ok. Yes. Was that late '70s, early '80s?

Q: Right. It looked like friendly governments, the UK, Germany, were going to go down because of intense public reaction to this, so the foreign policy establishment in Washington began to take public reactions very seriously, and ten years later perhaps less so. What is your evaluation of how we stand today, in terms of talk about empathy and the need to insert the importance of public opinion overseas in making foreign policy?

THIBEAULT: Because of the underlying strategic relationship within the transatlantic association, the cultural affinity, people are always ready to see the bright side and to cooperate. You know the old adage: when you're at the bottom of the hole, first thing, stop digging. Anyway, so that's under there.

Go back again to second Bush term. January '05, Condoleezza Rice comes out to Europe: all sweetness and light, everyone wants a new start. We're going to look at the United States in a new way; we're going to think positive things. Condoleezza Rice plays piano in Paris; very impressive. People give her credit for being more human. And, everyone on both sides says, "We're ready now to have a new cooperation." Now, it's interesting, at this time, one of the efforts that was going on was a contractor called Media Tenor. It's really difficult to talk about media monitoring strategies without visual effects. The type of analysis that I was just speaking about that we did in the Media Reaction Officer

where we did five or six studies, (it would be very labor-intensive to do more) but we found that we could make statements about issues, blank statements about issues.

So, for example, trying Saddam Hussein – when the issue came up that Saddam Hussein was going to be tried, boom, there was a spate of editorials, globally. We captured 130 or so and what we found in that was that among some people the possibility of the death penalty precluded any participation, so it had a very negative effect for making this an international trial. We saw that people wanted an international aspect to it and that there was support for people conducting the trial, because they were the victims, but there was also some desire for some kind of hybrid. Some people wanted the International Criminal Court to take part; well, that wasn't going to happen – you knew that. One thing that we saw is that there was a big fear that it would simply be a trial directed by the United States. We saw that people who were against executing Saddam had two reasons: there was a logical reason: he's going to become a martyr – don't kill him, and there was the ethical reason: we'll be no better than he is.

Q: So, either by design or unwittingly, it was useful to posit an idea and then to flush out the response.

THIBEAULT: And, what I'm saying is, (indicating an imaginary item), that this is a cute little folder right here that pretty much lays out what you can expect, where you can expect people to come from on this issue. And it probably takes like – oh, I don't know - 100 man hours or something like that, of using available media reaction material…

Q: As far as the energy that was put into gathering this rich, ample, categorized, material, do you feel that it was indeed factored into what the U.S. did?

THIBEAULT: No. This type of report needs advocacy for the findings, or people need to know there's a resource that has this archival material.

We did another analysis of Guantanamo – the whole prisons issue. We looked at a thousand editorials, at least, from a number of issues. The media monitoring ability is the ability to capture foreign statements in this certain public forum when it's editorially interesting. So, for Guantanamo, when Guantanamo was first set up, we had a sample of 75-85 editorials when it first hit the media in the beginning of probably 2002. It was pretty early when it was first set up. Then, at different stages, including the Supreme Court cases about Guantanamo, etc., we'd get another sample.

The same thing was available for the very public Bin Laden statements. We had captured large collections of editorials from the Middle East, from all over the world, from the Western Hemisphere, from East Asia, from different parties in Europe, countries in Europe that had troops in Iraq, from countries in Europe that didn't have troops in Iraq, etc.

We were able to slice and dice. For example, for Abu Ghraib; the distinctive concern of countries that had troops in Iraq was that the perpetrators of the Abu Ghraib tortures be

brought to justice. These were our allies in Iraq. This was an important issue to them, because they were implicated as they were part of the coalition. Therefore, they want to be part of something that is part of a criminal justice process. European countries that didn't have troops in Iraq were afraid that these revelations would produce a higher level of terrorism against the West in general. So, that's what they were afraid of. They weren't in Iraq but they just thought, "Oh, my god. This is going to stir up the radicals against all of us. Editorials from Arab and Muslim countries on the torture said, "Didn't we tell you that this was a campaign against Muslims? Look at the pictures."

A skilled practitioner can take these three audiences and say, "Mr. President, Madam Secretary, if you're talking to Muslims, here's the way they're seeing this and this is something that you are somehow going to have to engage with. But, if you're talking to our allies you want to tell them we will get to the bottom of this and we will make sure it won't be repeated and you can trust us on that."

Q: Do you think that happened?

THIBEAULT: Not based on this research, it didn't happen. I think people instinctively on an interpersonal level sometimes have very, very good arguments. But, research like what I've just cited, provides a check list.

Q: It's a great resource. Do you feel that it's a tool that has not been exploited, that it was not used when it could have been?

THIBEAULT: Yes, but it's not the fault of a given administration. This type of information needs an advocate…..

Q:….an undersecretary…

THIBEAULT: It could be an undersecretary, it could be an assistant secretary, but it could just be someone with a busy phone. Because it's the kind of research I was involved in, I am very enamored of it. But, at the same time, there are other kinds of research for media monitoring that turns into graphs and charts that oftentimes has its roots in the advertising business or the commercial field. The State Department, which is very concerned about showing evidence of effectiveness, wanted to measure something about the foreign media to see if our messaging was having positive or negative effects.

Q: So, they were looking at that as a result, rather than as input into future actions.

THIBEAULT: Right. But, they weren't looking at my material.

They hired a company called Media Tenor and Media Tenor had a very Germanic methodology of counting every single mention of the target institution, whether it'd be the United States, whether it'd be the Secretary of State, whether it'd be the U.S. criminal justice system, or, for example whether it'd be specifically Guantanamo. Their monitors would go through a selection of publications with intense scrutiny. So, Der Spiegel

magazine, if it's running 89 pages, they're going to look for every single mention of the United States and they're going to look in the surrounding text to see, first of all, if this mention of the United States positive, negative or neutral. This is one of the basics of the Media Tenor approach. So, what you would get on these positive, negative, neutral graphs that they would produce was a spectrum of colors - red, green and yellow – it's like a traffic light – red is negative, green positive and yellow neutral.

So, one thing that was very persuasive to me from Media Tenor was a vast number of mentions were neutral. So, this strategic trashing of the United States that people fear is going on is not the main thrust concerning the United States in international media; there's so much other stuff going on. But, Media Tenor had rubrics that they used in the commercial world to say, "If you're negatives get higher than a certain percentage, you'd better do something about it. If your positives are higher than this given percentage, you're on easy street." It was a very interesting gauge that is used in the commercial world to be able to apply to the United States. Not surprisingly, during the war in Iraq, there was a lot of negatives out there. So what you would see broken down for a wide variety of topic, then split by country and split by type of media – they could slice and dice this information. And you could see for Secretary Rice, in January, she was considered more positively than she was the month before.

Q: Who paid attention to this information?

THIBEAULT: PA (Public Affairs Bureau). PA was acting this way in concern for evidence of effectiveness, and so the idea was, "let's see what we can track." The interesting thing that Media Tenor taught me from the reports I saw and from the briefings I sat in on with them (and this is all unclassified materials), was that their approach was to direct your strategic communications to improving the graph to get more green and less red. So, more green and less red would be a measure of effectiveness.

What was the most successful way they brainstormed that you could do this? Have Secretary Rice play the piano. So, Secretary Rice in January goes to Europe and plays the piano. Not because Media Tenor has told her to play the piano. But, the fact that she does play the piano means that in France, where she plays the piano, the percentage of positive statements about Secretary Rice goes way up.

So, the Media Tenor precept is there's only a certain amount of mention you're likely to get in the particular set of international media sources that they're monitoring with such intensity. There are only so many mentions they're going to make of the United States, so if you can get neutral mentions and positive mentions up, they're going to squeeze out the negative mentions. So, if you apply this to the Middle East, don't talk about how things are going badly in Fallujah right at the moment; don't talk about Fallujah; talk about the World Economic Forum in Jordan, which is talking about economic cooperation and economic growth and access to markets, and all of these things.

Q: Isn't it intuitive? You don't need a high cost consultant to tell you to avoid issues that are causing us pain and condemnation and to concentrate on things that appear to be

positive.

THIBEAULT: No, not necessarily, because there may be issues that the domestic news cycle is demanding that you talk about involving Iraq. Well, then, as much as you can, when dealing with people from the Middle East, you should be talking about the World Economic Forum, and you should be getting camera time between the Secretary and King Abdullah and the other King Abdullah and camera time with Mubarak and talk about trade.

Q: So, is it natural and proper then that there's a bureaucratic difference between public affairs and public diplomacy?

THIBEAULT: I just think it's a matter of sophistication. I think that in the past, when public affairs had as its task at the State Department to explain our foreign policy to a domestic audience and the U.S. Information Agency took as its task to explain our foreign policy to a foreign audience, there was an organization distance between the two. But, at the same time, as a public affairs officer overseas, you use the daily State Department press briefing to talk about our policies. We didn't have different policies than the United States had; but, addressing a foreign audience, you would choose to emphasize not only what we were saying about issues that were relevant to the region, but also, the parts of what we said that created the greatest empathy.

Q: And I take it that you think that it is still possible to do that?

THIBEAULT: Yeah. And, again, it just takes this level of sophistication in PA and organizationally within PA to be able to look through the two lenses. The power of answering the U.S. public is just so enormous, even when the president or secretary travel overseas, specifically to visit the Saudis or the Jordanians. When the press conference starts, two thirds of the questions are from the American traveling press who have gone with them. It is so hard to pull away from that.

Q: We've gone on a….

THIBEAULT: A tangent?

Q: …a wonderful tangent and to be reductionist, which I tend to be, I am going to try to summarize what I think I have just heard. But, I don't want to leave this topic until I feel that you're satisfied that you've gotten your point across.

THIBEAULT: I think that there is a limited ability to sway foreign audiences, particularly if you cannot appeal to their self interest. And again, on terrorism, for example, we do. We see very often people will write, "Terrorism really is a global scourge." And we had a period of time when a lot of people were depicting terrorism as America's problem, because America somehow had done these things and therefore America is subject to this. But, I think we've always had a position that terrorism is everyone's problem. And we see that resonate.

There's a limit to how much you can sway other people unless you can show them a certain action is really in their self interest. So you've got to have limited expectations, but at the same time you can get a lot of mileage. In Japan we just had the latest of the Okinawa rape charges, which is always an irritant between the two publics. The ambassador immediately went to the highest appropriate official with an apology – very quick, very culturally responsive. Japan is really an apology society. So, a lot of people are doing the right things.

The media monitoring is a part of this loop and there are different ways to analyze. Some of it, as I said about this Media Tenor stuff, is very mechanistic, almost like the weather report. It gives you 50 different cities and it tells you what the barometric pressure is, and you have to figure it out; you have to figure out where the storm's coming from in a public diplomacy sense. Interesting data, but my feel has always been more into the rhetoric; more into the ideas, but not forgetting that it's logos, pathos, and ethos. You take the one that is going to be the most effective with your audience. If you have a logical meat and potatoes argument to make that something's in the self interest of all Bolivians, they'll see it. But, if you don't have that logical argument that's not so solid, you may want to have an emotional argument about we helped them with the flood six years ago and now's the time to buckle up or whatever. Or, it's an ethical argument where you say, "This is not about helping us, this is just the right thing to do."

Q: Logos, pathos, ethos?

THIBEAULT: Logos, pathos, ethos. This is strictly Aristotelian.

Q: Meaning, the first thing you try to do is to make a rational argument, logos.

THIBEAULT: No, they're not in order. What I'm saying is that you look at these three options. So, when we ended up with Bellinger and the renditions, he has an emotional argument which is, "My god, what are we going to do? What would you do? Innocent people are going to die." He has a logical argument. The logical argument is, "This is actually going to save lives and you should be able to look at it that way." And, his ethical argument is more in the responsibility; his ethical argument is, "It's our responsibility."

In some cases you can't make the ethical argument; you have to make a logical argument. You'll see this in public discourse. Public discourse will swing back and forth between people who say, "This is the right thing to do. Don't fail us." Three months later those same people say, "Grow up. This is the real world. We have to do this for practical reasons, so hold your nose!"

Q: People. Do you mean policy makers? Do you mean the public? Do you mean senators?

THIBEAULT: People advocating positions in public. In our business you just have to

know that none of these arguments is actually superior to the others in terms of connecting with an audience.

And, it's nice if you believe these things sincerely. It makes it easier to do. But, there are plenty of times when you have to think strategic communications; public diplomacy is similar to being a lawyer. You make the best case you can for your client; you shouldn't be lying, but you may leave out some information because it's not asked. The lawyer's job is to say, "You have no evidence putting my client at the scene of the crime." The lawyer may believe, "This guy has lied to me. Everything he's told me has been a lie." That's not relevant. So, again, don't confuse the communicator's statement with what they believe.

Q: Will you reassure the reader of this transcript that we're not talking about urging public communicators to lie?

THIBEAULT: No, not at all. I'm just saying that a lot of times you, sitting across from me here, have come up with a formulation of events that fits together perfectly, but that's not the way I would say it if I would be representing the United States.

Q: Advocacy being the difference between the things that different people would say.

THIBEAULT: You could say such provocative things about Abu Ghraib, about weapons of mass destruction.

Q: I didn't say that. [Laughs]

THIBEAULT: There are all of these issues that…it's not an appropriate tack to take. Again, if the representative of the United States is in a situation where candor is an appropriate strategy – and candor is often a very, very good strategy – then it's not that they're lying other times. But as I said on this issue of water boarding, to just come out and say, "It was three guys. You remember what it was like in 9/11. One of them planned 9/11. We haven't done it since. I don't know if we'll do it again." That's what basically what we said. But, if we had said this, again, five years before or three years before, it would have been more effective.

Again, I am getting off on a tangent.

Q: No, not at all. Here's what stands out, Steve. We've been on a fascinating and extremely nuanced path here. Communication is an extremely complicated thing. It has to do with the interest of the person communicating and convincing and persuading and understanding the other side and reacting when appropriate and overriding, sometimes the others…

THIBEAULT: If it were possible; that would be good.

Q: What stands out in this discourse to me, that you said, you've highlighted candor and

empathy as the more direct and effective ways of communicating with foreign publics. Here's a phrase that really stands out, putting yourself in the position of a hostile audience, "I would not have done what the United States did, but I understand where they're coming from."

THIBEAULT: That is the way we hope someone would perceive us. If you can't have them on your side, you'd at least like them understanding where you're coming from.

Q: Going back to what we used to call, mutual understanding, which is still enabling legislation of our activities. And, I guess with limited expectation because the weather report is often wrong. Using that analogy, the weather report in Washington DC is wrong half the time.

THIBEAULT: Yeah. So, this has been the last eight years of my career. It's been consistently reaching a different understanding of what this is all about. When I was in the field preparing media reaction reports, I had no idea that there was even an office back in the United States that collected them all and analyzed them with this emphasis after 9/11 on strategic communications. I just feel this is the culmination of what I learned in college. And, in college I had no framework as to how I would ever apply my knowledge and love of rhetoric. These last eight years have been totally in this field and not just from the point of view of the communications between the U.S. and foreign audiences, but also with how these issues are conceptualized within the U.S. government.

Q: Did you say what you majored in in college? I forget.

THIBEAULT: It was speech/theatre, but it was the argumentation-debate sense.

Q: So, Aristotle was the basis of this.

THIBEAULT: Aristotle is totally the basis of this. They don't have Aristotle's actual treatises; what they have are the lecture notes from people who taught about Aristotle hundreds of years later.

Q: Or Plato, right?

THIBEAULT: I think on some of these. This is the rhetoric – Aristotle's rhetoric. When you first read it, you read things that are almost like tautologies: what is good for me is bad for my enemy, except things that are bad for both of us like plague or things like that. Duh. But, in fact, the man is laying out a flow chart: things good for both of us, ok, maybe we can use that.

My original interest at that time was political and religious persuasion. Cults like Moses, David and the Children of God – Lyndon LaRouche – just to see how people used arguments to persuade. This is actually what I do now.

Q: When did this pique your interest? Did this happen because of interesting courses you

took in college or was this from before then?

THIBEAULT: I took argumentation and debate and learned about Aristotle.

Q: Did you know up to then how interested you really were?

THIBEAULT: No, but I've always been interested in communication phenomenon. When I was in high school I would watch television shows, the anti-Nazi ones like the Rat Patrol. I would count how many Nazis were killed in an episode; did they suffer or were they killed outright? They were always killed outright because we would never make someone suffer; we would never have any trauma. And, then I'd count the numbers, interested not just in the depiction of the combat but in how we managed to do World War II, where we would kill 20 of them for every one of ours who was tragically killed. So, I would do stuff like that.

Q: Bang, you're dead and the guy would just fall over.

THIBEAULT: Yes. Well, with a machine gun. And they would all die and none would be injured.

Q: Not even a second of pain – just to fall down dead.

THIBEAULT: Unless they were going to throw a grenade – then they could be in pain for a moment.

Q: Then the film The Longest Day, which was kind of a different thing.

THIBEAULT: But, again, this is TV shows. I would watch and try to see. Sometimes a show would be running real low, hardly any deaths, and then the last three minutes they'd get 15-20 death bodies in there. I just liked to monitor communications.

Q: Well, you were intrigued by this. Were you consciously aware that you were doing an intellectual development process? You were just a kid watching television.

THIBEAULT: Well, when I graduated from college, I thought, "What a shame you can't do this for a living."

Q: So, Steve, we've gone on what is not a tangent; it's a very basic and extremely important primer on what communication is. Without knowing what communication is you can't get very far, in think, in dealing with foreign publics. So, to me personally, it is extremely indispensable in getting this all on the record.

We've come to the close, I think, of one phase of this discussion, which is the nature of communication and what you've been able to do in the media react office. I think we're coming to the end of this discussion. We have not yet gotten you from Iraq to Jordan, chronologically, so we would like to do that in the next session and also get some

impressions of how it's been for you in linking, as you just did, your interests as a young man back in high school and college and how you have been able to actually make a living out of it.

Any sort of final comment for today, February 17, 2008 before we conclude for today.

THIBEAULT: No, I think this should be enough.

Q: Well, this is Dan Whitman interviewing Steve Thibeault. This is the end of our February 17, 2008 interview. Next time we are going to talk about Jordan and maybe get some of your reflections.

THIBEAULT: Right. Good.

Q: This is Dan Whitman interviewing Steve Thibeault. It's March 2, 2008. Steve, in our last session, we talked about some of the rhetorical basics of diplomacy and its importance. I would like to get back to that later. But, for now, let's go chronologically back to, I believe it is 1996. Let's get you from Thailand to Jordan.

THIBEAULT: Ok. When we were finishing up in Thailand, I think our feeling was that we'd be looking at a Washington tour because I'd gone overseas in 1986. This was ten years later. I hadn't done a Washington tour, apart from my language training for Thai and then prior to that my language training for Arabic. Then, we got a call from Amman, where my previous boss, Marcelle Wahba, who had been my boss in Cairo was coming in as the Public Affairs officer in Jordan and was looking for an information officer, press attaché. And, my wife and I had always heard that Washington was the greatest hardship post, so we decided we would take one more tour overseas. I arrived in Jordan in the summer of 1996.

There had been a peace treaty between Israel and Jordan, I believe in 1992 – the Wadi Araba Treaty.

Q: Spell it.

THIBEAULT: W-A-D-I A-R-A-B-A. Wadi means valley.

Q: Dry area.

THIBEAULT: Wadi can be dry or wet; it's kind of seasonal.

Q: So Jordan established itself as the second Arab country with a peace treaty with Israel, which it remains to this day. There are two Arab countries with peace treaties with Israel.

THIBEAULT: The personal power of King Hussein, in my time in Jordan, had a big effect on the bi-lateral relationship between Jordan and Israel. I don't know of any public

opinion poll on it. But, just in my experience of a couple of events, King Hussein had a relatively good image in Israel. When I was in Jordan, after the peace treaty, the border between Israel and Jordan had been rationalized, so that all the territory that was Jordanian returned to Jordanian sovereignty and control. One of these places was an island. I think it was on the Jordan River. I don't know how many other rivers there are that are on the Israeli-Jordanian border. This island returned to Jordanian sovereignty. But, during the years when the Israelis had had control of the island, they had used it for field trips, etc. So, even though it was under Jordanian control, again Israelis still had access to it.

There had been a group of Israeli school kids who had traveled to this island and a Jordanian security guard opened fire with a machine gun, killing maybe two or three Israeli girls. So, a Jordanian security guard murders these girls.

In the Jordanian press, from his side, there were statements that the girls had mocked him while he was praying or something like that. I think it's kind of a natural desire when you see someone representing you or your country do something terrible that you feel there must be some kind of extenuating circumstances because soldiers just don't kill girls. King Hussein was out of the country at the time. He flew back immediately. He went to Israel; he went to the homes of the girls who were killed. He apologized to them personally. I can't speak about the exact body language of the event. I think I remember him kind of abasing himself or getting down or something like that to deliver this apology. It struck me at the moment as a tremendous illustration of his understanding of what could be done with a very hostile audience, for Israelis, who had just had innocent children murdered, to have the king of the foreign country come and personally interact with the families of those girls is something that perhaps only a sovereign could do - to make that decision on the spur of the moment to send a message to a country that is absolutely crucial for Jordan's future. Relations with Israel are just tremendously important to Jordan, and to see King Hussein make that move just struck me as evidence of his understanding of what needed to be done for his country's sake and what was the appropriate thing to do. As I said, I think it might be only because he was a sovereign that he was able to do that.

Q: Was this shortly after you arrived in Amman?

THIBEAULT: No. I think this is probably in the middle of my tour.

Q: Ok.

THIBEAULT: King Hussein died right at the end of my tour.

I remember at the time of the shooting incident, when I spoke to Jordanians about the event, the people I spoke to were not angry with King Hussein for having done this. But, their question was, "When have the Israelis ever apologized for killing innocent girls?" It struck me that there are these opportunities for people on both sides of a dispute to do something remarkable like this. I think of Sadat in Egypt. At a time when any interaction

with Israel was forbidden, he went and addressed the Knesset. This in Arabic was called the Mubadra, the initiative.

Q: Spell it.

THIBEAULT: M-U-B-A-D-R-A. Mubadra.

And he was killed for making peace with Israel. Rabin - I don't know if there was any signature act that he took in this way. But, these two examples strike me as showing how you can disarm your opponents in another country and how you can empower people in the other country who would like to see better relations and reconciliation.

So, if we go back to the Wadi Araba treaty, which, again, was before I got to Jordan, there was a great deal of hope in Jordan that peace with Israel would bring a big economic dividend. The idea was that if Jordan's greatest archeological heritage, which is Petra, were part of the Israeli tourist economy, it would have a tremendous positive effect. By the time I got to Jordan in '96, there was disappointment in Jordan that this economic flourishing had not really taken place. There indeed was Israeli tourism to Petra. And, symbolically, the tourists would pay an entrance fee as their bus arrived at Petra; they'd buy their trinkets. But, they wouldn't stay in Petra, they wouldn't stay in the hotels; they'd go back to Israel at night. It seemed a symbolic thing to a lot of Jordanians that any kind of economic benefit they got from their relationship with Israel would be limited like that.

Q: Aside from tourism, what were the other possibilities for economic benefits?

THIBEAULT: The greatest schematic possibility was the possibility that Israeli economic expertise and entrepreneurship could be coupled with Jordanian labor, which was at a much lower pay scale than Israeli labor.

The theme that I have for my time in Jordan is that in my perception the United States pulled out all the stops to help Jordan; that after the Wadi Araba treaty, there was no lack of a U.S. assistance program. So, for example, there was a Peace Corps delegation in Jordan when I was there. Jordan was given non-NATO ally status, which is what Israel and South Korea also had. It was a status that allowed Jordan special access to purchasing used military equipment and things like this. Food aid under PL-480 went up dramatically; straight development aid to Jordan went up dramatically. Being the press attaché and working with the AID office at the embassy, it was my responsibility to get as much acknowledgement among the Jordanian public for all of the different programs that the United States was instituting to help Jordan. From 1992 until I left Jordan, the volume of all of these AID programs only went up and they went up dramatically.

Q: You arrived in '96 and you left in….

THIBEAULT: 1999. And, in 1999, the situation still held. Both in Egypt and in Jordan, what struck me, not as an expert in development, but as a bureaucrat and as someone who

worked at an embassy, was that the AID programs for these countries were geared to development needs in the country and that they were very specifically organized to address what were seen as the greatest obstacles to development. So, in Jordan it was population growth, second it was water and then, third, was economic help to entrepreneurship through micro-loans, which took the lead from the Dream Bank….

Q:…Bangladesh…

THIBEAULT: …in Bangladesh.

Q: So you felt the AID program was effective?

THIBEAULT: I felt that it was. It was targeting the correct problems. Jordan, all the years I was there, was drawing down its ground water. There was a big dam and this was not on the Jordan River. There's another river that comes in from Syria and there's a big dam and I think it was called the Abdullah dam. The height of the water behind this dam was sometimes in the news, supposedly indicating whether there was a drought or whether there was sufficient water. But, the truth was that the dam could be full to its tip top and could pass on as much water as possible to the Jordanian economy, and the country was still in water deficit because it was drawing down its ground water. So, I think, a lot of our programs were working towards efficiency of water use in the agricultural sector, etc., etc.

With regard to the population – I don't know how directly we could address population concerns in those days. I don't remember exactly how we were addressing that. There's a general rubric that bringing development in and including women in public life has the effect of lowering the rate of increase of birth. I think that was a part of what we were doing.

On the economic development, we had the micro loans. I think the micro loans represent low hanging fruit: there are people who are making a living on their own initiative and if they had modest sums of money, they could not only do better themselves, but draw some other people into the paying economy. So, the micro loans were important.

There was another very important initiative, the QIZs – the Qualified Industrial Zones. The QIZ was particularly attractive for the United States in dealing with Jordan and Israel, because it was an effort to couple the Israeli investment and the Israeli entrepreneurship with Jordanian labor conditions. Initially, when the legislation was written, these QIZs were supposed to be on the border between Israel and Jordan, so that there would be a zone where raw materials would enter and finished products would leave the zone but they would never really enter Jordan. Jordan came back and said, "No, this isn't where we want it; we actually this QIZ to be inside Jordan." Lo and behold, that was made possible. Within this QIZ, international companies could take their products and then export them duty-free to the United States. So, that was the lure, the incentive.

Q: Now, you were saying earlier that this was the hope of the Jordanians, and that they

were somewhat frustrated. They did not get quite the success they wanted in '96 to '98.

THIBEAULT: Right. That there was not this big influx of Israeli talent, Israeli investment, Israeli tourists. The Jordanians were disappointed.

Q: Did the QIZs depend on Israeli expertise or could it have been American?

THIBEAULT: In theory the objective was, again, to have Israelis and Jordanians interact on a growing personal basis, and business basis, and official basis, so that contacts between the two countries and their peoples could grow naturally with common goals, rather than something that was being imposed by outsiders telling the Israelis and Arabs to make nice with each other. The QIZs, from my experience, were the most successful part of this.

Interestingly, though some Israeli companies did take advantage of the QIZ, we had third countries, South Korean investors or Hong Kong investors, who saw an opportunity to export duty-free to the United States. They would pull together an investment package that had the requisite amount of Israeli content. That Israeli content could be investment money; it could be raw materials; it could be supervisory personnel – something like that.

Q: Doing this in Jordan?

THIBEAULT: Doing this in Jordan.

Q: So it was entrepreneurs from South Korea, from Hong Kong…

THIBEAULT: It could be, yes. We took a lot of journalists out to this operation, which was employing thousands of Jordanians in better labor conditions than they might have someplace else in the country. It was popular right in the area it was taking place. One of the companies that was most successful was a company that was doing clothing manufacturing for third parties. I believe some of Victoria Secret's stuff was made there. The labels would say, "Made in Israel" when literally it was being made in Jordan.

Q: How did that work?

THIBEAULT: The QIZ was a magic wand that you could wave over these products.

Q: Did the Jordanians object to this?

THIBEAULT: What I found was that there was not a lot of enthusiasm for the project outside, I think, the people who actually had jobs. Anyone who gets jobs would be happy with it. But, I was distressed to see that in Jordan the criticism was that Jordanians were being exploited as cheap labor by the Israelis, which certainly fit their stereotypes of the Israelis and in Israel it was criticized as exporting jobs to Jordan that Israelis should have.

Q: So, everybody figured out how to lose.

THIBEAULT: Yeah.

Q: Was there any cultural reaction to the production of Victoria Secret's items in an Arab country?

THIBEAULT: No, that was just my own ironic observation.

Q: Yeah. Ok.

THIBEAULT: This is an example, I believe, of the creative thinking that goes on in the government, that goes on in the State Department that goes on in USAID, that goes on in the White House as far as trying to brain storm how do you achieve Arab-Israeli cooperation. I am sure you are very familiar with all of the exchange programs conducted by USIA and still conducted at the State Department where the object is: put Israelis and Arabs in a venue where they can interact on something not directly related to the Arab-Israeli dispute, whether it is conservation, water resource developments, micro enterprise, or things like that.

Q: You talk about brain storming and coming up with innovative ideas. What's your take on how well the U.S. government did?

THIBEAULT: I though very well. When Congress mandates Arab-Israeli peace projects in order to get Arabs and Israelis together – again, not to confront the political issue that you see rehashed everyday in the newspapers in the Middle East – but instead to establish some kind of relationship on a topic of mutual interest. I just see that that was one of the major objectives of our cultural exchange programs, of our economic assistance programs that we were consistently to do what could be done. And this is in contrast to the inflexibility that the United States usually has in terms of making policy pronouncements on the Arab-Israeli dispute – that we tend to be frozen in that arena, whereas these kind of cultural exchange programs and economic development programs are too technical, I think sometimes, to draw the criticism that an outright policy change would, so it gives you a little bit more flexibility.

Q: You've just said this, but let's reiterate. You're saying that policy not purely foreign policy tends to be inflexible, whereas cultural exchange leaves a lot more area for flexibility and impunity.

THIBEAULT: Yeah. And then again, I think in looking at the QIZs, I think a program like that shows that when the economic situation is possible that I think we showed some great creativity in making it happen. But, because only Jordan and Egypt had peace treaties with Israel, those were the only two countries that could benefit from these QIZ arrangements.

Q: Tell me a little about your role as an IO in observing these initiatives that others were taking. How were you instrumental?

THIBEAULT: Well, what we would do – it was a classic information officer operation. This is prior to the big impact of Al Jazeera and Al Adovia and the international Arab broadcasters. They were just starting to develop the satellite dish audience that is so important. But, when I got to Jordan in 1996, Jordanians were getting their news from several sources. One, was the Jordanian print and broadcast outlets.

Q: Were these official media?

THIBEAULT: The broadcast, certainly it was official. On the print side, the staid or the standard Jordanian newspapers, Al Dustour, Al Rai had managing boards where the government definitely had the deciding vote on membership. So, both of these papers were controlled by the government at one remove – they had an ownership stake in the papers and they also got to nominate a certain number of members to the board. So, in effect, you could call them pro-government papers.

Q: They were private papers where the government had a veto, so to speak, on the editorial board.

THIBEAULT: The government actually had an ownership stake – not a majority, but an ownership stake. If we could work with journalists in those two newspapers, we knew that people would see our stories, that they would see a story that laid out what the particular assistance program was doing for the Jordanians, for example.

Q: Were these newspapers and media open to the stories you were interested in having them cover?

THIBEAULT: We had a good collegial relationship with them and relationship tended to go very deeply with the columnists, whom we read everyday. Jordan was awash in columnists. We'd read their stories and they would attend our events. The up-and-coming journalists, those whom we felt had a long career in front of them, were prime candidates to be selected for an international visitor's program, to visit the States for a month.

This is all a very classic information section operation that you have a group of journalists that you know are willing to give you a fair shake and to present your material without distortion. So we had those newspapers.

We had a very unusual occurrence while I was there: an actual independent newspaper did arise and this newspaper was called: Al Arab al Yawm, which is "the Arabs today". This was an independent newspaper, but it was subject to Jordan's press laws, which are pretty strict.

Q: You got there in '96; it came in in…

THIBEAULT: I think it probably came in '97 or so. A lot of them opened up.

They really established their credibility with a particular incident involving a Palestinian. I am trying to think if you should call him a PLO person. I don't know my Palestinian organizations that well, but the man was Khaled Mashal. He is now HAMAS's man in Damascus. Khaled Mashal was in Jordan and something happened to him. There was a scuffle of some kind and he was taken to the hospital. The mainstream papers didn't cover this story; Al Arab al Yawm runs a headline on the front page to the effect that the MOSSAD had attempted to kill Khaled Mashal. The next day's newspaper they are still running this story, providing all sorts of details. Their story was that the Israeli agents had shot some poison in his ear and it had caused him to go into some kind of terminal shock. However, when this scuffle took place the people who were involved with it got chased down by a cab driver and apprehended and handed over to the Jordanians.

So, on that second day, the mainstream Jordanian papers, the papers that have a government relationship, are downplaying this incident and saying it is not a spy thing, and it is not an assassination attempt. By the fourth day, they had changed their tune: this in fact was an assassination attempt; and in fact it was MOSSAD agents and they did shoot something into his ear.

Q: A great triumph for the independent newspaper.

THIBEAULT: It was a great triumph, particularly for its credibility because you can just know that Arab audiences are completely willing to accept MOSSAD plots to explain things that happen.

Q: Why would the official media have tried to play that down?

THIBEAULT: Because it would exacerbate tensions between the two countries.

Again, what I know about the actual event and the subsequent events is all hearsay coming from Jordanians that I know. But, the upshot was that the King demanded the antidote from the Israelis. This was straight out of a movie. The King demanded the antidote from the Israelis in return for returning their two agents who had carried this off, who were carrying Canadian passports, which then caused a Canadian-Israeli diplomatic tiff, that Israeli agents would be carrying these Canadian passports. So, apparently King Hussein…

Q: This is too fascinating. The individuals were of what descent? Were they Israeli? Were they Jordanians? Were they truly of Canadian descent?

THIBEAULT: They were traveling as Canadians and, I believe, they were Israelis.

Again, it is something that when I first saw it in the newspaper, I could've taken it either way: that it was just some crazy idea cooked up by the newspaper for its circulation purposes. But, the more that came out, the more apparently they got it right, that in fact this was an assassination attempt. And, if you look now, when Israel is at loggerhead with HAMAS in Gaza, this guy, Khaled Mashal, is still sitting in Damascus, running HAMAS

operations from there.

Q: HAMAS in Damascus.

THIBEAULT: So, he is still a major figure and this was Israel's chance to put him out of business.

Q: MOSSAD blew it.

THIBEAULT: Well, in a way I guess you have to say that. Certainly getting caught…. . Apparently, they did deliver the antidote that allowed this guy to survive.

At that point I got very interested in Al Arab al Yawm, because it actually seemed to be an independent newspaper in the Arab world, which had challenged the official line on a very sensitive story.

There was a lot of sniping at the time between the government and the media in Jordan. Jordan maintains a very positive reputation in the West. King Hussein knew how to play the Israeli media and the Israeli public. He certainly knew how to play the American public. He knew the correct things to say. As the peace process went along between the Israelis and the Palestinians, the United Stated could always count on King Hussein in Jordan to say what we considered to be the positive thing that would move things forward.

Q: If I am remembering correctly, this is that period of Queen Noor.

THIBEAULT: Certainly, Queen Noor; Lisa Halaby is her name. I think she was a New Yorker from an Arab-American family. That's a completely other story, the dynamics of Queen Noor and the royal family. I'm not an expert on that.

Q: Wouldn't her presence have created an openness to the United States?

THIBEAULT: Certainly. It was a very good connection for the United States in Jordan, certainly to have an American-born queen. She had foundations. Both she and the king and I believe every major member of the royal family has a foundation and the foundations all had good goals. Crown Prince Hassan has a foundation dealing with interfaith dialogue, something that would play very well here. And, the Queen's foundations, say for example on employing women in the handicraft industry for tourism, we were able to match up very well sometimes with our AID programs with these institutions. That would allow us entrée into a particular community or would give us a way to carry out these programs – the royal bureaucracy, cutting the red tape and things like that.

So, you have this situation where Jordan had a very positive, modern, forward-looking image in the West, but at the same time public opinion, as it is the Arab world as a whole, is very negative about Israel, is very negative about the U.S. and what they see as

unthinking support of Israel.

Q: It was said at the time, King Hussein was dealing with 70% of his population being Palestinians and that 70% of his own people were sort of standoffish or skeptical.

THIBEAULT: That could be a little bit high. From what I understood at the time, the majority of Jordanian citizens were Palestinians. From my looking around at the region at the time, Jordan had the most forward-leaning attitude toward the Palestinians. Palestinians could become Jordanian citizens. Now, the Queen of Jordan, Queen Rania, is of Palestinian origin. So, the Jordanians, compared to say the Syrians or the Egyptians, provided more incentive and ability for Palestinians to integrate into Jordanian society. However, one of the interesting things I saw when I arrived in Jordan or listened to conversations in Jordan, is that people were described as "Jordanian Jordanian". I came to realize that "Jordanian Jordanian" meant non-Palestinian. So, just that phrase indicates a certain resentment or a certain considering of Palestinians as somehow the outsiders to a certain extent. The political system was gerrymandered to maintain minority status in the legislature for Palestinians. But, again, compared to what I saw elsewhere in the region, the discrimination against Palestinians in Jordan legally seemed to be less than it was in other countries.

Q: You were making a distinction between what I guess is the central government as forward-leaning…..

THIBEAULT: …. and the population not so forward-leaning.

Q: Is that part of the discrepancy – the fact that there was a majority of people who were not "Jordanian Jordanian"?

THIBEAULT: I think that's a big part of it. But then again, just Arab public opinion even among "Jordanian Jordanians", I'm sure is against…..

Q: Were the majority of the people not so happy with King Hussein's positions?

THIBEAULT: I couldn't say. I think King Hussein had the ability to get out ahead of his population with the understanding that he knew what he was doing or something to that effect.

But, the relevance here of what I was speaking about is that if you had an absolutely free press what would sell would be outrageous anti-Israeli propaganda. There'd be a big market for that, which would really be at odds with the kind of image that Jordan was presenting; so the press laws were in place.

When I was there between '96 and '99, there was a lot of fiddling with the press laws. But, in effect, they used a bunch of ways to shut down newspapers that had nothing to do with content. So, for example, in order to be a chief editor, you needed a certain number of years as a full-time journalist and I believe it was consecutive years. So, a weekly

publication, for example, that was writing things derogatory about the King in a certain way, suddenly could lose its license because they discovered that the editor had lived in the United States for two years and therefore didn't have that unbroken career as a Jordanian journalist. If you were to say, "Why are you shutting down this newspaper?" the response would be, "This has nothing to do with what they write; this just has to do with the…

Q: …. professional standards….

THIBEAULT: ….professional standards." There's always a big desire for American Institutions and for the U.S. government to bring in Americans to raise professional standards in the journalism profession throughout the Arab world. Again, it was a very savvy way for them to approach us and say, "That's all we're doing is we're just trying to make sure that we have certain professional standards."

Q: When you say Hussein had the ability get out ahead of his population on certain issues, did he take personal risks in doing this or was he so savvy that he knew he was ok in making these gestures?

THIBEAULT: I think that he took personal risks in the same way that Rabin took personal risks; that you can never rule out the fact that someone may come after you. I think people understood the ground rules very, very well in Jordan, and they could look around the region and see that the ground rules were looser than they were in other places.

And I believe the King had a status as having taken his country for almost 50 years in a sustainable direction – sustainable may not be the exact word, but in a direction that most people were not angry about. So, he had a tremendous amount of personal connection. He had the unquestioned ability to speak an elevated, flowing, poetic Arabic and to speak Bedouin out in the desert, to speak English, to speak French – a master communicator.

They would use these press laws to corral the media. I don't believe that they were beyond taking a journalist out of his house in the middle of the night and sticking them in a cell naked and then sending them home. They got their messages across that there were some lines they shouldn't cross.

Now that I bring those words up, there's something in the Middle East in journalism called "red lines". You're not supposed to cross these "red lines". In Jordan the "red lines" would include direct criticism of the royal family and I think things about Israel were probably there as well, also criticism of the treaty, for example.

Q: These were understandings and not laws?

THIBEAULT: There were understandings and not laws. If you read editorials from other Arab countries you will see references to "red lines" and everyone knows exactly what they are. Most people in the country could tell you what the "red lines" were, but you

would never see them written any place. It is a mutual understanding of what cannot go in the press.

You may have observed that in the United States we have our own "red lines". I remember thinking during all the years of Lebanese civil war that you could certainly see mentions in the American media of Muslim terrorists, Lebanese terrorists, Palestinian terrorist, but you would never see a reference to Christian terrorist, even though many of the prominent Palestinian terrorists were Christian, or in Lebanon that horrendous bombings, etc. were carried out by Christians.

As for the Jordanians, where they got their news, first of all, they had their newspapers – the newspapers were controlled with these "red lines". They had Jordanian broadcasting – not very interesting. They also had Israeli broadcasting, because Jordan and Israel are so close to each other.

Q: They broadcast in Arabic?

THIBEAULT: Israel broadcasts in Arabic, both for international consumption, but also for their own domestic Arab population. That served very well to give Jordanians a kind of a stereo view of the Arab-Israeli dispute or of Israeli-Jordanian relations, so that if there were something that Jordanians knew, their government would not publicize ……

Q: These different types of information. The Jordanians were getting different points of view. What type of Jordanian was seeking or accepting these different points of view?

THIBEAULT: I think that when you think about Americans and what news they pay attention to, the deepest penetration of the news goes on topics that are of interest to everybody. So, Americans are not very interested in foreign affairs, for example. But in Jordan, when you're speaking of the Jordanian-Israeli relationship, that's something that has a very, very broad interest level, even among people who would not be interested in the news.

Say, for example, if there had been protests in Jordan. Those protests would not likely be in Jordanian media and in the old rubric, before satellite television, the best place to read about this or to hear about it would be in the Israeli-Arab media or in the Israeli-English media. So, I think that news that came about Jordan from Israel was widely spread.

Q: Was there no stigma against those who read Israeli papers or tuned into Israeli radios?

THIBEAULT: I don't think so at all. The assumption was that everybody listened or watched with a full understanding of Jordan's circumstances, that it was not a matter of listening to the enemy, it was a matter of looking at another news source and finding out what you weren't seeing domestically.

Q: So it was not at all comparable to, say, Radio Free Europe during the cold war?

THIBEAULT: I don't think so at all. And what I am describing, I believe, is an archaic situation. I think the establishment of Al Jazeera and then of Al Arabia and all sorts of international Arab broadcasters that can be picked up with satellite has changed the information environment dramatically in the Middle East. I may have said it before – if something particularly provocative had happened that people were blaming the Israelis for, the provocative photos would not show up in the Egyptian media.

Q: Are you willing to give an opinion about the quality and the penetration of Al Jazeera and Al Arabia?

THIBEAULT: I just think they changed the ground rules; they've made it much more difficult….

Q: No more "red lines"?

THIBEAULT: No, no. I think the domestic media in places like Egypt and Jordan may be a little more adventurous than they might have been in the past, but they still operate under, I believe, almost the same ground rules, that there are still "red lines" that they will not be able to touch. It is just that the newspapers' readers are still going to read Al Ahram in Egypt or Al Kokoria. You're still going to read those papers because it's got the sports news, it has what's going on in town, and it gives you a general idea of what the government is saying. It's just that when something controversial comes up, there's another way to get information that the government can't keep back from people. So that has really changed.

Q: Do you think that the average Egyptian or Jordanian will listen equally to their news as they do to the regional Al Jazeera or Al Arabia?

THIBEAULT: Most of my insights on this are really from our Jordanian employees. When I was in Jordan, we would speak about these issues. I think people pick and choose; they go to different news sources for different pieces of news.

I saw it myself. This was very interesting. When I was in Jordan, Prime Minister Netanyahu of Israel visited Jordan and in his remarks in Jordan he was open and conciliating to a certain extent. However, Jordanians, on the very same day, could hear what he said when he went back to Israel, which was very irredentist and kind of abrasive. He played a much harder role when he went back to Israel.

Q: That is a kind of a lack of sophistication on his part, isn't? Did he think that he wouldn't be heard in Jordan?

THIBEAULT: I think that all strategic communicators now have this dilemma that it's impossible to craft a message for the domestic audience that is not also for an international audience and visa versa. And so, on the record you want to say things in a foreign country as much as possible that are directed toward that audience, what will

move that audience to have empathy for the U.S. position; but you can't say anything to a foreign audience that's going to alienate American domestic audiences when it gets back.

We had an interesting thing in our press operation. My boss gave me a responsibility that was, I thought, more in the area of the cultural affairs officer, in that I had to do a – let's call it a monthly media seminar – I don't know how I would translate the Arabic. But, every month we would get Jordanian or just Arab speakers to engage in a round table or to give a lecture on a topic that was consistent with the country plan. So, whether it was on freedom of the press or whether it was on micro loans, we would try to put together a program involving the Jordanian media, sometimes having them as the panelists, sometimes bringing in an Arab-speaking American such as Shiblitof Hammid, who is the Washington correspondent for one of the Arab outlets. So, it really made my life just hectic. In addition to doing your normal press activities, I had to put on a cultural press presentation, basically, once a month – in Arabic. It was the only program that we did do in Arabic.

Q: Was it worth the hectic activities?

THIBEAULT: I think it was. I certainly didn't want to do it at the time. It just felt like the cup was overflowing with things I had to do.

Q: It sounds so intriguing, so irresistible, but I guess you were real busy without doing this.

THIBEAULT: There's no limit. There's always the VIP visits – the Congressional delegations. The Secretary of Defense, the Secretary of State would come through Jordan on a regular basis.

These are basically 'all hands on deck' kind of exercises that you prepare for beginning five or six weeks ahead of a big visit. Ideally, what you want, when the principal arrives, you want to be in a situation where you can tell them exactly what their schedule is to do in three days in fifteen minute increments. You want to prepare them especially for bilateral questions that are going to come up in any kind of press event. You want to give them biographical information on anyone that they are likely to meet, what questions these people will bring up. You want to be able to tell them, for example, "The second limo will stop with the door exactly at the entrance to the Omni hotel" or when the bags of the journalists need to be outside their hotel room door on the morning that you leave the country for the 'bag drag', as they call it. So, there's a tremendous amount of details and fore planning that come into organizing things like that.

Q: With the briefing on the bilateral issues, I guess it would have been the political officer doing it?

THIBEAULT: Well, certainly you have a parallel operation that reflects the different worlds that the public affairs and political officers live in. If you ask a political officer how relations are with Jordan, they're likely to say, "Great. I just talked to the Prime

Minister." If you ask the econ officer how relations are with Jordan, they'll say, "Great. They're working on an intellectual property law that they're about to pass." And, if you talk to the public affairs officer about how things are with Jordan, they'll say, "Well, the student demonstrations were smaller than we thought they would be and the two journalists who were in jail have just been released."

[Laughter]

Q: How often did you have these VIP visits?

THIBEAULT: I'd say about once every two months.

Q: Looking back at these monthly seminars, do you feel that this changed the tenor of the discourse with or in the country or was it just a waste of a lot of time and energy?

THIBEAULT: I don't think it changed the nature of the discourse in the country, but it provided us an opportunity every month to engage with journalists, to just have an ongoing relation with these people who either wrote opinion columns or were editors and decided what stories would be covered.

My boss, Marcelle Wahba, had very good, sophisticated instincts on how to engage people. One thing that USIA did in the late 1980s is they brought in a cadre of Arabists, people who were very proficient Arabic speakers at a level that only a small minority of the non-native speakers could get to. And, some of these people like Marcelle (Nabil Houlih was another one) were brought in because they were Arab-Americans who were fluent in both languages and very culturally sensitive. And other people who were brought in under this program, who were not native speaking, but also were just very, very good in the language, like Duncan Mac Innes. It was a very sensible initiative that USIA undertook.

I think Marcelle's idea about the monthly programs was very good.
There was another project which I was very proud of, which I proposed to her and eventually we carried out. It began with an archive of photographs from AID. The American assistance program, Agency for International Development, in Jordan, had been in the country for 50 years. We found an archive of photos from projects 40 and 30 and 20 years ago. We developed an idea of doing a photo exhibit taking the photos of these AID programs when they were going on and photographing the same place now and doing a then and now photo exhibit, which has inherent interest to Jordanians because they want to see how things have changed in 50 years or 40 years, etc. It gave us an opportunity to remind Jordanians about the American role in setting up institutions that were central to Jordanians' well being such as universities and major roads in the country that were built by the United States so long ago that people didn't realize that we'd been involved with this.

Q: Where were the venues for this exhibition?

THIBEAULT: Initially, as with all of our programs, it was the American Cultural Center within the embassy. As a venue that's a difficult venue. Our embassy in Jordan was called an Inman embassy because it met the security standards of Bobby Inman to protect American embassies from attack….

Q: …making it less accessible….

THIBEAULT: …..making it very much less accessible to Jordanians: the security people wanted us to have guest lists for programs and people coming to the programs would have to go through metal detectors, etc. So, it really made it difficult to expand our contacts with high-profile events, because we could only invite people that we knew. I think we had some arrangements for walk-ins, etc., but I think most of what we would call our successful programs in Jordan, relied very heavily on guest lists so that we sometimes limited ourselves to people we already knew, and it was difficult to bring in new people.

Q: It wasn't possible to take this photo exhibit on the road?

THIBEAULT: They did go on the road after my tenure. I finished up in '99 and this project was in 1999. We got it ready to go; it was under royal sponsorship and my understanding is that after I left the country, it did go on national tour.

Q: In your seminars with journalists, what was the relationship? Was it totally friendly? Was there teasing? Was there information going both ways? Was there persuasion in the air at all times? What was the mood there?

THIBEAULT: I there was always a very good mood. You're inviting someone, they arrive, and they're going to be open to your ideas just to be there. I think that our personal relations with the Jordanians and our Jordanian contacts were so consistent and followed up so regularly that our contacts had a good idea of what our formulations were on these controversial issues. First of all, they know that if they ask you what the official position of the United States is, you can tell them that. That's the first thing you need to do as a diplomat; you need to be able to explain what our official position is. Then, when you move back from the official position, what you try to do is to put things in a context that gets some empathy for the United States even when people don't agree with our positions.

I may have said this before about one of our Jordanian contacts, who was a journalist. We'd always engage with him on these very controversial issues, trying to bring our perspective into his experience. But, he had had a personal experience where he went to Israel. After the 1992 treaty, he made a trip to Israel. I believe he had the key to his house in Israel. Many Palestinians retain the key to their house in what is now Israel, the key that their father or their grandfather took when they left their home in the fighting in 1948, thinking that they would be going back. So, one of his reasons for going to Israel was to see the house that he'd always been told about. I think he said the people who were living there were not thrilled to see him show up. But he went and he saw the house.

And that was one of his experiences.

He also told me he rented a car and was driving in Israel and he saw two soldiers by the road equipped with weapons. He pulled over to give them a lift. They looked in at him, saw he was Arab and stepped back away and he said he could tell they were afraid. And this had an effect on him because when you engage Arabs and tell Arabs that Israelis act out of fear, that's not the image they have of Israelis. The image they have is of Israeli soldiers putting people through checkpoints and things like that. I thought this was a very telling anecdote.

Q: Did he write about this?

THIBEAULT: I don't think he wrote about that specific incident. I was in Jordan before the information universe really changed with satellite television. I think we had a very comprehensive program and effort to make Jordanians aware of everything we were doing to help their country. I think it was a standard model information program there.

Q: Did this lead to greater mutual understanding between the U.S. and Jordan?

THIBEAULT: I think it did among a certain class of people who maintained long-standing contacts. In countries where people are willing to hear us out, willing to see our position on things, and personal contact that you have from the embassy, the programs that you invite people to where they meet American thinkers, I think these have an effect. At the same time, however, attending university in the United States I believe is absolutely the most effective way to get people to see the United States.

Q: Personal contact and friendship sometimes transcend differences of opinion; people agree to disagree. It might not change the world but it might draw them into friendships.

THIBEAULT: …evolve into friendships and also to put our actions in a different context. If you have been told that the United States is a country that works against Muslims and basically is anti-Islam, visiting the United States and visiting Dearborn, Michigan and realizing that Ralph Nader is an Arab-American and is apparently running for president – I think that is just very effecting for people.

I did a de-brief of a Thai woman who had been in the United States on a USIA program at the time of the Rodney King incident in Los Angeles. Her two main observations in the United States were contradictory. She was at a campus in Missouri and she was very struck by the racial integration and the race relations in the university, that blacks and whites interacted and that it was not a tense situation. So that was her day-to-day life in Missouri. At the same time, you had the repeated showing of the Rodney King tape with police beating this man, then you had the acquittal of the police followed by race riots in Los Angeles with another tape of a white truck driver being beaten mercilessly by blacks, which was caught by a helicopter camera. So, just like the beating of Rodney King, the beating of this truck driver was shown again and again and again in the American media. And, she came back to Thailand impressed by race relations in Missouri and freedom of

the press, that she was struck by the idea that these videos, which anyone would think should be suppressed because they were inflammatory and also because they showed the United States in such bad light, the fact that not only weren't they suppressed, but they were shown over and over again made the point to her that the media is free to run what it wants to run.

I could never make this kind of impression with someone in a conversation, or by taking them to a concert or a lecture or something like that at the embassy. So, I see any opportunity to get people to see the United States in a context. If you're confident about your culture, and you're confident about your way of life, and you're confident about the way our government works, you want people to experience it, you want people to see it because on balance it will be a positive thing.

Q: We're now into summing up. I think we just went into that.

THIBEAULT: Ok.

Q: Since '99, just the outlines of what you've been doing.

THIBEAULT: Since '99. After a brief period in the Congressional Liaison Office, which was interesting but not real central to my career, I worked in the Bureau of Intelligence and Research in the Media Reaction Office, which analyzed foreign editorials and foreign media treatment of any issue that is of interest to the U.S. government. I took that job all the way till my retirement in 2007. However, beginning in 2005, and since my retirement, I worked four hours a day in the rapid response unit, which was an office started by Karen Hughes. It did a media monitoring job similar to media reaction, trying to track what foreigners are writing and saying about U.S. policy initiatives. But, secondly, the real idea that Karen Hughes had was to join this media monitoring function with a messaging function. The office looks for statements by Americans, official Americans on the issue that we are analyzing. So someone in the field will not only get a quick summary of how the United States is being portrayed, say with Guantanamo, but they also are given samples of what we're saying about Guantanamo. Thus they know if they're asked to represent the U.S. policy, they know their starting point on that.

Q: They meaning PAOs, IOs?

THIBEAULT: PAOs, IOs, Military briefers. For these products like the media reaction analyses and the rapid response unit products, the biggest audience is mid-level State Department officers. The second biggest audience is mid-level Defense Department officers. There are an awful lot of people in the Defense Department who are responsible for making sure that their superiors understand the rhetorical and media context of a given issue so they don't shoot themselves in the foot.

So, that's what I've done up till now. And, now, in retirement, that's what I'm doing. I'm working in the rapid response unit.

Q: Washington, Brussels, Islamabad – is that correct?

THIBEAULT: Washington, Brussels, Dubai – that's where we stand right now.

Q: We're trying to get one in Johannesburg.

THIBEAULT: That would be wonderful. One of the missing pieces in our media monitoring is Africa, that the reporting from Africa is very spotty. Some of it has to do with the media environment in the continent and some of it has to do with staffing at embassies, etc. I think having a hub might make a big difference.

Q: Dan _____ has been coaching us on this subject, on how to do this.

THIBEAULT: That would be great.

Q: We're not finished. I would like to give you a chance to say what it has been like for you personally and what you think you have been able to achieve.

THIBEAULT: I think there's still a great problem in the U.S. government, which I have outlined before. This is that there is not a voice within the process for the White House, where the White House determines what the President will say on a given issue that is very important to a foreign audience. There is not a person within that process that will flag problems for a foreign audience within a given speech or communication. I think that is just a structural shortcoming. One of the factors that works against solving this is that any administration that comes in – whatever their orientation – is going to hire new people at the top to run the organization. So, when they hire an undersecretary for public affairs and public diplomacy, this person is very unlikely to recognize that this is an issue.

Q: Then to know that this is supposed to be their job, to look at the attitudes of foreign audiences, and to factor that into what's basically a domestic message, I guess.

THIBEAULT: It's so hard to draw the line between domestic and international messaging now. There's a tendency when people come in to run an organization to look for ways in which that organization is falling short on the job. So, if you come in as a new undersecretary of public affairs and public diplomacy, you're going to look at you operations in Washington and your operations in the field and say to yourself, "How are these units carrying out the President's mandate on a given issue?" and so you're not likely to turn that camera on yourself. With little context for assuming this job, you're not likely to turn this camera on yourself and say, "Why isn't the undersecretary warning the President not to say this, not to emphasize that?" So, institutionally it would be very unusual for somebody to come in and their first question to be, "How am I succeeding or failing in my job as undersecretary?" instead of saying, "How is my organization for which I am responsible, carrying out this mission?" In both the media reaction office and in the rapid response unit, the insights we get into how foreigners are perceiving issues I think can be very valuable, but they're not being used.

Q: To be seen with James Glassman, if he ever gets confirmed.

THIBEAULT: I'm seeing him tomorrow.

Q: Really.

THIBEAULT: He's going to be in the office tomorrow.

Q: Of course, we really don't see him, as he has not been confirmed. We just kind of coincidentally run into him.

THIBEAULT: He might coincidentally drop into the office, tomorrow.

Q: Right.

THIBEAULT: I think that really is what has occurred to me is the glaring shortcoming of public diplomacy, that the principals, whether it's the President or the Secretary of State or the other prominent people in the Administration, no one seems to be applying the lessons of monitoring foreign opinion, of applying that to what is said by these high-profile people.

Q: Is this a structural thing or is this a shortcoming of the current administration?

THIBEAULT: This is not only structural, but it's human interaction. It's a basic human interaction problem. It is very difficult for someone coming in for a new job who is in the State Department and who is not the Secretary of State to try to insinuate themselves into the messaging process in the White House. So, you are doing an end run around the Secretary of State; you are doing an end run around the public affairs people at the White House. So, you would have to have a special relationship, I think, with the White House or coming into the job, there would have to be something very explicitly said that the undersecretary for public diplomacy can throw a flag like a football official. Stop the play and get them to look at what they're preparing to say.

Q: Our enabling legislation, again it seems a platitude, calls for mutual understanding. The tendency for most administrations is for the communication to be going from us to them, rather than from them to us. This, I think you are suggesting, is a natural structural thing, a human process. Are we failing to bring in the information and act on it accordingly? Is this part of what you're saying?

THIBEAULT: Sure. And again, I don't know who is failing whom.

There was an interagency PCC…

Q: What's a PCC?

THIBEAULT: Policy Coordinating Committee, or something like that.
There was an interagency PCC on terrorism detainees. And this was I believe, say in 2006, maybe the Spring of 2006. And, this interagency group was supposed to make recommendations on our detainee policy. My office in the media reaction office within the Bureau of Intelligence and Research was approached by the committee asking, "Do we have anything on how foreigners feel on detainee issues?" Now, the capability of the media reaction office, the rapid response unit and INR's office of research which does public opinion polling overseas, to provide documentation and the foreign opinion context on a given issue is remarkable. We are consistently collecting this material when it comes up. And so, on the detainees, I was asked, "Do we have any information on foreign perceptions of these detainee policies?" I did a quick look and said, "We've got about 12 reports." So, every time Guantanamo or Abu Ghraib, or some other detainee-related issue was in the international media, American embassies from around the world collected samples of what was said. So, we had what was said about Guantanamo, we had what was said when Abu Ghraib came to light, we had what was said when the Supreme Court granted some rights to detainees. Right down the line we had all of these things.

I did an analysis of this material, which was at least 2000 excerpts from editorials over these years. The most problematic part of the detainee system was that there was no predictability because there was no explication of how the system worked. People who wrote about these policies were willing to grant that the detainees could be dangerous, they could be murderers, they could be terrorists, but they saw no mechanism for determining who was a terrorist and who was innocent. They saw no predictable process. They did not see due process.

So, my recommendation in this report was that whatever the system was, it should be articulated so that when people were released from Guantanamo it was evidence that we had due process, that people had been found innocent. Because we never articulated what that process was, what the standards for evidence were, what the standards for guilt were in our detainee policy, we released hundreds of people from Guantanamo and never got credit for doing so. The only thing that would be said when they were released was, "If they were innocent, they shouldn't have been taken in the first place." Well, that's not the case. Innocent people get arrested all the time. But, because we did not put it in the context of due process, we were getting beat about the head and the shoulders.

Most recently, there was an event about three weeks ago. The head of the CIA, testifying in front of Congress, said that in fact the United States had used water boarding and that we'd only done it to two or three individuals. If that information had come out three years before, we would have been saved three years of people speculating on the dozens or the hundreds of people we had tortured in this manner. If we could have changed our approach to this issue and focused on the fact that we believed that in this particular circumstance and with these particular people in this particular time these methods were used, we would have been outlining what was going on.

So, anyway, this report gets handed to the PCC. But, in the end, the PCC is not the deciding factor. What I saw was a lack of an advocate for the implications of the media

monitoring. One thing about the intelligence community – and the media reaction office is part of the intelligence community, even though its products are unclassified for the most part – is that there is a prohibition on advocating policy. The intelligence community is simply to gather the information needed to make an informed policy decision. So, again, when you see these intelligence reports, the NIE – the National Intelligence Estimate – it will not say we should do X or Y; it will answer a particular question that was asked of it by the political structure.

Q: Iran or what have you.

THIBEAULT: Right. It doesn't say we should attack Iran. We might have an NIE somewhere that says what will happen if we attack Iran, based on intelligence.

Q: Shouldn't the undersecretary for public affairs and public diplomacy be that advocate?

THIBEAULT: I would think so. As I said, the penetration of these media monitoring products tends to be on the retail practitioners, it tends to be PAOs, desk officers, political officers, and mid-level public affairs people of the Defense Department who either have to brief their superiors or have to actually engage with foreign audiences; they're the ones who really read this material and take advantage of it. And, in the end, it's not surprising that people at the top aren't focused on these findings. Because of the pyramid nature of government, the people at the top can only see an extremely sifted version of the information that the government has collected. I think that it is a correct format. If people at the top are receiving what has been determined is the most crucial information, that if they respond back down the pyramid and say, "Why would you say this?" someone at a lower level has a wealth of information that they couldn't possibly put into a one-page report. So, the idea should be that the questions that come from the top can be answered in any level of detail by going eventually down to the desk officer, or to whoever was the original collector.

If we are asked a question about how the foreign media is perceiving an issue, or break it down regionally, or left-right political leanings, we can do that extremely well. If you had someone in the undersecretary of public affairs and public diplomacy position who basically got that and had important reports flagged for them and were able to make the implications clear to people in the White House or at the top of the State Department, that would really be a wonderful, wonderful situation.

Q: Good luck with your meeting tomorrow.

THIBEAULT: Oh, yes!

Q: This has been an enormously broad and deep story. Can you imagine your life for the past 23 years if you hadn't done this job? Or let me just ask for any comment that you might have about how this job has affected your life.

THIBEAULT: This is one of those 'road not taken' questions. This is the road I took and it was an opportunity only available because the Foreign Service selection process is quite a blind process compared to other hiring processes in the government. It is test-based. I think what they test you for in the test is very relevant to what you do for a living. It's a great privilege to be able to represent your country with foreigners.

It turned out to be exactly a match between my interests and my talent. Some of it absolutely fit with my talents and other times it was tough because I don't love bureaucracy; I don't love getting clearances. A lot of what you learn in the Foreign Service is strictly applicable to the Foreign Service so that it doesn't cross over into other parts of your life or your career.

One of the wonderful things about my current job with the rapid response unit and my job in the media reaction office is there is a tremendous amount of autonomy; because it involves the news and because the news is so time sensitive, we had a wonderful side benefit in that we didn't need to clear our analysis with any of the relevant offices. We could do a story on Chavez (Hugo Chavez) and we didn't need to clear it with the Western Hemisphere office, etc. So, that was a tremendous advantage in being able to shape product that showed the consensus of the analysts rather than reflect the editing of someone higher up in the chain.

Q: We're getting to the end of this discussion, but certainly not to your activities.

THIBEAULT: I am very interested in furthering our country's ability to not shoot itself in the foot so often when it speaks to foreign audiences. I think I am in a situation now where I could take advantage of that.

Again, I enjoyed this opportunity. It was, for me, somewhat of a Vietnam generation. My experience in Iraq was a chance for me to be in harms way for the sake of my country. So my experience in Iraq was very valuable. Personally to me to be able to serve one's country in a very tight situation.

No, I just appreciate the experience. I appreciate the ability to get some kind of pension at the age of 55, so that I am able to spend time with my high school girls and prepare them for college and things like that. I think that's it; I can't think of anymore.

Q: This is Dan Whitman on March 2, 2008, thanking Steve Thibeault for a remarkable series of discussions.

THIBEAULT: Thank you so much.

End of interview