

## **BURMA**

### **COUNTRY READER TABLE OF CONTENTS**

Jerome Holloway	1947-1949	Vice Consul, Rangoon
Edwin Webb Martin	1950-1951	Consular Officer, Rangoon
Joseph A. Mendenhall	1955-1957	Economic Officer, Office of Southeast Asian Affairs, Washington DC
Arthur W. Hummel, Jr.	1957-1961	Public Affairs Officer, USIS, Rangoon
Kenneth A. Guenther	1958-1959	Rangoon University, Rangoon
Cliff Forster	1958-1960	Information Officer, USIS, Rangoon
Morton Smith	1958-1963	Public Affairs Officer, USIS, Rangoon
Morton I. Abramowitz	1959	Temporary Duty, Economic Officer, Rangoon
Jack Shellenberger	1959-1962	Branch Public Affairs Officer, USIS, Moulmein
John R. O'Brien	1960-1962	Public Affairs Officer, USIS, Rangoon
Robert Mark Ward	1961	Assistant Desk Officer, USAID, Washington, DC
George M. Barbis	1961-1963	Analyst for Thailand and Burma, Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Washington DC
Robert S. Steven	1962-1964	Economic Officer, Rangoon
Ralph J. Katrosh	1962-1965	Political Officer, Rangoon
Ruth McLendon	1962-1966	Political/Consular Officer, Rangoon
Henry Byroade	1963-1969	Ambassador, Burma
John A. Lacey	1965-1966	Burma-Cambodia Desk Officer, Washington DC

Cliff Southard	1966-1969	Public Affairs Officer, USIS, Rangoon
Edward C. Ingraham	1967-1970	Political Counselor, Rangoon
Arthur W. Hummel Jr.	1968-1971	Ambassador, Burma
Robert J. Martens	1969-1970	Political – Economic Officer, Rangoon
G. Eugene Martin	1969-1971 1971-1973	Consular Officer, Rangoon Burma Desk Officer, Washington DC
Edwin Webb Martin	1971-1973	Ambassador, Burma
John A. Lacey	1972-1975	Deputy Chief of Mission, Rangoon
James A. Klemstine	1973-1976	Thailand-Burma Desk Officer, Washington DC
Frank P. Coward	1973-1978	Cultural Affairs Officer, USIS, Rangoon
Richard M. Gibson	1974-1975 1975-1977	Vice Consul, Rangoon Thailand-Burma Desk Officer, Washington DC
David L. Osborn	1974-1977	Ambassador, Burma
James R. Bullington	1975-1976 1976-1978	Principal Officer, Mandalay Political/Economic Counselor, Rangoon
Robert E. Fritts	1976-1979	East Asian Affairs, Country Director, Washington, DC
Daniel A. O'Donahue	1983-1987	Ambassador, Burma
Aloysius M. O'Neill	1986-1988	Chief Consular Officer, Rangoon
Victor L. Tomseth	1986-1989	Director of Office of Thailand-Burma Affairs, East Asia and Pacific Bureau, Washington DC
William Veale	1986-1990	Political Officer, Rangoon
Franklin E. Huffman	1987-1989	Assistant Public Affairs Officer, USIS, Rangoon

Marshall P. Adair	1988-1990	Counselor for Political/Economic Affairs, Rangoon
Marilyn A. Meyers	1994	FSI, Burmese Language Training, Washington DC
	1994-1996	Chief of Mission (Charge d’Affaires ad interim), Burma
Marie Therese Huhtala	1996-1998	Director, Office of Burma, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam Affairs, Washington, DC

**JEROME K. HOLLOWAY**  
**Vice Consul**  
**Rangoon (1947-1949)**

*Jerome K. Holloway was born in Pennsylvania in 1923. He received his bachelor's degree from Catholic University in 1947 and his master's from the University of Michigan in 1959. He served in the US Navy during World War II. He joined the Foreign Service in 1947. His overseas posts include Rangoon, Shanghai, Bremen, Hong Kong, Tokyo, Stockholm, and Osaka-Kobe. Mr. Holloway was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy on June 16, 1989.*

*Q: Your first post was what, Rangoon?*

HOLLOWAY: Rangoon.

*Q: You served there from when to when?*

HOLLOWAY: From the late summer of '47 until the spring of '49, when I went to China.

*Q: What was the situation in Rangoon when you got there?*

HOLLOWAY: Well, it was still a British colony. Independence had been promised, and the agreement on it was signed in the summer of '47 between Prime Minister Attlee and U Nu--Thakin Nu as he was called then--who was the successor of Aung San. The week before I was assigned to Rangoon, the prime minister and the entire cabinet were assassinated.

*Q: Oh, my God. You mean, sort of a local thing?*

HOLLOWAY: Well, it was a power struggle between those who had exercised what political power the Burmese did exercise in pre-war Burma and those who came after. Aung San and his group had originally been allies of the Japanese and then they turned on the Japanese. The assassination, I have since discovered in reading the papers of General Sir Hubert Ranz, who was the last British Governor of Burma, his papers are in the India library on Black Flyers Road in

London, that British officers had sold the guns to the group that did the assassination. So that the Burmese xenophobia was not without a certain amount of foundation.

*Q: What were American interests in Burma at the time?*

HOLLOWAY: As far as I could piece it out, there were only two. One was, we wanted to see Burma independent. If you recall, decolonization was a large part of our World War II and post-World War II policy. And we even asked the British, at one time, "Do you really intend to go through with this?" That was I guess our first interest. Our second interest was already, I can remember people saying "Well, we don't want a communist state on the Indian Ocean." I never could quite understand--

*Q: I mean, that was sort of the word that went around.*

HOLLOWAY: The distressing thing was that we really did have no policy, and we followed a personnel policy that made us suspicious to the Burmese. You've undoubtedly read that one of the big complaints which diplomatic historians correctly make about the Foreign Service is that when the era of decolonization came in, we had no one who was trained in languages or the cultures, because these posts had all been outposts of the European nations.

*Q: And Burma was a particularly handy one because it was English-speaking.*

HOLLOWAY: Saigon and Hanoi were French-speaking. And Batavia was Dutch-speaking, Jakarta.

So what we did was try to assign to Burma, except for another young officer and I, he had been a paratrooper, first lieutenant, they tried to find people who had some Burmese background. Well, this meant people who had been associated with the missionaries, or it meant, in the case of one officer, he had been an Eagle squadron pilot in the RAF, an American flying for the RAF, who they later transferred to our Air Force, and served in Burma. Another officer had been a colonel, or lieutenant colonel, who had developed a great affinity for one of the tribal groups in northern Burma. One of the USIS officers was the widow of a missionary. Our number-one economic and political officer had been a missionary teacher at Judson College, which is an American Baptist mission college, part of Rangoon University.

*Q: Well, you're describing to me what I consider a remarkable staff, knowing the Foreign Service personnel system. I mean, most of our posts anywhere just don't have that effort. Why this effort for Burma?*

HOLLOWAY: Well, I suppose, one of the reasons, I suspect, was that the people back on the desks, one of them Ed Dahl had been a business man in Burma before the war, and the other one was John Katy of Ohio University, of course one of the most eminent scholars on Burma. Unfortunately, it was a disaster.

*Q: Really?*

HOLLOWAY: These people were associated with the Burmese of the pre-war power elite, and there were very few of them. The group that had taken over, Aung San, and then his successor Thakin Nu, were young, radical. As I said, they had sided with the Japanese and then had switched back to the British. They looked upon this staff as a bunch of Trojan horses. These were colonialists. These were identified with the old order.

And the place where it came up most ludicrously was after I had left. The Burmese had nationalized the Irrawaddy Water Transport; that was, they ran the ships up and down the Irrawaddy River and the Rangoon River. And the question of compensation--the British owners wanted compensation. And in the compensation hearings, the British were sort of quoting our expert on some things he had written before the war on the Irrawaddy transport thing. We, in effect, became involved, to the Burmese mind, in the politics of the tribes. As you know, revolts broke out in Burma within three months of independence, and they're still going on today, forty years later, the same revolts are going on. And it seemed to the Burmese that we were dabbling in their affairs. We weren't!

*Q: Well, I suppose what you're doing is you're pointing out a problem that often the expert, or the person who knows an area, becomes fascinated with certain groups or certain things and they tend, even if they're under the, now dubbed the Foreign Service officer, they keep going. And I think tribal politics always gets--it's very easy to get enmeshed in this and I mean, in a way we did this in Vietnam, where many of our people got entranced with the Montagnards and also in Laos.*

HOLLOWAY: This, for the same reason, the British were sort of entranced by the Kachins, the Americans by the Karens. They were better fighters than the Burmese, they were mountain people, much more hardy. There's a whole difference between the military ethos of a rice-growing culture and that of a mountain tribe.

And also they became converts to Christianity. Let's face it, that was a large factor. But the point was that I saw--and still think I see--as far as the Burmese were concerned, we looked like we were setting up an embassy that was going to be mainly interested in Karens and Kachins and was going to be a divisive force in the country.

*Q: Well, of course, I know nothing about Burmese politics, but I assume the rice-growing city folk looked down upon the tribal people anyway, and so this is the equivalent of the 1920s group coming into Washington and working with the blacks instead of the whites or something.*

HOLLOWAY: The British favored the tribal groups, and they'd also protected them from the Burmese. The Burmese themselves, or the Burmans, to give them their correct title, they realized that they were taking more into their independent country than they should, that they probably could not have--it was called the union of Burma, meaning that all these tribal groups were encompassed in it, but the antipathy between the tribal groups and the Burmans was so great that many of the Burmese leaders themselves had second thoughts. But, and this is true, very true, in Africa, in a decolonization situation, you have to get back the colonial boundaries. In other words, you cannot give up anything. If the British had these boundaries, then damn it all, these were the boundaries of--

*Q: But we're still following this policy in Africa, absolutely refusing to support various separatist movements, despite pressures from Europe and from other places.*

HOLLOWAY: The one thing that's sacrosanct in Africa are those pre-war boundaries.

*Q: Because otherwise you're talking about chaos.*

HOLLOWAY: Nobody did a thing about Idi Amin until he crossed one of those boundaries.

*Q: Yes. Well, who was the ambassador and what was his operating style?*

HOLLOWAY: Well, here again this was unfortunate. He was a very astute old veteran of the consular corps, J. Klahr Huddle. He was away for the first thirteen months of his incumbency on the Kashmir Commission.

*Q: This was trying to resolve the Kashmir dispute, which is still going between Pakistan and India.*

HOLLOWAY: So he had no, he really had no--

*Q: Well, then, your deputy chief of mission--*

HOLLOWAY: He had spent the war in Cape Town and Durban, he had no experience in Southeast Asia. Or in Asia, period. Huddle saw the problems very clearly. For instance, the National Geographic Society wanted to photograph an eclipse down in the Tenasserim Peninsula, Mergui. It's very south, a long, thin peninsula going down the side of the Siam. And the foreign office gave its permission. Then it was withdrawn. I think that they expected we were putting some CIA people into the group.

Huddle very quickly organized a luncheon with the Rangoon University people and got the thing changed into a joint Rangoon University-National Geographic expedition, and the Burmese said, "Fine." He knew his way around.

*Q: What was your assignment?*

HOLLOWAY: Almost anything. I did the administrative work, I did the commercial work, I did the consular work. What we were basically trying to do there, right frankly, was to survive. We were buying property, because we had blocked rupees from war-surplus things, and we were trying to buy a new office, buy housing. Rangoon was not a very comfortable place after the war.

*Q: No, I don't imagine it was.*

HOLLOWAY: And the rate of sickness was very high.

Oh, I might mention we had one military interest, and that was in what was then called the Army Air Transport Command wanted landing rights at Thingangyun Airport, which is the airport outside of Rangoon, for their round-the-world service. And the British had granted us those rights, and the Burmese had agreed to honor them. In the event they weren't used very much at all.

*Q: Did you see Burma getting ready for this neutralist, isolationist turn?*

HOLLOWAY: Not really. I think they were proud of their independence, they were proud of their sovereignty. They saw themselves as participating in world affairs in a minor way. But once the trouble started with the tribal groups--and as I said, they're going on forty years later--they began to withdraw. They had no money to carry out really an active diplomatic policy.

And of course, after I left, the crowning blow was our assistance to the Chinese Nationalists who came into Burma. This was direct meddling. And these two Chinese divisions couldn't handle the Chinese Communists, but they could handle the Burmese Army.

*Q: These were two divisions that retreated after the collapse of the Chiang Kai-shek regime and moved into Burma, where they stayed after the war.*

HOLLOWAY: Years. Some are still there, in the opium business.

*Q: Yes, yes.*

HOLLOWAY: That's when they cut off. The Burmese said they would take no more aid from us. They were always slightly xenophobic.

*Q: How did you find dealing with the Burmese yourself?*

HOLLOWAY: They're a very charming people. And it's a country that one British writer once said where it's always 3:00 on a Saturday afternoon. There's no great pressure.

**EDWIN WEBB MARTIN**  
**Consular Officer**  
**Rangoon (1950-1951)**

*Ambassador Edwin Webb Martin was born in India of American parents in 1917. He received his bachelor's degree from Oberlin College in 1939 and his master's degree from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy in 1940. He joined the Foreign Service in 1941. His overseas posts include Leopoldville, Peiping, Hankow, Taipei, Rangoon, London, Ankara, and Hong Kong. He was the ambassador to Burma from 1971 to 1973. Ambassador Martin was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy on June 4, 1987 and by William Johnson and Harold Hinton on December 9, 1987.*

*Q: Since we're concentrating on your time in Burma, you went to Burma as a second secretary in 1950 to '51. What brought about this assignment?*

MARTIN: Well, I think that's important, too, because it gives you a flavor of the times. I was in Hangzhou, as I said, when most of North China fell to the Communists, and because of the threat of a civil war to the safety of Americans, many Americans were evacuated in the latter part of '48, and among those were the dependents or the families of Foreign Service officers in certain posts. I was in Hangzhou, which is about 600 miles up the Yangtze River and rather exposed, and my wife and our two little girls were evacuated from China, along with families from Nanking, the embassy in Nanking, and Shanghai, by the U.S. Marines. They were flown to Manila, and there they were--I forget how many, there were certainly 100 or more, including women and children--and they were put up there in an abandoned U.S. Army camp, under rather trying conditions. So that I was separated from my wife and children, and during our separation, she gave birth to twins there in Manila.

*Q: Good heavens! That brought the number to four.*

MARTIN: That brought the number to four, doubled our children, and I was in Hangzhou all this time. Our communications were virtually cut off, so that we had to communicate by cable.

Well, all this by way of background to say that when I finally got a transfer, after being overdue for leave for nearly a year, I was transferred to Taiwan after home leave. I managed to get out of China, and I won't take time to tell that story. Got down to the Philippines, and we had a nice boat trip back to the States, for home leave, consultation, and so forth, and on to Taiwan, where I arrived in September of 1949.

Well, by January of 1950, the mainland, having fallen to the Communists, and they were threatening Taiwan, the State Department decided to reduce the staff in Taiwan, in anticipation of a Communist invasion. Since I had been separated from my family already for some period of time, and the twins were then--they were born in the Philippines--were less than a year old, they decided that rather than evacuate my wife and family again, leaving us separated, that they would transfer me to Rangoon. I had only been in Taiwan for four or five months.

Now, another aspect of that transfer was that we still had consular and diplomatic officials in China, but in the latter part of January, the Department had made a decision, for reasons which I don't have time to go into now, to pull out of China. So we were facing a prospect of not having the usual flow of information from China, so the department decided to put Chinese language officers, that is, Foreign Service officers who had been trained in the Chinese language, and most of us had served already some time in China, put them on the periphery of China. I was assigned to Burma in that capacity. I was a political officer, of course, but my particular expertise was China and Chinese. My particular job in Rangoon at that time was to become acquainted with the Chinese community, which was very large in Burma, as it is in most Southeast Asian countries, to try to watch what was happening on the China-Burma border, which was the longest border of any Southeast Asian country. Burma, by the way, is the largest country in mainland Southeast Asia, about the size of Texas.



So here was a brand-new field. Those two reasons are why I was sent to Rangoon. I, of course, was the first Chinese-speaking Foreign Service officer ever to be assigned to Rangoon. Later on I became chief of the political section and was in charge of overall political affairs and reporting in the embassy. Of course, we had a small embassy. It's a very small embassy.

*Q: What was your rank?*

MARTIN: I was a Class IV officer.

*Q: So you were a good, solid mid-career officer at that point.*

MARTIN: That's right. That's right. I was a Class IV officer. As a matter of fact, I'd only been in Burma about three weeks when I was chargé briefly, because we had no ambassador at that time, and the chargé had to go to a chiefs of mission conference, so as the brand-new--well, a Class IV officer less than a year--I was the second ranking man in the embassy. So you can see it was a pretty small affair.

*Q: Could you describe how you saw the situation in Burma at the time you went there? We're talking about 1950.*

MARTIN: We're talking about 1950. The situation was that Burma had an elected government, it was a democracy. A fairly young man by the name of U Nu was the prime minister. Most of the leadership, the political leaders in power were people in their thirties, so they weren't much older than I. I was about 32 when I went to Burma. They were idealists in a way; they were Socialists in outlook, but not Communists. I think they were genuine democrats. Of course, they were strongly anti-imperialist, as they would say. Burma kicked the British out.

*Q: Only two years before.*

MARTIN: That's right. In 1948, Burma got its independence. Of course, we have to remember that the Burmese Nationalists, who were well before the war looking to oust the British, cooperated with the Japanese. They soon became disillusioned because the Japanese came in, and, of course, they defeated the British, and the American and the Chinese troops who were there under General Stilwell. The Japanese never got quite as far as the India border, but they had conquered a good part of Burma, the most productive part. But they soon began to show their true colors, as people who did not respect Burmese sovereignty. And although Burma was nominally an independent country, in fact, the Japanese military ran the country. So many of the Burmese became disillusioned with them, and many of them cooperated later on with the British and American OSS people and others that were dropped into the country and so forth.

So when I got there, you had a situation where Burma had a reputation of being independent-minded and rather anti-British, compared to some of the other colonies. They had received their independence, some say, before they actually wanted it; the British, when the Burmese made certain demands of them, had turned them down, and said, "Okay, go ahead. Take your independence if you want it." (Laughs) So they set up in January an independent government.

*Q: This was January 1948.*

MARTIN: 1948. I got there in January '50, you see, two years later. In the summer of 1947 a very tragic thing had occurred; Aung San and others were gunned down by assassins during a cabinet meeting. The assassins were hired by one of the opposition politicians, a really conservative guy, who was subsequently tried and hung. And this left the Burmese without their national hero and the leadership they might have had, and which they needed. Because Burma had been a kind of appendage to the Indian empire, there had not been trained in Burma the kind of civil service which had been trained in India. And by the late Forties, when India became independent--this is the year, I think, '47, the year before Burma--India had a large number of highly trained civil servants who had for years had experience in administering India. Actually, Indian civil servants had run Burma, had helped to run Burma, for a long time, and only in the Thirties had Burma been separated from India and been treated as a separate entity rather than an appendage. So all of this helps to explain why the Burmese were particularly nationalistic and bitter. They felt they were not only a colony, but a second class colony. That also explains why Burma did not have the kind of political leadership or administrative leadership that you had in India, for example.

Then when they had some of the few leaders they did have murdered like this, it left these less experienced people, like U Nu. One of those people was Ne Win; Ne Win was then defense minister. Burma at that time seemed to be in a rather bad way, but compared to what it became 20 years later, it looks now like they were in a pretty good way. (Laughs) And it had a good reason for being in a bad way. After all, it had been occupied by the Japanese, the Japanese had fought their way up to the northern part of the country, and then later on, the Allies came in and drove them back out, and they surrendered. So Burma had been fought over, had been bombed by both sides, and it was a shambles. The economy was a wreck, the oil industry, which used to be important, was a wreck. So there was good reason why it was in a bad way.

Then another very important reason was that there were many insurgencies in Burma. These insurgencies were both ideological and ethnically motivated--ideologically motivated and ethnically motivated.

Do you want me to go into that? I don't know how much time you have.

*Q: I think some of this will come up later. I think maybe more or less concentrating on your role and the embassy's role, some of this insurgency was Chinese, wasn't it?*

MARTIN: Well, that's important, I think, to look at. It wasn't Chinese in the sense that Chinese troops were fighting or Chinese were fighting in Burma. The Burma Communist Party was split into two factions. The larger faction was called the White Flag Communists, and the smaller faction was called the Red Flag Communists. Both had armies in the field, and the White Flag Communists did get support of some kind, although at that time, probably not a great deal of logistic support but more ideological support, training and so forth, from the Chinese Communists.

Then in addition to those two, I'll just mention a couple of the major insurgent groups, because when we get to 20 years later, when I'm in Burma again, you'll find that they're still fighting. (Laughs) There were the Kachins. They're a large group of tribal people, sometimes called hill people because they live up in the mountains, the hill country in northern Burma, especially northeastern Burma. Then there are the Shans. The Shans are related to the Thais ethnically and linguistically, and also both of these groups, and many of the tribal groups are related to what the Chinese now call minority people living on the other side of the Burma-China border, which, as I said, is a very long border. And the Shans had a rebellion going, and I don't know at that time whether they had more than one army. I think they were relatively minor, and back in those days, they were more important than when I was there 20 years later.

Then the main, the most feared rebel group at that particular time when I arrived in Burma, were the Karens. Karens were also hill people, but there are many Karen villages in the delta, in the Irrawaddy delta area, and the Karens and the Kachins both had been sort of favored by the British. The Burmans are the majority people in Burma, the ethnic Burmans. When I say Burmese, I mean a citizen of Burma or the people who live in Burma generally, although it's hard to keep this distinction in mind. But when I say Burman, I mean the ethnic Burmans who dominated the country. Ethnic Burmans were around 72-73% of the country, and the remaining 27 or 28% of the country were divided among these various hill peoples or minority groups.

Well, the British, having conquered Burma by overthrowing the Burmese king, who was a Burman, had favored the Karens and the Kachins as recruits for their military. They felt they were more reliable, and they were more trainable and so forth. So that the Karens, particularly being, I think, more numerous than the Kachins, after independence, demanded certain concessions, and some actually demanded an independent Karen state, which they didn't get. The result was that these people rebelled against the government, becoming insurgents, and since they had excellent training and discipline--some of the top officers in the British Burma Army were Karens--they had a lot of know-how and expertise. So they posed a real threat, and they came very close to invading Rangoon itself. In fact, when I and my family arrived in Burma towards the end of January, the Karens were just on the other side of the airport, and they were so close that when we went into Rangoon from the airport, we had to go through two military checkpoints, barriers. And just a few weeks before we arrived, Karens had actually shelled Rangoon.

So the country at that time was--I don't know what the proportions were, but a large area of the country, probably more than half the country, well over half of the country, I'd say, was in the hands of various insurgents of various political views.

*Q: How were the Chinese regarded there? I take it they were more the merchant class.*

MARTIN: That's right. The Chinese in Burma were, as they were in most Southeast Asian countries, the merchant class. They were the rice millers. Much of the rice paddy land had been owned by absentee Indian landowners, but the people who bought the rice, bought it and milled it, and then sold it and put it in international trade--well, I guess the British probably monopolized pretty much the international trade--they were the rice millers and the small manufacturers and the merchants. And they were highly organized.

My principal job when I went there was to study this community, looking at it also from the point of view of what influence China, particularly now that the Communists had taken that country, could have there. And so if I have time, I will explain a little bit about the community, the Chinese community.

*Q: Yes, please.*

MARTIN: Shall I do that? Because that actually was the principal job I had there.

I found that the Chinese community, of course, as it is in most Southeast Asian countries, was heavily concentrated in the cities, particularly Rangoon, but also Mandalay, although you would find Chinese merchants and even Chinese restaurants in the smaller towns. It was comprised, especially in Rangoon, of people from two areas primarily, one from Canton, one from Amoy, and they speak different languages. Now that's important, because the Chinese communities were highly organized. For example, a typical Chinese in Rangoon might belong to four or five organizations, which might include a society of his name. For example, all the Li's would have an organization. Another society he would belong to would be his school, the alumni of his school, because the Chinese have their own schools. And another organization he might belong to would be his guild, if he were a rice merchant or if he were whatever, he belonged to a guild of that group. Then he might belong to either a political party or a secret society. Actually, most of them belonged to some secret society. So he would belong to four or five organizations, and the Chinese took care of each other. They were very--you didn't see a poor Chinese. You didn't see a Chinese become a chargé on the Burmese Government. The Chinese looked after their own. They were highly organized.

Now, in the eastern part of the country, in the hill country, you also had Chinese who had come over the border from Yunnan--it was a large province on the border of Burma. So you had two things there to watch in terms of the Chinese--the border, the people who came across the border, and the overseas Chinese merchant community in the cities, Rangoon in particular. Now, an interesting thing about the Rangoon Chinese community; it apparently had never been studied seriously by the government, they didn't seem to know anything about it or pay attention to it. I found that there were two main linguistic groups--those from Amoy and those from Canton. And that at that time there were four newspapers the Chinese published in Rangoon. I read all four of them every day. Two of them were politically more or less neutral, sort of fence-sitters in the struggle between the Nationalists (the Kuomintang) and the Communists. And one of the papers was an out and out pro-Nationalist, probably a Kuomintang paper, and that was run by Cantonese. One was Communist, very pro-Communist, and that was run by Amoy people. So that the place of origin of the individual Chinese in Rangoon determined to some extent what their political allegiance was. Now, this was because this highly organized Chinese community in Rangoon was linked to Chinese communities all over Southeast Asia. For example, the name organization in Rangoon might have links to those in Bangkok and so forth, or the guild organization, or the secret society and so forth would have such links.

In Singapore, you had a Chinese, whose name I forget at the moment, but he was a wealthy Chinese who came out very strongly and rather early in the favor of the Chinese Communist side,

against the Nationalists. He was from Amoy. I think that his influence penetrated so far as Rangoon and tended to make the Amoy people pro-Communist.

I found also that this newspaper published by the Amoy faction was publishing news dispatches from the Burma Communist Party White Flag insurgents, just as though they had war correspondents with the White Flag insurgents. So that we learned quite a bit about them from this newspaper. No other newspaper published such news. As far as I know--and I'm very convinced of this--the Burmese Government had nobody who read Chinese and was following these newspapers. But here they had in their midst a Chinese newspaper, which was openly in favor of the White Flag Communists and actually had dispatches from them, telling of their victories or alleged victories against the Burmese Government.

So you had, I think, a very interesting situation there for the Burmese. Of course, they were brand-new. They were a brand-new government. They were struggling. The Chinese were a self-sufficient community, and they just didn't pay any attention to them.

*Q: Did you share your knowledge with anybody in the Burmese Government?*

MARTIN: I think it probably was. I can't remember exactly, but we had some intelligence liaison with them. I didn't do it personally, but I have a feeling that some of this was passed on, yes.

*Q: What was your contact with the Burmese Government?*

MARTIN: I did not have very much contact with the Burmese Government in those days, because I was really a specialist on this. I didn't have much contact in a formal sense. I did become acquainted with a number of young Burmese politicians, and at that time, the Burmese were still somewhat suspicious of us, but we had good contacts at middle level. It was fascinating to see the Burmese, who, as I say, were rather idealistic. They were socialistic in their outlook, and they felt that once having kicked out the British, they would then reap all of the fruits of their economy. Although it was in shambles, their natural resources were extremely plentiful, more so than many countries in Southeast Asia. And they couldn't believe that things were not going as well as they should economically, and they looked around for some reason for it. In their somewhat, perhaps oversimplified view, the British imperialists had fastened onto Burma, and had exploited it. And there were many British companies that certainly made an awful lot of profit in Burma. But what they didn't realize, I think, is that these companies, these capitalists, these entrepreneurs, also brought very important assets to Burma, not only capital assets, but expertise and an ability to organize and to extract timber and sell rice and put it on the international market.

*Q: Developing markets.*

MARTIN: That's right. Developing markets. The Burmese had nobody, almost nobody, who had any experience. It wasn't their fault. It was a pity, and one good argument for saying that they had been exploited by the British. But the idea that if you just get rid of these exploiters, you're going to benefit from this, leaves out any consideration of the importance of entrepreneurship and knowing the international market and all.

*Q: Did the Korean War have any impact on our embassy as such? Did we have any sort of assignment because of the concern?*

MARTIN: No, no, I don't think so, because even before the Korean War broke out, although it's hard for me to pin it down to a matter of months, the Korean War broke out in June . . .

*Q: June 25.*

MARTIN: That's when we got into it, yes. June 25, 1950. I'd only been in Rangoon about four or five months.

*Q: China came in in October 1950.*

MARTIN: I think the Korean War itself had very little impact, but there is something else that I think is important before we leave this period in Burma. We had, in my first year there for , the first time established an aid mission. We didn't call it AID in those days, but it was an economic assistance mission. And Burma, as you know, has been almost a model of non-alignment ever since independence. They've insisted on neutrality, and when it came to aid, why, they said, "Okay, if we take aid from the United States and Britain [British military assistance still existed at that time], we'll also take aid from Russia or whomever. We'll take it from all sides." So we established an aid mission there, and it had nothing to do with the Korean War. This decision was made before the Korean War. But what was important, and one of the reasons I was sent there, was to see what was going on on the China border. What happened on the China border was not an incursion of Communist troops; but an incursion of Nationalist troops, the KMT, as they called them, KMT for Kuomintang.

*Q: KMT.*

MARTIN: They called them KMT troops. Under some Nationalist generals, and there were several thousand of them--I'm not sure we ever knew how many, but at least there were maybe 4,000 or 5,000, and they were well armed--they had been driven out of Yunnan by the People's Liberation Army, the Communist Army. So they came into Burma. And the Burmese obviously were very unhappy about this. The Burmese at that time,--I should say the Burmese Government--was fighting all these insurgencies, and the insurgents had a large part of the country in their hands. So the Burmese Government really had no possibility of keeping these fellows out or of dealing with them militarily. And the Burmese were convinced that these KMT troops--I'll call them KMT troops--were there as part of a U.S. policy. So that immediately put us in very hot water. They tried to pin the blame on us because we were known to be pro-Nationalist. And this all happened before the Korean War, but the same thing would have happened if there had been no Korean War.

Now, I don't know all of the facts. I suspect there was some clandestine connection with these fellows for some reason or other, but it did not come from us in Burma. In fact, everyone in our embassy was opposed, and we kept pointing out to the Department the setbacks the KMT incursion had dealt our position in Burma, especially when this matter went to the U.N. The U.S.

was all in favor of getting the Kuomintang out of Burma. We actually put pressure on the Chinese Nationalist Government in Taiwan, and with our assistance, they evacuated some of the KMT troops. But a lot of them weren't evacuated because they had no incentive to leave. They'd established themselves in the hill country there, and they became local war lords. And what was in it for them to go back to Taiwan?

The Burmese finally, in their helplessness, appealed to the U.N. which passed resolution to get the KMT troops out, and we were all in favor of it; but the situation was that these people were holed up in a place where you really had to come in with armed force to dig them out. We weren't willing to do that; the Nationalist Government didn't have the capability, nor were they willing to do it.

The KMT troops, the Chinese troops, that came into Burma. The point that I wanted to make was that the Burmese apparently felt that they needed to make some gesture to show how strongly they felt on the matter, so what they did was to close down our aid mission, although we were really not responsible, and we had tried our best. I worked on this problem after I left Burma at the end of 1951 and came back to be on the China desk in the State Department. We really did try to do whatever we could to get these people out, and we succeeded partially, got a lot of them out, but not all of them. And some of them are still there. So that episode put a cloud on our relationship with Burma.

*Q: You left Burma in 1951, and then you went back to the State Department. There was about a 20-year period before you came back to Burma as chief of mission?*

MARTIN: That's right.

*Q: Had you had anything to do with Burma in subsequent assignments?*

MARTIN: Not really, except as I just mentioned. When I went back to the China desk, one of the problems which we had among a great many was this question of the KMT troops in Burma, and the fact the Burmese had--I think this happened after I left Burma--they decided to kick our aid mission out and so forth. It was a continuing problem for several years, and the Burmese, I think, after an interval of two or three--I think three years--finally decided, I guess, that we really had done everything we could, (Laughs) and let our mission back in again. But aside from that, I really had nothing to do with Burma directly. I had one assignment that covered the whole of East Asia, and that was when I was the political advisor to the Commander in Chief Pacific (CINCPAC) in Honolulu. But because Burma was a neutralist country, a non-aligned country, and had no U.S. military aid, CINCPAC, who was at that time Admiral Felt, did not visit Burma. He had no reason to visit Burma. We visited just about every other country in the area. In fact, I think we did visit every other country in the area in the whole of East Asia Pacific area, except Burma, and North Korea, of course, and North Vietnam.

*Q: I understand. And China.*

MARTIN: And China mainland.

*Q: In your dealings, since you were involved in Far Eastern affairs off and on for a good part of your career, did you find that Burma weighed at all in the balance?*

MARTIN: No. Burma was very unimportant to the United States, except to some extent (especially when I went there as a young Chinese language officer) as a listening post as to what was going on in China. I think that was its principal importance in those days, as an observation post when we had withdrawn from China. It was in some ways a fairly good spot, although it was very remote from the capital of China and what was going on there. Nevertheless, Burma had a long border with China, and there was Chinese interest in the insurgency, in the BCP (the Burma Communist Party), the White Flag Communists. So that was the main importance. But naturally, that was, on a scale of world events, pretty minimal.

*Q: How did your assignment as ambassador to Burma come about?*

MARTIN: Well, I really don't know. It's one of those Washington mysteries, I guess. I would judge that it came about because at the time I was appointed, I was a career minister. I had held three consecutive posts with the rank of minister.

*Q: Those posts were . . .*

MARTIN: My first one was political advisor to CinCPac. I was given the rank of minister by President Kennedy. And next was deputy chief of mission in Ankara, where I was given the rank of minister by Johnson. And then as consul general in Hong Kong, which was a far larger, far more important and demanding post than being ambassador in Burma, I also had the rank of minister there. So in other words, I had been a pretty senior guy for my last three posts, and presumably was on some list of Foreign Service officers who were considered to be ripe for ambassadorship, and they looked around for one and decided that Burma was a logical place, and I think it was in many ways. I had experience there. Although I was a China language officer, you couldn't put us in China in those days, and Taiwan was already occupied.

*Q: Your position as consul general in Hong Kong was actually, within the State Department, considered to be chief of mission.*

MARTIN: Chief of mission, yes.

*Q: A major chief of mission.*

MARTIN: Yes. Well, at least I got the perks of the chief of mission and was considered chief of mission because, unlike other consul generals, I was not under the general supervision of an embassy. I was independent, in an independent post that reported directly to Washington.

At that time, particularly, Hong Kong was in the category of a chief of mission job because we had primary field responsibility for reporting on the whole of mainland China. I was there during the height of the cultural revolution, when we began to get far more information than we'd been able to get before, so that we had an important assignment beyond just Hong Kong. U.S. trade with Hong Kong exceeded \$1 billion--and this was back in '69--for the first time in history, when



I was there. We at one time, I think it was the Immigration Act of '68, was it, that opened up Asia? Asians--I think it was about that.

*Q: '67.*

MARTIN: '67, maybe. It probably was '67, because it was '68-'69 that we suddenly jumped into the forefront of visa issuing offices. I had a total staff there of 400, which was about four times what I had in Rangoon, and much larger than most embassies. So it was, in terms of importance, and especially at that time, I think, well deserving of being a chief of mission.

*Q: You didn't have at that time any feeling that there were political appointees thirsting after the job of being chief of mission in Burma?*

MARTIN: No, I don't think so. And I can't remember whether any political appointee has ever been sent to Burma. There have been appointees there, as there have been other places that were not career Foreign Service; they were USIA or possibly AID. [Martin later recalled that President Kennedy had appointed John S. Everton from the Ford Foundation as ambassador in 1961].

*Q: But they came from within the professional ranks.*

MARTIN: Yes. Yes, Burma is not a place that a political appointee would thirst after. (Laughs) I liked it very much, but one of the advantages of having the embassy in Burma was that we were so much at the end of the line. I mean, there are very few capitals in the world that are further from Washington, D.C., than Rangoon.

*Q: Just physically as well as mentally.*

MARTIN: That's right. Since there weren't any burning issues--well, there was one major issue while I was there, which I'll get to. We were pretty well left alone, and we didn't have the high mucky-mucks in Washington concerned with our affairs, and I think the result of that is that our problems were handled mainly at the assistant secretary and deputy assistant secretary level most of the time. So we felt that--at least I felt--that I was listened to, and I didn't have the experience that some of my other colleagues did, having Nixon send out a special representative who totally ignored the ambassador in dealing with the government to which he was accredited. I had one person who more or less tried that, but he didn't push it very much.

*Q: Who was that?*

MARTIN: That was a fellow named Nelson Gross, who was the head of the State Department's anti-narcotics effort at that time. And this was the major U.S. Washington--at least the major Washington concern while I was chief of mission, was the . . .

**JOSEPH A. MENDENHALL**

**Economic Officer, Office of Southeast Asian Affairs  
Washington DC (1955-1957)**

*Joseph A. Mendenhall was born in Maryland in 1920. He received a bachelor's degree from the University of Delaware in 1940 and a master's degree from Harvard University in 1941. Mr. Mendenhall served in the U.S. Army from 1941-1946 and joined the Foreign Service in 1946. His career included positions in Turkey, Iceland, Switzerland, Vietnam, Laos, and Madagascar. Mr. Mendenhall was interviewed in February of 1991 by Horace Torbert.*

*Q: And without the automobile.*

MENDENHALL: Yes, without the automobile. It did finally come back. General Motors wrote me a letter and said that this car has put more miles on it without registering anything on the odometer than any car in our history--it had gone all the way around the world.

As for my assignment since there had been no advanced planning by the Department or by me with respect to it, the Department thrust me into the first and only opening for a Foreign Service officer at my grade that existed at that point which was a job in the Bureau of International Organizations dealing with crime, housing and other social matters. I was less than enthusiastic about this assignment and after one day on the job I went to the Director of the office, Walter Kotschnig and said, "I don't really want this assignment, I want out." Well he proved to be a gentleman too and he said, "All right, I don't want you to be unhappy in the work here. I want somebody who would like to have the job." He agreed that I could look for something else.

I went to Idar Rimestad who was then the man in charge of Washington assignments in the Personnel Division. He was not very happy with my decision at all. He said, "This is the only thing we have got. You should take it." I again demurred. He said, "You will have to see if you can find anything, we don't have anything for you."

So I managed to locate a job with the Office of Greece, Turkish and Irani Affairs as special assistant to the director. I had served in Turkey. The only trouble with that job was that there was no official slot for it and after 30 days the director of the office said, "There is no way in which I can keep you because we don't have any slot." So here I was again without a job.

But meanwhile there was another opening in the Department at my level doing economic work in the Office of Southeast Asian Affairs in the Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs. The closest I had gotten to the Far East and Southeast Asia was Turkey which is about half a world apart. I knew nothing about Southeast Asia. But I accepted the assignment *faut de mieux*--there was nothing else.

Interestingly enough that proved to be the start of a 15 year association on my part with Southeast Asia. I devoted the bulk of my career to it. And I have had not regrets subsequently, although I was not very happy at the outset.

I worked for two and a half years in the economic section of the Office of Southeastern Affairs during economic work with respect to Thailand and Burma. I learned a good deal, particularly on finding one's way around the bureaucracy here in Washington. As you know, Tully, economic work here in Washington is probably more complex, certainly more time consuming than political work because there are so many agencies in our government which are interested in economics. In the political field one may have to clear with Defense and possibly CIA, but in the economic field in so many areas one has to clear with anywhere from 3, 6, 8, or 10 agencies and it has become enormously difficult to get a decision.

One of the most difficult areas in that respect was the old surplus agricultural commodities agreements, so-called PL 480 agreements. I think they had more clearances on them than any document I have ever seen throughout Washington. So it put me in touch with a lot of people and one had to find his way around in order to try to get clearances.

I will give you another example of that. I remember a meeting which I attended, I think it dealt with Burma, at which the Under Secretary for Economic Affairs presided, the number two man from the aid organization, then called ICA was present, and our Deputy Assistant Secretary for Economic Affairs in the Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs. The subject of the meeting was one of considerable dissent and I have never seen a meeting end more in a shambles than that one. There was disagreement on everybody's part. As I walked out with the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Economic Affairs, Howard Jones, who later became our ambassador to Indonesia, he turned to me and said, "Would you draft a telegram on the consensus of this meeting." I sort of looked taken aback and walked back to my office and said, "The only consensus I know is my own point of view on this. I'll draft a telegram reflecting my own point of view." To my great surprise it went through all these high ranking officials who had been at the meeting expressing diametrically opposite points of view--all signed off on the telegram. Well, that proved to me the veracity of one of the adages around the Department that policy is made on the basis of the cables.

*Q: That is correct. The drafting officer has the whip hand.*

MENDENHALL: It certainly was in that case.

I will give you another interesting experience I had, again in connection with Burma. Burma has never been a very significant country in American foreign policy. At that particular stage we were devoting, I think much more attention to it than subsequently, because we were very interested in preventing Burma from slipping into the communist bloc. But it was very difficult to get any funds out of Washington for Burma because it had not rated very high in the significance of our foreign policy. But in 1956 we got word, I think from our Embassy in Rangoon, that the two highest ranking officials of the Soviet Union then, Bulganin and Mikoyan, I think, were due to arrive in Rangoon the next day. Well, that really set the alarm bells ringing here in Washington. The Burma desk officer and I drafted a telegram authorizing a \$25 million loan to Burma. Now there would have been utterly no chance of getting that cleared through the American government a day before. (That would have been the equivalent of \$250 million today.) We managed to get that telegram through the government in less than six hours because the two highest Soviet officials were arriving in Rangoon the next day.

One of my great obstacles had been the working level official in the Bureau of Economic Affairs. He would never agree to anything, nor would his boss, an office director. Well it was late enough at night when we were drafting it that we had it signed off by the Under Secretary for Economic Affairs as they had gone home. Then we took the telegram to Walter Robertson, the Assistant Secretary for Far Eastern Affairs, who often took a lot of authority on himself. But he decided he couldn't sign off for the Department on this. He would try to get ahold of the either the Secretary or the Under Secretary. Well, they had both left for the day, so he called the Under Secretary at his home. Since this was a highly classified telegram, Robertson read it to him sotto voce over the telephone. The Under Secretary, then Herbert Hoover, Jr., agreed. Robertson signed it and our \$25 million loan authorization went to our Embassy in Rangoon to be passed on to the Burmese government.

The epilogue to this, I think the telegram arrived garbled so that the offer couldn't be made prior to the arrival of the Soviet guests. It was subsequently made by the Embassy. But even ten years later that loan had not been completely disbursed by any means.

The lesson of that one to me is this. Don't be unduly afraid of what your great enemies might offer in the way of aid. It is not necessarily going to swing a country into their camp. I took this lesson to heart many years later when I was in Laos as director of the AID Mission. A Soviet Embassy official came in to me and wanted a briefing on our AID program. I gave him a very frank briefing, it was all in the public domain. I turned to him and said, "We would be delighted to see you make a major contribution to the foreign exchange stabilization fund here." I never saw an official show such instant fright and get out of my office so fast in my life as he did when I made that suggestion.

**ARTHUR W. HUMMEL JR.**  
**Public Affairs Officer, USIS**  
**Rangoon (1957-1961)**

*Ambassador Arthur W. Hummel, Jr. was born to American parents in China in 1920. He received his master's degree from the University of Chicago. His career with USIS included assignments in Hong Kong, Japan, Burma, and Taiwan. He served as the ambassador to Burma, Ethiopia, and Pakistan. Ambassador Hummel was interviewed by Dorothy Robins-Mowry on July 13, 1989.*

*Q: You went from a highly sophisticated society--I'm not sure that's the right term--but a highly organized society to quite a different place. You went to Burma, where we have you serving from 1957 to 1960, as Public Affairs Officer. How did that assignment come about?*

HUMMEL: I'm really not too sure. I had visited Burma a couple of times, during the time I served in Hong Kong. The position came open, and it was about time for me to leave Japan. So it worked out that way. I became really very much charmed by the whole society and the Burmese people. They are one of the few people that really act out their religion, in a very nice and gentle way. They were perfectly willing to go hunting with me, and I went on marvelous hunting trips

there, but some of them felt that killing animals is something that you atone for later, by building a pagoda, or something like that. Meanwhile, nobody's perfect.

*Q: What was the political and economic situation in this 1957-1960 period?*

HUMMEL: It was quite fascinating. The umbrella party that had brought about independence called the AFPFL, Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League had begun to split, along personality lines. Midway during this tour of duty in Burma, somewhere around 1958, there really was danger of a civil war. On the one hand the country was extraordinarily peaceful. Right after independence was achieved in 1948, a wave of insurgencies sprang up all over the country, along ethnic and political lines. At one time the central government was virtually confined to the city of Rangoon and was under siege.

By the time I arrived, all of that had disappeared. It was a marvelous time for traveling and driving around the country. I drove my own jeep up to places where you can't go any more--Bhamo, Lashio, Myitkyina, and many other exotic places. The ethnic insurgencies had all subsided.

However, in spite of that fact, the internal politics of the country in Rangoon had reached near fever pitch, to the point where it was agreed that they would ask the Minister of Defense, Gen. Ne Win, to take over for a limited period of time and then have elections. Strangely enough, he did actually hold fairly early elections. U Nu, the former Prime Minister, won them and took power back again for about three years. I left in 1960. After I left, Gen. Ne Win seized power again in 1962 and set up his totally stupid, socialist economic system.

During the time I was there 1957-1960 there was a kind of interregnum. There was great tension and danger of civil war. Everybody heaved a sigh of relief when a savior, Gen. Ne Win, took charge of the government for about a year. Elections were held, and things calmed down again.

This was the first, and, I guess, the only split in the governing coalition. Ne Win then took over the government permanently in 1962.

*Q: What were American interests, as we saw them, in Burma in this period?*

HUMMEL: Very, very slender. By the time I arrived in Burma, our feeble efforts to make trouble for the Chinese Communists in Yunnan Province by supporting remnant, Kuomintang troops had all subsided.

*Q: Was this the "Red Flag," "White Flag" conflict?*

HUMMEL: No, red and white flags were factions within the Communist Party of Burma. By agreement the pro-Nationalist troops were mostly airlifted out of Burma and sent off to Taiwan, although there were quite a few remnants left in Burma, who promptly went into the opium business to support themselves. However, in the beginning the communist factions were rather a trivial factor--at least by the time I was there. We in USIS had to be very careful, because the Burmese Government had an intimate relationship with the Chinese Communists. We had to be

careful not to be overly anti-communist in the materials we used or the books we had in the libraries. We had three USIS libraries there: in Rangoon, Mandalay, and Moulmein, the latter place down on the South coast. All of them were lovely, rather primitive towns. All of the libraries were extremely active information centers. For a time we even had a Consulate up in Mandalay, too, as well as an information center. All of these are gone now, of course, with the political changes in Burma and the U. S. budget squeeze.

The Burmese people are just extraordinarily nice. They are welcoming and delighted when you learn to speak a bit of the language. I was studying Burmese very seriously. By the time I left Burma in 1960, I could read the newspapers, though still very slowly, using a good dictionary.

*Q: Where does the Burmese language fall? Is it a mixture of Chinese and Malay?*

HUMMEL: It's part of the Sino-Tibetan family of languages. It's monosyllabic and tonal, so it's something like Chinese, although, strangely enough, there are very, very few cognate words that are related in both Chinese and Burmese. Anyway, the structure and even the tone system is very much like what I was accustomed to in Chinese.

*Q: During your time there, was our Ambassador Walter McConaughy?*

HUMMEL: When I first came to Rangoon, the Ambassador was William P. Snow, who was from out of the area. He was a Latin American person. As far as I was concerned, he was rather a nonentity. Ambassador Walter McConaughy, who succeeded him, was a Far Easterner, with extensive experience in China, although he couldn't speak Chinese.

*Q: He was a man with considerable knowledge of the area, was he not? He also had a reputation of being a hard line anti-communist.*

HUMMEL: Yes.

*Q: How did that work out in this peaceful country of Burma? Was he a little out of his element because of that, would you say?*

HUMMEL: No, I wouldn't say that. He was intelligent enough to be quite aware of Burmese sensitivities--how far to go and where to stop. We had at least two exciting incidents during my time there.

One was when a young official from the Soviet Embassy jumped the wall and came over to the American Embassy. He said that he wanted asylum. We had an exciting time over that because the Soviets, of course, demanded him back, claiming that he was a criminal and a thief. The Burmese Government really didn't want any part of this. However, we worked out a compromise so that he spent about a half hour alone with a couple of Soviet officers at the airport--to satisfy the Soviets that he was not being kidnapped. Then we put him on an American plane and whisked him out of the country. He subsequently wrote a book about his experiences in the Soviet Embassy, which was quite interesting and a devastating description of Soviet Embassy life.

*Q: This was a description of his time in the Soviet Embassy. I recall that this was a standard reference about how the Soviets maintained control over their people.*

HUMMEL: His name was Kaznachayev. The second incident was when a man from the Chinese Communist Embassy staggered into the home of our Air Attaché, which was close to the Chinese Communist Embassy, with a stab wound in his stomach--inflicted by the brother of his Sino-Burmese girl friend. I sat up with him all night because I spoke Chinese. Eventually, it turned out that he was vomiting blood, so he had to go to the hospital. While in the hospital, he was turned back to the Chinese Communists, and nobody ever heard of him again. These are incidents that stick out in my mind, although they are rather trivial in terms of American-Burmese relations. I would say that Burmese-American relations were quite good and improved, as time went on.

Marian Anderson came to Burma and sang and was an absolute, smash hit.

*Q: She was a black woman and a well-known contralto.*

HUMMEL: We even had a small version of an American ballet company which came to Rangoon. This was very successful.

We in USIS had many active programs, including book translations, as usual. The newspapers used a lot of our materials, and the cultural centers and libraries were very popular and effective.

*Q: How were the Burmese newspapers at that period of time? Were they independent?*

HUMMEL: Yes, pretty independent. They reflected different factions of the AFPFL party. I don't recall that there were any overtly communist newspapers. There were a few prominent, socialist writers whom I made a particular point of getting to know. They were very interesting and lively people. Some were quite close to being communists, although they all claimed to be socialists. There was a surprisingly lively intellectual life and a lot of cultural interchanges with foreign countries, especially Britain. There was a fairly good university. All in all, I found it a very pleasant place to be.

*Q: What was your impression of the Burmese Government--either under Ne Win or U Nu? How did you and the Embassy, as far as you could see, evaluate these people at that time?*

HUMMEL: I never felt, honestly, that either U Nu, Ne Win, or any of the other claimants to political power--U Ba Swe or U Kyaw Nyein, who were involved in a split within the AFPFL in 1958, had much in the way of intellectual smarts. They reflected their own society, but none of them was very well educated in Western terms. I'm not sure that any of them had a university education. There were people around who had good university educations from Britain. Their Chief Justice is still alive. He was a close friend of ours. He would now be 98, or something like that. He had had a thoroughly Oxonian education and was an excellent Chief Justice. There were people around who had good educations, but they weren't politicians. I wouldn't say that I was contemptuous of the politicians but I think that I had the same attitude as the Burmese had about

them, that they were individuals looking after themselves, somewhat corrupt, flawed people, the way many of ours are, and no real high quality among them.

*Q: What did you think of the intentions of Communist China toward Burma at that time?*

HUMMEL: Communist China's intentions toward Burma at that time were very dubious. I had questions as to what their intentions were. The Burmese Government was doing a pretty good job of eradicating the communist guerrillas. It had wiped out the "White Flag" wing of the Communist Party and had cornered the "Red Flag" wing in the central mountains of Burma, between a couple of river valleys. It had them pretty much under control. Burma managed to sign a very sensible border agreement with Communist China, which is still in effect, the Chinese Communists swapped some territory with Burma, on the basis of, "You give me that village, and I'll give you this village." Burma's outward relations with the Chinese Communists were quite good. The Burmese Government was very careful to pay obeisance to Beijing, making trips to Beijing. However, during my time in Burma these contacts never took on any political or economic colorations.

It was only after Ne Win took over in 1962, after I had completed my first tour of duty in Burma, that the Burmese Government began that extraordinarily stupid policy of "letting the state run everything." An extreme form of left socialist and communist system of management which virtually destroyed the Burmese economy.

*Q: I take it that drugs were not a problem during your first tour in Burma.*

HUMMEL: Not at that time. Later on, when I was in Rangoon in my second incarnation, as Ambassador, I started to exert pressure on Ne Win to begin to crack down on opium growing.

*Q: Was golf a major form of leisure activity for the leaders? I know that, later on, golf became a very important form of entree to Ne Win and company.*

HUMMEL: I guess that golf was not as important then as it became later on. I've always regretted that I've never played golf. That would have been an ideal time to start playing, because a golf course was five minutes' drive from my house. My wife, Betty Lou, gave me a set of golf clubs, but I was too busy going on hunting trips.

*Q: I think that we're near the end of this session. When you left Burma in 1960, what was your feeling about where the country was going? You were to come back as Ambassador at a later date. But at that point, where did you feel that Burma was going?*

HUMMEL: I was disappointed that Burma wasn't doing better, politically, economically, and educationally. In those days, just shortly after the end of World War II, you could make a fairly valid comparison between Thailand and Burma. They had almost the same size population, almost the same area, and the same religion (Theravada Buddhism). However, the Thai were going ahead full speed economically, based on greed, corruption, and grease, to a certain extent. But the Burmese were content to be a backwater and didn't want anything like that. It wasn't just Ne Win who closed Burma off from the world. It was the general sense among the Burmese that



they didn't want to have too much Westernization. As a result, I felt, even then, that they were not likely to do as well as I thought that they ought to do, either politically or economically.

One thing about Burmese society--and it's kind of attractive--is that the economy is quite flexible. That is, when things are good, the average person, who is a farmer, of course--and incidentally there still is more land than is being actively farmed--spends a lot of time and money on his religion, giving to the pagoda, the sangha (clergy), and lavish weddings and funerals. When things are bad, he just contracts his expenditures in those areas and still lives at about the same level. This is because of the ease of agricultural production and the very simple life that they lead. So I never thought that they were going to "crash"--and they haven't, in spite of the extraordinarily stupid economic policies which they have been following since 1962.

But I was sad that they weren't moving ahead into the modern world, as Thailand was. I would see a lot of Thailand, because my only access to Burma was through Thailand, through Bangkok. I had good friends in Bangkok and would stay with them. I was very much interested in Thailand as well. Those were my thoughts as I left Burma after my first tour there. I thought that the Burmese were lovely people but not destined to go very far. Nor did we have very important interests there.

**KENNETH A. GUENTHER**  
**Rangoon University**  
**Rangoon (1958-1959)**

*Mr. Guenther was born and raised in New York and was educated at The University of Rochester, Yale University and Johns Hopkins School of International Studies. After service with the Commerce Department in the Philippines, he joined the Foreign Service and was posted to Santiago, Chile. He subsequently dealt with United Nations Affairs in the State Department. He also served in the office of Senator Javits, in the Inter-American Development Bank, the Office of Special Trade Representative and with the Federal Reserve System. Mr. Guenther was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 2000.*

*Q: What was going on in Burma in this '58-'59 period?*

GUENTHER: This was the height of the Cold War. Burma was a non-aligned socialist country which sought to cooperate with Nehru's India, Tito's Yugoslavia, and Sukarno's Indonesia. There was also a strong Israeli embassy and technical assistance mission in Burma - Israel being another socialist country.

Americans, Russians, Indians and Israelis got together every Monday night in a small chess-playing group - a very high level of chess. Playing chess was a perfect way to escape Burma and there was cross-nationality matches of tremendous excitement. The chess club, in a way, epitomized the influences being brought to bear in Burma shortly after the defeat of the French in Indochina. The big powers including the Chinese seeking

to influence a small, poor country joined by the Indians and Israelis. Fascinating mix. We spent a lot of time writing research papers - that I found out after the fact were going to Air Force intelligence - while attempting to teach Burmese university students the finer points of English.

*Q: An awful lot of research was going on. They spent a lot of money on salaries and hoped something would come out of it.*

GUENTHER: It was looking at leading personalities, looking at the colonels. And there was, even at that time, tension between the students and the military.

*Q: What of the Burmese personality, were they a different breed of cat?*

GUENTHER: Immense cultural difference. For me it was, maybe it's too strong a word, a disillusioning experience. I went over there with illusions in terms of what you could do and how you could do it and the impact you could have. The existing culture pretty much swallowed you up and spit you out. When you're in an American library reading about Burma, you create certain images in your mind. When you face the reality of Burma, minimal sanitation, no garbage collection system, the garbage collected by at that time a half-million dogs and crows. The difficulty with things working. It was a good experience in reality, bringing me down to a very hard reality. I was hospitalized three times with a kidney infection - kept alive by a superb Seventh-Day Adventist hospital - and being in a hospital with ordinary Burmese underscored our profound differences.

*Q: Was there something within the Burmese culture that was rejecting outside influence? Today it's often portrayed as being, because of the 1962 coup and the various military governments who isolated Burma, a hermit kingdom.*

GUENTHER: There was a very profound Buddhist belief. Signs - "be kind to animals by not eating them." There was enormous poverty, poverty that impacts on people. I can remember driving down the street at night in a jeep, and if you found someone laying in the road, you'd get out of the jeep and pull them to the side of the road and let them lie there and go forward.

The macro picture was interesting. As a young idealistic student, you're looking at this non-aligned movement. And what can a non-aligned movement do when you have the world of the superpowers. Was there something that could be put together? Israel was a major player in the non-aligned movement. In 1956 the Russians had just invaded Hungary and there was the Suez crisis. Being non-aligned annoyed the United States, but appeared to be a viable foreign policy option.

Burmese foreign policy was based on the premise of not becoming another Korea. That was hammered in again and again and again, we don't want to become another Korea. In a way they weren't that stupid. If you look at what happened to the rest of Southeast Asia, with the Chinese coming down and supporting the North Vietnamese and the Americans coming in supporting the south, Vietnam was ripped apart. Well, Burma's non-aligned

foreign policy insured that they never were ripped apart. They didn't go anywhere economically.

*Q: At one point Indians were the shopkeepers. Did you find Indians had been pretty well expelled by this time?*

GUENTHER: I didn't find that. There were tensions with the Indians. The Indians were still the very small merchant class in downtown Rangoon. But there was always tension with the Indians and tension with the Chinese. In 1949 Aung San was assassinated. At that time drugs was not a big issue, the Burmese who were into farming weren't into drugs at that time. Culturally, very difficult. As a young man in Asia you stick out very much like a sore thumb. There were great Indian movies, the Indian culture was very strong. The British Burmese civil service were those who couldn't make it in India. George Orwell's classic *Burmese Days* captures this.

*Q: Did you have any contact with the American Embassy?*

GUENTHER: Very little. I was working under a senior American professor, there were three of us. William Johnstone was the professor, who was writing a book on Burmese foreign policy. There was another SAIS student, so three of us. We did not go out of our way to seek out the embassy. The Nathan Group, Robert Nathan who's still around in Washington - I bump into him now and then - the Nathan Group was very influential then in terms of advising the Burmese government on economic policy and we tapped into them. We did meet socially with American diplomats at the swimming club.

*Q: From your perspective, what was the Japanese occupation of Burma like?*

GUENTHER: It was a very bloody and brutal minor theater of the Pacific war. The Japanese tried to use Burma as the base for their drive into India. The goal was to unite with Indian nationalists and turn India against the British. After being welcomed as a liberating army, the Japanese in Burma as elsewhere quickly became hated oppressors. British forces primarily defeated the Japanese in hand-to-hand jungle warfare. Wingate and Merrill's Marauders. There was U.S. troop participation and Burma was used as a staging ground for U.S. bombing raids into China. In 1958 there were still rusting Japanese tanks along the sides of the roads.

While in Burma, our academic work did not focus on the war - rather, Burmese foreign policy and the emerging role of the Burmese military.

*Q: What was the reason SAIS had an outpost there?*

GUENTHER: At that time, I didn't know. Six of us would get up in the morning at SAIS to go to early morning Indonesian classes. They had a center in Jakarta and a center in Rangoon. They closed the center down in Jakarta. I met with the president of the University of Rangoon in Washington. Maybe, in retrospect, looking back on it, they just got some money from the Air Force to open a small center.

*Q: Was there a feeling of Southeast Asia being a fertile field to play around in? Or just opportunity? Later it obviously became \_\_\_\_\_ heat up a bit. Laos was the center of attention.*

GUENTHER: Hopkins did a fine job academically in grounding me in the politics of the region. Vietnam was quiet at that time. We didn't have many outside sources of current information and didn't have much of a picture of what was happening in surrounding countries or the world. China watchers who stopped in Burma kept us abreast of development in China. It was only after leaving Burma that I came to appreciate the international ramifications of our Monday night chess club. We were also aware of Japanese business delegations who stayed at a hotel near the university where we often ate and played tennis.

*Q: Did you interact with the Burmese?*

GUENTHER: Yes, at the university. There were very few friendly students. One of the major problems at the university was they'd take a book out of the library and maybe return it with pages ripped out, so you had to constantly monitor them to make sure the library was not totally wrecked by students. Considerable cultural differences. Foreign Service Institute courses didn't prepare one for the realities. Terrible food, lousy sanitation, considerable health problems. Eye-opening experiences, particularly in the hospital.

In the university, the bathrooms were very primitive - a hole in the floor, with a water faucet that one turned on with one's left hand rather than toilet paper. You don't ever touch anyone in Southeast Asia with your left hand.

*Q: You left there in '59?*

GUENTHER: Left there in 1959.

**CLIFF FORSTER**  
**Information Officer, USIS**  
**Rangoon (1958-1960)**

*Cliff Forster was born in Manila, the Philippines in 1924. His father was the field director for the American Red Cross in the Middle East. After serving in the U.S. Navy, Mr. Forster attended George Washington University and Stanford University. Mr. Forster served in the Foreign Service in the Philippines, Burma, and Israel. He was interviewed by G. Lewis Schmidt on May 29, 1990.*

FORSTER: In 1958, I joined Ambassador Arthur Hummel when he was public affairs officer in Rangoon, Burma. Arthur kindly invited me to come down and join him and I was eager to do so

having first served under him in Japan. I was most interested in this assignment, having been in the Philippines but never in mainland South-east Asia. So I went down as his information officer from Kobe 1958.

Let me just say that this assignment came at a most interesting time historically. It was the period from 1958 when Ne Win staged his first coup--an "arranged coup" with U Nu, who was then the prime minister. It was felt that U Nu had been too tolerant of the communists and that there had to be a greater effort to keep them out of Rangoon and to turn this thing around. So when we arrived the first coup had taken place and General Ne Win was in control. We left Burma two years later just before the second coup in 1961, when there was a real takeover by Ne Win. This time it was not "arranged" as Ne Win wanted absolute control.

*Q: Hadn't he turned the government back to the civilians for a short time?*

FORSTER: That's right. That's the period we were there. Not only that, he welcomed--or this is the way it started out--all of us in there. USIA was in Rangoon with the British Council as were the PRC and the USSR, all our opposite numbers. You had the Japanese working on construction projects, as we were with our AID programs. You had the Israelis helping them up in the more arid areas, near Mandalay. It was a real international effort to try and help Burma develop and bring it out into the open. It reminded me somewhat of the period in Japan after Deshima when the country began to open up to foreign influence.

But the real problem as time went on--and I'm not sure that we yet know all the causes of it--was that Ne Win became more and more opposed to this foreign presence. It suddenly became a case of "a plague on all your houses" and we were all given our walking papers. While we still had some representation there our personnel was cut way back and the library was closed. It took a long time for USIS to get under way again. The Fulbright program meanwhile was also closed down.

We were there, however, during the years when you could travel all over Burma and when you could accomplish a great deal, before the curtain came down. It was, as I say, a very exciting time, because you were getting back into what we had in the Philippines earlier with our "nation-building" type of program, assisting the Burmese with their efforts in the fields of education, public health and government administration. The Asia Foundation was also there with its projects. There were so many of us who were in there trying to do our very best to help this government that had been so rocky since the war what with insurrection movements and a deteriorating economy.

Ne Win, at least at the beginning, was pushing for a more unified Burma. I was not there for the actual coup and Ne Win's sudden moves against foreigners, but I understand from Rob Nevitt and others who were there, that it was just unbelievable how Ne Win turned against us and suddenly you had more of a socialist-communist type regime which was very dictatorial. The newspaper editors we had worked with were thrown into jail. One of them--maybe you knew him--was Ed Law Yone, the influential editor of the Nation, who was later with U Nu in Bangkok in exile.

*Q: I met him just once.*

FORSTER: His paper was closed down and he was put into solitary confinement. From '61 that country has been virtually walled off. It was very depressing because USIS was right out in front and very active in promoting closer relations at all levels.

I might just mention one event that was rather interesting. My opposite number in the Soviet Embassy was Kaznachayev. I don't know whether you recall this, but Kaznachayev was the information officer with their embassy. Just before he defected to us the military attaché, Colonel Stragin had also attempted to defect, but his own Soviet staff caught up with him and dragged him back, shipped him back to the Soviet Embassy. He was shipped out on a PRC plane. That infuriated the Burmese, because they knew Stragin was seeking asylum and protection from them, and they did not like the way he was whisked out of the country.

So Kaznachayev played his cards well. He walked quietly into our USIS library to defect. Zelma Graham, who was the director, called over to the embassy. He was a young fellow, very fluent in English. He said he was not a communist, and had not joined the party. He had come out to Burma to work on a Burmese-Russian dictionary, and said he was conscripted by his embassy. While there, he became increasingly upset about the KGB and what they were up to in Burma. The Soviets, of course, learned that he was in our embassy, and they were about to put out a story that we had kidnapped him. When we got wind of this, Art Hummel called the press officer, Larry Sharpe, and myself to counter that effort. We were able to get around to all the media to invite them in to meet with Kaznachayev at USIS the following morning to tell his story. He blew things wide open. His story appeared all over Asia and was also carried by the wire services to the US and Europe. It opened all eyes to what the Soviets were up to in attempting to subvert a neutral country like Burma and USIS played an important role in getting the story out.

We had been hoping, actually, to return to Burma for a second tour, but by that time I was running into this congressional regulation, apparently, where after eleven years out—

**MORTON SMITH**  
**Cultural Affairs Officer, USIS**  
**Rangoon (1958-1963)**

*Morton Smith joined the Foreign Service in 1955. He served in Korea, Kwangju, Burma, Singapore, and at the State Department in Washington DC. Mr. Smith was interviewed by Ed Findlay in 1994.*

SMITH: After my BPAO assignment in Kwangju, I was sent to Burma in 1958. I was very fortunate to have incredibly wonderful bosses. Art Hummel was the PAO in Burma; he later became the Ambassador there, and of course, still later, in China. In Burma, I was an assistant CAO, in charge of exhibits, book programs, and visiting performers. I was only twenty-seven years old. During my second two years there, Art asked me if I would be the press attaché. At

that time, there was a significant press. We had a very big program, with a staff of fifteen Americans at that time in USIS. The press activity was very active and important.

*Q: Let me interrupt here and get back a minute to your entering the Agency--your recruitment into the Agency. Can you pinpoint a little more specifically your motivation? Did you, for example, want a free trip to the Far East; did you want to "do good" in the promotion of U.S. policy? Was your motivation the urging by others or was your motivation selfish, that "This would be a pleasant thing for me to do to make me feel good?" How would you describe your motive for joining USIA?*

SMITH: The easiest way to do this would be to say all of the above. These were all factors, except nobody was urging me to do it but, as I said, I always had an interest in working in the Far East, and being relatively conservative in politics--I believe that government is not a bad thing and that we should support it. But I certainly don't have a missionary approach to the job. I have met people who in our missions were sort of on a semi-religious calling.

*Q: Crusading?*

SMITH: There were people like that. I didn't see it that way. To me, somebody has to do the government's PR work. There wasn't any one thing. I needed a job, no question about that. I actually turned down two jobs with the CIA at the same time. They got into my background. I don't know why I picked the Agency but it had appeal in being brand new.

*Q: With people your age, if the idea of Foreign Service entered your head, wouldn't you think of State first rather than CIA or USIA?*

SMITH: I never thought of State, I can honestly say that. I never wanted to be ambassador but I'll have some comments on that later on because I was a DCM. But I always said to myself, if I wanted to be ambassador, I'd have joined State. But I wanted to get into a business that was intellectually and professionally rewarding. Where could you, while still in your twenties, have the responsibilities such as those of a branch PAO?

*Q: Of course, I understand that very well.*

SMITH: I had over thirty local employees in Korea when I was twenty-six years old.

*Q: Did status have anything to do with your joining the Foreign Service or USIA?*

SMITH: Absolutely not.

*Q: None.*

SMITH: It's never been a factor in my life. I spent a total of six years in Burma on two different assignments. Then, when I returned home, first I was desk officer, and then Policy Officer for East Asia.

*Q: Let me interrupt you again and ask you a question about your Burma days. Can you relate your experience in Burma to U.S. government objectives? Not only what you did but why you did it and what you accomplished in terms of U.S. government objectives? What were you trying to achieve in Burma? To separate the Burmese from the Chinese, the Russians, what?*

SMITH: It was a highly politicized situation, particularly in the press job. I was at war with the Russians and the Chinese, and a very large significant group of Burmese communists. I got to know some of these people very well.

*Q: You had an impact on them?*

SMITH: I was able to influence some of them.

*Q: To reflect a better understanding and sympathies for American traditions?*

SMITH: No question about it. In those days we used to measure our effect. And in Burmese, I supplied them with the wherewithal. It's a long story, and I don't know all the ins and outs. Some of it was attributable to plain old choosing the right guys. I had an effectiveness in the precision of my choices, and the size of our press clippings reflect how much we were getting placed. Lots of papers were using our stuff.

*Q: Did you get the idea from Washington, either then or slightly earlier, that your job was that of a warrior? How did that become the Agency's job for twenty-five years?*

SMITH: Nobody told me that I should go and try to write a newspaper's editorials. It sort of happened.

*Q: I remember thinking to myself at that age that you were just describing, "What the hell am I doing, what am I supposed to be doing?" And I could think of USIA on Pennsylvania Avenue with that little sign out front, "Telling America's Story to the World". That's what I'm supposed to be doing. What the hell does that have to do with Communism vs. Democracy or Democracy vs. Communism? That's what it turned into, of course, but nobody ever told us this was our job, the ideological warrior.*

SMITH: It happened naturally and that was fine. It worked and everybody seemed...

*Q: Did you or they assume that this is what you should be doing there?*

SMITH: I might say in Burma that's where the political role of the USIS officer was very significant and very clear. We were out there, lots of people talking, lots of people every day. What about??? I sat down and had a meeting with this guy I selected, and he told me such and such, whether it was important or not. Before I knew it, I was a political operator as a by-product, a natural by-product. I didn't have to go out and seek out information.

*Q: Were you supported by the State Department people in the embassy?*



SMITH: Sure. I tended to bully people myself. First, with a Burmese language background. Second, with a degree in Southeast Asian studies... If you're going to argue with me... Same thing was true with Korea; I had a Korean language background and if you want to argue with me, fine. That's fine. But you'd better know what you're talking about!

Q: *Did you find people in important positions who simply belittled the whole role of USIS as useless? "What are you doing fighting an ideological war; your views are unimportant." "Going around making yourself feel good." Did you ever encounter that?*

SMITH: Yes I did, sure. The fact that I was as politically knowledgeable as just about anybody in the embassy I worked in, helped ameliorate that. Maybe I was the personal exception. That could very well be, but they couldn't tell me that they knew more about the political situation in any country in which I worked than I did.

**MORTON I. ABRAMOWITZ**  
**Temporary Duty, Economic Officer**  
**Rangoon (1959)**

*Ambassador Abramowitz was born in New Jersey and educated at Stanford and Harvard Universities. He entered the Foreign Service in 1960 after service in the US Army. A specialist in East Asian and Political/Military Affairs, the Ambassador held a number of senior positions in the Department of State and Department of Defense. He served as Assistant Secretary of State for Intelligence and Research and as US Ambassador to Thailand (1978-1981) and Turkey (1989-1991). He also served in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Vienna. Ambassador Abramowitz was interviewed by Thomas Stern in 2007.*

ABRAMOWITZ: Three months after I arrived in Taiwan, our embassy in Burma requested that an economic officer be sent to Rangoon to conduct an economic survey of the country. I was asked whether I would be interested in this assignment. I said sure and took off to Burma in the summer of 1959. I stayed for three months and worked up the annual country economic report for Burma which was required as a justification for an assistance program.

I essentially made up most of the economic data as best I could; much was just not available in Burma, as it was not in many underdeveloped countries. I covered about ten years both retroactively and prospectively. I developed GNP figures and the supporting data. It took me about two months to complete this report and then I was given permission to travel around the country. That was enormously interesting, but not entirely a happy experience. On returning from Mandalay on a train I got quite sick with a terrible toothache. I got to the Strand Hotel which was a marvelous relic left over from the days of the British. By sheer luck, the manager of the hotel was a Stanford graduate. In fact, one summer he and I had driven across the States from Stanford to the East Coast. Small world!!! I don't know which of us was more surprised when we met. I called him at 2:00 in the morning and told him I was in very bad shape and needed help. He immediately got me in touch with a friend of his – a practicing physician at the local

university hospital. He took me to that hospital at 3:00 a.m. where I was examined. I had an abscess in one tooth. He prescribed a pain killer and told me to see a dentist as soon as possible. My friend recommended a dentist who gave me some more drugs and told me to see an oral surgeon as soon as I returned. A few days before this incident, Sheppie and I had decided to get married; so I returned not to Taiwan but to the U.S. We got married in September 1959 while I was undergoing drug treatment. As a matter of fact, the day after our marriage, I went to see the dentist. That was the beginning of a long and continuing marriage. Eventually, I lost that tooth but only after all the drama.

**JACK SHELLENBERGER**  
**Branch Public Affairs Officer, USIS**  
**Moulmein (1959-1962)**

*Jack Shellenberger was born in New York on December 28, 1927. He received a bachelor's degree from Western University. His career included positions in Nagoya, Moulmein, Brussels, Lagos, Tehran, Ottawa, and Tokyo. He also served in the Voice of America. Mr. Shellenberger was interviewed by G. Lewis Schmidt on April 21, 1990.*

SHELLENBERGER: Art Hummel had gone on to Rangoon as PAO and I received word by some channel that he would like me to come to be his branch PAO in Moulmein, Burma. Never heard of it. But Rudyard Kipling of course wrote of the old Moulmein pagoda which he had looking Eastward to the sea. It doesn't. It faces West.

So we found ourselves, Jill, Katie and I, bound for Rangoon and then flying down the coast for about 40 minutes in a DC-3, to this port city, third largest in Burma, Moulmein, a very mixed up society ethnically with Burman, Mon, Karen, Pakistani, Chinese, and Indian, quite a heterogeneous cultural community. One of the things I remember about Moulmein was the opportunity it gave me to be more or less the eyes and ears of the U.S. government since I was the only U.S. representative in the southern half of Burma. Of course the Burmese are, I found, candid, very eager to communicate, very gracious, absolutely unquenchable in terms of their desire to learn and to take in information. And so our library in Moulmein was the library of record; our Fulbright English teacher, teaching advisor at the junior college in Moulmein was the guest of record for that educational institution. And as we went around and took part in the pwei, or the festivals with our exhibits and with our films, we were considered to be, as a USIS entity, one of the most desired of the concessionaires, if you will.

*Q: Of course Burma, having been an English possession for a long time, English had been widely used in the country. At the time you were there, was there still enough English spoken, enough English studied so that your library which must have been largely in English books could be utilized well by the Burmese?*

SHELLENBERGER: Anybody in high school had enough English to deal with high school level English material in our library. And certainly in my level of contacts, governmental, English was

commonplace in terms of communicating. And also, I sensed that the Burmese did not want to be beholden to any culture, certainly not the British. I believe it's the only country I can think of in the Third World which had at that time no AID program and did not want an AID program. They felt they could do it on their own, and indeed if you took a poll of economists who looked at the Third World in the early 60s and asked which countries are most likely to make it on their own, Burma would be near the top, because it was a major exporter of rice at that time. But the policies since have certainly suffocated the economy. Of course, let me be quick to point out that the economy was in large part in the hands of non-Burmans. It was in the hands of Chinese and Indians and other people. But that pride later became prideful in a sense that the Ne win regime took all of the motivation for economic expansion and economic success out of the society.

Art Hummel went on to--I didn't mention the water ski troop.

*Q: No, you haven't mentioned that.*

SHELLENBERGER: The water ski troupe. An American water ski troupe was touring East Asia under the sponsorship of the USO, entertaining American troops. Well, I heard about them and said, it would be great to have a water ski team in an area which hasn't seen a water skier in action ever. And I bucked the system to get them to come to Moulmein. It was a logistic nightmare but they did make it, taking schooners overnight from Rangoon down to Moulmein and unloading their boats and their engines; a group of about eight young American women and men who had skills and physical energy and were uncommonly attractive. Since there was no hotel in Moulmein, we put up some of them and others were put into a nearby hostel, but they all fed at our place.

The big day came and the schools emptied, a local public holiday was declared, and hundreds of thousands of people came from all over the region to watch this water ski team in action. They were not disappointed. It was exciting and unbelievable for these people to see what was going on in one aspect of the American culture, combining the water and the ski and the wings that would take a skier high above the boat.

Zhou En-lai, the premier of China, came the following week, I believe, and they again closed the schools, but the contrast between the draw of Zhou En-lai and the draw of the water ski troupe couldn't have been greater.

**JOHN R. O'BRIEN**  
**Public Affairs Officer, USIS**  
**Rangoon (1960-1962)**

*John R. O'Brien was born in Seattle, Washington in 1918. Following World War II, Mr. O'Brien became involved with the USIS in the Japan Occupation and later served in Indonesia, Burma, Thailand, and Washington, DC. Mr. O'Brien was interviewed by Hans Tuch in 1988.*

*Q: After your Voice tour of duty, you went as PAO to Burma for a relatively short time. But that also was a rather significant period, so if you have any comments about Burma, please tell me.*

O'BRIEN: Well, again, Burma was a country that fascinated me, and as I said earlier, I'd asked Henry to agree to a two-year hitch at the Voice, and he kept it almost to the day. Burma then was a fairly wide open program.

We had two active branch officers, one at Mandalay and one at Moulamein, with good libraries at both, and by all odds, the best library in the country in Rangoon. The library was run by a most remarkable woman named Zelma Graham. Zelma Graham had been in Burma before the war. Her husband was with a Baptist missionary group, and he died there. Zelma was in Burma when the Japanese marched in and marched out through India. As they walked along the road in India, an American Army captain in a jeep spotted her, picked her up. His name was Henry Byroade, Hank Byroade, who later became ambassador to several countries. Zelma worked for OWI during the war from India, wanted to go back to Burma after the war, and John Steeves, an OWI friend, said, "Zelma, go back and get yourself a library degree and you will come back." Zelma did that, and she had, I think, an all-time record for USIS personnel overseas in serving in Burma. She had the supreme satisfaction of having as people coming into her library, people who had come to it as children, in the children's part of the library. So there was a continuity that was unmatched in the country. Moreover, by hook or crook, Zelma had arranged to have a number of Burmese women come and take their library training in the United States. A number of them were at Catholic University] here. So there was built up, in addition to a first-rate library, a first-rate corps of librarians. It's been said by many Burmese that there were three Americans who have had the most lasting impact on that country. One would be Adoniram Judson, the Baptist missionary; number two--this is not necessarily in order--would be Gordon Seagrave, the Burma surgeon, and number three would be Zelma Graham. So that when halfway through my tour in Burma, Ne Win, a military officer, came back into power, and he closed our branch posts, closed Fulbright, and decreed the library in Rangoon to be closed. Zelma was shattered, and she deserved to cry, as she did. This was her baby, something she'd built up over the years. The Burmese were devastated. On an earlier occasion, they threw stones at the American Embassy, but they carefully stayed away from Zelma Graham's library two or three blocks away; it was their library. But we had to break it up and send books all over the area.

Ken Bunce, then the area director, saw that it was almost a dead program, and Thailand was exploding in every direction, so he transferred me to Bangkok.

**ROBERT MARK WARD**  
**Assistant Desk Officer, USAID**  
**Washington, DC (1961)**

*Robert Mark Ward was born in New York State in 1927. Ward served in the Army before graduating from Wesleyan University in 1949 and studied at Harvard's Center for Middle Eastern Studies. He joined the Agency for International Development in 1961 and served overseas in Southeast Asia, Egypt, Pakistan, and*

*Morocco. Ward also served in the Program and Policy Coordination Bureau, the Office of Near East and North African Affairs, and the USAID African Bureau. W. Haven North interviewed him in 1998.*

*Q: What year was this?*

WARD: I joined the foreign aid program in August 1961.

*Q: Did you get any kind of orientation when you joined?*

WARD: I don't think so. I don't think there was anybody who knew enough to be able to tell what it was all about. This was a period in the summer of 1961 when ICA, which had been organized functionally - into offices like "O/FOOD," for example, which dealt with agriculture and food matters - was being reorganized along regional lines, with regional bureaus. There was a lot of informal recruitment of people. People would be going around the corridors trying to hijack the better people they knew from different bureaus so that they could take them into their bureau. There was a lot of disorder and corridor politicking to try to get a critical mass of good people for the bureau that you happened to be in. That didn't last very long, naturally. By the fall of 1961, AID was pretty well in place.

*Q: Where were you assigned?*

WARD: I was assigned to the office dealing with Burma, Thailand, and Indonesia. The Office Director was a charming gentleman named David Burgess, whose background was rather interesting. He had been a Peace Corps director in Indonesia. He was an ordained minister who had been very actively involved in social service. In fact, he had been active in the south in the 1950s in union organizing in textile mills, which was quite dangerous. He was a marvelous Office Director. His deputy was Leonard Durso, a person who stayed around and whom I met repeatedly in various other assignments. Edward Felder, and later, F. William Small were the Burma Desk Officers. Bill Small later became the AID director in Burma.

*Q: What was your function?*

WARD: I was Assistant Desk Officer for Burma.

*Q: What was the situation in Burma at that time?*

WARD: We had a small AID program - too small to warrant a full-fledged USAID mission. We had an AID Representative. The most dramatic thing was the Rangoon to Mandalay Highway. We had contracted with the Army Corps of Engineers to build a highway from Rangoon to Mandalay. For a period of several years, there were arguments between AID and the Burmese Government about where the alignment was supposed to go, what kind of highway it was supposed to be. The American side didn't want to just say, "Well, let's just forget the whole thing." AID would have liked to have done that, but the United States had made a political commitment to build the highway.

*Q: Why did we want to build this highway? What was the point of that?*

WARD: I can't remember the origin-

*Q: Rudyard Kipling's song, "On the Road to Mandalay?"*

WARD: I'm not sure where the idea came from. But that had been picked as a good project for the Americans to do. In the end, it was the Burmese who said, "Let's forget the whole thing."

*Q: Why was that?*

WARD: Just because there didn't seem to be a basis for agreeing on how wide the highway should be and precisely where it should go and what the cost should be. Somebody had made a political commitment of \$25 or 30 million to do something in Burma. We all were trying to work out something, but in the end it turned out not to be possible. A typical situation where each side is nickel and diming the other. In the end, the Burmese had the good grace to say, "You're very kind, but no thanks."

*Q: Unusual. Were there other activities?*

WARD: There was new structure at the University of Rangoon, designed by an architectural firm called Brown and Daltas - Ben Brown and Spiro Daltas - who were outstanding architects. I think they're both still alive, although they've split up. Ben Brown is in Cambridge, Massachusetts now, I think. He must be quite old. But it was rather interesting. They had done work in Iran before. Ben Brown, who was a very gracious southern gentleman, had married a lovely Iranian woman. They had designed and built a little palace for an Iranian princess. The point that was driven home to them by the Iranians (This was, of course, during the time of the Shah, the late 1950s.) was that they had done a very good job of architectural research and drawn on the extremely rich Iranian architectural tradition to produce this new structure with modern materials, but a lot of traditional design themes. The Iranian clients loved it. They said, "Our problem is that so many of these young Iranian architects either take their training in Europe and are trying to imitate European architects and it's not Iranian." You foreigners have given us really good modern Iranian architecture.

*Q: Interesting.*

WARD: Too many artists and architects in developing countries try to imitate European themes and become derivative imitators rather than drawing on their own traditions.

*Q: But he was involved in this University of Rangoon? What were they building there?*

WARD: They were building some portion of the University, some new buildings, which got built actually.

*Q: Were we involved with any technical assistance with the University?*

WARD: No, we were not. The Burmese did not consider it appropriate for foreigners to be involved in content and what was taught. We did not provide that. We were just doing a bricks and mortar job. Actually, it would be interesting to see the structure now. Often in Asia you find stucco covered structures which typically after five years are covered with covered with mildew and mold because of the humidity and the climate. Brown and Daltas' design used enameled bricks, which were far more weather-proof than stucco. They would be hard colored surfaces which would not be destroyed or discolored by mildew and mold. So, they're probably in great shape even now.

*Q: Any other programs in Burma?*

WARD: One part of this University construction program was the matter of producing the enameled bricks. For that, they used local materials. They hired an American named Sergio dello Strologo, who had studied ceramics at Alfred College in New York State, and was teamed up with a partner in New York. Their focus was to try to match up handicraft skills in Third World countries with sophisticated markets in Europe and the United States. For example, one of our projects that they were quite proud of was discovering some basket weavers in some African country - I can't remember where - who were able to produce on order lampshades, which went over just beautifully in some of the really posh boutiques in New York, London, and Paris. They did this repeatedly. Local materials and local skills adapted and used and reworked for upscale export. In the long run, there were some problems with this. Very often, the popularity of certain things like the native African lampshades didn't last all that long. So, the markets tended to be somewhat volatile, but nevertheless, they had quite a number of good successes. In Burma they had gone up country someplace near Mandalay, and they had discovered some deposits of the right kind of colored clays which had been used for generations to make local bricks. They had made the bricks for the University locally and they had made the enamel locally and they put them all together. It worked fine.

*Q: Good. This was AID financed?*

WARD: That was totally AID financed.

*Q: Did we have a mission there then?*

WARD: There was an AID Representative, not a full-fledged mission. The engineer who oversaw both the highway and the university projects was Lou Cohen, who later replaced Bill Small as AID Rep and then went on to higher things - Mission Director in Botswana, I believe, among other assignments.

*Q: And Somalia.*

WARD: The American Ambassador in Burma then was Henry Byroade, who among his other claims to fame, happened to be the ambassador in Cairo when John Foster Dulles pulled the Aswan Dam commitment away from Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1955.

*Q: But why were we in Burma? Why were we interested in Burma?*

WARD: I'm sorry to say that I don't remember our strategic rationale for an AID presence in Burma, although I had a hand in writing the National Policy Paper on the country. A political commitment had been made during the Eisenhower administration. The United States did not care all that much about Burmese economic development. In those days, you must recall, the American rationale for economic assistance had not evolved to its present level of sophistication. Monuments showing American presence and interest were important. So, there were these two rather visible things, the highway, and the university. I believe there was also a malaria eradication program, but it was fairly modest if I recall.. In the end, there was a military coup, President U Nu was deposed and General Ne Win took over. One of the first things he did was to ask the Americans to leave.

*Q: We closed the mission?*

WARD: Yes.

*Q: Did anybody see that coming?*

WARD: I don't know.

*Q: There wasn't any talk about political unrest or anything?*

WARD: No, I don't remember very much about that.

*Q: Were you working in any other countries in AID on that assignment?*

WARD: There was Thailand and Indonesia. We were busy saving the economy of Indonesia with economic assistance at that point. But I didn't get directly involved in that. I remember in my capacity as a junior officer on the Burma and miscellaneous desk, I was assigned to try to put together a package of a birthday present for Western Samoa. This was under the Kennedy Administration. The future of the trust territories of the Pacific was uncertain at that point. The general thought in the Department of State was that the United States ought to exercise its influence and expand its control in that area if that was at all possible. One thing we wanted to do as gracious gesture was recognize the independence of Western Samoa. As it turned out, we gave two things. We gave some school buses and we gave some books for schools. There was a purchase order - a PIO/C - for the list of these various books that we picked out with help from the Library of Congress and the National Education Association. We put together this wonderful list of books and got them all procured and sent them out to Western Samoa to their school system. About six months later, we got a letter of thanks back, saying, "Thanks very much, but we were wondering what you expected us to do with the 1,000 dictionaries." It turned out that one little item which had escaped us all was that there was a slight typographical error opposite the Webster's Dictionary on this list of books. Instead of 10, it said 1,000. There were supposed to be 10 because there weren't all that many schools in Western Samoa. As it turned out, they somehow found a way of using the 1,000 dictionaries. I guess each little school in each little village got more than its share and they gave a few away to some of the students. But it was all



because various of us, including the Assistant Burma Desk Officer, had somehow failed to catch the one or two extra zeros in the PIO/C. My first major lesson in AID - always read the fine print.

*Q: Is that about all we did in Western Samoa at that time?*

WARD: Yes.

**GEORGE M. BARBIS**  
**Analyst for Thailand and Burma, Bureau of Intelligence and Research**  
**Washington DC (1961-1963)**

*Mr. Barbis was born in California and raised there and in Greece. He graduated from the University of California and served in the US Army in WWII. In 1954 he entered the Foreign Service and was posted to Teheran, Iran as Economic Officer. His other overseas assignments included postings in Thailand, Korea, France, Belgium and Greece, primarily in the Political and Economic fields. Mr. Barbis served on the US Delegation to the United Nations (1973-1975). His Washington assignments involved him in Southeast Asia matters and the US military. Mr. Barbis is a graduate of the National War College. Mr. Barbis was interviewed by Mr. Raymond C. Ewing in 1996.*

*Q: Were these students on Fulbrights and other government programs or just students in general who were here on their own?*

BARBIS: Just students in general, I would say. There were good programs like the American Field Service, which brought high school students and I think that program still continues around the world, but a lot of them were here on their own. There were a lot of affluent Persians at that time who could send their children here to study.

But, that job didn't last long because I was affected by another reduction in force program in the government and the position I occupied was abolished. So, suddenly I had to find a job. A friend ran into a friend and mentioned that I was looking for a job and I ended up in INR [Bureau of Intelligence and Research] in the Far East region [RFE], assigned as the analyst for Thailand and Burma. The Ne Win coup in Burma occurred my first weekend there and Dr. Spinks, who headed RFE, called me in and we went to the safe, which I didn't know how to open yet, opened it and looked in the biographic files. This was soon after the responsibility for biographic files and reporting had been transferred from the Department to CIA [Central Intelligence Agency]. But, that was no excuse, the file on Ne Win was empty. I knew even less, although I lived near the Burma border and one of my main interests in Chiang Mai had been to follow [cross border] developments and activities, I did not follow the Burmese political situation in detail. So, I had very little background that qualified me to write the brief for the Secretary on this coup. But, somehow with Dr. Spinks' assistance we managed to produce a paper that was acceptable.

*Q: Had you ever been to Rangoon?*

BARBIS: I had never been to Rangoon. The closest I got was the border in northwestern Thailand.

I was there for several months when the analyst for Laos was coming up for transfer, Bob Barrett, and he suggested that I was the logical person in the office at the time to succeed him. Of course, Bob was anxious to find a successor so he could move on. In any event, I became the Laos analyst. I think I dropped Burma but kept Thailand, but I was primarily on Laos which was heating up at that time and becoming an important issue in American policy. In that job I worked very closely with my counterparts in the army intelligence service (AIS) and, of course, at the CIA.

It was some months later, maybe more than a year, after I had become pretty knowledgeable and pretty deeply involved in Lao affairs and I can remember having to go in on weekends frequently. There was one particular time when Dr. Spinks took me up to brief Secretary Rusk on a Sunday afternoon and he was kind of relaxed, having a high ball with his coat off, etc. He had a big map on his desk and I was showing him how some of the intelligence reports had been exaggerated and tried to give him a true picture of the situation, which was threatening but not at the critical stage that some reports were suggesting. For this I was indebted to a major in army intelligence who kept me very well informed on the details of the order of battle and all that kind of thing. In any event, I remember to my horror as I was moving around and pointing things out on the map I hit and almost upset Secretary Rusk's high ball. Fortunately I retrieved it before it spilled all over the map.

**ROBERT S. STEVEN**  
**Economic Officer**  
**Rangoon (1962-1964)**

*Mr. Steven was born in Massachusetts and raised there and in Rhode Island. He graduated from Brown University and served in the US Army before entering the Foreign Service in 1957. Mr. Steven became a specialist Latin America, where he served in Mexico, Chile and Argentina. He also served in Burma, Vietnam and Japan and had several senior assignments at the State Department in Washington. Mr. Steven was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 2001.*

*Q: You went to Rangoon. When you arrived there, what was the situation?*

STEVEN: It was not so tense. The revolution, the coup, was almost bloodless. There was no organized resistance to it. I think they shot one politician who was foolish enough to resist, but basically nothing else. But the military had taken over and the military had an idea which they were beginning to develop while I was there called 'the Burmese way to socialism.' They believed in the socialists' concept but it had to be correct for Burma. This meant, for example, nationalizing everything, and overnight you went from these thousands of little shops you see on the streets in the Asian countries - you know them, a little hole in the wall where a guy sells

cigarettes and so on - every single one of those became a government shop, and they all had identical green signs with white lettering. The lettering, thank heaven, half was in Burmese and the other half was in English, which was the standard language for the government, and it would said 'People's Shop Number 243' and didn't tell you what was sold at People's Shop Number 243. You had to look in the window and figure it out. It was a stunning display of the arrogance of not well educated people who had a very isolated view of the world - they weren't people who traveled - but their idea of how this country was going to be run and they established it, and nothing you could say or do turned them from that course. Of course, Burma's still paying the price today for that. The economic work was all right. I wasn't given analysis of foreign exchange trends, things like that. They quickly gave me the things that I could do, which were labor reporting, which was a fairly interesting thing. I ran around the back alleys and the bars talking to labor leaders who were sort of semi on the run from the government, and I did the mining industry and several other types of things that left the economists in the section to concentrate on the economy. But the thing that Foreign Service Officers will appreciate: while I was doing all this labor work, I was very quickly identified by the Burmese intelligence as very suspicious because obviously, if I was sitting in bars late at night talking to Burmese labor leaders, I was probably a spy. We found out very quickly, and I noticed it first myself, that I was being followed. There was actually a car back there when I went somewhere. So I reported this to the appropriate people in the embassy, who were delighted. They said, "They haven't got that many people. If they've got a team following you around all the time, they aren't following the people that we're concerned about." They said there was no danger to me or anything like that, and they said, "Use common sense. Don't be seen publicly with people that you're concerned about, or the Burmese government might misunderstand." After a while, the surveillance sort of disappeared; they decided I was harmless, I guess, and it disappeared. It was an amusing thing to sort of look back and there they were.

*Q: Who was the ambassador? How was the embassy? It must have been quite a small embassy, wasn't it?*

STEVEN: Yes, it was a small embassy. The ambassador was John Everton. He was a non-career man, a political appointee. He was there until, I guess, '63 and was replaced by Henry Byroade, who had been a general in the Army. He had been an ambassador, I believe, in Nepal before that, or maybe it was Afghanistan even, one of the central Asian up there, and then came to Burma from there, and he was there for the rest of my tour.

*Q: The DCM, do you recall?*

STEVEN: What was his first name? Albert I want to say. S C H N E E, Schnee. He was a career officer at the time, later was here in the Department. Some of the older Foreign Service people might remember him. Apparently he later became blind, or virtually blind, but still was in the Department for several years working at one of the jobs here that he was able to do with help. The Burmese experience was fascinating.

*Q: Had the Burmese been sort of a commercial race? I think of the Chinese and the Vietnamese who really take to commerce like a duck to water, but I think of Burma as a place where the Indians were more or less...*

STEVEN: The Indians ran the economy until the military took over. The British had brought the Indians in, as the British did in other places like Fiji, with the same results. After the British left, the economy was controlled very much by the Indians, and all the professional people, the doctors and lawyers and so on, were Indians. When the military came in, they literally cleaned them out. They just forced them out of the country, and the country lost its entire entrepreneurial class.

*Q: Our embassy - and you were a part of this - must have been watching at the beginning the disintegration of a country.*

STEVEN: Oh, yes, we did, precisely, and there was very little we could do about it. Part of the question, of course, is how much did the US government want to do about it and how much do you invest in a country that's of no strategic importance, that had no role in the Cold War. The US had little in the way of trade interests or commercial interests there. It was traditionally a British sphere of influence if anything. The British embassy had more staff than anyone else there. We were fairly much bystanders. We had an AID program, which ran into interesting problems. One I remember so well: We had been helping to finance literally a new road to Mandalay. The highway between Rangoon and Mandalay obviously was a major commercial artery, such as it was, but it was a two-lane, paved road full of box carts and so on, and the idea was to build parallel to it a modern highway that could be used by trucks and other things and get the commerce of the country in good shape. AID committed to financing it, and they started actually, I think, building the lower section of it and then very quickly ran into a problem, because as it went out of Rangoon there was a hill they wanted to traverse and on the hill was a religious monument of some time, a cemetery or a temple, whatever, but there was something on that little hill. The engineers said the only real recourse is to go through that hill, so they would bulldoze it pretty much down, go over it, and continue on. Going around, I remember, was difficult because there was a gully with water over here and there was marshland over here. It just wasn't feasible. You had to go through this thing. And the Burmese were saying, "But, but, but there are spirits on that hill." The net result was that the Burmese held firm and said, "We can't do that. We've got to go around it. We're going to have to build bridges or whatever to go around that hill." The embassy continued, to press very, very hard, "Listen to our engineers. We've got to do this." I remember very distinctly being in the embassy when the message came from the foreign ministry that the Burmese had thought this through thoroughly and had come to the conclusion that it was becoming damaging to their relations with a friendly country like the United States, which they so much respected and loved, and because of this agreement it was becoming very unpleasant and, therefore, they thought the best thing to do was to forget about the road. I remember the AID director sitting in the country team meeting almost literally with his mouth hanging down saying, "But, but, but, they can't do this." His whole operation was geared up to this project, and now he was suddenly being told, "Forget it. You're going home." And we forgot it. It never went any further. It was typical of the way the Burmese did things.

*Q: Did you have any contact with Burmese officials?*

STEVEN: Yes, quite a fair amount, in the beginning particularly. They all spoke English. English was the operational language of government in Burma. The Burmese have half a dozen

different languages, and the common language is English, left from the colonial period. So it was easy to get to know them and, yes, they came to my home. I had parties at my house, invited officials and so on, and went on a few occasions to their homes, not too often. They tended also to take us to restaurants, because their homes were really modest and I guess they were a little ashamed to have us see how they lived. Yes, we had quite a bit of contact, but then the government, increasing its control over things, began to tell their officials not to associate with us, and other embassy people too. I talked to my colleagues in other embassies, and it was the same thing. They were simply told to stay away from us. They had to get permission finally to accept an invitation to an embassy party or something. That made it much more difficult. By the time I left there we were pretty much reduced to talking to each other in the diplomatic corps.

*Q: The military, the junta or whatever you want to call it, these were not very approachable, were they?*

STEVEN: No, they were not. General Nay Win was the leader at that time. He's still alive and, many think, still the power behind the throne in Burma. But no, our military, I think, had contact with them, just because they were soldiers, but they were not people that I think we could influence particularly or were interested in the US. I do remember reading a big, thick book on the development of Burma, and one of the things that sticks in my mind, and it's the impression I left Burma with, is that Burma is cursed by being a country just overwhelming rich in resources. Until apparently through the British colonial period at least, a young man growing up could marry and take his machete and walk down the road a mile or two and carve out a farm. There was plenty of land. It's enormously rich. They used to say if you stuck a broom handle in the ground it would flower. It was an enormous rice exporter in the old days. The climate's benign, few natural disasters. It doesn't suffer like, say, Bangladesh from floods and hurricanes. It's just blessed country for easy living. You can almost literally pick bananas off the trees. So the pressure was not on, as it has been in places like Vietnam and China, where you either learn to be an entrepreneur or you starve. That's why the Chinese, of course, have been so good, because you learn to be smart or you starve. In Burma you didn't starve. You just reached up and pulled a banana off the tree. I think that's been part of the problem, that they've been isolated but they haven't had the strong economic pressure. One of the economic analyses that I was involved in: we looked at the Burmese foreign exchange picture, and some people were just horrified saying, "My god, they can only finance about two weeks' imports," and so on. And then we began to ask ourselves what do they need. Medicines, certain medicines were good; flashlight batteries, which they were having difficulty producing, were useful; there wasn't an awful lot else. They had oil, their own. They had other resources. They had plenty of food. The lifestyle was very simple; people's expectations were low. Of course, the black market flourished. It wasn't the type of pressure that would happen in many countries where literally the population, like in North Korea, would starve. That is one reason, I think, why the military regime has lasted so long in Burma, that there isn't this movement from below in reaction to major deprivation. There isn't deprivation.

*Q: Was there a feeling that the military, particularly at this time, was pretty amateur in the rules it was setting out?*

STEVEN: Arbitrary. They had a few advisors, and they read books on Marxism and socialism. They had good ties with the Soviet Union at the time but were by no means subservient at all. Among my other functions was the protocol officer for the embassy, and I had contacts with the dean of the diplomatic corps, who happened at that time to be the Russian ambassador, the Soviet ambassador. In talking with his protocol officer, who actually was allowed to come to my home as long as he had another officer with him, at one point I do remember the fellow sort of shaking his head after some local thing the Burmese had done and saying, "You know, these people just don't listen to us. We tell them how to do this and how to do that, and they won't listen to us." I laughed and said, "You sound exactly like our economic assistance people." It was true. The Russians were as frustrated as we were with it, and they put in very strict rules which, of course, were also sometimes just ignored by everybody. Things loosened up from their initial tight reign, but they were still very tight. The attitude of the military there was particularly dangerous, because I believe that they regarded opposition to them as not just opposition but as evil. "It was bad that you did this. Didn't you understand that we're doing this for the sake of the country and, therefore, your opposition is not just a political viewpoint, it's an evil thing that you're going." And when the students at the university while I was there - I lived about half a mile from the university but across a lake so you could see the university from where I was - the students struck and had a big demonstration on the campus, the military brought in a few truckloads of soldiers, who got out and lined up at the edge of this big, open common area. An officer with a bullhorn told the students to disperse, go home, stop this, and they didn't do it, of course. They continued to yell, and I think some stones may have been thrown, so the officer in charge simply gestured and machine gunners, who had set up their tripod-mounted machine guns, opened fire. Nobody knows, but somewhere between several hundred to a thousand people were killed and many more wounded. They just mowed them down till they dispersed. Then, to make their point even more firm, the military went to the student union building, which was an old building that had been built way back in the British colonial period and had become a symbol because Burmese politicians like U Nu and others had been educated there.

This was sort of a national monument almost, the student union at the university, and so the military packed it with explosives and blew it up, and cracked windows in the compound where I lived half a mile away. I remember that tremendous explosion and the window rattling and the door shaking. We looked out and there was this cloud of dust coming up over at the university, and they had blown up the student union literally, and the university was then closed for a year or two. Since that time my understanding is that they close it for long periods. I think in the last 30 or 40 years since the military have been there, the university has been closed at least half the time. They just don't allow opposition. You won an election, so what? They're in charge. It's not so much that they're politicians. I think in the beginning they had some political ideas and theories about socialism that seemed good to them. Since that time I have not been associated with Burmese affairs, so an expert probably would laugh at me for trying to comment, but my impression has been that we're dealing now more just with a gang of thugs. They're in power and intend to stay there.

*Q: This is my understanding too. There are a lot of perks to be in the military.*

STEVEN: And nepotism; their families run the country.

*Q: What about insurgencies in Burma at that time?*

STEVEN: They were going. They weren't too active at the time, not as they have been even since, but the Shan and the Kachin and others had armed forces and occasionally there were raids going back and forth. That was a problem. We were not allowed to travel more than about 10 miles out of the city of Rangoon without permission from the foreign ministry, the excuse being that they didn't want diplomats exposed to danger from the insurgencies, the real reason being to keep track of us. If you asked for permission and you were going to see one of the tourist sights or, as I did on a couple of occasions, going to look at some plantation or something like that, you could get the permission, but they just wanted to know where you were going. The fighting wasn't as bad as it became later.

*Q: They didn't have the red flag/white flag group or whatever it is?*

STEVEN: I believe they used terms like that at times. I can't remember that now. There were different groups, and there were always the questions what the Chinese were doing. The Red Chinese had influence in the north and the Thai had influence over here.

*Q: Did you feel a bit like you were under siege there, isolated, or not?*

STEVEN: To a certain extent. It wasn't bad. We lived comfortably. One of the things I suspect you found in the Foreign Service as I did, we talk about the public image of things that are hardships, we got a hardship allowance, etcetera. Most of us, at least in those days, in personal terms lived very well. I lived in a house as big as this building we're in today with five servants altogether. I could have easily imagined myself to be a British colonial with all this stuff going on. At one point my wife and I actually sat down and figured out that I was supporting on my salary 22 human beings and two litters of cats, with the families of the servants, etcetera. I paid a servant perhaps 50 dollars a month, and that supported the servant plus the family, and I think I continued, as my predecessor had done, to pay for the education of a couple of the servants' children. This was sort of one of the perks that you gave a servant. But that cost me for a year's tuition 20 dollars, this sort of thing. So even on the salary of a third secretary, I had five servants in the house, and we belonged to the local sailing club on the lake where we could go and sail on the sailboats, and I had a car. Life was not unpleasant. There was round of, mostly as time went on, inter-embassy entertaining and activity. It was a pleasant assignment, not really hardship in the sense of being outside and you look at it. Yes, there were health problems. We had bad health problems a couple of times. Every once in a while you wanted to get away. We were allowed trips out to go to Bangkok and take a couple of days just to refresh yourself.

*Q: Did the outside world intrude much there on the Burmese?*

STEVEN: I don't think the outside world was that much interested. Burma is interesting in that it's isolated and it doesn't have much influence. It's not a military threat to anybody, it's not a major political player. It just sits there. Yes, I think there've always been certain people who have been interested in the human rights issue, shall we say, and were from '62 on, but it's never really brought any major attention from the outside world. People don't worry too much about it. It hits the newspapers once in a great while.

*Q: Did the Sino-Indo War up in the mountains raise anything, since these were two kind of neighbors.*

STEVEN: Not that I was aware of. I suppose there were people in our embassy who were concerned about such things. As I recall, it was never anything that seemed to be a threat to us or to Burma.

*Q: How about the assassination of President Kennedy?*

STEVEN: Yes, that has very personal memories. I was the protocol officer. I was at home - I'm trying to remember what time; I think it was the middle of the night in Rangoon when our telephone rang. The telephone was in the front hall, and I was way up in the bedroom, and I heard the phone and stumbled down, and my wife beat me to it. I'm never at my best in the middle of the night. She got to the phone first and she picked it up, and it was the embassy administrative officer, and he, the fool, in an ominous tone said, "Margaret, is Bob there? I need to speak to him." And all my wife could think was her mother had died or something like that and they didn't want to tell her, they wanted to tell me, so she sort of stood there petrified and handed me the phone. And, well, he was telling me that they'd just gotten a flash telegram come in that President Kennedy had been assassinated and the ambassador wanted to assemble the key staff at the residence to see what had to be done, and I was protocol officer, so he woke me. I remember being simultaneously furious at him for not realizing the effect a call like this would have on my wife in the way he presented it and relief that it wasn't a family member, and at the same time, my god, my President's been killed. I'm trying to talk to this fellow on the phone and I'm looking at my wife and saying like this, "It's okay," so she sort of wondered. It was one of those interesting moment when you're trying to communicate. But then I went to the ambassador's residence; we assembled there. I know it was around seven in the morning when we assembled, so I must have gotten the call early in the morning hours. One of the very first things the ambassador did - it was then Byroade - he sat down and wrote a handwritten note to Ne Win saying, "You should know that this has happened. It will be on the news this morning." I never read the note; I guess that's what he wrote. He put it in an envelope and gave it to me and said, "Bob I want you to take this to the presidential residence, Ne Win's residence." So I climbed in the ambassador's limousine which was right outside, and I was amused because nobody had thought to take the flags off because the ambassador wasn't in it. So off we went down the road with me in the back seat of the thing with the ambassadorial flags out there, the only time I ever had that happen. Went down to Ne Win's residence, where, of course, you stopped at the gate - there were soldiers there - so I got out and asked for the office of the guard there. The young lieutenant came running right up - spoke very good English - and I said, "This is from the United States ambassador, who would like you to take this personally to the general. Make sure that he has it right away. It's urgent." Eyes wide, he took it, saluted smartly, turned around and ran full-tilt to the residence. So I get back in the limousine. I told the ambassador, "I think it's probably been delivered." Then we had open house that afternoon, I think, or started the next day with a book to be signed at the residence, and the foreign ambassadors all came. The Russian ambassador came, and at that point we had just begun to get the information about who had done this. There was a connection with Russia; this guy had been in Russia. And with the Russian ambassador, of course, was his protocol officer, who was a fellow that I knew - he and I



had talked on occasion - so while the ambassador went to sign the book and talk with our ambassador in the hallway, I was in a side room and this fellow was standing with me and he looked at me and said, "Bob, I hear, I read, that the man who did the assassinating, he was in Russia?" and I said, "That's what we are hearing, yes, that he came from Moscow and was married to a Russian." He sort of looked sideways and said, "Oh, my god!" and I always remember "Oh, my god!" from an atheistic Communist Russian. He recognized the possible implications at that time, and I just tried to keep it very straightforward, you know. "This is what I'm hearing. I have no idea if it's true or if it's significant," but in any event, off they went. I think it shook them very badly. The impression I had from other embassies is that the Soviets particularly were badly shaken at this, wondering if some rogue operation had gone wrong or what it was. As it became clear, I think, that it was a madman and not a political assassination by the Soviets, they relaxed a bit more. It was an interesting one.

*Q: Did you get a feel for Henry Byroade, how he operated? He was later ambassador to Egypt, South Africa, God knows where.*

STEVEN: I found him very comfortable to work with. He seemed to know what he was doing and had a good relationship with the staff, relaxed. He put me at ease. I spent perhaps more time with him than some of the people did because of the protocol connection. Whenever he had a party, I was there. I found him pleasant to work with, comfortable. He had a personal life, which you may know is a little bit controversial. He had apparently stolen his general service officer's wife from his last post, divorced his own original wife and married this woman who was a Czechoslovak, I believe. So when he arrived in Burma, it preceded him, this sort of scandal or problem, and we didn't know quite how to handle it. He and she handled it beautifully, fit right in, very comfortable, and we all forgot about it.

*Q: Later I heard stories that he had quite an active life with young ladies.*

STEVEN: He liked the ladies very much. There would be stories here and there. All I can say is that I neither ever saw nor heard anything improper right in the embassy. He wasn't chasing people's wives at the embassy, but he did seem to have an appreciation for the ladies. My wife said he was very charming, all the younger wives all considered him very charming. He was gallant and attentive but never improper.

*Q: Was there any manufacturing or anything like that that you looked at it?*

STEVEN: Some but nothing major. They exported rice; that was the major crop. There was timber of various types. Oil, to a certain extent, was still going out then; British Petroleum was still there. Some minerals were going out. Manufacture: the local things that you would want. The motor vehicles all came from outside, but they manufactured, you know, flashlights and small things, stoves and other items.

*Q: In so many of these countries that went socialist who were great exporters of, say, rice ended up having to import rice. Did they go through sort of a collectivization thing?*

STEVEN: No, my impression was that they did not go to the communal farm type of thing. They “nationalized” every cigar stand. Literally the entire street was just all these little green signs. I do not recall that they actually tried collectivized agriculture. I think they tried to collectivize in a sense the distribution mechanisms and things like that. The farmers had to sell to the government, but I don’t think they ever got down to the point where they actually tried to nationalize the farms.

*Q: But you’re saying that the rice crop went down?*

STEVEN: It went down.

*Q: Why would that happen?*

STEVEN: Generally inefficiency, I guess.

*Q: Maybe there wasn’t that much in it for the...*

STEVEN: There wasn’t that much in it. They had to sell to the government, and the government made any profit there was to be made, and the prices they gave the farmers weren’t incentives enough for the farmers to work all that hard. And again - and, as I say, my sociologist background always comes through - my impression was that the average Burmese farmer entrepreneur did not have the incentive to really push himself hard. Why should the farmer go out there and work day and night in the hot sun to do this and really produce when he knew that anything he really made was not going to result in an improved life for him and his family. It was going to go to the government, another factor, of course, being the Burmese religious outlook on life. Burmese Buddhism is fatalistic. Your fate is already predetermined. Whatever you do isn’t really going to have much effect anyway. The saddest thing I can remember, an incident in my mind, going out to the street one day after hearing some screeching of brakes, I went out and looked and wondered what happened, and there was a burro or donkey lying beside the road that had been hit by a vehicle. The vehicle had hit the brakes, I guess, but it hit the animal and then had driven off. So I walked up to look, and the poor animal was still alive but in terrible condition, but it was still alive. So I went back to the house, with my servant helping, and they called the police and said, “There’s a donkey out here. You’ve got to come out and take care of this.” I remember that the police car finally came, and the policeman sort of looked at the donkey. I turned to my servant, who was interpreting for me - I spoke, again, only a few polite phrases in Burmese - and I said, “Tell the man to shoot the poor animal. It obviously can’t be saved.” The man talked to the soldier, and the soldier looked at him rather sharply and said something to him, and the two policemen got in their car and drove away. I thought, well, maybe at least they’re going to send the animal people. I asked my servant, “What did he say?” He said, “Oh, it’s the fate. The animal will die.” He couldn’t shoot. That would be taking a life. Policemen didn’t do that. They may take human life for political reasons but not for an animal. I was standing there. What on earth can we do here? I didn’t have a gun or would have shot the animal myself. From the other direction comes one of our British neighbors who was a oil company employee who was still there advising the Burmese, and he had his shotgun. He came down the street and he looked and said, “I’ve seen this before,” and he put a round in, shot the animal in the head, walked back to his house and said, “They’ll eventually come and pick up the body.” That was all

right, because if you, a foreigner, wish to take upon yourself the responsibility for ending this life, that was between you and God, but they certainly weren't going to do it. To me it sort of symbolized an attitude that is very difficult for us to understand. Economic progress was not a priority.

*Q: Well, Bob, I think I ought to put at the end of the tape - it's a good place to stop here - you left Rangoon in 1964. Where'd you go?*

STEVEN: Home leave, of course, and then to Yucatan, to Merida in Yucatan, Mexico.

**RALPH J. KATROSH**  
**Political Officer**  
**Rangoon (1962-1965)**

*Ralph J. Katrosh was born in 1927 and raised in Kingston, Pennsylvania. He attended Virginia Military Institute. From there, he joined the military and became a part of the Third Army Palace Guard. It was here in Europe that he developed a desire to join the foreign service. Upon returning to the States, he entered the Foreign Service School at Georgetown University. He then went to the State Department to work with China in Taiwan. He has also served in Burma, the Philippines, Malaysia, Israel and Vietnam. He was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy on August 28, 1992.*

*Q: So you served in Rangoon from when to when?*

KATROSH: Well, first I went to Burmese language school at FSI under U Khin, who is still living and still making quilts out in Maryland. I went to Rangoon in late summer of 1962 and stayed three years. So I was there for the last year of U Nu's prime ministership and the first two years of the current Ne Win dictatorship.

Burma is another story. It is a beautiful country, very placid people, very religious. The parliament was a theocracy operating under a patina of British parliamentary democracy. It could have worked if they had given the minorities a little more say in the national government but they threatened to leave the union. The army under Ne Win was not willing to accept this and they overthrew U Nu and you have had the Ne Win dictatorship from February 1964.

*Q: Could you describe our Embassy and how it operated in those days?*

KATROSH: The Embassy, unlike Singapore where we were on several floors of an office building, is located in downtown Rangoon off of a park and square by the Sulu Pagoda. We had 12 to 16 officers and a very active USIS under Jack O'Brien, who is still very much in contact with Burma.

*Q: He is another one we must get.*

KATROSH: Our interest in Burma under U Nu was to...we had a Military Equipment Delivery Team in and out of there which tried to Westernize Burmese military thinking.

USIS did a lot of educational projects. We also had a small agricultural mission trying to improve the quality of rice, mostly, as well as working up in the teak forests.

It was again a very nice, typical Southeast Asian tour until the revolution when Ne Win moved in and created some very serious problems with the large Indian population ...deported a lot of Indians...and told the minority groups like the Kachins, the Shans and the Karens, like it or not they were going to stay in the union of Burma and were not going to get any minority rights. He told the Burman that if they didn't like it they could talk it over with the local army commander whose instincts would be to lock them up or throw them into a pit.

*Q: How did the revolution...you were there at the time?*

KATROSH: Yes.

*Q: Could you describe how you observed it and how we reacted to it? How did we feel about U Nu?*

KATROSH: We liked U Nu. We had good relations with him. He was very popular here. He had good access to private funds and grants and that sort of thing. The US Embassy didn't predict a coup. We went to bed one night and U Nu was prime minister. We drove to the Embassy the next morning and there were troops all over the street, U Nu was locked up and Ne Win was the ruler.

*Q: Ne Win had been what?*

KATROSH: He was the senior army commander. He also led the government a few years before when U Nu asked him to come in and discipline some of the unruly politicians, but then he voluntarily stepped back and gave the government back to U Nu.

The US relationship with Ne Win was not good and still isn't. He slowly, slowly put the squeeze on USIS. He wouldn't let Burmese students go to the States and he closed our libraries up in Mandalay, down in Moulmein and, eventually, in Rangoon. He didn't want any more military aid, which we wouldn't have given to him anyway, and he closed down the agricultural programs. He left no doubt in our minds that he wanted to see us there only in a very low key, passive role. All foreign and Burmese businesses were nationalized. The army literally took over the country. It took over the banks, the private businesses and anything else that was worthwhile.

*Q: What did you see as our interests there at that time?*

KATROSH: At the time we had no serious interests. We didn't want to see the country go Communist, certainly. There was a Communist movement up around the border...the Red Flag

and White Flag...but they were not that threatening. During World War II many of the minorities were very helpful to us, particularly the Kachins. They ran guerilla operations for the US.

The US mission in the early 1960s was to make sure Burma didn't fall under Chinese influence. That is where we in the political section spent most of our time. We wanted to make sure that the internal Communist movement was frustrated...that wasn't much of a problem because it never was really popular among the Burmese, but there was a pull from China. There are many Chinese in Burma...and incidentally they suffered and still suffer under Ne Win. He went after the Chinese who controlled the rice market at the time. He took all of the business and their houses, etc.

*Q: It is easy to say that was our preoccupation, but you are sitting at the Embassy in a place where we don't have very cordial relations. What does this mean to keep Burma out of Chinese sphere?*

KATROSH: After the revolution it was very difficult and like all other things I think at that time that the Chinese, themselves, were distracted by the Soviets. People were realizing that the Sino-Soviet split was for real, that those fellows were going to go after each other. Some of the earlier pressures...you see, Zhou En-lai, when he was foreign minister, courted Southeast Asia. At that time the Chinese had a very velvet glove policy towards these countries and they were very much attracted to him. Zhou En-lai was a very impressive diplomat. He said: "Why can't we all cooperate. Why do you want to support these colonialists. You are just getting out from under their yoke. Look what they have done to you. You can talk to them, but look to our way."

*Q: I am really talking more about what does an Embassy do?*

KATROSH: Oh, I see. Well, what you try to do...it took Ne Win about three or four years to effectively do all the things that I have described and I would say for the two years that I was there we could still talk to the government officials, particularly to foreign ministry officers. They would visit your residence, particularly if you showed an American movie, which were very scarce in Burma. We tried to maintain contact, tried to show them the consequences that we saw because of too close a relationship with China. We never said they should fight the Chinese or not have a relationship with the Chinese. The Soviets were there, too, and very active.

Ne Win's instincts...the Soviet Embassy was larger than ours and very active...were that he had these three--China, the Soviets and the US--to maneuver against each other.

*Q: Chinese, Soviets and Americans.*

KATROSH: Right. Of course we would meet with the Soviet Embassy officers and try to get as much out of them as we could in terms of what they were doing and thinking. They would, of course, return the favor. At their parties they would have the Chinese there and when "no one was looking" we would go over and chat a bit. We worked with the contacts in the government, trying to contrast the options of looking at the United States' proposition vis-a-vis what was in store for you if you worked with the Russians or the Chinese. The Russians would ship in 50 tractors and they would offload them down in one of the ports...the darn things were for the

steppes of Russia not the tropical forests of Burma. The tractors would sink in the mud. I bet they are still there; just a pile of rust.

A lot of young men in the Burmese government who were trained in the United States would talk to us. They would go to Moscow and talk to the Russians; go to Beijing and talk to the Chinese. We, in Burma, performed the traditional work of a political or economic officer in an Embassy, of staying involved in the community, of trying to analyze and determine what the intentions of the competing forces are and then getting policy direction to Washington.

In Burma the climate is very important to what you do. From May until October it rains every day. By August you look at the wall and the nail marks are there, you can't get out. It is a monsoon climate with a very heavy monsoon. Monsoon ditches in Burma were as big as a 9' x 12' room. You could drown in them and sometimes an unfortunate youngster did.

*Q: So you are really nailed home?*

KATROSH: You are nailed in the city. It is very difficult to travel around in Burma during the monsoon season. Now from October to May it doesn't rain. This is the cool season. Then is when you go "up country." Then is when you talk to the villagers. Then is when you go up to Mandalay, or Maymyo or Lashio.

But slowly, slowly, Ne Win every two or three months would narrow, narrow, the scope of our travel until by the time I left there you could go from Rangoon to Pegu and that was it. Now, I understand, one can travel to Mandalay and other cities more often. They are still very much controlled, however.

*Q: You left there about 1965. Who was the Ambassador when you were there?*

KATROSH: Everton and Byroade.

*Q: What were their first names?*

KATROSH: John Scott Everton and Henry J. Byroade.

*Q: How did they operate?*

KATROSH: Everton was very passive, a very low-key person, not too aggressive. He flew the flag. He reminded me of some of the diplomats we had in Asia in the late 19th century. I think he was connected with the Protestant missions prior to his work with Foundations and the U.S. Government. Byroade is an ex- Air Force General who built airfields near Kunming, China during WW II. A West Point graduate in the Corps of Engineers, he was an excellent choice for the assignment. He later went to Manila as Ambassador.

**RUTH MCLENDON**

**Political/Consular Officer  
Rangoon (1962-1966)**

*Ruth McLendon was born in Texas in 1929. She received her bachelor's degree from Texas Christian University in 1949 and her master's degree from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy in 1950. Her postings abroad following her entry into the Foreign Service in 1951 include Sao Paulo, Manila, Adelaide, Rangoon, Bangkok and Paris. Ms. McLendon was interviewed in 1995 by Charles Stuart Kennedy.*

*Q: Getting ready to go out there, how did, I mean what was American interests in Burma at that time. We're talking about, I mean you went out in '62 I guess?*

McLENDON: Well, when I started preparing to go they had a parliamentary regime that wasn't working very well. They had a number of insurgencies on their hands. They were a friendly country in which we had a number of economic aid projects and a military assistance group operating and a lot of exchange USIA programs operating. We had a full complement there. Then slightly more than midway through my training the army officers had started the revolution and arrested the cabinet and began the Burmese socialist revolution. They started down a radical socialist path. An intensely nationalistic fear of foreigners.

*Q: Xenophobic.*

McLENDON: More xenophobic than anything else. I arrived in July of 1962 very shortly after the student demonstrations. These had resulted in the army suppression which had resulted in the deaths of over 100 students. I don't think the full number was ever known and they arrested hundreds. So, there had been a rather brutal crack down right before I got there. It was at the time I first arrived. I think the Burmese people had been accustomed to British rule and then of course they'd had Japanese domination during the war, but then a return to the British rule and quickly independence. Then this attempt at parliamentary rule. They had been accustomed to a moderate government all these years basically and they had not yet become adjusted to this government. They did not yet realize what they were up against and they were still being fairly free to talk and be with foreigners and so forth. That changed.

*Q: You were there at a very interesting time, but you were there from when to when?*

McLENDON: It was fascinating. I was there four and a half years. I was there from July of '62 to December of '66.

*Q: How did you see Burma? I mean we've talked about the political situation was just in the process of changing. It had changed, but.*

McLENDON: It had changed and they were just in the process of their revolution. Let me describe first what happened to me and then I'll go into that if I may.

*Q: Okay. Please.*

McLENDON: I can speak with less authority on the earlier part, the first year I was there than the later part because of one of the things, you know, another of these little switches that the Foreign Service felt free to pull on women officers in those days, more than men. I was a mid-career officer at this point of what, two, three, four posts. I had finished Burmese training with the highest score by one they had. I was supposed to go into the political section as a Burmese language officer. The DCM decided to move a first tour officer from the consular section who wanted to change out of consular work into the political section and give me the consular job which was a job appropriate for a first tour officer and the DCM did it. Although I protested, I didn't have much to say about it. Fortunately, the officer who was moved up in my place, although I resented it terribly, was in fact a fine officer. He turned out to be a fine officer and I had nothing against him, but it wasn't right. Fortunately during that first year we were inspected. The inspectors supported me and the recommendation was that I be moved into the political section at the first opportunity. That eventually took place but for that first year I was not in a position to follow the political situation except through the newspaper and so forth.

*Q: Well, who was the ambassador and DCM at that time when you first arrived?*

McLENDON: Well, we had an ambassador who was a former missionary, a political appointee, a Kennedy political appointee. John Edgerton, a former missionary. He knew Burma. With a good supportive DCM he would have been a good ambassador, but he had been too close. He also had been with the Ford Foundation and he was too closely associated with the Ford Foundation for this revolutionary regime to accept him. At that point, no ambassador could have been effective I think. His DCM was not supportive and he was a weak man himself.

*Q: Who was it?*

McLENDON: It was Alexander Schnee. He would undercut the ambassador with the staff and it was an embassy divided within itself.

*Q: It's sad because it's obviously a small place and it doesn't take much to create a very unhappy feeling.*

McLENDON: It doesn't take much to create unhappiness and it was not a happy place. But fortunately, Edgerton was replaced by Hank Byroade and Hank Byroade was exactly what we needed once we got him.

*Q: He was the youngest general.*

McLENDON: The youngest brigadier general since the Revolutionary War and had been the ambassador to Egypt at the time that we backed out of the Aswan dam project. If you've heard that story you know something of Byroade's personality. Byroade could be a hard charger, but he was also one of the best judges of human nature I've ever worked with and a very nice guy to work with. Anyhow, he came along and we were in good hands. We weren't going to have that kind of problem anymore. From the time Byroade arrived he was fretting. First, it took him a while to get in and present his credentials. Then after he did, after that formal meeting with the



Head of State he couldn't get in to see him at all. He was cooling his heels and fretting and he wanted to know why. There were those within the embassy, and this was something that I'd struggled against with Rick Schnee, there were those within the embassy that were convinced Burma for all practical purposes was a communist country. It was going to go down the communist line, it was a satellite of China and this was it. I think the first report I remember writing when I wrote, when I joined the political section.

*Q: This would be about '63?*

McLENDON: This was '63, the fall of '63. Was a visit by I think it was from China.

*Q: The Premier of China.*

McLENDON: Foreign Minister at the time.

*Q: Foreign Minister, yes.*

McLENDON: All the publicity, all the headlines of the newspapers were about these friendly relations and that was in the English language press in Burma. There were still two English language dailies. I read also the Burmese press and commentary. My task was supervising the translation pool and I would select things for them to translate and there was a lot of comment in Burmese on the other side and one of the most telling comments was here he comes again. They told a story, a Burmese tale of a bully who made the point of brushing his teeth in front of his, who wanted to be known as the sweetheart or a lover of a certain village girl and she would have nothing to do with him. So, he made a point of performing his morning brushing in front of her house so it appeared as if he had stayed there. In effect the comparison was with the Chinese Minister. He was coming down with all this fanfare to make it appear that Burma was a satellite of China. I wrote a dispatch on that visit pointing out the contrast and the chief of the political section and I were on track on that. We both agreed that Burma was very carefully following its own path and was trying very, very hard to stay out of both camps. Byroade understood that very well and agreed with it, but he didn't understand, he couldn't see why they should be so suspicious of us and I remember sitting down with them and saying they have good reason. If you look at the surface. If you know enough to see surface indications and don't know what was actually going on, they have good reason because there were a number of things. There was a group of Buddhist monks while I was up in Mandalay temporarily in charge of Mandalay before I went to the political section had started the first public opposition to the regime and it created quite a stir. We followed them very closely because remember this was '63 and just over the way in Vietnam we had the monks burning themselves. We were acutely sensitive. This was the same group of monks who had been active in the agitation for Burmese independence. The first group of Buddhists monks to become politicized and they had played a role in the Burmese movement for independence, so there was also that angle to consider and consider how much they might do. So, we were, as it turned out that was the same group of monks that were anti-communists and our USIA had been providing I think equipment primarily to help them in some of their anti-communist efforts. Equipment like movie projectors and cameras and things like that. We're not talking about subversive stuff.

*Q: No, but I mean, very, yes.*

McLENDON: We're talking propaganda stuff.

*Q: Yes.*

McLENDON: Maybe a printing press, we may have loaned them or bought them a printing press. I don't know that side of it. I was only aware of it because some of it had been handled in Mandalay, not while I was there. All of this had stopped before this time. We also had some aid projects that looked funny. We had some Americans who were still wandering around the country and had been there since the end of World War Two and may or may not have been brought in by the CIA or recruited by the CIA as reporting. I don't know.

*Q: Let me stop here.*

McLENDON: From my side I guess I could say, the monk who came out who started the protest movement, asked to meet me in Mandalay. Met me at the residence of our branch public affairs officer. He and his senior Burmese assistant were there and his interpreter. He made a perfectly straightforward appeal for help against the Burmese government, against the revolutionary government. Why are you fighting communism everywhere in the world and not here? I just without any policy instructions from my government, I just said, we are involved in Vietnam. We have our hands full in Vietnam. We have very limited interests in Burma and Burma is a long way from the United States and we are not going to get involved here. We're just, that's just not in our interest at this point. I told Byroade. I said, I assume the Burmese military intelligence knew about that meeting because they must have been following him and they probably were following me. The only thing is they probably don't know that I told him no. They probably don't know what I told him.

*Q: Yes, yes.*

McLENDON: Of course he later came down; he didn't want to take that no for an answer and later he came down to the embassy and was given an appointment with the ambassador. I pointed out that he was seen coming in here and the Burmese Government know that, but they don't know what you told him.

*Q: What was your analysis, yours and him and obviously the political section and ambassador's analysis of why this government coterie took this very xenophobic line which is really quite different from around there and it remains that way to today?*

McLENDON: I think it was that their experience. The Burmese had an inferiority complex in dealing with foreign powers. Their experience was that when they had any dealings with foreigners they got taken over first by the British and then the Japanese. They didn't want to be dominated by our culture. They didn't want to be dominated by us politically and the alternative, it seemed to them, was they would likely be dominated by China which they wanted if anything even less. One statement that I heard quoted and I'm not sure who it was, it may have been Harrison Salisbury.

*Q: Who was a writer for the New York Times.*

McLENDON: He was. He had come to Burma in 1965 or so, and had an extensive interview with Burmese officials and then came back and briefed us on it. After that briefing, I said for the first time I think I have heard the true version of why Burma is doing this. It was either that interview with Salisbury or a later one in which he was equally or almost equally frank with another visitor whom he'd known a long time. The Burmese said, he pointed and looked at a map and he just sort of seemed discouraged and he said, "I wish I had a pair of atomic scissors and I could just cut this off from this continent and move it someplace else." He feared the pressure from China and yet to be drawn into our train would provoke trouble too, he feared.

*Q: Was there any affinity with India?*

McLENDON: No, the opposite. There was a strong racial prejudice against Indians in Burma, racial and cultural. Because the Indians had been brought in as laborers to build the railroads and to do all the work that the Burmese would not do. Then they stayed and then had taken over and adapted very well and taken over the economy and they were the merchants and the bankers and the civil servants and so forth. The Burmese felt that between the Indians who had been brought in by the British and the Chinese the overseas Chinese, who had come in their own way, they felt that economically they had lost control of their country that way. That was another motivation.

*Q: Was the Government working to get rid of the Indians and Chinese?*

McLENDON: They did get rid of the Indians by forcing those who were not third generation Burmese to leave. There were these forced deportations of Indians, all the while I was there. Well, first they were encouraging all of those who would leave to leave and then they were forcing out the others, they were making it impossible for them to stay. They were leaving; there were chartered boats. The Indian embassy, the Indian government was running just a fleet of chartered boats taking them home. Those who could afford it were flying out.

*Q: Well, now, we've got this increasing xenophobic country that don't want to get involved with us.*

McLENDON: They don't want to get involved with anybody.

*Q: You were a political officer and the whole idea of a political officer is to mix and mingle and find out what the ruling people are doing and you're representing this country which is becoming an anathema to the ruling party. How did you operate during your four and a half years there?*

McLENDON: We weren't talking to the Burmese representatives of the Burmese government at any significant level. What we were told didn't have much significance. The Burmese who would talk to us had no influence in the government. We were watching and reading. I was reading the Burmese newspapers. We were talking to our Burmese friends. Some of my friends were retired. Some were in nonpolitical jobs, technical jobs that were still needed. We were not

talking; they were not in on the political decisions. We were not talking about political decisions. It just gave a feeling for how the Burmese react and how they think and how likely it might be that these policies of the government would succeed. I thought no way with the Burmese, no way. The most individualistic people on earth, they'll never ever bring them to the first step.

*Q: Where was their leader getting his socialist ideas?*

McLENDON: Of course we had CIA operating and they had sources that I didn't know, but some of them were good. I had access to most of the agency people and in fact they sometimes touched base with me before they went out on a report after I'd been there a while. We knew a lot of what was going on, but not through your normal diplomatic contacts.

*Q: How about the insurgents?*

McLENDON: Oh, Lordy.

*Q: One always used to hear about the flag insurgencies, red flag, white flag, black flag.*

McLENDON: Yes, the red flag communists, the white flag communists, the insurgents.

*Q: The mountaineers?*

McLENDON: No, not mountaineers. Some insurgents were in the south and east primarily over to the Thai border which is when that became such a sensitive area.

*Q: But they weren't?*

McLENDON: Not mountaineers. Some were largely Baptists, or Christian which is a further division. There were about 14 or 15 different groups, most of them small. The Kia were the big threat because they had at one time had moved within 30 miles of Rangoon and had Rangoon surrounded. There were just wide areas that were either no man's land or largely held by the rebels. I remember we had a very bright officer who joined the political section at that time who was just convinced that the government was going to collapse in a couple of months because. We'd go over the map. We were sitting with him and trying to explain why we're not going to say in such strong terms that the government was really in very serious straits from these rebels. He pointed out all the territory they held and then I said, yes, but look at the productive areas of the country. Look where the rice was produced and those are not held by the rebels. I said the areas you are talking about are economically dependent; they are not income producing areas. As long as they can hold that, this central strip, that's where lies the revenue. He was furious. He just thought we were overcome by localitis and couldn't see the real picture.

*Q: What was America, I mean at this time, I mean, did you feel that as long as Burma didn't turn violently red or that the Department of State, hence the American government was quite content to leave it as it was?*

McLENDON: We were told in not so many words, we've got our hands full, we'd just as soon forget about you. We know you don't feel appreciated and you think all of your reporting is not appreciated and we know you think we don't give you any of our time, but we don't worry or think about Burma.

*Q: Well, of course we are talking about a tremendous commitment in Indochina.*

McLENDON: You're talking about an increasing commitment because the dividing line in Vietnam was '63 with the fall of Diem.

*Q: You were there until '67 is that right?*

McLENDON: '66. The end of '66.

*Q: '66. Did you see Byroade getting anywhere?*

McLENDON: Yes, I saw him beginning to get someplace. When Byroade finally got his first appointment with the head of the Burmese Government, I spoke to Byroade. I said, if you're going to overcome this, with ego I don't want to make it sound as if I had to tell Byroade how to conduct his business. Byroade I will say again was one of the shrewdest, the best ambassadors in terms of knowing his people and how to get his message across. Knowing his people, I mean knowing the government he was dealing with. I suggested to him that there were a lot of things that needed explaining. He had better be prepared to explain everything in terms that would be credible. He had to say that what made the Burmese feel suspicious was in fact not directed against the revolutionary government. Byroade spent weeks waiting for his appointment doing the most thorough preparation I've ever seen. He demanded and I think got agreements from CIA that they would brief him completely on everything they had ever done in Burma. That was the promise in any case and he was briefed very thoroughly. So this meeting made a start and then he was able to build on that and he began to make headway. The leader was beginning to at least trust him personally. Then we had an opportunity to invite the leader for a State Visit. Now this was not terribly popular with Washington at the time, but we proposed that it would serve both our interests to invite him for a State Visit to Washington because he was a representative of a thoroughly independent and neutral nation which had gone out of its way to make us feel unwelcome. By inviting him to Washington with full honors we would show to all the independent neutral nations that we had nothing against it. As long as it is genuine neutrality, we respect it and we'll work with it. It would show that he didn't just visit communist countries, but was respected and invited to visit the leader of the Western side. Somewhat to our surprise, he was invited. We got him in.

*Q: Were you there when he went?*

McLENDON: Yes.

*Q: How did it go?*

McLENDON: It went very well. Not without your usual glitches. You think everything and everyone is agreed and then they start bringing in the protocol people. They want to overturn everything you've set up. Well, that's what happened. That was the only big problem. It went very well. The leader did not want to wear a military uniform because he was aware that that would not be well received, and he did not want to wear traditional Burmese dress. He was very sensitive to the reaction that Westerners have to a man wearing a basically a sarong and a funny looking hat on his head with a bow on the side. In Burma, Burmese men wearing it look dignified and fine, but in a Western capital, no. He also detested white tie and tails. So, he was making a state visit to Japan on the same trip and they had managed to get agreement from Japan that he did not have to wear white tie and tails to call on the emperor and that was a first.

*Q: Oh, yes.*

McLENDON: The Japanese had waived their protocol which is very, very unusual.

*Q: Court driven, yes.*

McLENDON: So, then after he was already en route to London with the wardrobe he had packed, the White House protocol got in the act. They absolutely could not have a White House state dinner that was not white tie. We said, forget it. We pointed out, well, not in those terms, one doesn't talk so bluntly to the White House. We pointed out that if the Japanese royal family could waive their protocol, surely, surely the White House could find some way to do it. So, I don't know where it was decided in the White House, but it was decided to call it a family style dinner. Since we were all on such close terms, it was a family style dinner and it was so popular that LBJ decided to make that the style. He liked those family style dinners.

*Q: Now, I've heard one of the things at least about later on that the way to make inroads with the ruling group of military officers there was golf. When you were there was golf much of an entree or not?*

McLENDON: I don't recall the details. It may have been at one time, it may have been later, not during my time.

*Q: Well, now, you left there the end of '66. Is that right? Where was Burma with the United States at that time?*

McLENDON: I was sad that Burma made such a hash of its economic policies. It was just incredibly bad. I felt very sorry for that, but I felt that we were on a sound course. We were dealing with them in the only way they could accept. They could not at that time accept aid. Aid at that time would have been thrown away unless they were willing to do something sensible in terms of distribution.

*Q: Yes, well, I thought we'd end at this point.*

McLENDON: We were doing what they could accept and we were willing to do. Everybody by this time had calmed down and realized that they were indeed neutral and were really fiercely

determined to stay that way. We had a limited role and as long as we accepted that it was a very limited role, we could get along just fine and we did. After I left it wasn't long before they were beginning to accept aid again in a limited manner where they had more control and then they began to cooperate on the drug effort.

*Q: Were drugs a problem at the time you were there?*

McLENDON: We did not recognize them so much as a problem, but yes. The golden triangle was in existence at that time and we were aware at that time that the KMT, the ex-KMT.

*Q: KMT?*

McLENDON: The remnants of the Chinese troops that had over the border from China into Thailand. They controlled the opium traffic from Burma through Thailand.

*Q: Before we leave here and stop this interview, was there anything else in Burma, any problems or episodes or anything that we should cover?*

McLENDON: Well, it depends on your interest. One thing that was fascinating in Burma was watching the attempt by the revolutionary government to impose these radical socialist policies from elsewhere, imported from elsewhere, on a largely rural, Buddhist, peasant society with highly individualistic ways. Another was comparing the theory of the communist socialist state and revolution with what happened in actual practice and at times it would move you to tears and at times it was just like watching a Marx Brothers comedy. It was hilarious.

*Q: Well, another year has passed and this is December 16th, 1996. So, why don't we talk about your time in Burma, some of the events that you saw there and if there are any problems or specific things that you were dealing with?*

McLENDON: I arrived four months after the socialist revolution had overthrown the former government. Immediately before my arrival there were student demonstrations in which the army turned the guns on the students. We never knew how many were killed, far more than the government ever admitted. The estimates were backed up by eyewitnesses who saw bodies being unloaded at hospitals and morgues. The number was well over 100 and some estimates over 200. It was a time that the revolution was just beginning to organize itself. I don't think that the revolutionary council came into power with any real framework or idea of what they wanted to do. They wanted to take over the country with a strong hand. They were I think fed up with politicians who could waffle and they had been convinced by some theorists among them that a radical socialist path would fit Burma and would enable them to develop the country more quickly. In fact they had as it turned out no concept at all of how to run an economy or how to run a government. They were simply very good at military intelligence and at ferreting out their opposition and arresting them.

*Q: What was our feeling about the composition of the Burmese army, particularly the officer corps at this time?*

McLENDON: The officer corps were not those who had served under British rule. These were the officers who had led the opposition, the nationalist opposition to the British. Those who had led the movement that eventually led to Burmese independence with the British were through. The army had remained loyal through the years of parliamentary rule, but they had become increasingly restless because the policies were causing more and more of the ethnic minorities to rebel against the central government.

I think they set about writing their policy after they took over and eventually came up with the Burmese way to socialism.

*Q: Did we have any or was there any chance for us to have any input at that time? Did the embassy play, what sort of a role was the embassy playing during this period?*

McLENDON: We and the other embassies were totally out in left field. They were not speaking to us. They were having nothing to do with us. They made it clear to any government employee that his career was in danger if he was friendly with foreigners. That feeling gradually spread so I would say the majority of Burmese were afraid of us. The Burmese were on the whole very friendly. They would have liked to be friendly and if you could get outside of Rangoon, they were friendly. Army officers had taken over the civilian posts of district superintendents and that sort of thing or at least were controlling them.

*Q: You were there from when to when?*

McLENDON: From July of 1962 to December of 1966.

*Q: Well, you were there about four years. What did you do?*

McLENDON: Well, as one of my colleagues put it, we became expert criminologists. We learned to interpret the newspapers very carefully, looking for very small indications, reading the editorials. That's where my training came in handy because I had spent ten months learning Burmese before I went out and I could read the Burmese newspapers which were far more revealing than the English language newspapers. It was very frustrating. Of course we had intelligence sources and we sometimes had good intelligence through those sources. There were still Burmese opposed to the government. There was basically a lot of popular support for not just the U.S., but Western powers. We also knew that every such contact was probably almost certainly known to the military intelligence and that may have deepened their suspicions of us. For the first couple of years I was there, the leader was really afraid that we were going to try to overthrow him. I think he really thought that. A lot of our former contacts were among his opposition and most of them ended up being arrested.

*Q: Well, also, we had had a hand in some action that had taken place. This was somewhat earlier, but there had been some rebellions and the hand of the CIA was not completely hidden.*

McLENDON: If you look back at that time, if you look back at the sixties, that was not so long after we had almost openly been involved in Guatemala. We were much more an activist in political struggles within countries then than we are now. These were the years of Vietnam. We



had had close ties through our USIA with the young monks association, and specifically with the group in Mandalay more than in Rangoon. We had because the communists had made an attempt to infiltrate the Buddhist monks or at least so we thought. I think we helped them purchase a press, a printing press to put out their pamphlets and publicize their viewpoint. I, of course, was not then nor have I ever been aware of what our CIA might have been doing. When Henry Byroade came as ambassador, replacing Edgerton in July or August of '63, I'd been sent to take over Mandalay while one of the officers in charge was transferred. While I was in Mandalay some dissidents began their open opposition to the regime. One of their leaders started making speeches in Mandalay that were openly calling for resistance to this in his view communist government. Through his contact with our information office there, he sent word that he wanted to meet with me and we met at the home of our branch PAO, Jim Bradley? Bradfield? I'm terrible with names, worse every year.

*Q: No problem.*

McLENDON: But we met and this person made a direct appeal to the U.S. to intervene and displace this allegedly communist government. I explained that we had no intention, that we had our hands full in Vietnam and had absolutely no intention of taking any action in Burma.

I even used my Burmese which was not fluent and it was very basic to put it in so many words, our interests in Burma were very limited, that as long as Burma remained independent and neutral then its government was of no direct concern to us. We were sympathetic with the need for a government to follow its own policies. He was polite, but he didn't take my word for it. I think a few months later he came to Rangoon and asked for and received an appointment with the ambassador where he was again turned down. I reported all this. By the time I returned to Rangoon Byroade had arrived but had yet to meet the leader. I think he may have, I think he had been allowed to present his credentials, but there was no way he could get an appointment to sit down and try to talk with him. He was very frustrated because Ambassador Byroade was one of the canniest men I've ever known, canny in terms of human nature and in relating to people and putting people at ease with him. He couldn't practice his skill because he couldn't get his foot in the door. He was very informal with his staff and he would wander around the embassy. At that time I think his wife had persuaded him to give up smoking and he would wander around the second floor of the embassy where our officers were trying to bum cigarettes from everybody around and all of us had been warned not to help him out. He'd just come and flop down in the chair by my desk and say, what can I do about this? You can't, until he is ready to see you, you can't. He said, why is he afraid, what is he afraid of? I said, you don't realize how it looks to him. Then I started listing all of the things that had gone on before and some were going on. We had an ex-CIA stringer, an American, who was a loose cannon still wandering around the country. We had of course the monks; that was the worst. I pointed out all of the contacts that had been made. Those who were in opposition to the military government or who had become opponents who had immediately run to us asking for help. I said, you know, the military intelligence knows very well they've been to see us, they just don't know what we said. If you ever do get that appointment with the leader you better be prepared to discuss our relationship, our activities, our policy in Burma from the beginning. So, he did. He spent those intervening months or weeks informing himself and he demanded that the Department lean heavily on the CIA to brief him fully on everything they'd ever done in Burma so that he was prepared to lay it all out on the

table and discuss and answer any questions. He eventually did get his appointment with the leader and he made a reasonably good start and he had a further appointment and did discuss and explain and because, then he was able to bring his real strengths into play. They built a relationship of mutual trust so that in the last year I was in Burma we were able to arrange a state visit for the leader. I don't know how we were able to manage to do that, but we persuaded the White House to invite him. Our point of view was that it would be the clearest possible indication that we wished to be friends with the leader, the neutral, and that we would honor him and respect him, too. It went very well.

We had been on fairly close terms with Frank Trager who was a scholar, an historian on Southeast Asia and particularly on Burma. The Tragers visited Rangoon a couple of times while I was there and were always invited to the government residence and had dinner with the leader. On the second visit Trager I know came back and reported that the leader really trusted Byroade, and he was practically the only foreigner he did trust.

*Q: How did we feel as the leader took power and consolidate his power during this time you were there up until 1966? What did we feel the role of the communist Chinese was?*

McLENDON: We were split on that within the embassy. Military attachés tended to think that the Chinese were coming over the border any minute. We had one naval attaché who had some sources who were very happy to take his money and tell him anything he wanted to hear. He had some of the wildest reports from northern Burma in the Mandalay area. Our CIA had better sources and their reporting was much sounder. Before Byroade arrived, our chargé at the time tended to go with the military attaché and I know there was some strange reporting coming out of the embassy. While I was still up in Mandalay and when I came down on one visit before I was transferred back I stopped in to talk things over with the political counselor, Jim Martin. I said, some of these reports I've been reading, that doesn't go with anything we're seeing. Jim gave a sigh of relief and he said, "We have a problem here." He said, "I'm glad you put it that way. I don't feel that way at all. That's not my reading of the leader and where he would head. It's not Burmese and it's not, it just seems out of character." Our chargé pretty well lost his reputation over this handling of the embassy during that interim period and things settled down right after Byroade arrived. I think we were able to get the reporting back on track. Again, that was where my knowledge of Burmese came in handy. I got back to Rangoon and was able to read the two official versions of the working peoples daily, the English and the Burmese which were very different and the other Burmese language papers and I could pick up on things. I also was able to supervise the translation pool and select items that I thought important instead of leaving them entirely free to select the items that they thought were of interest, I selected some that I was particularly interested in. I think that was probably my greatest contribution to the embassy in those years that I could help them get the flavor of these very subtle, well, not very subtle, but was able to pick up on the editorial comment that was viciously anti-American, but also the editorial comment and the columns that were more subtly, but distinctly anti-Chinese. The headlines in all of the articles in the English language press made it sound as if Burma was right there in China's lap, but some of the other articles in the Burmese language press were much less complimentary to the Chinese. So the report I wrote was, I entitled it something like Warm on the Surface, Cool at the Depths and tried to put it in balance. This was practically my first experience in political reporting because I'd only done a little bit in Adelaide and that of no

importance at all. I will always remember that one because Jim came in when I'd turned the draft in to him and he said, "I think that's the best report that's been prepared in this section since I've been here." We'd come out at the same time. I'd been delayed in the consular section for a while.

I tended to be sympathetic with what the leader was trying to do and this was later confirmed by Harrison Salisbury that he was just driven with the desire to keep his country isolated from what was happening in Vietnam and to keep it from being taken over by China or become a tool of the Western powers. He was just obsessed with this and the quote that Harrison Salisbury brought back to us after his interview with him was that looking at a map of Asia and he said, "I wish I had a pair of atomic scissors and I could cut us right out of there and move us out in the ocean."

*Q: You left there in 1966?*

McLENDON: The end of '66.

**HENRY BYROADE**  
**Ambassador**  
**Burma (1963-1969)**

*Ambassador Henry Byroade was born in Indiana in 1913. He graduated from West Point in 1937. He served in the Hawaiian Islands from 1937-1939. While still in the service, he received a master's degree from Cornell in 1940. In addition to Egypt, his Foreign Service posts included South Africa, Afghanistan, Burma, the Philippines, and Pakistan. He was interviewed by Niel M. Johnson on September 19, 1988.*

*Q: Well, you got your wish I guess. You went to Burma in 1963; was it Ne Win who was in charge?*

BYROADE: Ne Win was in power when I got there.

*Q: Did you notice any undercurrents of opposition, which, of course, now has erupted into terrible street riots and so on?*

BYROADE: There wasn't opposition then noticeably on the part of the Burmese people. There was opposition in the ethnic minorities; the Shans, the Kachins, and Karens never quite accepted Rangoon--they felt separatist.

*Q: This was a one-party state, but you were used to being Ambassador to one-party states, weren't you?*

BYROADE: Yes, I preferred rather out-of-the-way places; it's fascinating. You get to work out in the field and accomplish some practical things.

*Q: In other words, you preferred being in the Third World, or underdeveloped countries, in order to see more progress possibly being made?*

BYROADE: Well, if you go to Europe, you know, you're running a normal Embassy. You're reporting on what the Parliament does and all this and that, but you're not really running anything. I'd rather be where we're building dams, trying to put in a new strain of wheat seed, etc.--where you are really doing things that affect the life of people.

*Q: Point IV. Was Point IV working in Burma?*

BYROADE: Yes, we had a rather small aid program there. It wasn't Point IV, anymore. I thought Point IV was a great concept; that and Jack Kennedy's Peace Corps, I felt were great.

*Q: What were American relations with Burma like?*

BYROADE: When I first got there, it was in a state of complete distrust, on the part of Ne Win for the United States. I think all I really accomplished in four or five years was to get rid of that distrust. It all stemmed from the fact that during the Korean war somebody got the bright idea of helping transport forces into Northern Burma to cause concern and disruption in the southern part of China. It was a very ill-conceived sort of thing, and we stopped it almost as soon as we started it. But Ne Win knew that our CIA had helped in that, and our Ambassadors, up to me, had denied it. One time in talking to our Ambassador on the subject at a public reception, Ne Win said, "Why don't you just go home?" and just walked away from our Ambassador. I told Dean Rusk, when I went out there, that I wasn't going to lie to him. He brought it up first when I presented my credentials, and I said, "I'm not going to deny that. I just ask you to look at the world as we saw it then." Then, I told him of our concern over Korea and the overall world situation at that time. I said it may have been stupid but we had done it, and we were now trying to help Burma get rid of them as best we could.

He never brought up the subject again. He had no use for foreign Ambassadors, but he came here on a State visit with Lyndon Johnson, which went very well. After the visit here in Washington, Ne Win said, "Look, I don't want to look at any factories or anything like that. Let's go to Maui and play golf." So I took him out there for a week and we got to know him and his delightful wife Kitty very well. After that, we were in the palace a lot; never told the Diplomatic Corps--it was none of their business. He never saw other Ambassadors. But as well as I knew him, I couldn't get him to make sense at all on the economic situation in Burma. He would say things like, "Well, as long as you leave the iron ore in the ground, it won't rust." That's hard to argue against. Burma was moving backwards. When I left, it was moving backwards. By moving backwards, I mean the old plants, which the British had put in there, were wearing out and there was nothing to replace them.

*Q: And he wasn't willing to introduce private enterprise?*

BYROADE: No, he was not. And he admitted that he didn't know anything about economics. He said every economist he talked to told him something different, and he didn't know what to do.

*Q: He was just going to have the Government run everything as best it could?*

BYROADE: That's right. In a way, this is interesting--Ne Win was caught in a box that Burma still is in today. The one love that Ne Win had was his military. He knew things weren't going well, but he knew if he took them out of power, there would be a great reaction of the Burmese people against the Burmese military. He wasn't willing to face up to that, and he had a tiger by the tail all these years. Now I don't know what's going to happen today. I'm afraid they're headed for a lot of bloodshed, which is very regrettable. Burmese people are lovely people, and it's a nice country.

*Q: Of course, this was also the time when we became involved in Vietnam, militarily.*

BYROADE: That's right.

*Q: Did Ne Win take a strong interest in our policy in Vietnam, and did this bother him that we were intervening on behalf of South Vietnam or did he have any strong feelings?*

BYROADE: No, it never was a bone of contention with Ne Win. He didn't talk about it very much. He wasn't a world statesman.

*Q: Pretty much isolated?*

BYROADE: Pretty isolated.

*Q: They didn't feel any particular kinship with either Communist regimes or anti-Communist regimes that were in that part of the world?*

BYROADE: Only with China. He made trips to China; he knew the Chinese leaders better than anyone we were speaking to in those days. I told Lyndon Johnson that and Johnson got him into a very interesting talk on what was going on in China. That was at a time when our sources of information were very few.

**JOHN A. LACEY**  
**Burma-Cambodia Desk Officer**  
**Washington DC (1965-1966)**

*John A. Lacey was born in Illinois in 1917. He joined the Department of State in 1950 and the Foreign Service in 1955. He served in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Australia, and Rangoon. He was interviewed by Henry Precht in 1989.*

*Q: So then you completed your tour in '65 and went back to Washington where it seems you had several assignments. One was in charge of Burma and Cambodia. But along the way somewhere you ran into trouble with the Bundy brothers did you say earlier?*

LACEY: That was when I ran into trouble with the Bundys. Now, I should explain, in defense of the Bundys, that in 1965 I left Singapore almost on a litter, had been carried to Clark Field in an air-evac plane with my family and had been operated on for a cyst in the cranium. When I came to three months later, that left me completely paralyzed on my right side. Left me speechless. And what's worse, left me unable to read.

I remember, Henry, being wheeled around Clark Field Air Base Hospital by my older daughter. I looked up, and I saw over the door, a red sign. I knew it had to read something significant, but I could not read it. For one of the few times in my life, I returned to my bed, and cried like a baby. But I swore that I would get back on my feet and return to duty.

I was sent to Walter Reed Hospital in Washington where I was treated like an imbecile because that's what I was. I told my wife finally, "Honey, if I don't get out of this ward, I am going to end up an imbecile." She managed, bless her soul, to convey that fact to the doctors. So I was put in a different ward and put on a good physical therapy and remedial program which enabled me gradually to recover the use of my limbs although I am still three-quarters blind. Instead of a 1500 word reading rate, I now can scarcely manage 100 words a minute.

My friends Joe Yager, Roy Wald, John Stanley and Harald Jacobson, those four people and wives, had been at the airport when the plane returned from Clark Field. They kept seeing me, and I told Joe that my only desire was to get back into harness. I remember using that phrase. I didn't know what it meant.

By January of '66 I was enough on my feet that I was bound and determined to get to the office, to the State Department, on the first opening day of the new year. As it turned out, it was a heavy snow storm, and the best I could do was shovel a makeshift path to the bus-stop--the buses weren't running--and then return to my house and collapse.

But I did make it. Brother Joe Yager was kind enough to give me a job as "consultant" on Asia for a paper that he and the Pentagon were jointly doing on a ten-year look at U.S. interests in Asia. I was now sane enough and mindful enough that I learned a lot from that experience but contributed very little, I am afraid.

But by the end of that period, I was enough back on my feet, that I was assigned to State's Senior Seminar. I found that an eye-opening, mind-stretching experience. I want to say something here, Henry, that I am very critical of much the Department of State has done or is doing. But I can't ever take issue with the fact that when one of their people is ill, no holes barred as far as the Department's Medical Bureau is concerned.

Q: *They have a heart.*

LACEY: They have a compassionate heart.

Q: *I agree with you.*

LACEY: You do?

*Q: Yes. But let's get on to the Burma and Cambodia Desk.*

LACEY: After the Senior Seminar that was my first assignment. I was made officer in charge of the Burma-Cambodia desk, in what was then called Far Eastern Affairs but is now called East Asian and Pacific Affairs (EA/P).

I didn't realize in taking over that job that I was not as able as I thought I was. I still had lingering shortcomings including, importantly being a slow reader. But also being a presumptuous fellow, I was ill-advised to take issue with Mr. Bundy.

*Q: What was the issue?*

LACEY: The issue was Vietnam.

*Q: And you opposed what the U.S. was doing?*

LACEY: Yes, I did. I thought that we were making a mistake, that the Chicoms weren't nearly as strong as our propaganda made them out to be. I felt also, and this is a very basic point, I felt that Uncle Sam was sending out thousands and thousands of troops to Asia, primarily to Vietnam, without their being briefed at all about why they were going. I know that for a fact because I talked to many of them. I think one of our troubles today stems from the fact that too many of our young people, men and women, black and white, are involved in a show that they had no idea why for. I think Uncle Sam made a mistake in failing to brief them fully.

*Q: At that time, there was a feeling that if we lost out in Vietnam, if the communist side prevailed, that the domino effect would go to work and that Cambodia, Burma, and other Southeast Asian countries would be toppled. Did you subscribe to that view?*

LACEY: I did, and I do. Contrary to David Newsom, who some years ago wrote an article that the domino theory was exploded, I think it is still a plausible possibility. Had the Chinese Communists been able to work out more cooperative relations both with the Russians and with the Vietnamese some form of communism would have swept over Southeast Asia. Initially they were cooperative. Now, fortunately for us, Russia and China disagreed radically. And even more fortunately for us, the Vietnamese and Chinese disagreed.

*Q: But that was not the perception in Washington at the time, was it?*

LACEY: No, it was not. When we talk about Washington in my view, simplistic though it may be, I have in mind two echelons. I have in mind the echelon of the expert, whether he is a China-trained officer or a Russia-trained officer or whatever language officer. I think Uncle Sam, meaning the Department of State and other government agencies, has done an excellent job of training our people in the nuts and bolts of Asian politics and the dynamics thereof. But that is one echelon.

I believe this echelon is too often ignored or overruled by what I call the political echelon, where the Presidents of the United States are interested in repaying political debts by appointing non-career ambassadors. And with the rapid evolution of our international communication system, professionalism seems less necessary. The Ambassador's word--whether that of a career officer or political appointee--is now subordinate to the latest news flash from whatever part of the globe.

*Q: How did you know you were in trouble with Mr. Bundy? I mean, how did that drama play out?*

LACEY: I took over the Burma-Cambodian desk from a very able officer, Dick Ewing, in July or August--I have forgotten the precise date--of '67. At the time, it was felt by everyone including myself that Burma and Cambodia were sleepy little outfits and that Lacey despite his health would be up to it. But, as it turned out, no one had reckoned with the desire of the Pentagon leaders, especially those concerned with Asia and Vietnam, to step up the ante. The ante being a desire on the part of senior Pentagon mostly Army types to intervene in Cambodia to stop the movement of the Viet Cong down the Ho Chi Minh trail. Remember that?

*Q: Right.*

LACEY: And the Ho Chi Minh trail went along the border that ended in the southern part of Cambodia. The Pentagon wanted to intercept that trail in the worst kind of way.

Well, John Lacey and a superior person by the name of Evelyn Colbert, who still was intelligence INR/DRF, felt to the contrary. Our argument was, "Look, you fellows, you can't even control the northern part of Vietnam, south of the dividing line. Why do you want to extend the war? I mean, the conflict?" Incidentally, I still refuse to refer to it as a war because we never declared war. In any case, that was our position and EAP's energies focused on that.

Every morning there was a scheduled meeting on Vietnam/Cambodia. The Pentagon tribe would come over the river to the Department of State. We would have prepared our last position in response to their last proposal only to be confronted with a newly-developed position, a new rationale for why American troops should be allowed to enter Cambodia. They wore us down.

I fought that to the point where the word got passed to the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State.

*Q: Sullivan?*

LACEY: No, not Sullivan, he was much earlier. This fellow was a carpet by the name of Habib, Phil Habib. He called me into his office and said, "John, Mr. Bundy wants you out by noon today."

*Q: Had you done something in the morning meeting that had offended him?*

LACEY: I have no idea what the circumstances were, but I think the provocation for Bundy's decision was that I had been consistently opposing--



*Q: A thorn in the Pentagon's side.*

LACEY: Well, in the Department of State's side, too, as far as Bill Bundy was concerned. So I had no choice but to pack up my few papers. I remember going to Harald Jacobson's office who was then chief of the China desk of EAP. I cried like a baby. The second time I have cried. Harald Jacobson was a good family friend and still is. I was mortified, but in retrospect, that was probably the best thing that ever happened to me, Henry, because Roy Wald--whose name I have mentioned before--was now working in the Office of Science and Technological Affairs. He and I had been long-time friends.

As soon as Roy heard that I was jobless, he went to Herman Pollack, his boss, who was the head of that bureau, and told Herm Pollack about me and gave me a good enough recommendation as a Far Eastern expert that Herm Pollack jumped aboard right away.

*Q: So you found a mooring then.*

LACEY: Yes. And let me say a couple things about that mooring. First, Herm Pollack in my judgment is one of the most astute, most accomplished bureaucrats that I have ever met. He ran a world-wide operation on the smallest budget in the Department of State. How did he do it? By picking up fellows like myself who remained on the East Asian/Pacific payroll and, therefore, were not a burden to his bureau financially, but who were disavowed, for one reason or another, sickness or some other reason, and were available for work in his bureau. Secondly, I became conversant with technology and realized earlier than most its great potential as a new gateway into international conclaves.

**CLIFF SOUTHARD**  
**Public Affairs Officer, USIS**  
**Rangoon (1966-1969)**

*Cliff Southard was born in Illinois in 1925. He joined USIS in 1955. His career included posts in the Philippines, Japan, Burma, and Nigeria. He was interviewed by Pat Nieburg in February of 1988.*

SOUTHARD: In Burma, we arrived there several years after the Ne Win (General Ne Win) socialist revolution. He pulled a coup in 1962 and kicked Premier U Nu out of the country and put in place a military dictatorship. He also declared that Burma would be absolutely neutral and would have as little to do with foreign governments as possible.

One of the first things he did was to order all of the foreign libraries in the country closed. It takes quite a while to get a message across to Americans, like us, because when I went there in 1966, we still had an American librarian on the payroll, hoping that--during those four years--

hoping that Ne Win would change his mind. The library did not exist, of course, but we had the librarian waiting in the wings.

One of the first things after I got there was the unhappy chore of conducting a large reduction in force, to bring the size of the organization down to an appropriate size for a post whose every effort was now being very closely scrutinized by the host government. As I say, the hopeful ones in USIA had still maintained a staff to close to sixty or seventy people, when really only about thirty were required.

As I said, my first job was this reduction in force, also, removing several of the American positions that were there, including the librarian position which was then held by Zelma Graham. She was one of the all time great USIS librarians.

*Q: Cliff, the Ne Win policies that were instituted, did that imply that basically your efforts had to be directed or confined to primarily government contacts, rather than trying to make contact with the population at large?*

SOUTHARD: What it meant was that everything that we did was censored. Every word in our local magazine or in pamphlets that would be brought in from RSC or produced in our own shop, had to be read and approved. Then, after having to have it read and approved prior to publication, every copy had to have an approved Burmese government stamp--a Ministry of Information stamp--before it could be distributed.

Furthermore, when it was distributed, you had to take the pamphlet or the magazine and the envelope, which also had an approved stamp on it, to the post office where the material would be inserted in the envelope and sealed in the presence of officials from the Ministry of Information. There was no particular inhibition upon who we could put upon the mailing list.

However, everything that was mailed, had to pass through the Ministry of Information's hands. They knew exactly who was getting the material and they felt no compunction in just throwing things in the waste basket, if they did not want any specific item sent to a person. Sometimes they would just simply--after accepting them at the post office and taking our postage--destroy the mail.

*Q: I never realized that the U.S. government would submit to this kind of censorship. In your experience, were there actually instances where texts were changed, or where there was a prohibition against a certain magazine, or a paragraph within a magazine, where the government took umbrage with what we had written?*

SOUTHARD: Yes. I remember one case in our magazine, we were serializing Sorensen's book on Kennedy's 1000 days. [This may be an erroneous reference. Sorensen wrote The Word War; Schlesinger wrote The 1000 Days.] When we sent the magazine's manuscript to the Ministry of Information, they okayed it, in manuscript form. After we set it in type, we were called one day, and told that this paragraph, that paragraph and another paragraph cannot appear in the magazine. I thought I would kind of stick it to them. So, we printed the magazine, 7000 copies of it with the white space showing where the deleted paragraphs were shown on the page. I thought

this would embarrass them. Obviously, every reader who gets this is going to know what happened.

Of course, through other means of determining what of our materials actually did get distributed, we learned they distributed not a single copy of that magazine. So, old smartass outsmarted himself.

*Q: Cliff, in knowing what the conditions were, I mean, what amounted to a defacto submission to censorship under this government, what was the Agency's attitude toward it? Did you get any instruction from Washington saying it is not worthwhile doing it? Or--unless you can get a text in "as is," do not publish it or try? What was the attitude of Washington toward this type of an operation?*

SOUTHARD: I cannot remember any--this was going on before I got there and it has been going on ever since I was there. I cannot remember any specific message from Washington that condoned it, but certainly USIA was eager to get anything out that it could get out. They accepted the other government's right to do this and certainly did not dispute it in any specific sort of way.

*Q: Did the question of censorship, which is of course a very real thing to Americans in terms of freedom of the press, ever become a subject for bilateral discussion at the diplomatic level? By the Ambassador? Was the foreign office in Washington, the State Department, calling in the Burmese Ambassador?*

SOUTHARD: I do not recall any specific meetings. Obviously every foreign government in Burma was treated alike. The Soviets accepted the same thing and so did every government that had an embassy there. We found that playing--by going through the rules--that we got a hell of a lot of material distributed. Again, every film that came into the country had to be censored, too, and approved. Furthermore, once it was approved, you could only show it in you own homes. You could not give it to any organization. It had to be shown on U.S. government premises to Burmese--invited Burmese guests.

*Q: What happened, for example, to an Ampart if he were to give a lecture? Did he have to submit a--*

SOUTHARD: They did not permit any Amparts to come into the country.

*Q: So, that eliminated the problem.*

SOUTHARD: There were no Amparts in the country. Well, we could occasionally get sporting events and individuals. The Dallas Tornado came there. An AAU track and field team came once. The pro-golfer, Paul Harney, came twice. He was a great favorite of General Ne Win, who liked to play golf with him. Harney was there again just two years ago, twenty years later. Ne Win is still asking him to come play golf with him.

We had the American College of Cardiologists, but the normal Ampart simply was not permitted in those days. No American ever went on the campus of the University of Rangoon for a period of about ten years.

*Q: What about Fulbright activity--exchanges--Burmese going to the U.S.?*

SOUTHARD: None came to the United States; they simply abrogated the Fulbright agreement. We had a Fulbright organization. Again, as I say, we were terribly optimistic. After the Burmese clearly said that they did not want a Fulbright program and would permit no Burmese to go to the U.S. or Americans to come to Burma, we maintained the structure of the Fulbright organization, three employees, and provided space to them. USIS provided space to them.

Their only business was in renting little Volkswagens bugs, which they had acquired during the earlier Fulbright days. They were provided as part of the grants to the visiting American Fulbright students and professors. They ended up, when the program was closed, with about eight Volkswagen bugs. For years and years, the only income for the Fulbright organization was renting these Volkswagen bugs to official Americans who came to the Embassy without diplomatic passports and could not import automobiles.

*Q: Tell me, Cliff, what you describe is somewhat almost like a curtain fell on Burma. You were living behind this certain kind of a curtain, I do not know whether it was a bamboo curtain, a rice curtain or however you described it. The Burmese, on the other hand, are known to be a gentle and friendly people. What did it do to your personal relations with the people in Rangoon or in Burma? Could you travel? Could you meet people? Were they reluctant to have anything to do with it?*

SOUTHARD: They were very reluctant. Keep in mind, the Burmese government's design was to eliminate, or try to eliminate, personal relationships between the Burmese people--and particularly the officials of the Burmese government and foreigners. There are always, in every society, some Burmese who are absolutely, as you say, the most pleasant and friendly people that I have know.

In any society such as this, there were some Burmese, usually businessmen, who had been expropriated by the socialist government or academics, who had not been able to go along with the change, who became estranged from their own government, but who had done nothing bad enough to get them put in jail. They are the people that chose to have relationships with the members of the foreign embassies that came into the country. We knew quite a few of these people. Many of them live right here in the Washington area now, whom we still see socially, as recently as two weeks ago.

*Q: They were part of the dissident community, as we say?*

SOUTHARD: They were dissident, but in terms of a revolutionary government, they were relatively harmless. They were permitted to mix freely with the foreign community and eventually were permitted, in many cases, to emigrate.

There is one other thing. Government controlled all of the media except book publishing. We did an active business for the first couple of years in book translations, until the government finally discovered that this was an area that they had forgotten. Then they started insisting that every translation manuscript be approved by the government censors.

For my first party I invited something like twenty people from the Ministry of Information, newspapers the government owned, magazines, the radio station--Burmese radio. We prepared quite a bit of food. Only six or eight people came. It was something of a surprise and I was offended, because no one called to say they were not coming. I suppose it was designed by the Ministry to show the new boy in town how things worked.

The next day I called to make an appointment with the Information Secretary--Burma had the British secretariat system. The Minister was a colonel who really did not know much about information. I told him that I was terribly irked. I had a lot of wasted food from the previous night. I invited twenty people from his outfit and only six people came, including him by the way. I said, "Is it just that these people cannot come or what is the reason for this? Can't they tell me they are not coming?"

He said, "Mr. Southard, let me tell you something. I decided who goes to all the social events sponsored by foreign embassies. I decide--that is, who in the Ministry of Information is going to go and who is not going to go. I have, right here in front of your nose, this stamp. It says, 'You may go,' and here is another stamp that says, 'You may not go.' Sometimes I do not stamp them at all. Here's another one--'You must go.'"

He said, "I advise you not to try to distribute all of these invitations to the people that you want to come to your place. Prepare all the invitations and have your chief Burmese assistant bring the whole stack of envelopes to me and I will tell you how many people are going to be coming to your affairs in advance. Then you will not have any wasted food."

Now, of course, it must seem like an affront. We were not free to invite to our homes anyone that we liked. That is the way you had to do it in order to be successful in the business.

I must say that what had started out as a monthly meeting with about 15 of the officials of the Ministry of Information, when I left three and a half years later, he was permitting about ninety people to come to my home. It grew to such an extent that instead of the fourth Friday of every month we had to do it the fourth Friday and the fourth Saturday of every month, in order to fit all of the officials into my house that he would permit to come. He just raised the ante each year a little bit. First fifteen would come and then twenty and then twenty-five and more and more. Finally, by the time I left, we were getting a tremendous number of acceptances.

If I had tried to go on my own and say, "I'm not going to screw around with this guy and let him decide who is going to come to my house," I would probably never gotten more than six or seven people. Most people, most subordinates would be afraid to act on their own. They would be afraid if they accepted on their own and came that they would be found out and disciplined. You had to work through the hierarchy in order to get to the people you wanted to talk to.

*Q: Do you have by any chance, any playback from your successor whether, when you left, the number reverted again to a very few and went up again or what happened?*

SOUTHARD: This is interesting. Harold McConeghey was my successor. I left Burma in 1969 and went back in 1971 on a trip. The same colonel was still the Secretary of the Ministry of Information and he complained to me that Mr. McConeghey was not inviting as many people. (laughter)

He said, "Has your representation budget been reduced? Because, I have a lot of people who want to go to his house and he is simply not sending that many invitations out. (laughter)

*Q: It worked the other way.*

SOUTHARD: I might say, by the way, that this same man had developed a very, very high respect for and was a fan of Winston Churchill, so you found the USIS PAO presenting books about Winston Churchill to him in order to get along.

I inspected Burma in 1978. At this point the good colonel was out of a job having been implicated in a coup--in unsuccessful coup plotting. There was no coup attempt, but about thirty officers in 1976 were kicked out of the government and out of the military for having been accused of doing some coup plotting. Colonel Tin Tun was one of those that got knocked out of the government. When I saw him in 1978, he had two little Isuzu trucks and was running a pick up delivery service. (laughter)

*Q: Entrepreneur.*

SOUTHARD: Entrepreneur, yes.

*Q: How did your family fare during that time?*

SOUTHARD: It was our most delightful post. It was the only post where all four of our daughters were at the post at the same time--all in school. The housing was grand. Houses were enormous and lovely. Of course, the water went off every day and the electricity went off every day, but we still enjoyed it very, very much.

I had some very excellent USIS officers who were there with me and I worked for two excellent ambassadors, Henry Byroade and Arthur Hummel. Arthur Hummel became my first ambassador who had been a former USIA officer. Later, John Reinhardt was another former USIA officer who I worked for as an ambassador.

*Q: Rumor has it that when you were in Burma, you had a boat.*

SOUTHARD: Yes.

*Q: Did you sail in the open ocean or--*

SOUTHARD: No. In the center of Rangoon there are two large manmade lakes developed by the British. We lived at the northernmost end of the northern lake, Inya Lake. I was able to buy a sixteen foot sailboat for \$100. I sailed it. We used to keep it at a little pier right in front of our house. I would come home from the office at night and get in the sailboat with my kids, get a jar of martinis and go floating around the lake, waiting for the cook to make dinner. I used it for three and a half years and sold it for \$100. (laughter)

*Q: Cliff, to wind up Burma, in retrospect, you were there during a very difficult time in terms of USIS business. In your judgment, should we have maintained the operation or, seeing the limitations that were imposed on us, should we have maybe closed the post?*

SOUTHARD: No, we certainly did the right thing. Today the Burmese orientation is solidly in the direction of the United States. In those days, they did their very best to be neutral. Most of the Burmese, I think, even in the government wanted to lean toward the West. The socialist military government had some communists in it and they were eager to have them look toward the East. We were there competing with the Soviets and the Chinese. I think the steady USIS effort which was quite significant eventually paid off. Today, we even have an AID program that is underway. AID was kicked out of the country during the time we were there.

**EDWARD C. INGRAHAM**  
**Political Counselor**  
**Rangoon (1967-1970)**

*Edward C. Ingraham was born in New York state in 1922. He received his undergraduate degree from Dartmouth College in 1942 and subsequently joined the war effort and served in the U.S. Army overseas between 1943-45. He entered the Foreign Service in 1947. In addition to Islamabad, his posts included Cochabamba, La Paz, Hong Kong, Perth, Madras, Djakarta, and Rangoon. He was interviewed on April 8, 1991 by Charles Stuart Kennedy.*

*Q: We have a fairly long interview with him on this. Why don't we move to your next assignment? Your next assignment was to the War College. You were there from '65-'66. And then you went to Rangoon. You were there as what?*

INGRAHAM: Political Counselor.

*Q: How did that assignment come about?*

INGRAHAM: I haven't the faintest idea. I did not want to go to Rangoon. I wanted to go back to the more open world of Southeast Asia, to Malaysia or perhaps even back to Indonesia, but there was Burma. So with some trepidations off we went to Burma. It turned out to be a pleasant but not terribly exciting three years.

*Q: What was the situation in Burma when you went there? You were there from '66-'69.*

INGRAHAM: Burma was a country whose first contact with the Western world came in 1825. Earlier they had been the great conquerors of Southeast Asia on several occasions. They thought a great deal of themselves. In 1825 they got into a war with the Brits. They thought, "We have beaten and occupied Thailand; we even have beaten the center of all power in the universe, China." (They in fact had done so in a border war.) "So here are the Brits over there in India; let's take over Assam." So they sent their army off to take over Assam and they beat the hell out of the Brits. But the one thing the Brits had that the Chinese didn't have was a navy. So while they were beating the British in Assam, the British navy was seizing Rangoon and that was the end of the war. And, as the Burmese would tell us, ever since then, every contact with the outside world has been a disaster.

They had another war with the Brits in 1852 and lost more territory. Finally in the 1870s there was the third Burma War which ended up with all of Burma being annexed by the Brits and made a part of India. The latter was even worse than being annexed. The British didn't actually mistreat the Burmese. They pretty much ignored the Burmese and didn't recognize Burma's separate existence.

Then came World War II. The Burmese welcomed the Japanese with open arms until the Japanese made it very clear that they were going to behave in a way that even the British never did.

So the Burmese at that stage became even more convinced that every time the outside world comes to them, it is a disaster.

In the late '40s and '50s Burma pretty well fell apart. There was a democratic government in Rangoon with several very well meaning people...U Nu was one of them, a saintly man. I met him years ago when he came to Washington. He just was not the kind of leader to hold the country together. When it inevitably fell apart, the army commander, Ne Win, took power. He straightened things out and turned the government back to the civilians, who proceeded to screw up again, so Ne Win threw them out and took power for the second time just before we arrived.

*Q: Ne Win was in the saddle when you arrived?*

INGRAHAM: Yes. He was married to his second wife, Kitty.

The whole time we were in Burma our governments got along reasonably well. It was a country that wasn't causing us any trouble. And there were virtually no American commercial or private interests in the country. We used to laugh and say, "Well, we had the American business community in for dinner last night, with his wife and two lovely children." It was a totally isolated place. We were dutifully reporting what was going on in Burma to Washington, but Washington's interest by that time was all Vietnam. Nobody cared about Burma, which was more or less what the Burmese wanted. Except...there was something called the Burmese way to socialism, which was socialism with an ethnic cast to it...to us socialism involves public control, government ownership, etc., but to the Burmese it was much more simple. Capitalism--you walked into a store to buy something and there was an Indian sitting behind the counter;



Socialism--the Indian was back in India and there was a Burmese sitting behind the counter. That was what Ne Win and his people imposed on Burma. Unfortunately the Burmese sitting behind the counter didn't know what to do next when the shelves were bare. So that was Burma for three years.

Now things have gone to hell. Ne Win has grown old, brutal and mean. But in those days the country was doing about as well as it could. There was a loosening up when we were there. U Nu was let out of prison along with various others from his era. Burma was doing, in every way except economically, reasonably well. It was a fairly quiet period in Burmese history.

One thing about Burma I soon discovered, after serving in India and Indonesia...Burma was always listed among the very poorest countries of the world in those days. Its per capita GNP was below even India's. But I would go out into the countryside and there would be no comparison whatsoever. The rural Burmese were infinitely better off than the people of India. It was just that they were largely outside the monetized economy. We were free to travel almost all over Burma and we did. (You can't do that now and you couldn't do it before.) We had no trouble anywhere. We were welcomed everywhere. Wherever we went we found a relatively prosperous countryside. The cities were pretty much of a mess. They were not magnets. They hadn't drawn people from the countryside, partly because the cities had so little to offer and the countryside so much to offer. The current picture we have of most of the third world is of these massive Mexico Cities with their 15 million people. That wasn't happening in Burma. You had a society that really wasn't badly off at all, except for some of the people in the cities.

Every time we would go to Thailand, on business or for a weekend shopping tour, we would have about 15 Burmese friends asking us to bring back such exotic things as a fan belt for a 1961 Ford. Would you bring us some toothpaste? Things like that. We would go to Bangkok and come back loaded down. The Burmese customs were easy going. Once I brought back 144 tennis balls. It was a pleasant, not terribly busy life.

One thing that was fascinating about Rangoon at that time was...this was a totally neutral country. It was so neutral that it wouldn't even join the neutral nations. Because of that, everybody was represented in Rangoon. We had North Koreans, South Koreans, North Vietnamese, South Vietnamese, East Germans, West Germans, the whole schmeer was there. And because there was so little else to do, and the Burmese government, while it was more or less approachable, kept all foreigners at arms' lengths...we could always call on them but we didn't get much out of them. Burmese officials rarely came to our houses; many would have loved to come but they didn't quite dare. At the same time they were friendly and available when necessary. So the diplomatic corps was thrown in on itself, and it was one place in the world where virtually all of us were represented. There was a hotel, the Inya Lake, where (given the 50 or so countries represented) about once a week we would have a national day, and the reception would always be there. We would all find ourselves thrown in together. The East Germans and the West Germans...that cute East German girl and all the rest. This was the height of the Cold War and we were not supposed to be that friendly with each other.

One of my jobs was to work fairly closely with the South Vietnamese representative and the Cambodian representative, particularly the South Vietnamese. We would share things with him

and let him use our facilities now and then. And we would pass information back to Washington that he couldn't get to Saigon, that kind of thing. He was a very decent man. I can't think of his name. He was a career type, hard working. He was making no dent on the Burmese, but then again neither were the North Vietnamese.

*Q: You had two rather hard-charging ambassadors while you were there--Henry Byroade and Art Hummel. How did they operate in this sort of benign atmosphere?*

INGRAHAM: Ah. It wasn't quite benign at the beginning. I arrived shortly after Byroade. Now, back in the '50s we had briefly supported the KMT army that had been chased out of Western China and ended up in northern Burma. We had provided arms for them and encouraged them to go back in to China, which I think they did once or twice and got the hell beat out of them. Then they decided opium cultivating was easier. The Burmese were deeply suspicious of us because we had initially supported the KMT army. They didn't like it. They had a centuries-old distrust of China and suspected we were trying to force them into our orbit.

Then Byroade, a former military man and trouble-shooter, arrived. Tense situation. The Burmese were sure we were up to no good. Byroade's first move, oddly enough, was to...Ed Law Yone had been the editor of the local newspaper, had run afoul of the military and had been carted off to jail. Ed Law Yone had a Rolls Royce. He sold it to Byroade, who had it taken to the Embassy residence. Byroade himself took that car apart down to the last bearing and put it back together, adding leopard skin seats and teak paneling. He would spend most of the day at the residence working on the car. You would ask, "What the hell is the Ambassador doing?" The answer was that Byroade knew exactly what he was doing. Hank figured out that the Burmese were suspicious of him and assumed he was engaged in all sorts of covert doings. Military background, all that kind of stuff, had been in Egypt and everywhere. They would be certain he was up to no good. So he showed them utter relaxation. He would come into the office about 10:00 in the morning (the Burmese would be following him) and leave early. The Burmese would wonder what nefarious activities he was engaged in, and then the word would get back to the Burmese security people that he was back under that car again. I thought it was a brilliant bit of psychological diplomacy.

The thing is, Byroade rather liked it that way too. Byroade was not one of the world's workaholics by any means. But in this case he was doing exactly what needed doing. It was done consciously. At the very beginning he disarmed the Burmese by showing he was not out there to take over their country. Then he began to work on Ne Win. He established a sort of a friendship with Kitty Ne Win, the wife. Byroade was known as quite a lady's man. We used to laugh in Rangoon and say, "When the British Ambassador or the Chinese Ambassador talked to Kitty Ne Win they were talking to the wife of the Head of State. When Byroade talked to her, he was talking to a woman and she knew it." She got to rather like him and then so did Ne Win. They would invite Byroade to the Palace and that sort of thing.

So he maintained as good relations as he could with the Burmese, despite their touchy, scrupulous neutrality. It was a rather pleasant three years.

**ARTHUR W. HUMMEL JR.**  
**Ambassador**  
**Burma (1968-1971)**

*Ambassador Arthur W. Hummel, Jr. was born to American parents in China in 1920. He received his master's degree from the University of Chicago. His career with USIS included assignments in Hong Kong, Japan, Burma, and Taiwan. He served as the ambassador to Burma, Ethiopia, and Pakistan. Ambassador Hummel was interviewed by Dorothy Robins-Mowry on July 13, 1989.*

*Q: You went on to Burma then?*

HUMMEL: In the summer of '68.

*Q: You were Ambassador there?*

HUMMEL: Until '71.

*Q: So, you had two very nice long stints, then, in Burma.*

HUMMEL: Yes, very pleasant. Even under the Ne Win government, it was still pleasant, because the Burmese are pleasant. I could still go hunting, too.

*Q: Is this where you got your baby tiger?*

HUMMEL: Yes, I got the baby tigers there. Actually, I bought those from the vendors in Rangoon. I didn't shoot them; I never did. I never shot a tiger, I'm glad to say, but I certainly saw a lot. I've seen them when I was on foot walking in the jungle; it's a great sight, very exciting.

*Q: They left you alone, I take it?*

HUMMEL: Yes.

*Q: You walk very discreetly. What, from your point of view, were the highlights of your time as Ambassador in Burma?*

HUMMEL: Well, let's see --

*Q: It was closed by that time, wasn't it?*

HUMMEL: Very closed. The country was essentially the way it is now, running as an economic disaster and kept afloat only by a mammoth black market operation across the border with Thailand for most of the spare parts, a lot of the gasoline; all the essential things, medicines which the state system can't supply come through the black market.

By the same token, there is a terrible drain on their natural resources. The gems and teak are smuggled out. They get smuggled out and then, of course, there is the opium problem and the drug problem which has now put most of the Shan State out of control of the government. They have a continual civil war that's going on there between the government forces and the opium growers and smugglers.

When narcotics was not yet high on our national agenda, I started, at my own initiative, the first talks with Ne Win about trying to assist him in doing something about the narcotics problem in Burma.

*Q: Would the local population be using narcotics?*

HUMMEL: Yes, to some extent, yes. What brought Ne Win around was that his son turned out to be a heroin addict later on. I didn't get very far in my first conversations with him, but I at least opened the subject and eventually the government decided they wanted to do things.

It was directly related to their insurgency. The insurgents were supporting themselves by the opium trade, so I guess that was one of the high points, the official high points of the place.

Burma is not terribly consequential on the American horizon. If it were to blow up or something, why then it would become so, or if the Chinese or somebody else were to invade it, it would be. But, they've always had an anti-Soviet tilt and, incidentally, a pro-Chinese tilt in spite of all the Chinese support for their insurgencies.

*Q: At a conference I went to on Burma, it talked about the fact that at least the Burmese point of view was that because they are essentially a Buddhist country, they don't mind the deprivations because it is part of a reflection of their religion and the kind of life they lead and what they hope to have in the future.*

*Is that a straight out-and-out propaganda statement or is this really the way the people think?*

HUMMEL: I think that's a propaganda statement if you are talking about the intellectual life. If you are talking about the life of the peasant, the farmer, in the small village, there is a lot of truth in that because their lifestyle is adjustable, expandable and contractible in a very remarkable way.

They live in an exceedingly simple way. When they get a lot of money, they will spend it on the temple, the Burmese pagoda, and on things like weddings and funerals. Their material possessions are very, very meager and they know how to get along without them.

So, when the economy turns down on them, as it has, they just can't give as much money to the pagoda and they can't have such lavish weddings and funerals or other parties, name days and so on, but they can, because of their lifestyle, which is certainly related to Buddhism, they can get along so that the peasants -- who live exceedingly simply -- can always find enough to eat. It's a lush country. They don't feel restive about the national economy turning itself inside out.

*Q: Have the recent riots which they've been having, intellectually, this does not discomfit them with the situation?*

HUMMEL: Not much among the farmers in the rural areas. Like almost all of this restiveness, except maybe the Communist Chinese Revolution, which began in rural areas, most of these other things happen in cities.

What we saw in Burma was the city people, everybody, workers, intellectuals, students, government officials, even, standing up; virtually, the whole foreign ministry sent in their resignations in Burma at one time.

**ROBERT J. MARTENS**  
**Political – Economic Officer**  
**Rangoon (1969-1970)**

*Robert Martens grew up in Kansas City, Missouri. He entered the U.S. Army in July of 1943 at the age of 17 and served in Europe. In 1949, Mr. Martens graduated from the University of Southern California. He entered the Foreign Service in January 1951. His career included positions in Italy, the Soviet Union, Indonesia, Burma, Austria, Romania, Sweden, and Washington, DC. Mr. Martens was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 1991.*

*Q: You were in Burma from '69 through '70.*

MARTENS: That's right. I was supposed to have gone as Political Counselor to Moscow in mid-1969, but that fell through at the last minute. So I was left without an onward assignment. I was then offered by some of the people in EA who knew me from Indonesia, and knew my specialization in Marxism in third countries that came out of that, a position in Embassy Rangoon. They thought I might be useful in this strange nationalist- socialist country, very Marxist in a way, but with a number of other attributes. Burma had a military but Marxist regime which I thought would be interesting. So my family and I went to Burma. I was head of the Political-Economic Section.

*Q: What was the situation in Burma at that time?*

MARTENS: It was very similar to what is there now in 1991. There had been a coup led by General Ne Win in February, 1962, and out of that had been formed a military revolutionary council which espoused a Burmese road to socialism, not Soviet, not Chinese, but in fact very Marxist-Leninist in its orientation. This was so even though the government was fighting various breakaway communist factions out in the hills, the so- called White Flag, and Red Flag communists.

*Q: Red Flag and White Flag Chinese, were they? Both were communists?*

MARTENS: The White Flag communists were supported and financed by the Chinese. While the separate Red Flag faction was small but had a longer guerrilla history. Both of these groups as well as the Government party were Marxist but, at the same time, Burmese nationalists. However, I don't want to go into the details that would be required. Anyway, the Burma Socialist Program Party, which Ne Win had developed, came out, for the first time during my period there in '69 to '70, with a new party constitution. I studied that document and found that it was almost word for word a copy of the Soviet Communist Party constitution. This was not because the Ne Win regime was pro-Soviet, but because it did have this kind of Marxist-Leninist orientation. There was a Burmese preamble and a Burmese conclusion but the operational paragraphs, which described how the party was organized, what it was up to, etc., were a carbon copy of Marxist-Leninist dogma. And in actual fact, the regime thought it was a convenient way to run the country.

*Q: Why? I mean was it just that "this is a damn good way if you're going to take control of a country, you do it that way."*

MARTENS: Well, a number of things went into it. First of all, Ne Win--this has never come out--but Ne Win had been a secret member of the communist party until 1944. He left the Communist Party when it looked like the British were going to gain victory over the Japanese. The head of the Nationalist movement that Ne Win was a part of, the so-called Thakin movement, took power at the end of the war. They had been brought in by the Japanese, incidentally, but many of them were Marxist oriented. The leader of the Thakin movement, Aung San, who had also been a secret communist earlier, went into a democratic-socialist direction at that fork in the road, you might say. You will recall that the British under Attlee, and with Admiral Mountbatten as the CBI commander-in-chief, were offering independence to Burma. That policy resulted in the top man, Aung San, taking this moderate course. Aung San's brother-in-law, the number two, disagreed with a policy of accepting independence as proposed by the British. Although they were members of the same party, they differed ideologically. The brother-in-law, Than Tun, went out into the hills and founded what became the White Flag Communists. Ne Win, who was a more junior member of this group, was a regimental commander in the new Burmese army. He later became Minister of Defense. But at this point I believe he thought about going out into rebellion too but he didn't, presumably because of the way he evaluated his prospects in the developing situation. I regard Ne Win as a man who accepted Marxist dogma at an early age, but was not a real ideologue in the sense of being intellectually involved with this. He was much like certain men in the West who get some ideas in their twenties, never give them up, but never really look at them very closely either. Ne Win had come to power briefly in 1958 as head of a brief caretaker government and had shown no Marxist proclivities at that time. He came back to power in 1962 leading this coup primarily for nationalist reasons. The argument was over how much independence, or rather autonomy, should be given, or economy, should be given to the hill tribes. Ne Win led the army in opposition to the more moderate policies of U Nu toward the hill tribes. The Army favored a centralized, and that's a typical military position, a strong disciplined centrally organized state. When Ne Win got into power as a result of the Army coup he had to come up with some kind of structured government organization and I think he didn't know anything else to do but go back to this Marxism that he had learned in his youth. So he kind of willy-nilly installed this totalitarian Marxist system.

Now there were also some people in the Army who were much more ideologically oriented, and also pushed in that direction. There was a Brigadier General named Tin Pe. Aside from Ne Win, there were only two other officers in the Army who even had Brigadier rank, and this fellow one. He, Tin Pe, was pushing the government in a leftward direction too, and there was a gradual purging of those non-Marxist military officers who had followed Ne Win in the coup because he was the top guy in the Army, because they agreed with him on the national question, and because the Army hoped to get the goodies of being in charge.

Anyway, the non-Marxist members of that group were gradually pushed out of power, and the Army turned more and more into this sort of ideologically directed Army although a lot of these people probably were not very ideological either but were going along with it because they saw that that was what the old man wanted, and it had a lot of advantages from the standpoint, as you were indicating, of being a good way to organize the state if you want to keep tight control and you want to get all the positions of power, and you want to keep down all dissident elements.

*Q: What were, if any, American interests in Burma at that time?*

MARTENS: We didn't think there were many. I would say the main interest was not to see it become part of, or tied to, either the Soviets or the Chinese in that period. But that wasn't really the problem so there was no active policy of pursuing it. Our long-term interest lay in the direction of keeping the options open for an eventual more pro-Western, and democratic society. We couldn't do much about that either, so we just sat and watched it. But if we had any choice, any way of influencing things, I'm sure as we do everywhere, we would want to see democratic values win out over totalitarian ones. So there was some mild interest, but not a great power, narrowly defined, national security interest of any great importance other than keeping Burma out of the Soviet or Chinese camp. But we couldn't do anything about it in either case anyway.

*Q: Did you have much contact, you and others in the embassy, with the Burmese?*

MARTENS: Again, it was very difficult. I was the normal routine contact point with the Foreign Ministry. However, I was never in the Foreign Ministry building. Foreigners were not allowed in the Foreign Ministry itself. They had a little building across the street, a converted house, in which you had to deliver a diplomatic Note or make a representation. You'd go to that house and the desk officer would come across the street, and talk to you, and it was a very stilted conversation because the place was bugged. I remember that after getting outside after the formal business, the Burmese official would sometimes talk to me more openly. These people were very Western educated, and often did not have much sympathy for the regime. I don't mean they would divulge secrets, but they would talk to you in a friendly manner outside, that they would not be willing to do inside. It was generally illegal for anyone in the Burmese government to have contact with foreigners in other circumstances. They weren't supposed to have such contact, and if they did have it by accident, they were supposed to write up a very lengthy report. This tended to be a great damper on contact. Actually, however, you did have more contact than this would indicate. There were people, again, that were braver. This quasi-Marxist, which was in many ways theoretically more rigid even than the Soviet system, broke down in practice. They just weren't that well organized in carrying it out.

For example, I had a lot of contact with a rather nefarious character who was head of the Burmese equivalent of the KGB--it was called the MIS. The man in question, Tin U, regularly attended national day receptions given by the various embassies. I had an interesting conversation with him on World War II battles in Burma on which I was well informed and as a result I was able to talk to him at the national day receptions. I discovered that he tended to drink too much. Toward the end of the evening you could sometimes have quite interesting conversations when he was a little bit tipsy, but not so inebriated that he couldn't talk. Another example was that I got to know one of the two co-founders of the Burmese Communist Party. He had left the Communist Party many years earlier but remained a convinced Marxist. He was also a close associate of Ne Win. We became pretty good friends and he used to come to my house for lunch rather regularly because he enjoyed talking to me about Marxism in the Soviet Union as well as Marxism in Burma. So I had a good contact there. I also frequently saw the brother of U Thant, who at the time was Secretary General of the UN, and a number of other people. Again in a society in which you have a fairly small elite, you might find somebody that was pretty high in the party, or the government, but who would have relatives who were basically anti-regime. If you could get to know the relatives, who were not in the government, you might get some insight occasionally on what was going on.

Additionally, my wife and I formed some very good friendships that were not job-oriented in any way. In fact, to this day here in Washington, D.C., I am in a circle of Burmese friends and I probably have more contact with them than with any other group of people, including Americans. They are people whom I got to know from that period.

**G. EUGENE MARTIN**  
**Consular Officer**  
**Rangoon (1969-1971)**

**Burma Desk Officer**  
**Washington DC (1971-1973)**

*A Specialist in Chinese Affairs and a speaker of Chinese, Mr. Martin spent the major part of his career dealing with matters relating to China, both in Washington and abroad. His overseas assignments included Hong Kong, Taipei, Huangzhou (formerly Canton), Beijing, Manila and Rangoon. His Washington assignments also concerned China and the Far East. Mr. Martin was born in Indiana of Missionary parents and was raised in the US. and India. He is a graduate of Kalamazoo College and Syracuse University. Mr. Martin was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 1999.*

*Q: Well, then, in late '68 you left. Where'd you go?*

MARTIN: We went on home leave and then were transferred to Burma. Assignments in those days were very different from today's open assignment system. Then they were made by Personnel in Washington the officer was informed, often at the last minute.



One day in mid-1968, out of the blue, I received a carbon copy of a letter Personnel had written to my draft board. My draft board, had written the Department, saying, "We here in western Michigan are running out of strong, able, young men. Where is Gene Martin? We'd kind of like to find him!" So the Department went through their BC (before computer) filing system and found that Gene Martin was yes! Lo and behold! In Hong Kong and was due for reassignment in December of 1968. I, in good Foreign Service tradition of course, had asked to extend my tour in Hong Kong since, having taken six months to learn Cantonese, had not put in two years' of service to the taxpayer, needed to improve my language capabilities, etc. All I got was a big horselaugh out of my request, since in those days there were probably 40 people waiting for my job in non-hardship post HK. Still the case no doubt.

So Personnel looked around, and said, "Well, let's see. He's leaving December. We've got to find an assignment for him." And they found me an assignment and wrote back to my draft board that Gene Martin was a vice-consul at the U.S. consulate in Hong Kong and was about to be assigned as the vice-consul in Rangoon, Burma. I guess that impressed the western Michigan draft board members. They probably looked at the letter after consulting the map and said, "Well, that's over by Vietnam. He's probably in the war already. So give him a deferment."

That was my first, and only notice, that I was going to be assigned to Burma as the vice consul. It just arrived in the mail. As it turned out, that was probably the longest notice I ever had about an assignment. It came almost six months before I was due to transfer, or six months before I was due to arrive in Burma, certainly. So I went on home leave and out to Burma. But first I had to break the news to my wife whom I had married half way through my assignment in HK.

*Q: Yes. Where did you meet your wife?*

MARTIN: I met her here when I was in A100. Two of the six women officers in our Foreign Service officers' class rented a five person apartment on Courthouse Road in Rosslyn. My wife was a college classmate with one and had just started teaching at Fairfax High School. So she moved into the apartment. Coincidentally, no doubt, about two weeks after the A100 bio list came out, all the bachelors were invited to a party at that house. The old phrase about shooting fish in a barrel comes to mind.

We dated for a while, and then I went off to Hong Kong. Being a teacher with the summer off, she decided to visit her former roommate, who had been assigned to Taipei. So she and some other friends visited Japan and Taipei, and since Hong Kong was just down the block, she swung by Hong Kong. We had a fast and furious courtship.

*Q: What was her background?*

MARTIN: She was a Spanish teacher. After Mills College in Oakland, she received a master's from Middlebury in Spanish by studying in Madrid. She taught Spanish at Kent State before moving to Washington where we met.

*Q: So you went to Burma. You were in Burma from when to when?*

MARTIN: We were in Burma from March 1969 until July 1971.

*Q: What was the politico-economic situation in Burma at this time?*

MARTIN: Dismal like it is now. Those are the good bad old days! Ne Win was back in power, having taken over in '62 from U Nu who was imprisoned until released and allowed to go into exile in Thailand.

The embassy was very small. We still had an USAID (U. S. Agency for International Development) mission, finishing university buildings and some infrastructure projects, mostly water. We had a small military equipment delivery team (MEDT), which is like a junior JUSMAG (Joint United States Military Advisory Group), still delivering military equipment, which had been paid for and was in the pipeline, but nothing new. The relations were not very warm; they were pretty strained. Burma was a very difficult place in which to operate.

*Q: Who was our ambassador?*

MARTIN: The ambassador was Arthur Hummel, Jr. on his first ambassadorial tour. Don Rinard was the DCM (Deputy Chief of Mission) succeeded subsequently by Ben Fleck.

*Q: Yes. Well now, what were you doing there?*

MARTIN: I was THE consular officer, a full two-year assignment. It was a one-man consular post. I had two FSNs (Foreign Service Nationals) working with me. My predecessor, Scott Butcher, was still there when I arrived as he did not have a definite onward assignment. He was waiting to pack out of the house in which we were to live, so we lived in the hotel for about a month. Finally, he got a message saying that, yes; they had found him an assignment -- next door to Burma, in Dhaka, Bangladesh. As a reward, I guess, for his hardship tour in Burma.

*Q: It was a consulate general at that time, yes.*

MARTIN: It was a consulate general, in what was then East Pakistan.

*Q: Yes.*

MARTIN: Anyway, he was happy to get the assignment. Subsequently, the evacuation and the civil war in Dhaka was a rather difficult period. But he was finally able to pack out and leave, and we moved into the house. During his two year assignment as the consular officer, Scott had issued, I think, a total of 200 visas. Unfortunately, about the time I arrived, the Bureau of Consular Affairs was asked by the Department of Labor to open what they called the Schedule C, a pre-certification of certain jobs which were in short supply in the United States. On this list, which was a fairly lengthy list of all sorts of things such as shepherders (for the Basques probably) were two jobs which struck a chord in Burma. One was dressmaker and the other was automobile mechanic. Well, in Burma, since the last legitimately imported car was in about 1949, automobile mechanics were prevalent, particularly in the Chinese community. They all knew

how to repair cars because they had to keep them running, usually with home made spare parts, spit and bailing wire. So almost every man could claim to be an automobile mechanic. And they came into the consular section with some of the most elaborate certificates from Oo Soo Lin's Automobile Mechanic Training School - all bogus, of course.

And the women, since there was little clothing to buy in the economy, had to buy material and learn to sew clothes. So they, of course, came in with certificates from Daw Fay Tsin's Sewing Class "proving" they were trained seamstresses. Therefore, I issued a lot of visas, mostly to Chinese, some Indians, very few Burmese, a few of the hill tribe minorities. In total numbers, the number of visas I issued was minuscule compared to what Hong Kong or Manila issue now. But I issued somewhere around 2,000 visas in the two years I was there - which was not a lot, but a lot more than the 200 my predecessor did! So I had a busy tour.

In addition, as the only consular officer, I was also a section head, which was nice. I attended all the country team meetings and was aware of what all the other sections were doing. I was also the post language officer, the protocol officer, and all the other things that nobody else wanted to do. It was good experience as I had much more exposure than most of my other junior officer colleagues. We were invited to all the national day receptions, which became rather tiresome, often with two or three a night. However, that was one of the few times we had contact with Burmese officials because the government was aloof, suspicious of foreign diplomats and difficult to approach. The isolated diplomatic corps had its own way of handling the receptions. You would see exactly the same people at each, so you'd say, "How have you been since I saw you half an hour ago at the other reception?" Or even more fun, you'd start a scurrilous rumor as you walked in the door saying, "Did you hear that so and so is doing such and such?" And you'd wait until you were about to leave an hour or so later, and you would see how this rumor had been contorted by being passed from lip to lip. It was the kind of games people played when there was little contact with reality.

Burma had a very unusual diplomatic corps in those days because it was totally nonaligned. In fact, it was so nonaligned it dropped out of the nonaligned movement, and became totally neutral. Therefore everybody was there. We had the East and West Germans, North and South Vietnamese, North and South Koreans, and I think everybody else, except the Nationalists from Taiwan. It made for some interesting receptions. Art Hummel used to say that the North Koreans always looked like they were wearing trench coats, even in that hot steamy tropical weather. Whether they were wearing them or not, they looked like it, and at receptions they would hunker down in a corner, all clustered together, as if they were, I'm sure, afraid to separate.

The East Germans were more sociable. My wife was talking amiably with a young lady, when somebody came up and whispered in the young lady's ear, and she said, "Oh, excuse me, I'm not supposed to talk to you." She pulled away saying she was from East Germany. My wife said, "We were having a nice conversation."

The Chinese were there, of course, and at that time we were just beginning to have some contact with the Chinese. It was allowed to smile and talk to them, but we couldn't have any substantive conversation, just be polite.

*Q: Well, when you went to these receptions, were you and the other members of the embassy sort of given instructions to find out something, or was it pretty much pro forma?*

MARTIN: It varied, depends on the circumstances and the reception. Occasionally during country team meetings the ambassador or DCM would mention that certain things were rumored or known to be happening so we would try to find out. It was good training, for we all had a chance to go around and try to buttonhole what Burmese officials showed up, and try to get information. They were pretty close mouthed and didn't say much.

Officials would never come to your house for a function, and they would almost never go out with you because they had to fill out reams and reams of paper, as to where they went, why they went, what they said, who said what to them, etc. A few I dealt with officially told me it was just too much trouble and too painful for them to meet socially. It wasn't anything personal, but the system prevented them from doing it. The receptions were really about the only time we had a chance to talk to officials. I had relatively regular contact with consular and protocol officials in the Foreign Ministry, occasionally even in their offices.

*Q: How did Art Hummel run the embassy, and what was your impression of what he was imparting?*

MARTIN: I thought he was very good. He was hands-on, but allowed officers to run their own sections. He was not domineering. He ran a collegial mission, and I admired him. He was my first ambassador and remains one of my favorite.

*Q: Were you picking up any reflections there about the Vietnam War because the Tet Offensive had occurred in '68? We had the Nixon administration in and all that. Was that impacting at all?*

MARTIN: As far as I recall, Vietnam did not impact very much on Burma policy. Actually there wasn't much policy. It was basically a holding action. We didn't have a lot of initiatives. Yes, Vietnam was something that we watched with interest. Thailand was a big country between the two, providing a good deal of separation. Occasionally, in my particular consular role, the war would reach our borders. One time we learned about an American who had been incarcerated in Moulmein, down on the panhandle of Burma along the Thai border near Three Pagoda Pass.

This was several weeks after he'd been not only arrested, but also tried and sentenced. We protested since the consular convention required the Burmese to inform us within a matter of days if not hours. It turned out the American was a GI (enlisted person of the U.S. armed forces), who had gone AWOL (Absent Without Leave) in Vietnam, had walked across Cambodia, across Thailand, and into Burma. I don't know how far he planned to walk! Maybe on his way back to Europe! He had reached Burma before he was picked up. The Burmese finally released him to our Defense Attaches who sent him back, where I don't know. I assume the Army stockade was probably more comfortable than a Burmese prison. The only other direct contact I had with Vietnam during my Burma tour was Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker's over flights to Nepal to visit his bride, Ambassador Carol Laise. The honeymoon flights would go back and forth; and we'd nearly always get their flight clearance request about 10 or 12. Somehow the Burmese would give the clearance in the middle of the night. Perhaps they wanted to support honeymoons.

*Q: How about the students. I mean were they pretty well kept under the -*

MARTIN: Very much so. On occasion they would protest, and the government would just either close the universities and send them all home, or arrest them. There was no messing around. This all came out, of course, in 1989, when they massacred National League for Democracy (NLD) protesters in the streets, right in front of the embassy.

*Q: What about...was golf at all an entrée?*

MARTIN: Only slightly. We did join the Rangoon Golf Club, which had the “hards” and the “browns”, the terms we used for the fairways and the greens, at least during the dry season. In the wet season, it was in the swamps. But few, very little contact was possible with officials. The golf course was managed and controlled by the military, as was almost everything. The only real contact with the military was through our defense attachés, who played tennis with several of their contacts and would include others from the Embassy in the tennis matches. That was about the only social contact, almost totally non-substantive.

*Q: Well, you must have felt like you were sort of out of this world?*

MARTIN: Very much so, very much so. It was very isolated. I often said the Burmese government would have preferred to adopt the title of an old movie, “Stop the World. I Want to Get Off.”

*Q: Was there any feeling of "so what are we doing here?"*

MARTIN: Occasionally. But I was busy enough with my visa applicants, and others in the Embassy found enough to keep their interest. We tried to keep up with the civil conflicts between the government and non-Burman minorities in the north, follow the continued economic denigration of the economy under the “Burmese Way to Socialism” (easy as it was all down hill), and the turgid policies of the military run government. Art Hummel, being a China specialist, also was much interested in what China was doing vis-à-vis Burma. Still, it was the Cultural Revolution, and China’s foreign relations could hardly be considered normal. There were a couple of efforts by Chinese activists to stir things up in the Chinese community, which the Burmese stomped on pretty hard. The Chinese embassy remained remote behind their red walled compound, and we never saw much of them except at receptions.

*Q: What did your wife think of this peculiar world?*

MARTIN: She thought it was very strange. Quite different from Cleveland. Hong Kong had been enjoyable and when we were assigned to Burma, I told her I would take her “skiing in Austria...on the way to Rangoon.” (the later phrase solto voce), but...well...it was difficult. But our first child was born while we were in Rangoon, so we were busy young parents.

*Q: How about drugs? Because we did develop a certain amount of country narcotics cooperation with the Burmese, but were drugs an issue at all?*

MARTIN: Not really, although there was some concern about it while I was in Burma. I subsequently did get involved in our anti drug cooperation.

While we couldn't see much of the government officials, we did have good contact with what I would call the former business community. When the military took over under Ne Win in 1962, they nationalized everything. I joined the Rotary Club. As you know, one joins rotary clubs as a representative of different sectors of business. You have manufacturing, import/export, hotels, rice milling in tropical countries, and so forth. Since all private enterprise had been nationalized, the Rangoon Rotary Club consisted of former import/export, former manufacturing, former hotels. Most of the Rotarians were Chinese and Indian since they had controlled much of the economy. The lunch meetings went on forever because they had nothing to do. They would meet Wednesday noon at the old Strand Hotel for a leisurely lunch. I had to leave after an hour and a half or so, but they would go on half the afternoon. It was an interesting entrée into the society because you did pick up a good deal of information about what was going on, what it was like to be in the Chinese community, what it was like to be in the Indian community, minorities the Burmese government was trying to push out as fast as possible. They nationalized all their businesses. They encouraged them to repatriate to their "native" countries although many had lived in Burma for generations.

The Chinese had a very difficult position because most of them were not pro-Communist. They did not want to go to the mainland, certainly in the middle of the Cultural Revolution, and very few of them had gainful employment. This is why I had a lot of visa business. With Schedule C, many people were able to immigrate to the States.

*Q: Well, how would you check on their qualifications with all those fraudulent certificates? What would you do?*

MARTIN: I would give them a test occasionally, have them come out and show me a car, or look at my car - I never had them work on my car - but I would see if they knew something about cars, give them some questions as to what would you do in such and such a case, and so forth. We were quite concerned, of course, about Communist agent infiltration, and we checked this as best we can. A major problem in Burma is names. As you may know, the Burmese do not have any surnames; there are no family names; everybody has a given name. One has no idea who is related to whom. The Chinese often Burmanized their names to avoid government or Burman discrimination. It became something of a concern as to exactly who was getting visas, and who wasn't. We tried to check backgrounds and relationships as best we could but it was far from ideal.

*Q: Were you picking up anything about these insurgent groups, the Red Flags, or White Flags, and the tribal groups, and all that?*

MARTIN: Absolutely! The variegated insurgencies, or as some people would say, "Everybody in hills are revolting!" And it was just about that. We had the Red Flag and the White Flag Communist groups; we had the Burma Communist Party; we had the people in Pegu, who were left over from the old Moscow oriented Communist Party, the BCP (Burma Communist Party)

which was pro-Chinese. And that was just the communists, not including the ethnic minorities that wanted independence from Rangoon. The security situation was very bad, not as bad as it had been back in 1947 – 48 (around the time of independence, when insurgents were at the gates of the city), but there were lots of parts of the country to which one could not travel. The government controlled where the diplomatic corps could visit and did not allow us to go very many places.

*Q: Mandalay - was this an area to go to?*

MARTIN: Yes, we had a consulate still in Mandalay in those days. We'd go there. We'd go to Pagan, the old capital with the many pagodas; we could go to Pegu, which was a city fairly near to Rangoon; and we'd go to some of the hill stations, like Maymyo and Taunggyi and Kalaw, and so forth, basically the tourist sights, but not much beyond that. We could not get to the north of Burma. In fact, it was kind of funny, because when I was in Rangoon, we always wanted to try to get up near the China border, and the government would say, "No! No! Very dangerous! You know, Chinese Communists," and so forth. Years later I got there from the Chinese side. I stood on the border looking into Burma from the Chinese side, and thought, "This is a strange world. Times do change." [Laughter]

*Q: [Laughter] What would a consulate be doing in Mandalay? I mean was it a one-man -*

MARTIN: It was a one-man listening post more than anything else. In addition to showing the flag, the consul did some consular work and reported on what was happening in that part of the country. The consulate was one of five worldwide subsequently closed by the State Department for budgetary reasons, and then Congress said, "No, you have to reopen them all." So we tried to reopen Mandalay, but the Burmese said, "No!" So we no longer have a consulate there; still have the building, but no presence." But the Chinese have a consulate in Mandalay.

Life in Burma was not bad for a 25% hardship post although one had to bring in almost everything from abroad. The Embassy had a small commissary and we could use the attaché airplane, an old DC-3, to fly to and from Bangkok.

*Q: Well, your wife had a baby. Did she have it in Burma?*

MARTIN: No! He was born in Bangkok. A Sri Lankan diplomat friend of had a baby in Rangoon General Hospital, and that was really a sobering occasion! One had to bring everything except perhaps the bed frame and they probably should have brought that. Literally, they provided the mattress, sheets, bandages, medications, food, water, and everything else. It was pretty grim. The medical situation was extremely poor.

*Q: Yes. Well, I guess you were ready for a little more bright lights or something by this time, in '71.*

MARTIN: My two year assignment was up in March 1971. My successor had been named, but failed the physical, and so had to break his assignment. Art Hummel said, "I'm not going let you go until I have a contact replacement. You know that old story! But as the only consular officer, I

understood his position. So I hung on; and the next person assigned resigned, refused to take the post, or something. Finally in late June they did get another candidate, who happened to be named Jimmy Carter. He did come out and replaced me.

In the meanwhile, I had had a difficult case in which I had to fire one of my FSNs caught engaged in fraudulent activities. She was substituting application documents that she would mark up at home, advancing people's priority date on the waiting list. To cover herself, she told applicants, especially in the Chinese community, that I was on the take. She said the cost was high because I was corrupt. Embassy colleagues heard the rumors in the community initially and we worked together to get evidence against her. We suspended the FSN and finally were able to break a couple of families by threatening them with permanent exclusion from the U.S. until they confessed to the scheme. We fired the FSN, which was too bad because she was a good worker and had been there 15 years. Two more years she would have been eligible for a special immigrant visa.

*Q: Yes. Well, did the government interfere? I mean were people coming in and saying, you know, "I'm U Nu's cousin, and I want a visa," and that sort of thing?*

MARTIN: Anyone leaving the country had to get an exit permit. They often had to give all their earthly possessions to the government official handling exit permits, pay bribes, or sell their goods and give the bribes to the official. Others were not allowed to leave at all. I had a young lawyer friend, who couldn't get permission to leave Burma. He had sent his wife out a couple years earlier, and he wanted to get out. He finally walking out to Thailand through the Three Pagoda Pass, along the route of the old Japanese death railway built by POWs during the war.

*Q: Did you ever run across Aung San Suu Kyi?*

MARTIN: No as she was not in the country at the time. She was in London. But we went to her father's mausoleum every year during the Martyr's Day commemoration. All the military brass turned out for the wreath laying ceremony since Aung San, her father, was the hero of Burmese independence. The event was attended by the entire diplomatic corps.

*Q: Was there any feeling, by the time you'd left, of optimism, that maybe Burma might turn a corner or do something?*

MARTIN: There was, I think, a sense of perhaps things were going to get a little bit better. Ne Win still was very much the power behind the scenes but hardly anybody ever saw him. In fact, the ambassador, I think, saw him once when he came and once when he left, and that was it. The Burmese people rarely saw the old man although occasionally he would show up at the Inya Lake Hotel and bust up the place when he didn't like the music or something. The military, through the Military Intelligence Service, kept a tight control of everything. Many of us thought it could not last forever since the economy and the people's standard of living was worsening. But I guess as Buddhists, the society was willing to put up with difficulties perhaps more patiently than most. Burmese are such wonderful people, warm, hospitable, lovely people. The regime is so awful one wonders how it is able to get the soldiers to be so brutal.



*Q: As we talk today, it's still essentially under the same situation in '99.*

MARTIN: Despite Aung San Ssu Kyi and the democracy movement which gave us all hope in the late 1980s, little has changed. People's power, initiated in the Philippines in 1986, was tried in Burma with very tragic results.

*Q: Yes, slaughter in the streets.*

MARTIN: It was.

*Q: I take it the feeling wasn't really ideology. Was it control, power?*

MARTIN: I think so. They had all this propaganda about the Burmese way to socialism and the Working People's Party, and so forth. And it just got worse and worse. Burma used to be a wealthy and productive country. In 1939, they were the world's largest rice exporter. When we were there, they were importing rice to feed the people. It was really a tragic situation and could have been so much better.

*Q: Well, in '71 whither?*

MARTIN: In '71 we returned to Washington after four and a half years. Initially, I was assigned to INR (Bureau of Intelligence and Research), but because of my delayed departure, INR couldn't wait for me. I was supposed to go into the China watch in INR, which would have been ideal. When I finally left in July, I was assigned to the Cultural Affairs (CU) office. That assignment did not excite me very much because I was a political cone officer who had not yet had a political assignment. I was concerned about promotions in the cone without political experience. When I reached the Department, I learned the Burma desk officer position was available. The incumbent left, and his replacement couldn't take the job for some reason. I thought this was an ideal assignment since I had just left Burma and it was considered a good political job. The ambassador wanted me, the assistant secretary wanted me, and the country director wanted me in the position but CU said, "No." After some discussion, finally their answer was, "Well, if you can find us a warm body who'll come here, we'll let you go." So I went looking for warm bodies. I found a young man, whose name I can't remember anymore, who was willing to go anywhere but Vietnam in those days. He was delighted to take my CU position and I went to the Burma desk, which turned out to be very good.

*Q: You were in the Burma desk from '71 to -*

MARTIN: I was there from '71 to '73.

*Q: What would you do? I mean we just talked about a sort of a nullity in diplomatic relations with this country and normally you'd have a lot of visits and things like that, but this doesn't seem to be an active desk.*

MARTIN: Well, if we didn't find God, we found drugs and ended up rather busy. Because of President Nixon's new focus on drugs, within the year after I left Rangoon I returned to have

initial discussions with the Burmese government on a counter narcotics cooperation program. I joined the ambassador and members of the country team, came up with a basic plan as to how we might cooperate on trying to do something about all the opium that was being grown in the hill states and converted to heroin before being trafficked out through Thailand. That was quite an exciting and interesting period.

*Q: What sparked this drug offensive?*

MARTIN: It was a Nixon administration concern about what was happening in terms of narcotics here in this country. Heroin was the big issue then. It was not cocaine. Things have come around again, but the concern was over the use of heroin in those days. It was injected; it was before AIDS [Autoimmune Deficiency Syndrome], of course. When AIDS came around, heroin use dropped off considerably.

*Q: AIDS being a sexually transmitted disease.*

MARTIN: Yes but also through sharing needles to shoot up heroin. And heroin in those days was injected, so you had all the needle marks. That's how you told a heroin addict. But now it's so pure that they can snort it or inhale it. Then the purity was only 5-10% pure, not high enough to get a good high without injecting it. After AIDS became widespread, people stopped using heroin and switched to cocaine.

But at that point, heroin was the big threat, and most of it came from Burma. The Nixon administration decided we needed to do something about heroin and about Burma. We started discussing how we could cooperate to cut back on the opium production.

*Q: What bureau within the department was the narcotics center?*

MARTIN: They established an office called S/NM under the Secretary's office, a Narcotics Matters office. Nelson Gross, a New Jersey politician who subsequently had legal trouble, was the coordinator. He had a small office with whom we in EAP worked. This small office subsequently became a bureau, International Narcotics Matters (INM) and with the combination of transnational crime issues, International Narcotics and Legal Affairs (INL).

*Q: Did this come up all of a sudden, or did somebody else in coming on say we're going after drugs now?*

MARTIN: No, as I recall, President Nixon came to the department in the late summer or fall of '71 and gave a counter narcotics speech, saying, "We need to initiate a new program here to go after narcotics." And that was, as I recall, the start of it. People at the White House, with whom we worked on the drug issue, later turned out to be the Watergate "plumbers," but that was a different job that they had.

*Q: Well, now, when you got to it, can you go through sort of the process of what you were...I mean, all of a sudden you're supposed to do something. Here's Burma. The place has been stiff-*

*arming every move we try to make in any substantive thing. Was the thinking maybe we can do something, and then, what you do?*

MARTIN: I think the question was "How do you address this question?" The Burmese' immediate reaction was that opium growing areas were outside the government's control. It's dominated by the various multi-colored insurgencies, ethnic or Communist, and it would be very difficult to do anything about all the opium fields up there. So the solution to that was spraying, which you do remotely, from the air. You can try to avoid being on the ground because you couldn't really get into most of these places, which are really quite remote. So the idea of using aerial sprayers -- helicopters and light planes -- to spray chemicals on the opium fields was formulated. That was basically what we helped the Burmese government do for a number of years.

*Q: Well, when you went out there, had there been a problem in getting to the Burmese government?*

MARTIN: On this subject, yes. We'd had some initial discussions on it, but this was the first serious bilateral dialogue with them. I went out to represent the department, and the embassy participated in an exchange of views on how to approach the issue. Subsequently, after I left the desk, the terms were worked out.

*Q: Who was the contact area within the Burmese government?*

MARTIN: I can't remember who it was but I assume it was one of the Colonels or Brigadiers in MIS who were the main interlocutors with foreign diplomats.

*Q: Was this a sullen job, or were they ready?*

MARTIN: I think they saw an advantage to this. For their own reasons, they may have seen this as a means of cutting off the money flow for the insurgencies. Subsequently, there were reports that the government used the helicopters for non-narcotics purposes, to move troops and to drop bombs out the side door onto insurgent concentrations. I think they probably saw the program as a means of enhancing their counter insurgency efforts.

*Q: Was there any residue feeling about, from World War II, Merrill's Marauders and the Chindits along the Burma Road?*

MARTIN: Burma is a very interesting country. It's really a bifurcated country in many ways because you have the Burmans, the flatlanders if you will, in the delta and the Irrawaddy River plain, and then you have all the hill tribes around the perimeter. Merrill's Marauders, the Burma Road, Stillwell and all that were mostly in the tribal areas of the Kachins, Shans, Chins, and so forth, and not very much with the Burmans. In fact, Aung San, Ne Win and other anti-British nationalists went to Japan for training and collaborated with the Japanese during the occupation. After the war, the British tried to come back in and never could, and so they separated from India, and gained independence fairly early on after the war. These leaders were not anti-Japanese.

*Q: After two years on the Burma desk, you're now a narcotics expert. Right?*

MARTIN: Well, of sorts. Finally I succeeded in getting Chinese language training. I went to FSI in the summer of 1973 to begin two years of full time language study.

**EDWIN WEBB MARTIN**  
**Ambassador**  
**Burma (1971-1973)**

*Ambassador Edwin Webb Martin was born in India of American parents in 1917. He received his bachelor's degree from Oberlin College in 1939 and his master's degree from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy in 1940. He joined the Foreign Service in 1941. His overseas posts include Leopoldville, Peiping, Hankow, Taipei, Rangoon, London, Ankara, and Hong Kong. He was the ambassador to Burma from 1971 to 1973. Ambassador Martin was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy on June 4, 1987 and by William Johnson and Harold Hinton on December 9, 1987.*

*Q: I wanted to ask you what were your instructions when you were sent out to Burma. This was in 1971?*

MARTIN: '71, yes, in September.

*Q: September '71. Did you have any?*

MARTIN: Yes. Well, I don't remember anything specifically, but it was clear from the beginning that Washington's primary interest in Burma was the fact that it was a major source at that time of opium and, I subsequently found out, also of heroin, and that the golden triangle, consisting of Burma, Thailand, and Laos, their border areas, was at that time considered a major source--probably was at that time--a major source of heroin. I mean, for the United States. But later on, now, for example, I don't think it's any longer a major source.

Another reason for the concern was that the Vietnam War, we were still in the Vietnam War at that time, and there was a lot of concern with the growing drug problem among GIs in Vietnam. Of course, that all came from the so-called golden triangle. And in the golden triangle, Burma at that time was the largest producer. So there was a very legitimate concern in Washington to try to somehow choke off, as much as possible, the supply of heroin. The base of heroin, of course, as you know, is opium, and a lot of opium was grown there.

Now, this was a very interesting problem, and certainly one of the most interesting and most delicate problems that I've had in my Foreign Service career, because we're dealing with a non-aligned, neutralist country, very sensitive to its nationalism. At the time, when we first broached this subject, and we broached it at the Ne Win level . . .

*Q: He was . . .*

MARTIN: I should probably fill in. One of the major things that happened between my first and second tours in Burma was that General Ne Win, who had been defense minister in the U Nu cabinet, when I was first in Burma, had, by a military coup, overthrown the democratic government of Burma, or basically democratic, I would say, and established not only, in effect, a military dictatorship, but eventually established, or brought in, a new ideology called the Burmese Way to Socialism, and eventually organized--and this happened just before I got out there as ambassador--as the Burmese Socialist Program Party, BSPP, which had a socialist ideology, but which carefully distinguished itself from Communist parties--in fact, fought Communist parties--but was also anti-capitalist and was a kind of mixture of Marxism, which was certainly a very strong element in it, Burmese Nationalism and Buddhism, the Buddhist principles. And Ne Win still runs the country in 1987; he's been in power for 25 years now. I think it was March 2 or March 4. It was early March of '62 that he took power, and he has not relinquished it, and any rivals that have come up mainly through the military, that he felt were rivals, he has disposed of. He hasn't shot them the way Stalin did, but he's exiled them to Maymyo or someplace like that.

*Q: What was the name of the place?*

MARTIN: Maymyo, which was a hill station, a British hill station. In other words, he has taken them out of the line of power, so that he's pretty well--in fact, his domination of the government is such that it's very difficult to get decisions made in Burma, and no one is willing to make a decision without checking with Ne Win, and he's sometimes out of the country or he's indisposed or he's on the golf course. In other words, it's a very difficult situation to deal with. He had a habit of not seeing--a policy of not seeing ambassadors privately, except when they presented their credentials and when they said farewell. He just liked it that way, and there wasn't anything you could do.

Well, that's all getting back to the delicate problem of that's the kind of government you're dealing with, non-aligned. We have no aid program; we had the remnants of an aid program, but we had had no new aid agreement with Burma since the coup. So we had absolutely zero leverage of any kind on the Burmese Government, none whatsoever. In fact, they tended to be suspicious of us because we were in so thick with the Thais. You know we had bases in Thailand.

*Q: Those were the days when we were flying bombing missions out of Thailand.*

MARTIN: We probably were still, yes.

*Q: Just towards the end, I guess.*

MARTIN: Yes. We were still in Vietnam, but the thing is, in Burmese eyes, and it's true, we were close allies of the Thais, and we had our military bases there and so forth, but Burma and Thailand have been jealous of each other or rivals for several centuries. The Burmese regard the Thais as sort of city slickers, untrustworthy at best; and the Thais regard the Burmese as uncouth country bumpkins. So one of the problems that we faced was trying to get Thai-Burmese

cooperation, because they have this long border, and there was a lot of narcotics smuggling going on. It was a very, very complex situation. When we first took up the question of doing something about Burma's opium-growing, most of which took place in the Shan states and Kachin state, which are over toward the Chinese border, most of this area was out of the control of the Burmese.

*Q: The dissident movement was still . . .*

MARTIN: Oh, yes. Insurgencies were still going on, the same ones that I mentioned before, except the Red Flag Communists had been pretty well wiped out. The White Flag Communists had I think, during the Sixties, late Sixties, suffered a rather serious defeat in their stronghold in the Pegu Yomas, which are the . . .

*Q: Can I get you to spell that?*

MARTIN: Yoma is the word for hill in Burmese, so the Pegu Yomas are hills just north of Rangoon that run up the central part of Burma. They're not high mountains. Their insurgency had been based there ever since independence, but with this defeat, they were pretty well driven out, and they went over and ensconced themselves along the China border, where they got logistic support and actual training and so forth.

Well, in this situation, when we first approached Ne Win, he was quite defensive; but on the other hand, from the Burmese point of view, certainly, what he said made a good deal of sense. First he looked at it from the historical point of view, which wasn't terribly relevant at that time, but it was sort of interesting background. According to the Burmese, it was the British who were responsible for the opium problem; they had encouraged opium-growing so they could sell it to China.

*Q: There were the Opium Wars.*

MARTIN: Yes, that was back in the 1840s, yes. So the Burmese, in the first place, were victimized by the British, and the second place, opium-growing had been confined to these fairly remote hill parts of Burma. It was not a problem. There was no addiction in Burma, except for some of these hill tribes who used opium and had for generations, and they used it in its raw state, and there was no heroin made anyway in Burma. So, "We've been growing opium for generations, thanks to the British. We don't have an addiction problem here, so why do you come running to us? There never was a problem before, so why do you come running to us?" I'm talking about the Burmese point of view. And, "If you have a problem, that's because of your society, some weaknesses or whatever. In other words, it's your fault. Why should you blame it on us? We've been growing for all these years. You've never had a problem; now you've got a problem. Don't blame us."

Well, as I say, there was a good deal of truth in that. They didn't have a problem in terms of their own addiction, and we did. So it's pretty hard to convince somebody where they've been growing opium for years. The Turks were similar, actually. They didn't have an addiction problem in Turkey, really, although they grew opium there. But that's a different story.

Well, so we didn't get very far with the initial approaches.

*Q: This was when you first came out?*

MARTIN: This was in the fall of '71, yes.

*Q: Had there been approaches prior to that?*

MARTIN: I don't think so, at least not a major push. Under the Nixon Administration, in '71, they decided they would make a major push. This was a policy decision that I think was made in Washington. I don't know when; maybe it was summer. But they were going to make a big push on the golden triangle area. But at that time, both Laos and Thailand were areas where we had a large presence and so forth. But in Burma, we had it totally different. We didn't have leverage in Burma at all, and we're dealing with people who were very sensitive about their nationalism, about their non-alignment and so on. So the best we could get out of that was that they did agree to having an information exchange, because some of the information we had on what was going on in Burma with opium-growing--in other words, our information was that it was a considerably larger problem, and there was considerable export; the Burmese didn't have that intelligence, and the main reason they didn't was that they weren't really in control of that area.

Then our intelligence people had come up with the allegation, which turned out to be true, that some of the irregular forces that were employed by the Burmese Government, along with their regular army, to fight the insurgents--and I'll give you the Burmese name, but let's not bother with it here; they were called the Ka Kwe Ye, let's call them Burmese irregular forces--were under a general of Chinese extraction, probably many of them were ethnic Chinese or Shans, and the general's name was Lo Hsing Han. Well, our intelligence people had come up with pretty good evidence that Lo Hsing Han and the Ka Kwe Ye, the irregular forces, were deep into the opium-smuggling business. Of course, we were exchanging this information with the Burmese Government. Our intelligence people came up with even more damning information; that was that there were actually heroin refineries in the jungles on the Burmese side of the Thai-Burma border. And this was particularly damning because the Burmese had denied that there were any heroin refineries. But we got more and more evidence, and, of course, in Thailand, we had a team of DEA people, the Drug Enforcement Agency, and they were working with the Thais, and they were getting intelligence from the Thais.

*Q: The intelligence was basically coming from . . .*

MARTIN: I think most of it was coming from Thailand, yes. I think most of it was, because these refineries were right close to the border, and the intelligence was that heroin was being refined in Burma under the supervision of Chinese chemists, and then being smuggled into Thailand. Of course, once you refine opium into heroin, it's much easier to smuggle. Opium is much more bulky. It was being smuggled across the border by the Ka Kwe Ye primarily, but also to some extent by insurgent groups, and then coming down through Thailand through the main channel to other Southeast Asian countries--Hong Kong, where there's quite a drug addiction problem, and then eventually getting into the West Coast of the United States. The Burmese

were somewhat skeptical of this, and we kept working on them, and we had visitors come out, including Bud Krogh, who was on the White House staff.

*Q: He became involved in the Watergate affair, didn't he?*

MARTIN: Oh, yes, yes. In fact, two of the people I've mentioned wound up in legal difficulties. One was Krogh, although I was very sorry to hear about Krogh, because in dealings I had with him, he seemed to be a fine guy. I think he was just one of these fellows that was blinded by loyalty to his boss and got into trouble. The other was Nelson Gross, who was accused of violating laws when he was Chairman of the Republican Party of New Jersey, so it had nothing to do with Watergate or anything to do with the narcotics thing. We didn't know it at the time, of course.

Other people came out occasionally, visiting--a fellow named Minnick, I can't remember others, all to see how we were doing and encourage us and so forth. So we kept working away at this, and the Burmese, I think, my own personal belief--and I can't prove this, but the timing is such--when they finally decided to go beyond just exchange of information, had a good deal to do with the fact that they began having a drug problem for the first time.

*Q: This is within the cities, not out in the field.*

MARTIN: No, they didn't care about what they did. Also, this is heroin, you see. This is heroin. It wasn't opium; it was heroin. Heroin started to come first into the Shan states, in places like Taungyi, which is the capital of the southern Shan states, and eventually even into other cities and down to Rangoon. The people who were getting this drug were, as it was in other countries, young people from what would pass in Burma as the more privileged class. In other words, the children of the Army officers and maybe of high civil officials and so forth. Then the Burmese officials began to get worried. They began to believe that they did have a problem and that the heroin maybe did come from Burma, because how else would it get in there?

So finally, and this was a rather dramatic thing, one of our embassy officers who was working with the Burmese on this and with Burmese intelligence, persuaded them and the Army. I think there were people in the government all the time who were more concerned than Ne Win and some of the higher-ups were, and I think their cooperation was very important.

*Q: Whom were you dealing with in the government?*

MARTIN: I dealt with the foreign ministry.

*Q: Ne Win?*

MARTIN: I think the only time I saw Ne Win was when Gross came out, and I don't think I saw him on any other occasion. I dealt with the foreign minister or people just under him.

*Q: I see.*



MARTIN: But we also had Army contacts. We had attachés there, and we had intelligence contacts. Finally, we got the people concerned in the Burmese Government, not the foreign ministry, but more on the enforcement side to take an Army plane and fly over the area where our intelligence said there were opium refineries. And an embassy officer, whom I will not name, who was very instrumental in getting a lot of these good results, was on the plane. When they flew over the jungle just north of the Thai border and didn't spot anything, he thought, "Our whole scheme is going to blow up." Finally, just when he was about to give up, they flew over a ridge and they spotted the refineries. There was a whole line of long houses that obviously were refineries, which we had told the Burmese about. And that was a very decisive moment, because then they could see with their own eyes that we were not kidding, heroin was being refined there. And then the Burmese Government started investigating Lo Hsing Han and the Ka Kwe Ye, whom they had believed were their allies who had helped fight the Communist insurgents and so forth. So they found there was a lot of corruption in the Ka Kwe Ye; and a certain amount among lower level Burmese Army officers. In other words, they found that what we'd been patiently telling them, which had been building up over a period of time with collection of intelligence and so forth, was true.

Once they found out it was true, plus the fact--and I think, there again, they began seeing they were themselves beginning to have a drug problem among their youths--they turned over a leaf and began to go after the problem. They bombed the refineries, and they went after Lo Hsing Han, and assigned a special force of four or five battalions to go after the Ka Kwe Ye. They cornered them down by the Thai border, and just at the time the troops were surrendering, Lo went across the border, and the Thais arrested him, much to his surprise. He'd always been able to go across, because the Thais, as I said, didn't have any particular love for the Burmese, and vice versa, but that's another thing that we'd worked on to try to get some cooperation between the Thais and the Burmese. So we alerted the Thais to the fact that this opium smuggler was coming across.

*Q: Other than intelligence, did we play any role in military aid?*

MARTIN: Well, eventually. Now, the upshot of all this was that the Burmese Government asked for [assistance]--we had said right along, "We want to help you," The first thing was to get them to see that there was a problem and want to do something about it. Once they did this--and this was one of the last negotiations I had with them before I left--and I negotiated a bit with Washington on this, too, they asked for helicopters so they could drop troops in and clean out the refineries, and also so they could spot the smugglers. Once they disposed of the Ka Kwe Ye, then some of the Shan insurgents, Kachin insurgents, and BCP, which now controls a lot of the opium-growing area, were smuggling the stuff out.

The people--now we get back to the KMT troops--the remnants of the KMT troops still there found, "Here's a great thing! Here's a good thing! We can be the transporters of this opium." And so they became transporters of the opium, and they had the caravans. Not the sole ones, but some of the more important ones into Thailand. So the Burmese, I think they made out a good case, said, "We need some helicopters to get these guys in the jungle. We need to spot the caravans." So we strongly recommended that they start out with six helicopters, and this is one of the last things I dealt with before leaving Burma.

We had some opposition in Washington from people who said, "This is just a cover for the Burmese to get some military equipment to fight their rebels, their insurgents."

*Q: Where was the opposition coming from?*

MARTIN: I really don't know.

*Q: Was it the Pentagon?*

MARTIN: No, I don't think it was the Pentagon. I think it might have been somewhere in the State Department. I'm not sure where. Questions were being raised. And possibly also in Congress. There might have been some opposition there. But the upshot was that eventually approval came. I remember arguing that obviously we can't guarantee they're not going to use these helicopters against insurgents. In the first place, a lot of the smugglers are insurgents! (Laughs) But if we're serious about cutting down the opium--and I might say, the result of all this was that there was a very significant drop in the amount of opium that was being exported. I can't give you the exact figures, but it was more than 50%. It was a very significant drop.

The upshot was that eventually the Burmese got, after my time, the helicopters, they came in '74. I think they eventually got as many as 20 helicopters. Maybe that was after my time--15 or 20. They got a light plane and so forth. Then we began to cooperate on other things, too. The U.N., by the way, had a mission in there which we cooperated with, I forget the initials, but they were a branch of one of these permanent organizations of the U.N. that fights drugs worldwide. They came into Burma. They didn't have quite the problem we did, because Burma has been a pretty staunch supporter of the U.N. Of course, U Thant, who, during my first tour in Burma, was information minister in the Burmese Cabinet, eventually became Secretary General of the U.N. So the U.N. was in there. They were working on the crop substitution angle.

*Q: This would be planting something . . .*

MARTIN: Something besides opium. Of course, that's a tough one to do, because nothing makes money like opium. (Laughs)

*Q: You'd just been through this as deputy chief of mission in Ankara?*

MARTIN: Right. That's right, so I was familiar with the U.N. activity. We're still--I was just reading the other day something from Wilson Center, when they had our ambassador-- our previous ambassador to Burma, O'Donahue, at this symposium on Burma last spring, last March, I think it was. He was still talking about the cooperation of the Burmese Government in spraying, and how we're spraying the opium crop with herbicides to kill it and so forth. So what we started back there has continued and developed. Burma now, I think, if you look--I haven't followed this in recent years, but my impression is that if you look at the major suppliers of opium that comes into the United States now, the golden triangle is nowhere near what it used to be. In fact, you hardly see it mentioned. Mexico, Pakistan, and places like that are the big places I've seen mentioned.

*Q: What were some of the other issues?*

MARTIN: Well, we would go regularly with the circulars that came out every year when the U.N. General Assembly met, and go around and ask the Burmese to vote this way and that. Those things we would do as routine, but the Burmese were very non-aligned, very independent. I used to argue, and I used to tell the Department--I think the Department came to appreciate this, "Look, Burma isn't like Cuba and other countries and some Arab countries that say they're not aligned both vote right down the line most of the time with the Soviets. The Burmese really are non-aligned."

But I should mention their relationship with China. Of course, we didn't even bother with the Chinese representation issue. Burma was the first non-Communist country that recognized the People's Republic. That happened just before I got there, the month before I first got to Burma. And one of the unhappy figures that I became somewhat acquainted with before he left Burma was the Nationalist ambassador, the Chinese ambassador, who was, of course, without a job when Burma recognized the P.R.C. I was there when the Communist ambassador came in. This was back in 1950. We learned that the Burmese--of course, they never said anything about this out loud--but the Burmese were very unhappy, because one of the men that he brought in as secretary of the embassy was an intelligence operative whom the Burmese Government had put on their wanted list. (Laughs) But the Burmese were very polite at that time with the Chinese. Of course, they have a problem historically with China. There's an old saying in Burma that when China spits, Burma swims. That's because they have this huge neighbor, and it's an age-old problem. They have to get along with them, but they have maintained their independence, I think.

*Q: You, as a Chinese-speaking officer, did you have any activity with the Chinese Embassy in Rangoon?*

MARTIN: Not really. We began speaking to each other, of course, once Kissinger went with Nixon to China, and so forth, and that was a period of some cordiality. But we didn't really have any business relations. The effect was that we shook hands at diplomatic receptions. I have a souvenir, which every chief of mission got from his colleagues upon his departure, and it has the name of the Chinese ambassador on it. Before the Nixon visit they would never have thought of doing that. So although we did not establish diplomatic relations, nevertheless, that was a big breakthrough, in Burma it noticeably affected our relations, but they were strictly social relations.

*Q: You weren't exchanging drug information or anything like this?*

MARTIN: Oh, no. In fact, I don't think the Burmese even had been doing this. You see, the Burmese, on the one hand, had diplomatic and very correct relations with the Chinese in Peking, and they had an ambassador there, and the foreign minister went there and so forth. But at the same time, they knew darn well that the Chinese were aiding the Burmese Communist Party insurgents.

*Q: These are the White Flag?*

MARTIN: The White Flag. The Red Flag, by that time, had pretty well been wiped out. They were always a smaller group anyway. And as a matter of fact, a year or two after I left Burma, I can't remember whether it was '74 or '75--I think it was still '74, maybe, it was not long after that for the first time, the Burmese Government found that there were actually Chinese cadres fighting with the BCP on Burmese territory. Now, we had not noticed that before. But there was a lot of evidence of Chinese support. Now, this was at a time when the Cultural Revolution was still going on and so forth, and there had been a time in the late Sixties, at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, when there had been demonstrations in Rangoon, and there had been some rioting, and there had been some people issuing forth from the Chinese Embassy shouting anti-Burmese slogans. So relations with China had gotten pretty bad, and the Burmese were, I think, happy--

*Q: You were saying that the Burmese were relieved when the United States and China started to come together.*

MARTIN: Yes, because they felt that enmity between China and the United States was always a threat to the security of Southeast Asian countries including Burma. They thought there was more chance for peace when the United States and China started to come together. After all, they don't have any power, really, or influence in international affairs. The best they can do is to defend their own independence and maintain a non-aligned position, which is not only balancing Communist and non-Communist powers, but balancing Russia and China up against each other internally, to the extent that they can. On the other hand, I think they were a little worried that we might just pull out of Southeast Asia altogether. It's a funny situation, because while they would consistently vote against security measures that we took--for example, they were opposed to our role in Vietnam--nevertheless, they realized that their ability to pursue a neutralist non-aligned policy depended on a certain balance of power in the area, and that the United States was an extremely important element in that balance of power. And if we pulled out of Southeast Asia, they would be left to face an unbalanced situation.

Of course, I might say that what developed in southeast Asia after I left Burma was that you began to have a Sino-Soviet rivalry, which is part of the balance of power now.

*Q: But it still keeps one power from becoming dominant.*

MARTIN: That's right. That's what they're interested in. So basically, I think, they feel--I don't know. I haven't been back to Burma, but I'm sure that with the demise of the cultural revolution and the taking over of China by people who are more pragmatic, I should think the Burmese might feel a little more comfortable than they did at the time I left, when they were so worried about the BCP insurgency and China's role, and they worried about what was going to happen in Vietnam and all that sort of thing.

*Q: Were there any other concerns of the United States, like offshore petroleum?*

MARTIN: Yes, yes. I'm glad you mentioned that. That was of concern, as far as our U.S. government was concerned, only to the extent that American firms, American companies, be given a shot at the offshore oil. And they were. Because Burma is a Socialist government, and

private enterprise is discouraged and limited to small affairs, when the government negotiated an agreement with an American company, an oil company or a consortium, they wanted very much to have some official U.S. presence, because they seemed to be sensitive to dealing with a capitalist company. (Laughs) And although it was made clear the United States Government had no part in this agreement, they wanted us present. So I would be present when the agreement was initialed in the Foreign Ministry, as a concession to the Burmese sensitivities on this thing. So we did have a role in getting certain concessions for offshore drilling. Unfortunately, nothing ever came of it. They found a lot of gas, but they never found commercially exploitable oil reserves.

From Washington I learned that some companies--and I don't remember the names of the companies, and it's not important--had learned that I had gone with a representative of one of their rival American companies to the Foreign Ministry to negotiate this agreement. They complained about this, saying I was showing favoritism. I said, "Nonsense. I'd do this for any American company. I don't care about one over the other. I'd do it for any American company. Furthermore, it was not my idea. I did it because the Burmese Government requested it and because of their particular ideological and economic policies." So nothing more came of that, and I would have done it for any company.

*Q: Do we have any other interests there? Tourism?*

MARTIN: Well, in those days, there was very little tourism. Actually, the year that I came to Burma, nothing but just a coincidence, the Burmese, under Ne Win, for almost ten years had only allowed--well, first, 24-hour visas and then 48-hour visas, which was as good as excluding everybody. Who would go to Burma for two days or one day? But that year, 1971, they began issuing one-week visas, and now in 1987, I understand they still have one-week visas. One week is all you can go there for.

*Q: Is one week about it as far as a tourist goes anyway?*

MARTIN: Well, it depends on the tourist. For people who are really interested in Burma and its culture, one week is nothing. But if you want to see Pagan and Mandalay and something around Rangoon, you can do it in a week. That's very true. But the Burmese do their best--it's perhaps not quite as bad as it is in China, as I understand it--to keep foreign tourists as much as they can separated from the Burmese population. (Laughs) They're somehow afraid that the Burmese are going to get corrupted by foreign influence.

*Q: You had already come from being both a deputy chief of mission in Ankara and running a very large post in Hong Kong and all, so you were an experienced officer in running a large thing. How did you find the staff? Although smaller, was it an effective staff?*

MARTIN: Well, it wasn't, I would say, on the whole, as able as my top officers were in bigger posts, but that's not surprising in a way.

*Q: No, no.*

MARTIN: I thought they were competent, and we had no major problems. There are not many Burma specialists, as you can imagine, because it's not a country where you can even spend more than maybe a couple of tours. But I thought I had no problem with them. We had a difficult situation, of course, because it was impossible to have really close relations with the Burmese, not only the Burmese Government officials, but Burmese citizens. People in the universities and so forth would find it scary to come to a reception or dinner at my place, probably less so at other officers'.

*Q: Would they be visited by intelligence officers?*

MARTIN: Yes, they would be. In fact, they told us that they had to give reports. I remember I gave one reception for some visiting delegation of doctors of the United States, the head of the American Heart Association and other doctors, cardiologists. I just happen to remember this particular reception. Some uninvited Burmese showed up, which was not too surprising. It turned out he was a guy from their counterintelligence or whatever. We had that happen. Burmese said, "Well, I'm sorry, but it's just not worth going to your house, because we have to send in a report," and they didn't want to. So there was close surveillance kept, and that obviously put on a real damper. (Laughs) Q: There was a difficult situation in your embassy, I would imagine, in that much of your work was really intelligence work, not against the government, but because of the narcotics business.

MARTIN: That's right. We worked on that basis. We did work with them, and increasingly so with the foreign minister and with the Burmese intelligence.

*Q: Every year we find there's another problem of our intelligence services, whether it's CIA, Drug Enforcement Agency, or what have you, becoming a bit free-wheeling, looking for the short-term gain rather than the long-term. How did you find this?*

MARTIN: I felt very lucky. Of course, it wasn't a place like Thailand, for example, where you had a huge organization. In Thailand, as I understand it, the embassy for a while fought having DEA people there, but they finally had to give in, and they had all these attachés. In Burma, because it was non-aligned, because it was very sensitive and everything, they didn't try to force unwanted staff on me. And the people I did have from other agencies were extremely cooperative. I was very pleased.

*Q: You felt you were kept informed of what was going on, rather than something happening.*

MARTIN: Very much so. Yes. Nothing happened that surprised me. The station chief there was very, very cooperative, and really believed in the general directive given by President Kennedy. They were supposed to keep the ambassador informed.

*Q: This was a general directive that Kennedy first came and said a chief of mission is chief of the mission.*

MARTIN: And is to be informed.

*Q: Of everything that's going on. That had worked in some places and certainly not in others.*

MARTIN: Not in others. Well, I think, obviously, if something went on that I didn't know about, then I can't tell you, because I didn't know about it. As far as I know, nothing that was of any significance occurred, and there were no surprises. As I say, I felt that I got excellent cooperation and loyalty from the people there.

*Q: Beginning to wind up this very interesting discussion, what did you feel were your main accomplishments while you were in Burma?*

MARTIN: Well, obviously the main accomplishment, I think, was that we did secure the cooperation from the Burmese Government on the narcotics thing, which was the principal priority job and priority interest that the U.S. had in Burma during my tenure there. And I was very, very pleased with that. Otherwise, it was just sort of keeping things on an even keel. Just to give you an idea, I think I mentioned the fact that we had no economic aid agreement since the 1962 coup, but to show how slowly the Burmese Government operated, when I was there, we still had one or two aid projects, which were still going on. (Laughs)

*Q: What sort of projects?*

MARTIN: Well, the very last one we had that was still being financed by money appropriated in '62, was a teak mill. One of Burma's primary exports was teak wood, and still is. In fact, I think I saw the other day that it's threatened to overtake rice. That's because rice has been . . .

*Q: A glut in the market now.*

MARTIN: Perhaps, yes. And under the British, Burma was the number one rice exporter in the world.

Anyway, we had minor things, like gifts of blankets when they had an earthquake, gifts of athletic equipment, gifts of books, and that sort of thing. We kept, I think, a positive image of the United States in Burma, and the only serious incident we had was towards the end of my tour, when a helicopter with American personnel aboard, which was part of the anti-narcotics thing in Thailand, strayed across the border and landed in Burma, near an Army post near the border. It's one of those things that happens. The helicopter landed and then tried to take off, and the Burmese Army shot at it and forced it down. An American on board was detained. I forget how long it took us to get this guy out, but he wasn't detained more than a couple of weeks, which I thought was pretty good for the Burmese. The helicopter had violated Burmese territory, and they had a perfect right to do everything they did. The idea that they were going to jump up and let the guy go immediately didn't really make sense from their point of view. I thought they came through as well as we could have hoped for in the situation, given their relations with Thailand and so forth.

*Q: Did you have any great frustration or anything that you wish you could have done differently?*

MARTIN: Well, I imagine the main frustration I had, really, was that I wasn't able to see Ne Win, because I knew that's where the power was. But since all the other mission chiefs shared that problem, why, that helped a bit. This included the Japanese ambassador, although Japan was by far the major aid-giver at that time. The United States was giving nothing. He finally got to the point where he sent the message back through the Foreign Ministry, I guess, that, "My government is not going to continue to provide major aid to Burma if I'm unable to see General Ne Win." So he finally got in to see him, but it was because of a pure and simple threat that he could.

*Q: It was purchased.*

MARTIN: Yes. Which I didn't have. I did find that the Burmese officials, in terms of my personal relations, were generally polite, and some were really cordial, and the foreign minister that we had most of the time that I was there was in that category--Kyaw Soe. He was one of the original revolutionary council members. In other words, one of the original coup group, an Army officer. He was a devout Buddhist, as far as I could tell. He also believed firmly in the ideology of the Burmese Way to Socialism. But a very pleasant guy, one you could approach. On the other hand, he was--well, I'll tell you a story about him. When he came to Washington, and this was--I can't remember exactly; I think in about June or the summer of '73, although don't hold me to that date--anyway, he had been attending a non-aligned conference somewhere in Latin America, in Venezuela or Colombia or something like that, a non-aligned conference, and so we thought, well, the Burma desk thought, and I endorsed it, to invite him up to meet the Secretary, to call on the Secretary, because he was going to be in Washington, apparently, and coming privately. So we arranged this.

The Secretary at that time was Rogers. I had first become acquainted with Rogers when he visited Hong Kong in 1969. So the Burma desk prepared a briefing for Rogers, as they usually do when you have a visiting foreign minister. (Laughs) So Kyaw Soe came in, his very smiley self, you know, very pleasant and everything, and he sat there. And Rogers, an affable, experienced man as he was, made the pitch that we suggested that he make, and then he had all these answers to questions in case Kyaw Soe brought them up. But Kyaw Soe just sat there and grinned. So finally, Rogers decided that although Kyaw Soe hadn't asked these questions, he would give our answers. As he went through the whole briefing paper, Kyaw Soe didn't say a word, except, "Yes," or, "No," or "Thank you." Never asked a single question. And it was a fiasco! (Laughs) I thought it gave our people in the State Department some idea of what we'd been dealing with right along, you know. And Kyaw Soe was at least affable and pleasant, whereas some of the other people were very short and wouldn't give you the time of day. That was not true of the career officers in the Burmese government, of course, the people who are just below the political appointee level. They were a fine, able bunch of people on the whole. I thought they were very fine to deal with.

*Q: It may be somewhat facetious, but I noticed in reading a bit about Burma before this interview that golf comes up quite a bit.*

MARTIN: Golf? Yes.



*Q: For a Marxist, austere state, to hear about the officers worried about not having golfing equipment strikes me as peculiar.*

MARTIN: That's very important. Just to show how important it is, I had never been a golfer. I might have been out on the course two or three times before I went to Burma, at the most, because tennis has been my bag. Well, I deliberately decided that I was going to take up golf in Burma, because it was so hard to get acquainted with Burmese officials at the cabinet level or sub-cabinet level, because we had so little business with Burma, and there was so little reason to call on them after you made your initial calls and so forth. I decided I'd take up golf. And it paid off to some extent. The reason that I did, practically all of them played golf. There was hardly a person in the revolutionary council that didn't play, and I understand that for them it was also politically wise to do it, because Ne Win was an ardent golfer. Apparently this was popular in the upper echelons of the Army. They learned from the British, I'm sure.

*Q: Quite true in Korea, too.*

MARTIN: Yes, yes. So I never became more than a hacker at golf. Nevertheless, it gave me an opportunity to mix with people like Kyaw Soe and others on an informal basis, especially after the game. We'd sit around and have some beers and so forth, and it at least made me feel that I knew these officials. (Laughs) So that was my way of trying to get around the barrier that they put up against foreigners and foreign diplomats in particular. And it paid off. Now, I never played golf with Ne Win. There again, he had a deliberate policy of not socializing with foreign officials and with the foreign diplomats. There were two or three Americans whom he had known in various capacities or places, private citizens who came out and visited Burma, and he entertained them and played golf with them and so forth. But if he did it with one diplomat, he'd have to do it with all. The Burmese were very careful about their non-alignment. We would joke sometimes, if I were to make a presentation of anything, like blankets or whatever, they would always have this in the paper, then they'd have something from the East Bloc in the same paper, or vice versa. If they had some visitor from the East Bloc in the newspaper, they would contrive some way of putting me, or somebody in the American embassy, or maybe the British embassy, in the same paper just to balance things out. They were very careful about this. But golf was--I just attribute it to the fact that they learned this from the British in British times, and it became popular in the Army, and Ne Win particularly liked it, so if Ne Win liked it, everybody had to like it.

**JOHN A. LACEY**  
**Deputy Chief of Mission**  
**Rangoon (1972-1975)**

*John A. Lacey was born in Illinois in 1917. He joined the Department of State in 1950 and the Foreign Service in 1955. He served in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Australia, and Rangoon. He was interviewed by Henry Precht in 1989.*

*Q: Then your next assignment after Perth was Rangoon as Deputy Chief of Mission.*

LACEY: That was both a very happy and a very sad experience for me. My first ambassador was Ed Martin, himself a China watcher, of scholarly inclination. He was quite content, having sized up the U.S.-Burmese situation, to keep himself informed, to act in "a responsible manner" but who really knew down deep in his heart that nothing important was going to go on of consequence to Uncle Sam.

Way back in '62 when I first visited Burma out of Hong Kong--this is one of the many trips I made throughout Asia--in 1962 I visited Rangoon. I was entertained and well cared for by the then Chief of Station, Horace Feldman, and his lovely wife, Joan.

But my first appointment was with a textile entrepreneur, textiles being one of my sub-jobs in Hong Kong. I was the textile negotiator for Uncle Sam. I had gone to Burma primarily for textile reasons, and my call was in the morning of the next day. I arrived to be greeted by one of the leading textile manufacturers. And I found him almost in tears. A Chinese seldom cries. Now a Burman is mostly a Chinese by blood way, way back in time. In any case, the smart money in Rangoon then and now stemmed from that kind of blood relationship.

But this time, I met this Chinese oriented entrepreneur whose name I have forgotten. He dutifully took me to lunch and dutifully showed me the plant, but in the course of doing so, lamely said, "I am forbidden by General Ne Win any longer to trade with Communist China. (Communist China grows long staple cotton.) That is the only cotton my mills will take. Now what do I do?"

Well, that was the beginning of the end of the Burmese economy. This situation a sidelight on the way things were at that time.

*Q: Why was Ne Win so opposed to the Chinese? Were the Chinese insurgents in northern Burma giving him problems?*

LACEY: That was one of the more immediate reasons, but I think in deference to Ne Win, his concern however misguided, was truly a commitment to what he conceived to be real neutralism. Because along with the Chinese, he had to fear Russians, and Americans.

*Q: So he was really sealing Burma off.*

LACEY: Not sealing it off so much as carefully guarding the entrée of America, Beijing, and Moscow. Whatever he did for one, he always did for the other two in the interests of neutrality.

*Q: Now, when you were in Burma, this period in the mid-'70s, was there a narcotics problem that was of grave concern to us?*

LACEY: There was, and I am pleased to say that I had a very important hand in helping resolve it--rather take steps towards its resolution. The then station chief was a fine able officer by the name of Clyde McAvoy. Now Clyde McAvoy and I frequently fought like cats and dogs. I thought seriously that the ambassador ought to be informed about everything that was going on in his mission. I soon discovered that that was not the case. Along with CIA having its own

transmittal system, so did the Pentagon. And I want to come back to that point too because I think it's important.

In any case, regarding opium and the transformation of opium into other, harder drugs, Clyde McAvoy had worked out with the Hong Kong secret police a deal whereby if Uncle Sam would provide the wherewithal, including both aircraft and training, the Burmese government would welcome that. And they welcomed it because of something you mentioned earlier, namely, their own fear of upland intransigents and opposition, especially from two groups, the Karen and the Shan. And I stumbled upon that fact quite accidentally one day.

*Q: The fact that the CIA was giving them this aid?*

LACEY: No, not giving them aid. Through CIA I learned that the Burmese government was interested in support. So I said, "Well, Clyde, that is something that the ambassador should know about." He quickly agreed. The two of us went into the ambassador's office, and Clyde told the ambassador all that had transpired up to that point in time. Ambassador Ed Martin, who was always looking for a way of getting into the closed Burmese society, decided it was U.S. interest to support that project and personally sent a telegram to Washington to that effect.

Shortly thereafter, Ed left for what turned out to be retirement. So for a long time I was charged and working with McAvoy primarily but also with our political Counselor of Embassy, Paul Jerome Benette. Jerry, was a real Burma expert, we drafted what was to be the first narcotics treaty on cooperation between our two governments. The terms of the treaty called for something like twenty-three million dollars worth of assistance. Far more than Burma had agreed to receiving from us or from anyone else for a long time. The treaty provided for both training Burmese pilots and soldiers on anti-narcotic measures and in providing a wonderful kind of airplane. I think it was called the STOL, whatever the name--

*Q: STOL, yes, vertical takeoff.*

LACEY: Well, we provided that. Let me tell you a story about CIA and why I have such a high regard for Clyde McAvoy as station chief. He had reported to his own people, and they came out to inspect the fact that, the Shan and the Karen primarily, were growing opium and that there was a distillery on the Thai side of the border of Burma where it was converted into heroin and harder stuff. The region is called The Golden Triangle, lost in the political vocabulary of President Bush.

Clyde went up in an airplane to spot this place. He himself told me this story. I was not present. He said, "We went over one hill, looked down the valley, nothing there. Next mountain, nothing there. Next mountain, nothing there. Our plane was beginning to run out of gas, and I said, 'I am certain there is such a place. Go east up to the point where you have to go home because of fuel shortage.'" And, my God, there down in the valley was the distillery that he had read about and gotten reports about. He now could see it with his own eyes.

*Q: Was opium production and our cooperation the key issue that you all had with the Burmese during that period?*

LACEY: That was probably the only issue of consequence.

*Q: You know, a few months back, there were these disturbances in Burma with movement for democracy by students and others squashed by the government. What was your sense of the way the people, the average Burmese in cities, reacted to the government?*

LACEY: The first reaction of the activists was one of running away to the foothills.

*Q: If they had a problem with the government?*

LACEY: Yes, because they had a problem with the government.

*Q: No, no, but I mean in your time.*

LACEY: Oh.

*Q: What was your perception of how well the government was doing in maintaining the allegiance of its citizens?*

LACEY: I thought it quite effective for two reasons. One was the way they exploited the Burman not the Burmese--but the Burmans propensity for Buddhism. The state let it be known that the Shwedagon pagoda, as far as the authorities were concerned, was above ground, not off-limits. Although I know for a fact that senior Burman officers begrudged how much riches in jewels and gold were being thrown away in worship of the Lord Buddha--that is their term not mine--I felt that the government, if not encouraged did not discourage, Buddhism was one of the elements making for stability.

The other thing which I think the Ne Win government stood for was open support for education. Now that support had to be limited in terms of recurring broken down university buildings, but education was encouraged as a matter of state policy. The Burman elite--officials, teachers, broadcasters and others whom I knew--were worldly wise.

*Q: But wouldn't that produce the kind of society that would question authoritarian government in Rangoon?*

LACEY: Well, it probably did and ultimately did. But at the time, the Burmese police were omnipresent. And I can tell you a graphic story that illustrates that point very well.

We were always entertaining people from the U.S.A. One person, a well-known national, international economist, Warren Huntsberger and his wife came to Rangoon as our guests. Warren had been my first Chief of the intelligence Division of Research for the Far East (DRF). I had called up the president of Rangoon University, U Maung Maung Kha whom I knew quite well from cocktail parties and liked, but who had been refusing to receive any of my proposed guests that I wanted to call on him. In this case, when he heard about Dr. Warren Huntsberger he

agreed to see him. We made a call on him at the university. He received us graciously and spoke rather openly.

At the close of the meeting, I said, "Doc, why did you receive us now as against other times?"

He said, "Oh, John, it is not a matter of discourtesy. It isn't a matter of not wanting to meet people, but every time I receive a foreign guest, American or otherwise, I have to write out a complete report on what transpired, on what he said, on what I said. It is so much trouble that I prefer not to receive foreign guests."

Now that is how pervasive the police system was--or at least how pervasive was the fear of the police.

*Q: You said that Burma was a happy post, but it was also a sad post.*

LACEY: It was happy because, first of all, Ed Martin was a great ambassador and his wife, Emma Rose, a fine lady. We admired the Martins. And, secondly, because I had a lengthy period as chargé when I could run things the way I wanted to. And the way I wanted to was consistent with U.S. policy.

Then, alas, from my point of view, we got a second ambassador. David Osborn his name was. He had been l'enfant terrible, a term I reserve for people of a specially-gifted mentalities. Dave Osborn was a master of foreign languages. He had been DCM in Embassy Tokyo, at least he held a high position in Embassy Tokyo. I had known him earlier in the Department of State concerning Chinese affairs where he was a gung ho man. Truly a gifted linguist, whom I thought would be a friend. I welcomed him. In fact, my wife and I went more than all out to receive Ambassador Osborn and his wife, Helenka.

As it turned out, for reasons which I have never been able to diagnose, the Osborns and the Laceys didn't strike it off at all well. I think part of the trouble was Helenka, a very gifted woman, who resented the fact that my wife was an able shopper and had acquired quite a few Burmese works of art--or at least Burmese artifacts, I won't call them works of art. In any case, I think that was one of the causes for friction.

But another cause for friction was that David really wanted a friend of his from Embassy Tokyo to be DCM. He was able, however, to bring him in as chief of the administrative section. I have always had the feeling that the two were far closer than I, the DCM, was with the ambassador.

In any case, what may have brought this division into the open were two things. One, the previous admin officer, whom I greatly liked, if the truth be known was something of a conniver. He never did anything completely illegal but tended to operate sometimes on the shady side.

*Q: In the interest of the post.*

LACEY: Beg your pardon?

*Q: In the interest of the post.*

LACEY: In the interest of the post, of course. That had given the ambassador and his newly-appointed admin officer some ammunition for taking issue with Lacey's chargéness.

The other thing that may have caused trouble was not unique to Burma. At no post I ever feel that the Pentagon representatives, namely the Army attaché or Naval attaché or whatever, was really in step with the State Department. I always felt that they had their own axes to grind. In the case of the U.S. attaché to Burma, I felt that he was not doing his job because while he was able, unlike most of us, to travel widely throughout Burma--in fact, he one time saw the Burma Road which I dearly would have liked to see--he didn't report anything. Or, if he reported it as I believe he did, he reported it through his own channels. His name was Harry Summer, affectionately known as Colonel Harry. Well, Colonel Harry and I were, for the most part, congenial compatriots. But increasingly, I took issue, and rather unfortunately for me, explicit issue with Colonel Summer's failure to report on things military. Of anything that was going on in Burma, the most important thing was Burmese military operation.

I had the unhappy job of writing up Colonel Summer's fitness report which was signed off by the ambassador. After showing it to Harry, and he disagreed, of course, I turned it over to the ambassador for review. In fact, I remember calling Harry into the ambassador's office. This was Ed Martin. Ed Martin signed off on it. But that was a mistake, a mistake for me and my career because I hadn't estimated correctly the strength of Harry's friends back in Washington. As it turned out, after I left, he was reassigned back to Rangoon as being one of their fair-haired boys.

As a sequel, I must say this of Colonel Harry Summer. He turned out to be, in retirement, not only a prolific writer on the Asian political scene but very informed, graphically so. I have often thought--and I have been saving all these Colonel Summer articles thinking that one day I would write to him and apologize.

*Q: Well, after Rangoon, then, you came back and retired for personal reasons.*

LACEY: Yes. I had mentioned those earlier, namely, the health of my wife's family and my aging father.

**JAMES A. KLEMSTINE**  
**Thailand-Burma Desk Officer**  
**Washington DC (1973-1976)**

*James A. Klemstine was born in Pennsylvania in 1930. He received a bachelor's degree from the University of Pennsylvania and a master's degree from Yale University. He served in the U.S. Army from 1952-1954 and entered the Foreign Service in 1956. Mr. Klemstine's career included assignments to Germany, the Soviet Union, China (Taiwan), and Korea. He was interviewed by Jeff Broadwater on April 15, 1993.*

KLEMSTINE: I came back to Washington and was on the Thai-Burma desk.

Q: *What did you do?*

KLEMSTINE: Well, the first year I was sort of the economic officer, and then the second and third year... '74 to '76, I was deputy director. I went back into some political work at least for four or five months when the director was on a leave of absence for some training, I ran the office. That was a transition period between the end of the Vietnam war, and what was to be our new relationship with Southeast Asia. It was an era of uncertainty. It was an era of uncertainty in the Department what we were going to do, and it was an era of uncertainty among the Southeast Asians, especially after the North Vietnamese took over Saigon. The Thais were beginning to get nervous, to say the least. And then the Communists took over Cambodia and Laos, and they were suddenly on the border. What were we going to do, and what were the Thais going to do? In '74 the military government had been overthrown; Thailand sort of fluctuated between a democracy and the military. It had been overthrown after some student riots, and then they had two parliamentary elections. Again, this is vague because this is quite a long time ago. They had to form coalition governments because there were 20 some parties, and there was wavering in the government. Another question was, should the U.S. get out of its bases in Thailand, because we had about five or six bases, Air Force, and naval. The Thai military wanted us to stay, but some Thai politicians wanted the Americans out. It was an era of uncertainty between the two countries.

Q: *What were American relations with Burma like. You don't hear too much about Burma.*

KLEMSTINE: Not very much. In fact, there was some talk about normalizing but the only real thing we had going with the Burmese at that time was narcotics control in the Golden Triangle. The rest of the things with the Burmese was about as minimal as you could get. They sort of welcomed our support on narcotics strictly because the people who were trading narcotics in Burma are the tribes, the Shan and the Kachins, who the downhill Burmese had been fighting ever since independence. The people up in the hills want their own states and the Burmese central government has been trying to put them down. So they welcomed our cooperation on narcotics interdiction because one, we furnished them with helicopters and things like that so they could do their campaigning against these dissident rebels; and two by denying narcotic money, deny the rebels money to purchase arms. Outside narcotics, things in Burma were minimal.

**FRANK P. COWARD**  
**Cultural Affairs Officer, USIS**  
**Rangoon (1973-1978)**

*Frank P. Coward was born in New York in 1918. He graduated from Union College in 1942, served in the US Army from 1942-1946 overseas, and received his Master's in Education from the University of New York at Buffalo in 1952. His*

*career with USIA led to assignments in India, Thailand and Burma. In 1993 Mr. Coward was interviewed by Fred Coffey.*

COWARD: It was across the border, fifty minutes in time in flight and a 150 years in cultural experience from Bangkok to Rangoon. A completely different, from a thoroughly extroverted, sophisticated society to a highly introverted and tightly socialistic political situation that ultimately I wouldn't have missed for anything. We happened, incidentally, to make our transition in August, 1973 when the Kittikachorn government had collapsed. The student demonstrations had taken over in Bangkok. On our return from home leave we were scheduled to fly from Hong Kong to Bangkok, but we had to spend the next night in Hong Kong because the Bangkok airport was closed and we couldn't get in. The following morning we were all told that there was one flight that was leaving Hong Kong and to get up and get on the plane. We did and arrived in Bangkok. There were no taxis, there was nothing. The Boy Scouts were handling traffic. So what to do, how to get into town to get to USIS? We sat quite some time in the airport when suddenly I heard a person going through saying that the bus from the Narai Hotel waiting for a French tour group was ready to leave and would they please hurry along. Immediately, speaking French, we joined that group and my wife and I went to the Narai Hotel, where we spent the night and made the transfer the next day. USIS picked us up, took us back to the airport and we were off to Rangoon.

*Q: This was going to Burma without any special training?*

COWARD: Yes. There was no special training. We had our three months at home. The transition to Burma was very interesting because when we left Bangkok we were scheduled to go to Vietnam, to Saigon. In fact we had gone there and spent three days. I was to be assigned to take over the binational center. We visited the house, approved everything, thought it would be very interesting and went back to Bangkok and then on home leave. Our effects in the meantime went to Saigon. I had an interview with the then PAO, Marshall Bement, a thoroughly obnoxious State person, and I knew it would be difficult working with him because his attitude was "I am God and thou shalt have no other Gods before me."

During my home leave he apparently had someone whom he preferred, who was already there, take the assignment. He was fluent in Vietnamese, so that perhaps was a very definite advantage. Anyway, while he had accepted me and everything was fine from what I knew, he petitioned the Agency and the Agency approved and I was told we were not going to Saigon.

So I waited and the next assignment that came through was Haiti. I had never been to Haiti. My idea again, big world. So we read up on Haiti and were all set to go when the telegram came in that I was too senior for Haiti so scrap and where would I like to go. Well, I said, "You tell me. There is a lot of the world I don't know and I am tired getting all these assignments that are then scratched, so you tell me where I am to go and we will go." So the assignment came through for either Vientiane or Rangoon. I opted for Vientiane because it was French speaking and I had French and wanted to use it. So, of course, the answer when the assignment came was Rangoon. So off we went to Rangoon.



That was all right. Had we gone to Saigon we would have been there for the collapse; had we gone to Vientiane we would have been there for another collapse. Whereas we were happy in Rangoon and had the unique experience of an ideological socialist government, which was a unique learning experience.

*Q: And you went there in what position, Frank?*

COWARD: I went there as CAO at that time. Arnie Hanson was PAO and I was CAO.

*Q: How long were you in Burma?*

COWARD: We were there a full five years.

*Q: Five years. At each one of your posts you had a considerable number of years.*

COWARD: Yes.

*Q: Instead of the frequent two and out tours. In Burma how did you approach your job? Did you have the freedom of operation you had in India or even in Thailand?*

COWARD: No, you had no freedom of action in Burma. In Burma it was very true you could do what you could do, but every time you approached any ministry you went hat in hand. No matter what happened on Monday, that was no guarantee that it would happen that way on Tuesday. The vibes were absolutely essential. You had to establish your personal credentials and you had to realize that any official with whom you were in contact put his neck on the line when you entered his office. In fact, you never made an appointment. You would get the PA on the phone and he would say, "What is it about?" You couldn't merely ask to see someone. This all had to be filtered and you had to respect it. The people with whom you could speak were probably designated, the people who came to your home when you entertained were certainly designated. We always assumed that some of our household servants were on the MIA payroll. After all in Rangoon the salary level was such that for \$10 a month the MIA (Military Intelligence Agency), could buy all the servants of all the diplomats in the city.

*Q: With these kinds of fences built around your programs, what could you do?*

COWARD: Burma was the original Fulbright program. It was the only Fulbright agreement that did not carry a proviso for what to do with the funds in the event that the program ceased to function. All subsequent agreements apparently said that if the program somehow was held in abeyance or dropped, the funds automatically reverted to American control. In Burma that did not happen. It was simply silent on the subject; these were joint funds. The Fulbright program had been stopped in 1962 when General Ne Win took over. There were no exchanges.

*Q: Given the odds, the post had quite a number of successes, if you would call them that. What information tools did you use and do you figure you did have some successes?*

COWARD: I think we were actually quite successful. The Fulbright program had been canceled, as I said, and the political officer at the Embassy had in his annual reports invariably ended the question of exchanges and the potential for USIS programming saying that they should wait until the government fell. This struck me as being a little ridiculous because the government hadn't fallen. It was 12 years later and there hadn't been any exchanges. I felt first of all that we had been more or less told, Arnie Hanson and myself, that our job was to get a program going or let's take USIS out of Rangoon. So we felt it was make or break.

When I began to make my soundings my point of view was not what the political officer's was...his view was that there were Embassy terms on which Burma could have exchange of persons. When I began going to the Ministry of Education my question was simply "Would you like, is there a basis for exchange? What are your requirements, terms for exchange of persons? Will I be able to meet them?" So what we actually did, which was certainly no magic, was to begin a program, which they permitted, actually desired, but on their terms.

My experience in Burma was that one must realize the Burmese know whose country it is and they feel quite competent, have every intention of running it in their own way. They anticipate that foreign governments will accept this. I had no objection to that. My assignment was to start a program and to do that I had to know what their terms were. The net result was that Fulbright exchange began again, cultural programming and exchange began again.

*Q: What do you mean cultural exchange in addition to the Fulbright program?*

COWARD: We had, for instance, the Charlie Bird Trio come out. The Martha Graham Dancers came and spent a week because of the restricted flight pattern out of Burma. You could only get out twice a week. They were en route to Japan but had to spend a week in Burma. They were sponsored by the Ministry of Culture, the first American group ever sponsored by the Burmese government. Then we had the McLean Family Band. We did all this in one year. They were tremendous successes. Of course I think anything foreign, and certainly American, could have been a success because for so long there had been nothing. They hadn't had anything. Nevertheless, they came and the whole year was a big success.

*Q: Did this happen the first year you were there? You were there for five years.*

COWARD: Those three groups came during my second year. The big deal after that was to convince them that it was in their interest to send a Burmese dance group on an American tour. Beate Gordon, the monumental director of cultural programs at the Asia Society in New York, wanted a group of Burmese dancers. The GUB had never sent a classical dance troupe out of the country before and it took us two years to convince them but they finally allowed them to go. They were a big success here. An interesting coincidence occurred over potential publicity. The Smithsonian Magazine wanted to do a feature article on the dancers and proposed sending the eminent Life photographer, Carl Mydans and his wife to Burma to do the necessary. Well there was no question of getting anyone like that into Burma.

*Q: You mean they could not get into Burma?*

COWARD: The GUB permitted no one registered as a photographer or journalist into Burma. Absolutely not. And this is a good example of how things were done in Burma. I went to the Minister of Culture and said, "You know Carl Mydans is perhaps our number one photographer. 'Life' magazine. This is wonderful for your dancers, for Burma. They are going to be featured in this prominent magazine." He was terribly sorry but the rules and regulations permitted no deviation. The Asia Society wanted the publicity and I could see we were going to lose a great opportunity, when the minister said in a comment over coffee, "Of course, a USIS photographer could do anything he wants." So I replied, "In other words, if OUR photographer were to take these pictures that would be perfectly acceptable?" "Yes." So Carl Mydans and his lovely wife, Shelley, came in as a USIS photographer. They spent a week staying in our house covering the dancers. The publicity was wonderful and the Burmese were most appreciative. But I had to pick up on that comment. He was telling me how it could be worked. If I hadn't caught that we would not have had the article and photography in the Smithsonian Magazine, which, of course, was an excellent thing for both countries. That was doing business in Burma.

*Q: So you had to be keenly attuned to the nuances that were floating out to you. Either you understood them and interpreted them correctly...*

COWARD: You had to listen all the time. I learned that early on in one of my first program efforts when I stumbled. There was a building down the street from the Embassy in Rangoon that we rented from the Burma Bible Society which hadn't been used for those 12 years for anything but storage. But that was the office of the Burmese chap who controlled the Fulbright funds. The Embassy didn't even know him when I brought up his name, because of these 12 years. It was an unheard of experience that this impeccably honest man accounted for every dime, over a million and a half dollars worth of kyat, for 12 years during which he carefully forwarded reports. Speak of under valued local employees!

Anyway we had this building so I thought why not try a cultural center with exhibits in the lobby and cultural activities and film shows upstairs. The Embassy rented the building so we could do whatever we wanted to do with it. But to get an audience you always had to write a formal letter to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs from the Embassy of the United States of America, etc. I did all that and as we received non reply in three weeks I assumed a green light and went ahead with program plans. I waited about three weeks for a reply and no reply came. Then I received a call from the office of Dr. Nyi Nyi, the Minister of Education, an obnoxious person who had studied in the United States and, for some reason, harbored an intense grudge against the United States and its citizens. He called me into his office and Arnie and I went. I needed Arnie for companionship at that moment. Dr. Nyi Nyi said very quietly, "Did you have permission for this program?" I said that I thought I had followed all of the directions. I showed a copy of the letter we had submitted. He said, "Did you have a reply?" I said, "No, we did not have a reply, but since the time elapsed I assumed that if the reply were negative we would have heard it." He said, "Well, in the future, I think it would be better to wait until you have received an official response. Of course, at the American center you can do anything you want to do, but remember that we control the audience."

That was all, but he taught me a lesson. We went away and learned from that experience. We always waited for our replies which could be five or six weeks in coming. This wasn't easy, but they became a little easier as we went along. But that was doing business in Burma.

*Q: Well, did you have that first program? Did anybody show up?*

COWARD: We did because he called me in before the program date took place. It would have been the first and last non-program had that meeting not taken place. But it did suggest to us that it was possible to do things as long as we carefully minded our manners and moved according to the parameters set by the Burmese government. The American Center was a popular success and young foreign service trainees were part of our regular audience.

*Q: I am curious how you managed to get permission to operate a cultural center even though you financed it through these Fulbright funds. There must have been some give on the Burmese government to allow you to do this.*

COWARD: Well, the Burmese are a very interesting people. If they say no, they mean absolutely no, there is no questioning, no nothing, that is it. On the other hand, if they say yes, they will do everything, absolutely everything. Cooperation is 100 percent. When they agreed to sponsor the Martha Graham Dancers, that government that has practically no money to do anything, even gave those 27 dancers spending money. To be sure it wasn't a lot, but they felt it was their obligation to give these people...and they would allow us to do nothing, even when I asked the cultural chap who was assigned a couple of questions if it wouldn't make it easier for him, with a great big smile he would say, "No, no problem. We will take care of it." When they say yes, they go 103 percent of the way. The easiest people in the world if they have agreed.

*Q: You mentioned the military rule under which you worked. Didn't you find that rather infringing, very restricting on your movement around the country and the types of programs?*

COWARD: Oh yes.

*Q: Could you bring in a professor to discuss the development of democracy?*

COWARD: No, you could not, and here the Agency was very good. There was a chap, Len Robock, who went down the line for us. The way to do exchanges in Burma was to do what you could do. There were certain things it wouldn't have done any good to ask. Just what you have said. The Burmese were very sport minded. Our interest was to get exchanges going. We could bring in sports people. So we brought in tennis instructors. We brought in a swimming instructor. And then the Burmese would entertain them and give them access to the young people. We finally had to establish two Fulbright houses to house the people whom we brought in.

You could bring in literature. That was fine. But it was what they wanted. Doctors, the Burmese were very high on medical people. We could bring in doctors. We could use types the Agency with its political orientation did not particularly favor because they wanted to accent political development. Our problem was that if that was all we could get there wouldn't be any program. If we wanted to get this road paved, we had to do it on their terms. And Len Robock was so

understanding, was so good and fought for us here that we were able to work the program. One could say it was often as difficult to work with Washington as it was in Rangoon.

About the center, again the Burmese were very interesting. The same thing happened with the Fulbright funds. They did not question. We rented that building and we could do anything in it that we wished except get Burmese people in. For that you had to have another dimension. In all those 12 years they did not question ownership or mention that fund but State would not let us tap it. Anything we wanted to do with Fulbright had to be with a dollar budget. In the meantime, sitting in Rangoon, I had a million and a half dollars worth of kyat, inviolate, which I couldn't use while Washington was saying save dollars, and I had all those kyat. Every time the kyat was devalued, the USG lost a pocket full of dollars, but the protocol said there had to be a binational decision on the use of those monies and State was adamant. Without Ambassador David Osborn's support, a splendid chap, I couldn't have worked this. I had to go to Washington and plead with the lawyers in the State Department. Finally I had to ask them flat out, "In other words I have to tell a lie in order to save government money." And the answer was, "Yes, I think you do." I had to have a committee of Burmese people. I had to get from the Ministry of Education authority to name three Burmese officials with three Americans, because that was what the protocol said, to approve the use of these funds. The Burmese had no intention of participating in anything that had to do with Fulbright. As far as they were concerned it was a dead letter. Exchange was possible but not under the Fulbright name because that had been canceled. Our problem was in Washington.

I came back and explained to my counterpart, whom I much appreciated, who didn't understand it. He said, "This is your money isn't it?" "Yes." "Have we ever questioned the use of it?" "No." "And we are never going to. Why can't you just use it?" "Well," I said, "I am caught just like you are caught under your government." Together we worked out a fabrication and finally after about 13 years, we were able to get the use of these kyat funds to pay salaries, to operate the center, to rent two houses, to whittle down the dollar equivalent. But that was doing business in Washington. We had the green light in Burma, the red light was here in Washington.

*Q: That showed great imagination, Frank, in working within the system and still moving toward your goals. Are there any other activities that come to mind in Burma that you felt were outstanding? Or any incidents? Did you travel? Did you have any branch activities?*

COWARD: We couldn't go by car more than 50 miles outside Rangoon without again the official letter to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, etc. You could fly to Mandalay because we had had an office up there, but the Embassy consular officer occupies what had been the USIS residence. We didn't any longer have cultural activities up there, but you could take one person, if you had him, up there to the university. You were always dealing with acute sensitivity. So as far as the programming was concerned that really was confined to Rangoon.

One interesting experience, however, when we were readying the Burmese dancers to leave for the States, Beate Gordon from the Asia Society was there in town and Ambassador Osborn gave a dinner party for her and the Minister of Culture. Beate Gordon's Austrian father, who was a musician, had lived in Tokyo for years where he was first violinist in the Imperial orchestra. Beate grew up in Tokyo and was fluent in Japanese. The Minister of Culture had done flight

training in Japan. He was part of the Burmese group in the Freedom from Britain movement. Ambassador Osborn had come from a Japanese assignment. So we are at the residence and they begin singing songs in Japanese. Beate Gordon knew these songs, and the Minister of Culture knew them. Whether David Osborn knew the songs I am not sure, but he was fluent in Japanese. It was a very friendly musical evening with much singing. After we left and were driving home Beate laughed and said, "You know the songs we were singing? They were all the old Horst Wessel songs in Japanese."

*Q: Frank, to accomplish what you did under the circumstances, you must have developed a rather warm relationship with the Minister of Culture. Any particular anecdotes or events that you would like to recall at this point?*

COWARD: Well, not so much with the Minister of Culture as with the Minister of Education. One of my first experiences with him, which brought us into a pleasant relationship occurred at his office. I had an appointment with him and his PA told me that 20 minutes was the time that Dr. Khin Maung Win had allocated. So when I was ushered into the office, with my local assistant and we were chatting, I was timing my 20 minutes on a clock on the wall opposite me but behind the Minister. In due course I began to feel a little uneasy about time. You know you run out of things to say and find yourself manufacturing things. Finally I looked at my watch which I hadn't wanted to do before for fear of appearing a little rude while facing him across the coffee table, and I realized I had been there an hour and five minutes. His clock was not functioning properly. I promptly got up, and apologizing pointed out to him that I had been using his clock and the clock wasn't working.

Well, the next time I went to see him he pointed out right away that that clock was missing. That sealed a relationship which right up until the end he remembered and laughed about. The clock, never appeared again on his wall during my tenure. When we were scheduled to leave he gave a luncheon at the university for my wife and myself at which he presented me with a painting of the temples at Pagan which we have in the house. At parting he said, "You understand that under normal circumstances, you should have been a frequent guest at my house and I should have been a frequent guest in your house, but you understand that under our situation that could not be." I did understand. Our two compounds, his official residence and the then residence of the Cultural Affairs Officer, were very near one another in Golden Valley. That was all he said but it was a lot at the end of five years. That again is doing business in Burma and he wanted me to know. And I was happy to know because he was also telling me that we had minded our manners, that we had made USIS perfectly acceptable on their terms.

**RICHARD M. GIBSON**  
**Vice Consul**  
**Rangoon (1974-1975)**

**Thailand Burma Desk Officer**  
**Washington DC (1975-1977)**

*Richard M. Gibson was born in Florida in 1942. He received a bachelor's degree from San Jose State College in 1965 and his master's in 1966. He served in the US Navy from 1966-1971 as a lieutenant overseas and entered the Foreign Service in 1971. Mr. Gibson was assigned to Rangoon, Bangkok, Songhla, Yokohama, Okinawa, and Chiang Mai. In 1998, he was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy.*

*Q: You were in Rangoon from when to when?*

GIBSON: 18 months. It was back in the days when junior officer assignments were 18 months, at least in Rangoon. I got there in January of '74 and I left in July of '75.

*Q: What was your assignment in Rangoon?*

GIBSON: Vice consul. There was a one officer visa section and I had me, a Sino-Burmese guy and a Burmese woman. We were the consular section.

*Q: What did your wife think about this? Was this more to her liking?*

GIBSON: Yes, I guess so. She had been totally unhappy in Martinique because she couldn't communicate with anybody. It is such a small community and the relationships between the boss, the American secretary, and myself were not good. The American secretary drank too much and it was just not a happy work environment. She was delighted to get out of there and she liked the idea of going to Asia. She had been subjected in Martinique by the local population to racist remarks and leering and that sort of thing. She did not really feel comfortable. She liked the idea of going back to Asia where she looked like everybody else. She loved Rangoon, as did I. Of course, I loved Martinique. I was happy everywhere I went. I never had a posting I didn't like. She was quite happy to go there.

I was consular officer and I guess my predecessor had been a full time consular officer. I found that there wasn't enough to do to keep me busy so I kept pestering the political, economic and admin. guys for other things. They would give me their scruff work. I got the E&E plan.

*Q: That's the emergency plan.*

GIBSON: The emergency evacuation plan. They gave me civil aviation, so I did work on that. Then the chief of the political economic combined section, who turned out to be a very close friend of the family for years thereafter, let me do about whatever I wanted. I did reports on things like their judiciary system, the legal system. It was sort of the peripheral stuff that your normal political officer doesn't get around to. I did a lot of interesting stuff.

*Q: Who was the ambassador at the time?*

GIBSON: When I first got there we didn't have one. I think Dirk Byroad had just left. John Lacey was the chargé. A nice fellow. I think that may have been his last assignment. Not long

after I got there David Osborne came and he was the ambassador until I left. A remarkable guy. Too bad you can't interview him. He died, he was killed in an accident.

*Q: How did he run the embassy?*

GIBSON: I'm really not a very good bureaucrat. I just sort of did my job, sort of played around and that sort of thing. I don't know how he ran the embassy. He was a very nice man. I found working for him to be perfectly fine. John Lacey transferred and we got a new DCM, Richard (I've forgot his last name). He was a very nice man. This was probably towards the end of my assignment. Lacey was ill, I think. Anyway, David Osborne was one of the smartest guys you ever want to meet. He taught himself Burmese and within six months of being there was giving speeches in Burmese. I heard him speak French at cocktail parties and such. He spoke tremendously good French. I know he spoke Chinese and Japanese.

Here's an interesting story on David Osborne. We had an American club which still exists in Rangoon on a compound, and the Brits had a club. The Brits allowed the Aussies to be in their club. It wasn't a big embassy community, there were something like 20 embassies or so. Our club had a reciprocal relationship with any club that gave us reciprocal privileges and that meant the British club. So there was the American club and the British club. It was a very white environment there.

David came in one day and said "I want you to run for office. I want you to be elected to the American club board (or the American Association board). I want you to run for it." He didn't really tell me why, it was just that he wanted me to be on it as a consular officer. So I did and I got a seat. Then we met and chose the president and I became the president of the board. David Osborne comes to me and says "OK Dick what I want you to do is I want you to integrate the club." He tried not to be heavy handed, he could have just ordered it, but that was his style. You're the president, you do it. I agreed with it.

*Q: What was the context of integrating.*

GIBSON: Let somebody besides the Brits enter the club, other diplomats from other countries: Indians, not Chinese they wouldn't have joined it anyway, Thai, Japanese, or Bengali or anybody. I waged a several months, well it seemed like a long time, campaign to integrate the club like that. Over the dead body of most of the board members, not most but I gathered a majority of one or something like that, we passed a new rule saying that Americans are the voting members and everybody else is like an associate member. They don't get to vote and we can limit the number of them so that we don't overcrowd the facilities and so forth. Limit it to diplomats because we were having duty free booze and food served there and that sort of thing. We did it and basically it was because David was giving me all the support that I needed. At the end we had a club that had Japanese, Indians and sort of French, and we had a variety of people in there for a change.

One of the things that struck me was the hostility on the part of a large part of the American embassy community to integrating the club that way. I could never really figure it out and this may not sound right but we basically had an embassy of about 55 people of which how many



were State you could imagine that. There seemed to be the officer level State people, as opposed to secretaries necessarily, and the USIS people, they seemed pretty much at ease with this. The communicator community, the technical people in the embassy had a large segment of people that were basically red necks and the hostility toward integrating the club having non-Anglos in the pool, I found it amazing. But anyway it happened and I made a lot of enemies but it worked.

*Q: What was the situation in Burma in the '74 to '75 period?*

GIBSON: We were very controlled. We could go right out in the immediate area around Rangoon. We still had a consulate at the time in Mandalay and we booked Mandalay, but as diplomats we couldn't go very far without special permission from the government. We would send a dip note to the government and they would take their own sweet time about answering. Sometimes they would let us go and sometimes they wouldn't, normally they wouldn't. Their excuse was had something to do with some Russians that were kidnapped in about 1972 or 1973, it is foggy in my mind now.

Khun Sa had been arrested, I think, in '71 by the Burmese government. Khun Sa is the notorious drug trafficker up in the Golden Triangle area. He was arrested by the Burmese and put in jail in I think '71. In the next year or the year after, his henchmen kidnapped a couple of Russian doctors or engineers from the town of Taunggyi which is in the Shan State. They held them and they wanted to do a trade. The Burmese government held off for a long time and these poor Russian guys, I don't know where they were held, they weren't mistreated or anything but they were just held captive for a year or so, I'd have to go back and check on that. The idea was that was the excuse the government used: if you guys travel up there they are going to kidnap you and make trouble with you, for us and everybody else so we can't let you go to sensitive areas. I think it was also that they didn't want us over there nosing around. There are all kinds of games played there. Anyway, we were very compliant. We couldn't go a lot of places.

Any time a Burmese official had any kind of conversation with an American, the Burmese official had to write it up in a formal report and submit it. So if you invited a Burmese official to your house it was almost impossible to get them there except the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, these guys could come. A very secretive, closed society, much like it is today. They were very suspicious and xenophobic and didn't want to have anything to do with us basically.

There were three sets of public disturbances during my years there. One was the famous thing when U Thant died and his funeral turned into a riot. There were a couple of other student type of launched things. One with students and one with workers and the two never met. You couldn't get the workers and the students to unite and go out there and do it together. You'd have either the students and they'd have to be put down, then the workers and they had to be put down. Three different times, it was not a happy place.

Socially, the diplomatic community hung around with the diplomatic community. No official would hang around with you. It was the kiss of death to be too friendly to the foreigners. It was poor and things didn't work. The army ran things. Pretty much it has changed, it's better.

*Q: What were our interests in Burma at that time?*

GIBSON: Our interests were very limited. We had almost no meaningful contact with the Rangoon government at the time but there was starting to be sort of a rapprochement on narcotics. This was all not at my level. This was going on around me and I wasn't really aware of it. We were by '72 or '73 well into negotiations with the Burmese to begin what became a rather long lasting program of providing them with airplanes, helicopters, and communications, non-lethal equipment to use in suppressing the drug trafficking in the Shan State. This was going on and it was causing closer ties but it was more the clandestine side of the house that was taking care of this. McAvoy was there and he was the station chief. He's now with Continental or maybe he's retired from Continental by now but he did very well. He was a VP or big in Continental Airlines. Anyway, he I think was engineering the whole thing. I think he basically took care of that and then State got involved of course and that sort of thing. There was starting to be a program on narcotics cooperation there and that was really the big thing. We had the attachés and they would hang out with the Thai army and the air force. But there was no real political exchange.

There was the famous story by David Osborne. This is such a great story that you've got to have it in here. We got one of these stupid things that the department was so good at sending out to all diplomatic and consular posts. We're negotiating at the time with the Brits for Diego Garcia to build our bases in the Indian Ocean. We were going to build a base, which we eventually built, and the British let us have our base there. We got this all diplomatic and consular posts notice wanting us to ascertain the reaction of the host country to the development of this as a base. This is the process and naturally the Indians were up in arms about it and so on.

They wanted to know obviously how the Burmese felt about it. David Osborne didn't even bother to go in and talk to the Burmese but the message came in and we all saw the message. As the consular officer, chief bottle washer, the whole thing, I got to be at the country team meeting. At the next country team meeting I am sitting there and David has got this cable and he says "I think you have all seen this cable. I don't know if you have seen my response yet." He sort of passed it around. The response is a one liner. It says the Burmese think that Diego Garcia is a Cuban cigar. That's exactly right. The Burmese weren't going to say anything. Regardless of what they thought they weren't going to say anything about it because they were very in control. Had they their druthers, who knows what they really felt but they weren't going to say anything.

I am told that that is what ruined David Osborne's career because when he left Rangoon he ended up on the inspection board. The story is that Henry Kissinger read that and went ballistic. Apparently he ranted and raved, threw it down and complained that this was like an insult to him for asking this question and this sort of thing, this was like flippancy. He was really upset. The story is that this basically scuttled Osborne's career. I don't know if it is true or not, who knows, but it was a great story. The cable was great. I may have missed a word or two but basically it was a one liner.

In short, we have almost no trade with Burma. Our only interest there at the time was twofold. There was the drug question. The second one was the BCP, the Burma Communist Party, which was then heavily supported by the Chinese. It occupied a very large portion of northeastern Burma in the Wa, Konkan and northern Shan States, part of the Kachin State I think. These guys

basically ran that section of the country and the Burma army was always there fighting with them all of the time, ramping up on them, and being ramped up on and it was sort of like a stalemate. Meanwhile there was another faction of the Burma Communist Party that the old sort of pro-Russian remnants had been in down in the actual Burman area of the country. While I was there the Burma army rounded up the last of them, killed the leaders. They were captured dead as the Burmese newspapers liked to say. The insurgency in the northeast we were watching because the Indochina mess was still sorting out. It had pretty much been sorted out by then. I remember Vietnam fell while I was there and Cambodia fell while I was there.

I will tell you two interesting stories about that. The first is that all of the old Asian hands at post were saying what's going to happen is the Vietnamese are going to just go down there and massacre the southerners and the Cambodians are just going to lay back and just sort of forget about it. In retrospect it was the exact opposite which I found interesting. So much for conventional wisdom.

The other thing was there Vietnam fell in April of '75, in February there was that famous battle in the highlands at Ban Me Thuot which sort of when that went, everybody fell. I didn't know anything about it but my colleagues who knew something about Vietnam said that's bad guys, it's really close to the end. Anyway right around the beginning of the year Josiah Bennett (I think that was his name) who I think was the political counselor in Saigon, was on a tour in Southeast Asia going from embassy to embassy giving the light at the end of the tunnel speech. It was the most unreal thing I've ever seen in my life. We are all sitting there in the bubble, in the special room where we have secret meetings, and Bennett is sitting in there telling everybody all these good signs on how the South Vietnamese were getting their act together and they're dancing here and they're pulling this thing this out. We were all sitting there looking at each other. We all have to read papers and we know what is going on. The more senior guys were sitting there looking very intent and nodding and all of us young guys are looking around at each other and are thinking, wait a minute what's going on around here? It was the light at the end of the tunnel speech. We got out and just couldn't believe it and started talking amongst ourselves. Within four months of course it is over. It was unreal.

*Q: He was reflecting Graham Martin, this was his job. What I'm saying is that whole thing was really a very peculiar situation.*

GIBSON: I guess so.

*Q: Who was in power? Was it Ne Win? What sort of estimate did people have of him?*

GIBSON: He ruled with an iron hand. There was no doubt who was in charge. At the time he was always going to Europe for medical treatments for one thing or another so there was always talk about he's not going to make it. He's still alive today, so so much for that conventional wisdom, too. He was very reclusive. A very hard man to get to see. The story was the U.S. ambassador probably would see him when they presented credentials and if they were lucky they would see him at their exit farewell visit. Nobody saw him in-between. He was reclusive even then and more reclusive now. The big gossip around town was that his son, who was a pilot and flew for Burma Airways, I guess at one time he had flown in the air force or something, was

alleged to be a heroin addict. I don't know if that was true or not, it was the talk. It was said that that was one of the reasons why Ne Win himself was so interested in the anti-drug program of the United States. In retrospect I think that is nonsense. I think Ne Win was interested in it because the drug trade was supporting and funding the insurgency which denied him control of the entire country. He wanted our equipment to ramp up on these guys so he could control his country. The daughter, who was said to be very bright, very capable, and very influential, and I guess she still is, but very secretive and nobody ever saw them much.

*Q: I was told about the one entree to the ruling group of military people was golf. Was that true?*

GIBSON: Yes, golf, but also in Rangoon, tennis was very popular. The guys who had the very best access in Rangoon were the military guys, the attachés. There were two. There was an army attaché who was the DAT and there was an air force attaché who was the assistant. There was a naval attaché in Bangkok who was still accredited. These guys had the most access of anybody because the military ran the country and they had to deal with the military. They played golf but they played tennis an awful lot. Tennis seemed to be the really popular game there. That's where I learned to play tennis.

*Q: What about dissidents and all that? Would you have people coming in to the consular section being dissident or anything of that nature?*

GIBSON: We did have one defection when I was there as I recall, but I wasn't involved with it, Clyde Boyce was. It was some Bulgarian diplomat or some Eastern European diplomat who defected but I don't know the details of it. No, we didn't have any dissidents. We had very little business in the consular work because it was very hard to get a visa to leave. Most of our visas were A visas, official visas for diplomats going to the United Nations or wherever. We were issuing a lot of immigrant visas at the time but they were going to mainly ethnic Chinese and Indians.

When I first got there the Burmese had just finished up shipping large numbers of Indians back to India. India said look, all you overseas Indians if you are in bad places like that, come on back and we will help you get settled. Many of the Indians in Burma took the offer and went back. Indians were in mainly unskilled laborer type jobs and the Burmese being very xenophobic, were very anti-Indian. Indians took a lot of abuse, discrimination and that sort of thing. The same with the Chinese. They were very suspicious of the Chinese. The Chinese were back in the Cultural Revolution, the insurgency up on the border and all this sort of thing. They weren't Burmese citizens, they had Taiwan passports. They were allowed to leave and so they had to get an exit visa before they came to see us. Most of the Indians were going back to India. We took quite a few Chinese immigrants.

That was in the days when they had a program where if you had a skill, trade, or profession that was in short supply in the United States you could come. Actually that program had been stopped a couple years before I got to Rangoon. Under that program, if you were an auto mechanic, if you were a cook, if you were a cabinetmaker, you could get a visa. The program was discontinued but there was some kind of a court challenge that forced it to be reinstated and all those on the waiting list who had signed up to come in, had to be adjudicated. We had an

awful lot of these guys who came in the office and applied for visas under these circumstances. They were almost all Chinese. I was a curious man and started investigating them all. I investigated every single case and many of them were fraudulent. If it was a carpenter, I would say make me a dovetail joint. If it was an auto mechanic I'd say inside the distributor we've got this or that, because I'd grown up working on cars, and so I could quickly figure out if this guy even knew what a car was. That was basically our visa work.

It was illegal for most Burmese to leave the country. For one they didn't have any foreign exchange and if you were at all political involved with the old regime in any way, they probably wouldn't give you a passport. Most Burmese who wanted out would walk down to Thailand overland. They would dodge the army patrols and the bandits and thugs along the way.

What had happened, when the military regime took over for the second and permanent time in 1962, the dominant merchant class, the people who dominated the economy in the first 12, 13, 14 years of independence were Indians and Chinese. No big surprise right? The Burmans set about nationalizing everything they could get their hands on and basically driving these people out of the country. The people who were leaving, many of them had been quite wealthy at one time and they had big houses and had to sell them, practically desert them or give them away in order to leave. It was really kind of sad. I got in on the tail end of that. The Chinese were mostly the small merchant type but the Indians, some of them had been big traders, financial dealings and big time merchants and this sort of thing.

*Q: You were there during the riots, the student riots and the workers riots? Did the embassy play any role at all?*

GIBSON: You know I don't know. It wasn't in my turf and I don't remember. We were concerned about it and took care of our own security and that sort of thing. We didn't seem to have much to say about it. We reported it. Basically it is one of those things that I don't recall any human rights type cables saying go in there and tell the Burmese that they shouldn't shoot their own people. The Burmese would have laughed at you, if they would give you an appointment. No I don't remember any big response on our part except reporting on it.

*Q: Why don't we stop at this point. I would like to put at the end here, you left in 1975?*

GIBSON: I came back to be Burma desk officer.

*Q: We'll pick it up in 1975 when you're the Burma desk officer.*

*Today is the 15th of April, 1998. Dick, in 1975 you were going to be doing what?*

GIBSON: In July of 1975 I took a direct transfer back to the Department to an office called EA/TB, the East Asia Bureau, Thai Burma Desk. My job on the desk was one, to be the Burma desk officer and two, to be the officer for both Thailand and Burma on narcotics issues. That second one ended up taking probably as much, if not more, of my time than being Burma desk officer.

*Q: First you were on the desk from '75 until when?*

GIBSON: Summer of '77.

*Q: When you took over the desk how did you see the situation in Burma and what were American interests?*

GIBSON: By the time I got on the desk, the American interest in Burma was overwhelmingly narcotics and that is why they paired the two jobs basically. I can not remember any other issues that we really had with the Burmese at that time. It was totally narcotics as far as I recall. There would be the occasional *démarche* on a particular vote in the UN but we all knew we were just going through the motions. The Burmese were going to vote or not vote as they saw fit. We tried to follow the course of the communist insurgency but it was sort of related to narcotics as well. Basically the issues were narcotics.

We had already begun, or were in the early stages I suppose of providing narcotics related assistance to the Rangoon government. I think the agreement for that had been signed in '74 or I don't know if there was a formal agreement even. An agreement had been reached and certainly there must have been a memorandum of understanding or something like that in '74. I was not involved in that while I was in Rangoon but when I got back to the desk, one of my major jobs was to work very closely with an office at that time called S/NM which stood for the Secretariat Narcotics Matters. The special advisor for narcotics control or something like that was a man named Sheldon Vance a career diplomat. We worked very closely with his office regarding narcotics related assistance to both Burma and Thailand.

*Q: From the perspective of the desk during this two year period, how cooperative did you find the Burmese on narcotics?*

GIBSON: Actually we found them quite cooperative. It was in their interest. We were providing them equipment which they would use for suppressing narcotics trafficking organizations. The original purpose as I recall was to interdict caravans heading south to the Thai border. It got expanded to taking base camps and that sort of thing. At that time, as today, the political insurgents were supporting their insurgency through narcotics. That was a big debate always. Are these people ethnic political insurgents, freedom fighters, or whatever, or are they drug trafficking thugs? Our view was they were primarily drug trafficking thugs and I think that is probably still the American government's view of the group. I agree with that. I don't have any problem with that. What we were doing was giving the Burmese the opportunity to help themselves by suppressing their armed political opposition, armed insurgencies, who were trafficking in drugs, therefore meeting our objective as well. It was win-win.

We weren't particularly intrusive. The Burmese were a little bit stubborn as they would be about protecting their own prerogatives and national independence and that sort of thing. They made it very clear that they would not have a bunch of Americans running around the place looking at what they were doing with the helicopters or the communications equipment that we were providing them. This was all non-lethal stuff. We eventually provided them F-28 Fokker cargo aircraft good for moving cargo. We also eventually provided them, well after I left, with spray

aircraft, like what crop dusters use, for spraying chemicals onto the opium and destroying the crop that way. It just kept expanding.

All this time the Burmese would fill in the paper work and give us reports. How accurate the reports were, we had absolutely no way of knowing. As I recall at least in the early days when I was there, they sounded reasonable and we accepted them at face value. We had no real choice. They weren't going to let us in and monitor everything which is not a particularly surprising attitude from the Burmese. That's the way they are. They are xenophobic. They guard their independence and their prerogatives but we found them cooperative enough.

We would go over there and visit and they would take us out. They would be cutting down opium fields for us, this was before the spraying. They would have meetings with my bosses and I was there as the note taker type guy. They would come over to the States and we would pay for an executive observation tour and we would take them around and meet with DEA and with Customs. In general it was a pretty good program at the time. A lot of people opposed the program.

There were a lot of sort of the predecessors of today's anti-Burmese government activists who were very much concerned that the helicopters, in particular, would be used to suppress non-drug trafficking insurgent groups. Our view at the time was non-drug trafficking groups in rebellion consisted of two: the Karen and the Mon. That was basically because they were not in areas where opium was available. We made it clear to the Burmese that this was for suppressing trafficking groups. As time went on, the Burmese by all accusation actually did use the helicopters against non-trafficking insurgents. In my time I don't recall that happening but later on apparently that happened. There are enough reports so I suspect they are true but I don't have any knowledge of that.

*Q: Did the human rights side come up again at all during the time that you were on the desk?*

GIBSON: Not really. You know that was still a little bit before the human rights emphasis and I don't recall human rights, while I was on the desk from '75 to '77, being an issue with the assistance to Burma. Later on when we move to my next job, it did become a bit of an issue but not much and I'll tell you why. In those days, '75, '76, '77, I don't recall it being an issue.

**DAVID L. OSBORN**  
**Ambassador**  
**Burma (1974-1977)**

*David L. Osborn was born in Indiana in 1921. His career with the State Department included assignments to Taiwan, Japan, Hong Kong, and an ambassadorship to Burma. He was interviewed by Bert Potts on January 16, 1989.*

*Q: So you arrived in Burma, in March of 1974?*

OSBORN: Yes, March of 1974.

*Q: You were there from '74 to '77, as ambassador in Rangoon. What was the main focus of your work during these three years?*

OSBORN: The biggest problems in our relations with Rangoon at that time were the narcotics problems. The Golden Triangle, of which that corner of Burma is a large part, was then producing the lion's share of the raw opium that went into the world's illicit narcotics traffic.

During the Vietnam War, the American troops in Vietnam began to consume large quantities of heroin, and this contributed to an increasing tendency to refine the opium into heroin in the countries where it was grown, so that it could then supply the growing demand among the American forces and others.

In the past, opium had been used as a sort of all-purpose medicine by the hill tribes and others in those countries, with little impact on the illegal heroin traffic or drug addiction in the United States. When the domestic production of heroin started in the field--in those countries--it began to enter directly into the narcotics problem in the United States. It also created serious drug addiction problems in Burma and other Southeast Asian countries. So it became very important for the United States and for the local governments to cooperate in eradicating opium and heroin production if they could.

So one of the first things that I had to do, in Burma, was to work out a treaty for the supply of helicopters for use in eradicating opium and heroin production.

There was also, of course, the endemic problem of insurgencies, which further complicated the narcotics problem. Since the war, Burma had not had a single year in which it was not plagued with insurgencies, by one or the other--usually more than one--of its racial minorities. The Shan, the Karens, the Kachins, the Wa, and other indigenous groups, not to mention the "KMT irregulars," nationalists Chinese holdouts from the Chinese civil war, many of whom supported themselves by producing and trafficking in opium and heroin.

So it became very important for the Burmese to have use of good helicopters, with the proper tactics, in order to interdict the growth, transportation, and refining of heroin in their jungle areas--and not just incidentally, to combat the insurgents. So this is why we were able to arrange that agreement; and it is why we could count on Burmese cooperation in suppressing the growth and process of opium.

*Q: I think you even had to live through an abortive coup there?*

OSBORN: Meanwhile, the fundamental problem for Burma was the steady collapse--steady deterioration of the economic position. The economy had been deteriorating ever since the Burmese had adopted their very peculiar form of socialism, which was even more antithetical than most varieties of socialism towards economic prosperity and growth. Socialism is no way to run a railroad! Anyone who doubted that should have been assigned to Burma in those years.



Naturally, there was strong and growing sentiment among the ordinary people of Burma, for somehow getting rid of their particular socialist system--the Burma Socialist Program Party or "BSPP." Now during the time that I was there, a group of junior military officers began to plot in earnest to knock over the government, and to install a degree of free enterprise-oriented democracy. The embassy was not aware of this plot, and of course had no part in it.

One of the plotters' hopes was that they could promote meaningful, joint-venture investment from the United States. These junior military officers (later called the "Captains Coup Plotters") plotted a coup to overthrow the government, which, by coincidence, was to occur very near the time of our July 4th celebrations, in 1976--the bicentennial celebrations. The young plotters--did in fact attempt to launch their coup, but they blew it.

At the time it happened--that evening, in July of 1976--I was attending a dinner party at the Pakistani ambassador's home, when I was called home and learned--on getting back to my residence--that the leader of the Captains Coup group was seeking asylum in the residence. This presented us with a problem, because the embassy and its code room had been shut down; we did not maintain 24 hours. It would have been impossible for me to go to the embassy and have a telephone conversation, or a telegraphic exchange with the Department, without alerting the Burmese that something was up. So I had a consultation with my acting political counselor, and the Acting CIA station chief; and I decided that we would have to handle this on our own--without immediate reference to the Department.

What I decided to do was to offer the captain his free choice: on the one hand, he could take shelter in the embassy, with the understanding that he would have to be turned over to the Burmese when and if they came and made a proper request for his release. On the other hand, if he so desired, we would take him to any part of Rangoon that he designated, and drop him at the roadside, with no questions asked, and he would be on his own and free to try to escape. He thought it over for a while, and then chose to take his chances on trying to escape. So, true to our promise, we took him and deposited him near the [Sule] Pagoda, and he took it from there. As it turned out, he was able to hide out for only a matter of a few weeks; a couple of weeks later he was, in fact, picked up by the Burmese police, and imprisoned. Ultimately he was put on trial for his part in the coup attempt, and was probably executed, I fear. In some ways, that was the most dramatic episode in my tour in Burma.

*Q: And so your tour in Burma ended in 1977, and at that point you decided it was just time to retire?*

OSBORN: Yes; I did undertake a brief whirlwind tour in the inspection corps, and went off to inspect Barbados, Suriname, and other Caribbean posts. Following that I did retire.

*Q: And now in 1989, we find ourselves in San Diego.*

**JAMES R. BULLINGTON**  
**Principal Officer**

## **Mandalay (1975-1976)**

### **Political/Economic Counselor Rangoon (1976-1978)**

*Ambassador James R. Bullington was born in Tennessee in 1940, and received his BA from Auburn University in 1962, when he entered the Foreign Service. His assignments abroad include Hue, Saigon, Quang Tri, Chiang Mai, Mandalay, Rangoon, N'Djamena and Contonou, with an ambassadorship to Burundi. In 2001 Ambassador Bullington was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy.*

*Q: Where'd you go?*

BULLINGTON: I went to Burma. I spent a few weeks in Burmese language training, just enough for the basics, and then went to Mandalay as Principal Officer.

*Q: You were there from '75 to?*

BULLINGTON: I was in Mandalay from '75 to '76 and then went to Rangoon, where I was chief of the political-economic section. I was there for two years, '76 – '78.

*Q: Well let's talk about Mandalay first. What was Mandalay like?*

BULLINGTON: It's not like Kipling says. (laughter) It's not where the flying fishes play, and the sun comes up like thunder out of China 'cross the bay. No, it's not like that. It's dusty and sleepy and remote. There was an Indian Consulate and an American Consulate there and that was the diplomatic community. I pretty quickly came to question why we were there. The government was basically the same as it is today, a military dictatorship, then under Ne Win. It was nasty, isolationist to the point of being hermit-like (they didn't even want tourists), anti-American, suspicious, difficult to work with. The Burmese people were great, but there wasn't much I could do in Mandalay. For a whole year I couldn't even get in to see the provincial governor. As the U.S. Consul, he wouldn't see me. Didn't want anything to do with American representatives. So, frankly I didn't do a whole heck of a lot. I learned to play tennis and tried to write a few reports on whatever I could find that was interesting, but there was not much there. I recommended that the post be closed.

*Q: Well then, I take it there really wasn't any opposition you went to talk to?*

BULLINGTON: Oh, no. And in fact they restricted movement, so I couldn't travel around very much. There were just a few places foreigners could go. The Burmese government was engaged in counter-insurgency operations all along the frontiers. The Burmese heartland is the Irawaddy Valley, but all along the periphery of the country are various mountain tribes, the Shan states to the east bordering Thailand and the Karen and Kachin and half a dozen other groups up along the Chinese border to the north and over to the west along the Indian border. Most of those people were not under government control and were in varying states of rebellion. Also, there were the warlord narcotics traffickers in those areas. The Burmese government didn't promote or condone

the narcotics trafficking. While they didn't much give a damn about U.S. domestic narcotics problems, they did care about the narcotics traffickers because they realized that much if not most of the insurgency was financed by narcotics trafficking. So our interests, though differing, converged.

*Q: Did you get involved with any, while you were in Mandalay with any anti-narcotics?*

BULLINGTON: No, because there was nothing that could be done. We didn't have a good enough relationship with the Burmese government that we could work with them in Mandalay. Later, however, after I moved to Rangoon, we became very much involved with them there. At the senior level, exchanging intelligence, the Agency was active. DEA came in with a resident agent. Most importantly, we had a military assistance program giving the Burmese helicopters to go after the narcotics traffickers - from our point of view narcotics traffickers, from their point of view insurgents. They happened to be the same guys. Particularly because of my experience in Chiang Mai, I had reservations about working with this really nasty government on narcotics, particularly giving them military assistance, because once we gave it to them we didn't have the kind of relationship that would enable us to exert a lot of influence, much less control, over how it was used. I was very concerned that they would use it for things that were not in our interests, basically to go out and suppress innocent people as well as narcotics traffickers. They would go after narcotics traffickers insofar as it so happened that they were also insurgents. But they likely would not make the distinction between people who were insurgents because of religious, political or other reasons, and those who were just criminal narcotics traffickers. They were using our equipment for all of it.

*Q: Well when you were in Mandalay, what was the staff of our consulate there?*

BULLINGTON: There was me and a vice consul and three or four FSNs.

*Q: I take it no visa work or?*

BULLINGTON: No. I don't believe we had a single tourist the whole time I was there. The Burmese didn't want tourists to come.

*Q: Who was vice consul when you were there?*

BULLINGTON: Jim Marx.

*Q: How about the Indian consul, was he doing anything?*

BULLINGTON: He didn't seem to have very much to do, but there was an Indian community there. Burma was part of British India, and many Indians moved to Burma during the colonial period.

*Q: When you went down you were in Rangoon from '76 to '78.*

BULLINGTON: Right.

*Q: Who was the Ambassador when you were there?*

BULLINGTON: David Osborne. And he was replaced by Maurice Bean.

*Q: Well, you were what, economic?*

BULLINGTON: Political-economic Counselor. We had a combined political and economic section that consisted of me and two other officers and a secretary.

*Q: In Burma at that time was there anything that could be recognized as an opposition party?*

BULLINGTON: There was the insurgency, the armed opposition. Political opposition simply was not tolerated. As now, the opposition was thrown in jail.

*Q: Did you have any contact there within the Burmese government?*

BULLINGTON: We had some but it was rather limited. I worked with the Foreign Ministry in my job. I was also the narcotics coordinator for the Mission, so I got involved in that quite a bit. Also I spent half the time as Acting DCM. For health reasons, we had two DCMs evacuated. I was the number three guy, so I spent nearly half of my tour there as Acting DCM.

*Q: I would think that DCM is responsible for the staff and all that, it sounds like there wasn't an awful lot for people to do.*

BULLINGTON: Not an awful lot, it wasn't that busy. The busiest part of the Embassy's work was connected with narcotics. There was some economic work, oil exploration. One American oil company was active there. Responding to the many inquiries from the Department on human rights and trying to find out what was going on (with very limited success) took some time.

*Q: Was Un-Sung....*

BULLINGTON: Aung San Su-Chi?

*Q: Su-Chi, was she a presence?*

BULLINGTON: She was not a presence at that time. She was not somebody that we had ever heard of.

*Q: Ne Win was the long-time ruler. Was there any feeling about what he was after or what sort of person he was?*

BULLINGTON: Oh, he was a corrupt military dictator, to sum it up. Power hungry, would not tolerate opposition, and he had a clique of military people around him who kept it that way. They were in it basically for power, not ideology.

*Q: It sounds like sort of almost a sterile place, wasn't it, as far as what one could do.*

BULLINGTON: Yes. We played a lot of tennis, and those who wanted to golfed. Ne Win was a great golfer, and consequently they had a couple of nice golf courses. We played tennis, we socialized, there was a fairly good-sized diplomatic community. The biggest adventure I had there was an aborted coup attempt. This was one of the times I was Acting DCM. The duty officer called about nine or ten o'clock while I was at a dinner, and said that a man has appeared at the Ambassador's gate, and he's hiding in the bushes and he's asking for political asylum. So the duty officer picked me up and the two of us went to investigate. We finally induced the guy to come out of the bushes where he was hiding. He turned out to be a young Burmese army captain who had been the leader of a plot to assassinate Ne Win and overthrow the government. The plot had gone awry, and he had come to the American Ambassador's house seeking political asylum. Well, we wouldn't let him in; we couldn't really, as sorry as we felt for him. We drove him around town, got his story, and said 'hey, gee I'm sorry, but there's not much we can do for you,' and we put him out at the railroad station. He was later captured and executed. That was exciting but sad.

*Q: Burma, is that part of southeast Asia?*

BULLINGTON: It's on the border between south and southeast Asia, between India and Thailand. I was pleased to have served in the three most romantic sounding Consulates in Southeast Asia, Hue, Chiang Mai and Mandalay.

*Q: This would be '75, I guess. I mean '78.*

BULLINGTON: '78, when I finished up in Rangoon. Then the Department sent me to the Army War College, for senior training.

**ROBERT E. FRITTS**  
**East Asian Affairs, Country Director**  
**Washington, DC (1976-1979)**

*Ambassador Robert E. Fritts was born in Illinois in 1934. He received his B.A. from the University of Michigan in 1956 and served in the U.S. Navy overseas from 1956 to 1959 as a lieutenant. His postings abroad have included Luxembourg, Sudan, Rwanda, Indonesia, and Ghana. Ambassador Fritts was interviewed in 1999 by Charles Stuart Kennedy.*

*Q: Why don't we now cover the countries of TIMBS, starting with the smaller ones. What was the situation in Burma and what were our concerns?*

FRITTS: Our relationship with then-Burma, now Myanmar, had two policy prongs: anti-narcotics and human rights, often in conflict. The salient and recurrent focal point was the helos provided by the U.S. to the Burmese Army. Initially unarmed, the Burmese put guns on them as, after all, they often got shot at on anti-narcotic ops. But were the helos being used solely for anti-

narcotics operations, such as crop destruction? Or were they also being used to suppress the many and varied insurgencies. In virtually every case, of course, insurgents were also into narcotics in varying degrees. It was a fascinating mélange - tribal groups such as the Karens, autonomous warlords such as Khee Shan, and even a remnant of Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang army. We knew that parts of the Burmese military and government were also in cahoots with selected producers and traffickers among the insurgents. Some of the army's attacks on heroin laboratories were staged, for example. There were continual shadow plays. It was the Wild West of the Far East.

*Q: On the narcotics side, did you find the government responsive?*

FRITTS: Only to a degree that the Burmese Government found our focus and aid useful in an anti- insurgency context. For us, at best, political and, at worst, military. Burma was also then and is today insular and isolated. Our embassy was restricted and didn't have much access to officialdom. Nor did any Western embassy. Our ambassador had never met Gen. Ne Win, who lived in seclusion. We had intelligence on the Golden Triangle, the narcotics area enveloping the borders of Burma, Thailand and Laos, but it was as unreliable as it was complex.

One way to keep in touch and induce the Burmese Government to respond was to organize narcotics inspection visits. Mathea Falco, head of our anti-narcotics bureau, developed quite good contacts with the Burmese. Too good, the human rights folk said.

A major player on Burma was Congressman Lester Wolf, Chairman of the House and Senate Joint Committee on Narcotics. He led several CODELs to Burma. The helos staged out of up-country sites and flew us into the narcotics and insurgency areas. It was a great experience. We were able to talk with otherwise inaccessible Burmese civilian and army types, often at senior levels.

One policy issue we fought was Lester Wolfe's idea of a "preemptive buy." It actually originated with Khee Shan, a major drug lord, and picked up by Wolfe's staffers. The idea was for the U.S. to buy the Golden Triangle's heroin production in advance and thus keep it off the market. Deceptively simple. It took us some time to convince Wolfe that heroin poppies should not be handled as a subsidized American farm crop, whose main historical result had been to increase production geometrically. Also no one had or would ever have a clue as to actual total production. So we'd still have an illegal crop.

Khee Sahn became angry after Wolfe decided not to pursue a "preemptive buy" policy. On his next trip, the embassy learned that Khee Shan might attempt to shoot down the helo carrying the Congressional Delegation (CODEL) helo. We thus flew above 5000 feet. Wolfe told me to keep quiet and didn't tell his Congressional colleagues (Congressmen Hyde and Dornan) until after the flight was over. They were quite miffed with him. Years later I heard Dornan as host of a call-in radio show talk of his courage in flying "alone" over Burma as the assassination target of a drug lord. What a self- promoter...

*Q: Who was ambassador to Burma when you were there?*

FRITTS: Maurice Bean for part of the time. After he left until now, we've had only chargés d'affaires in Rangoon or Yangon, as it's now called.

*Q: Was there much we could do in the human rights line?*

FRITTS: The usual demarches at working levels. And the recurring issue of whether the helicopters were being misused.

There wasn't much leverage. We had only a very small aid program outside narcotics. And narcotics control was the key priority for us. Japan was the major donor with projects linked to former WW II reparations. The Japanese had little interest in tweaking a major trade program for human rights goals. Indeed, human rights in Burma became increasingly worse over the years. Make that decades.

**DANIEL A. O'DONAHUE**  
**Ambassador**  
**Burma (1983-1987)**

*Ambassador Daniel A. O'Donohue was born in Michigan in 1931. He received a BS from the University of Detroit in 1953 and an MPA in 1958 from Wayne State University. He served overseas in the US Army from 1953 to 1955 and entered the Foreign Service in 1959. His assignments abroad include Genoa, Seoul, Accra and Bangkok, with ambassadorships to Burma and Thailand. Charles Stuart Kennedy interviewed Ambassador O'Donohue in 1996.*

*Q: You were Ambassador to Burma from when to when?*

O'DONOHUE: I arrived in Rangoon in December, 1983, and left in March of 1987. So I was there for a little more than three years.

*Q: Obviously, you'd been in the EA Bureau and had done your reading up on Burma and all of that. When you went out there, what did you carry in your mental portfolio in terms of what you wanted to do and what things...*

O'DONOHUE: As the Deputy Assistant Secretary in EA, I had been responsible for Burma. I actually tried to get out to the area once every quarter, but the timing would vary. In addition to ASEAN stops, one time I would go to Laos, the next time I would go down to Burma or Australia, and so forth. So I visited Burma twice or three times and was responsible for our policy toward that country. I had a sense of the Embassy and our policy, having dealt with it in Washington.

When I went there as Ambassador, it was a matter of going out there and deciding what I would try to do. At that point in time human rights considerations were not a dominant problem. Burma was seen as a backwater. Patricia Byrnes, who preceded me as Ambassador, had done a fine job

in terms of clearing out the “miasma” which historically had affected the Embassy in Rangoon, due to the isolation and the bizarre nature of Ne Win’s rule.

From our perspective narcotics control and narcotics programs were the only, major activity facing the Embassy. They were significant. In the mid 1970’s the Burmese military had agreed to cooperate with us on narcotics. So, over time, a program of some size had gotten off the ground. DEA [Drug Enforcement Agency] had gotten in, over the objections and opposition of the Burmese but had to operate under very heavy constraints. We had some programs. We had provided the Burmese with helicopters for the anti-narcotics program and we had other activities in that area. . Actually, the anti-narcotics program was of additional value to me because it made it possible to develop a different relationship with the Burmese and the Burmese military leadership than any other government could have done.

We had the resumption of an economic aid program there, which was relatively small. Nonetheless, we had an AID Mission which was doing things. As I went out to Burma, I saw the anti-narcotics and the aid program as two aspects of our relationship which, operationally, were promising. I had gone out to Burma with all sorts of advice. I was advised that you couldn’t get close to the military leadership and couldn’t do much in Burmese society as a whole. Those views posed challenges to me. I went out also looking to emphasize the economic aspect of our relationship.

At that point [1983] you hardly could call Burmese economic policy a rational one. However, the acceptance of our aid mission and a few other programs were measures of a change from the former, “Burmese Way to Socialism,” which had been a disaster. So that reflected some change. Potentially, the country had a fair amount of natural resources. Considering the fact that Burma was as poor as it was, some improvement might be expected from almost any change in policy.

However, there wasn’t much improvement on the economic side, during the three and one-half years that I was Ambassador to Burma. I had thought that there would be some improvement, but there wasn’t.

In the struggle against the narcotics traffic we actually developed a fairly close relationship with the Burmese military. There were some significant programs which didn’t survive the public upheaval and turmoil in 1988. I was military as second lieutenants when Ne Win began to run the country. They were products of his system and grew up within the framework of a structure with Ne Win as the center. They were so young and so much junior to him that they had really not had any contact with him until they rose in rank or served as his aides. These people were now in their ‘50s just moving into the top ranks of the Burmese military when I arrived in Rangoon. Indeed, they are the ones who are running the country today. They were of a different generation.

*Q: How did you deal with him? At that time he had the reputation, and deservedly so, of being reclusive.*

O’DONOHUE: Well, he was. The structure was set up in a manner in which both the civil servants and, even more so, the military were shielded from anything but the most minimal,



outside contact. The military people had created a different caste. Literally, once they entered the Burmese military, they lived together--even had their own hospitals. They had done terrible damage to their own country, and this also led them to be more insular. So the military ended up, in effect, almost as a separate caste within this society.

When I arrived in Burma, it was really a question of how to come to grips with this structure. Rather consciously, I set out to do it. Interestingly enough, the South Korean Ambassador and I were the two foreigners who had the most success in developing an acceptance and ability to work with Burmese officials. You can hardly call this "normal." When I first arrived, I found that there were really no constraints on dealing with civilian society outside the military and the government. It was really a measure of your own energy in getting out. This was mainly because, at that point, the military were so confident, and the older people were so irrelevant politically, that they really didn't care. If I had spent my time associating with only minority groups, out of which one or the other rebellions had come, there might have been a different government reaction. However, dealing with the civilians, whom the Burmese military saw as no political threat, didn't bother them.

As a matter of fact, as far as contacts were concerned, I was able to manage my work load fairly easily--probably more so than anywhere that I had been. We were out in Burmese homes frequently. For my wife, in many ways, it was probably the happiest time she had in the Foreign Service, although, in fact, she liked all of the places where we had been. You could be very much a part of that kind of society--meaning the civilian society, which had been excluded from any significant political role.

As time went on, and this was really a reflection of the fact that they saw that we had comfortable relations with the Burmese military, civilian officials were able to deal with us more easily. For them the constraints were completely external. They would have liked to deal openly, but that wasn't the way things were. Civilians as well as military personnel needed permission from the authorities to attend a social affair. They could get waivers for dealing with certain people. If a Burmese was involved in some project, he could deal with the project manager without specific permission for each contact. So that aspect of making contacts worked reasonably well.

However, with the Burmese military there were problems, because the system was structured to keep you at arm's length from them. It was a combination of things. However, for example, we were able to use the narcotics program to justify different treatment for ourselves. No other country had such a program. The Burmese military therefore felt that, when they dealt with us, nominally on narcotics, or when they went traveling with us to visit projects up in the hills--let's say that we wanted to go to Lashio--they could justify that. They would just describe the purpose of the contact, "narcotics," even though the purpose of the Lashio visit was just to visit Lashio.

*Q: That was the terminus of the old Burma Road, wasn't it?*

O'DONOHUE: It was one of the links with the old Burma Road. It was the point at which the Burma Road went Northwards to China. It was in an area in which the Burmese military controlled the valley. They could go up into the mountains if they had enough troops, but the

insurgents usually held the high ground. Trucks had to travel in convoy, so this was quite an isolated area.

The narcotics program was important in itself and, indeed, many of our discussions were concerned with strengthening the program. This gave us a substantive issue which was important to us and was useful to the Burmese military. This program made it possible for us to deal with the Minister for Home Affairs, who was a Major General; top police officials; and various and sundry others, in a way that no other country representatives could. That was one element.

The second element was the question of how to get closer to Burmese officials personally. Inevitably, this came out to be golf.

*Q: I've heard this again and again.*

O'DONOHUE: In looking at this question of golf, I have to admit that I'm a terrible athlete. However, no one ever got so much out of golf as I did, in both Burma and Thailand. There were two aspects. In Rangoon itself the only place that civilians met casually and in any numbers was at the two golf courses. There were no restaurants, to speak of. You did a lot of things in people's homes, but, by its nature, that was limited. The golf courses were the only places where you could go out, play with three or four people, meet others, have something to eat, and have more or less informal relations with them.

The only time that the Burmese military ever "let their hair down" was at the periodic golf tournaments at the military golf course. So, as a matter of fact, I took up golf, like medicine. In fact, I never improved. However, I remember that one day, during the rainy monsoon, I was standing out on the golf course, not in a rain, but in a drizzle. The golf ball was "teed up" on some mud, out of a puddle, with the water at times inching perilously close to my shoes. I thought to myself that if anyone had ever told me that I would be swinging at a silly golf ball in the middle of a puddle, I would have told them that they were insane.

Golf games became important because, outside of travel with senior Burmese military officers, these were occasions to meet and talk with the senior military figures and visit their homes or have them come informally to mine. Opportunities to travel were fairly rare--but they happened a few times a year. When we were playing golf, you might say, the rules were off for at least the Korean Ambassador and myself.

*Q: The South Korean Ambassador played golf, too, I take it.*

O'DONOHUE: Yes, he was a good player.

*Q: I recall that when I was in South Korea--and I am a horrible player--a South Korean Lieutenant General kept dragging me out to play golf I play in the middle 140's for 18 holes. This officer was almost a "scratch golfer." However, he would drag me out. Our Ambassador, Dick Sneider, and the Political Counselor, Paul Cleveland, were very good golfers. They really used golf to contact people.*

O'DONOHUE: In Burma the golf tournaments took place several times a year. There was one group of people we were very close to. The Minister for Home Affairs was an Army Major General. Other members of this group were the commander of the Navy and his predecessor, plus two or three other, senior people. During my time in Burma, they had switched over from being on active, military duty and had become senior cabinet ministers.

When we finished playing golf, we would go over to their houses, which was normally unthinkable. Now, they all drank. They all drank on the golf course, which I found amazing-- particularly in that hot weather. By the time we were through playing golf, they were pretty high. In any event, we would go over to their houses for several hours. We ended up with very close, working relationships with certain Burmese military figures. Conversation with them covered a multitude of subjects. The most obvious area was the matter of narcotics. We went from mounting a major, aerial spraying program, which was just getting off the ground when the public upheaval and turmoil broke out in 1988, to persuading these Burmese leaders to put troops into the field. These were major operations. They put troops into the field, using information we provided, at least chasing and disrupting the activities of the narcotics traffickers.

*Q: Well, that's also where the narcotics action was.*

O'DONOHUE: The action was in Burma but, as I mentioned earlier, DEA had been allowed to station personnel in Burma only under great pressure from Washington. This deployment of DEA personnel was also opposed by the Embassy and the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] Station as the Burmese. The first DEA officer assigned to Burma spent his time acting as if he were "walking on eggs," with everyone in Washington waiting for him to "foul up." He did very, very little. There were lots of people who felt that they didn't want DEA personnel in Burma because this was too sensitive an area.

He was succeeded by a younger officer who was outstanding. Then he was succeeded by another fine officer. The Burmese Military Intelligence Service insisted that they had to treat our Defense Attaché in the same way as they treated all Military Attaches. That is, our Military Attaché had only formal relationships with the Burmese military. The Burmese Military Intelligence Service had a friendly but very, very distant relationship with the CIA Station.

It ended up that these two DEA officers were my major working level conduits on a variety of issues, not simply on narcotics affairs. For instance, if I wanted a picture of what was going on along the Burmese-Chinese border, these DEA officers would go over to discuss the matter with the Burmese military. Their Burmese military intelligence counterparts had permission to meet with the DEA officers without having to get prior approval.

*Q: For the record, what was the narcotics situation in Burma when you arrived there in 1984? Also, what was in it for the Burmese authorities to "play ball" with us?*

O'DONOHUE: First, Burma and Thailand were inextricably linked along the Thai-Burmese border. Over time a variety of things happened. We had traditionally had close relationships with the Thai. Narcotics were always colored by corruption and the rest, but our political relationships

with the Thai and the Thai military and police were all close. With Burma our relations were distant and difficult.

At first the narcotics refineries were on the Thai side of the Thai-Burmese border. Then we'd put pressure on the Thai, who would just push the refineries across the border into Burma. Now, these areas of Burma were not under the control of the Burmese Government. The Burmese side of the Thai border, at least nominally, was composed of areas controlled by groups which had risen up against the Burmese Government.

In Burma at that time there were insurgent, ethnic minority groups along almost all of its borders with Thailand. About 80 percent of the population of Burma lives in the valley of the Irrawaddy River. The people who live there are called, "Burmans." They are Buddhist and, historically, a very warlike and cruel group of people. They were very cruel neighbors. Thailand was always being invaded by the Burmese.

Then there are large areas which are not heavily populated and which belong to a number of ethnic minority groups. In the very North there is the Kachin State, which figured in the activities of OSS [Office of Strategic Services] detachments and of "Merrill's Marauders" in the Second World War. Outside the towns in the ethnic areas, Burmese troops could go where they wanted in the countryside only if there were enough of them. Otherwise, the various insurgent groups controlled the hinterland.

In the Shan State [northeast Burma] there was a bewildering variety of groups. The most famous group was not really an insurgent movement. It was essentially "cover" for a Sino-Burmese narcotics trafficker Khun Sa, the most famous of the narcotics traffickers. Khun Sa nominally led a Shan insurgency. However, in fact, he was a Sino-Burmese narcotics trafficker. His troops were there to protect him. You could call him a warlord. The other Shan State insurgencies varied. Some of the smaller ones were like the group led by Khun Sa. Some of the others, like the Karens, were involved in a longstanding insurgency against the Burmese Government. This had started out in 1946. Initially, the Karens carried the fight to the outskirts of Rangoon. Then there was the insurgency led by the Chinese Communists, which started after the end of World War II in 1945.

From the point of view of the Burmese military, they had successfully pushed all of these insurgent groups back into the hinterland, apart from occasional acts of sabotage in the Burman areas of the country.

These insurgencies and the narcotics traffic were inextricably linked, because most of the growing of opium poppies, their transportation and the refineries were in areas where the Burmese Government had only tenuous control, if any.

Throughout the period following World War II the Thai and the Burmese had very poor relationships. There was corruption on both sides of the border, further coloring the situation.

In terms of the problems in these areas there were different priorities. From the Burmese military point of view, Khun Sa posed a problem which they would rather not have. They would rather

control the area in which he operated. However, Khun Sa was not a threat to the Burmese state, so to speak. The true, ethnic insurgent groups were a target of first priority for the Burmese military--let's say, the Karens, because they were an insurgent group that had political ends. Khun Sa never had any political ends. From the point of view of the Burmese military--and the same was true of the Thai military--there was a tendency to find ways to ease pressures against their lesser enemies while devoting their limited resources to the relatively greater enemies. We would constantly have to "prod" the Burmese to do something about the drug related pseudo insurgents.

By the time I left Burma, we had in place a fairly significant, anti-narcotics program which was just about ready to take off. None of this survived the upheavals and the human rights issues posed following the disturbances of 1988 in Rangoon. The Ambassador who succeeded me in Burma also took a line that all of this was "show." Like anti-narcotics activity in any country, including Thailand, the other country where I served as Ambassador, this was true to some degree. However, we had had a fairly significant effort going in the anti-narcotics field at a rather modest cost.

From the Burmese point of view when they originally agreed to the antinarcotics program, it was the provision of US equipment that attracted them. They were going to get helicopters, some C-47 [twin-engine] aircraft, and some training. We're not talking about immense amounts of money. For an army like that of Burma, which was just scraping by, it was enough of an attraction to make them prepared to make some limited commitments to us. During my time in Burma, I think that we were able to convince them that they had something to be gained by cooperating with us. While we were providing some aerial interdiction of narcotics trafficking by aerial spraying of opium poppies, using spray aircraft and the rest of the program, these aircraft were of no great use for anything else. In fact, the equipment was usable for very narrow purposes. The major items in the program--the helicopters and the C-47's--had been turned over by the time I arrived in Burma. That effort was largely confined to maintenance activity.

In the field of intelligence cooperation we had the two DEA officers, who did a marvelous job. Subsequently, the DEA role became much more of a problem for the Embassy. There was a succession of significant problems involving the DEA. The DEA had clearly picked inappropriate officers for assignment to Burma. We had a couple of DEA officers who were kicked out of Burma. One has brought a suit against the Chargé d'Affaires in Burma, who was there for four years. So subsequent to what I might call the "happy era," there followed a sequence of incidents of bureaucratic turmoil and conflict.

The major event after I left Burma was the 1988 public upheaval and its brutal suppression by the military. Now, human rights dominate the relationship between Burma and the United States.

*Q: We're really talking about "big money" in a very small place. Was the military almost insulated by having their own form of corruption?*

O'DONOHUE: No. First of all, it wasn't really "big money." There were a couple of constraints on corruption in Burma which had nothing to do with morality. One of them is that nobody could live conspicuously. If you did, you were bound to get into trouble sooner or later. This didn't

mean that the military in relative terms, didn't live well. Now I'm talking about having whiskey, food, and a car. But anybody who put up a palace was going to be in trouble. Now, there were some wonderful houses which the military occupied.

Corruption was a problem, but it was not as much of a problem as it was in Thailand. In Thailand the Narcotics Control Board, and the Police connected with it, were essentially uncorrupted, because the Police General in charge [Police Maj Gen Sarasin] was the second son of one of the wealthiest families in the country. His approach to corruption was that you insulated police from temptation by defending officers who were independently well off. However, this was in the context of a Police force that was utterly corrupt, outside of a few small units.

In Burma what you had was a widespread level of corruption--but fairly small pickings for all of that. When I was in Burma, despite a couple of allegations, there was no evidence of high level government corruption related to narcotics. This was in contrast to, let's say, corruption in an area controlled by Khun Sa, the narcotics trafficker. In that area Khun Sa would be in touch with the Burmese Army battalions and so forth. They would avoid each other.

*Q: Could you talk a little about the staff of the Embassy in Rangoon? How did they live in this environment? How were the Political and Economic Sections? How did they get out and around, and what were you interested in?*

O'DONOHUE: When I arrived in Burma, I found that my predecessor, Pat Byrne, had done a wonderful job in terms of Embassy morale and focus. When I was DCM in Bangkok in 1977, I was always struck by the "paranoia" in the Embassy in Burma. Rangoon was a very strange environment.

When I arrived in Rangoon, the Embassy was a fairly happy place to work. Ambassador Pat Byrne had had some objectives, which weren't the same as mine, but, nonetheless, they had given the Embassy a focus. She had been there, I think, during the whole period of the economic assistance mission. The DCM was Charley Salmon, who was a fine, outstanding officer. The AID Mission Director when Ambassador Byrne was there was David Merrill, one of the finest officers in AID and now Ambassador to Bangladesh. When I was in Burma, the AID Director was a good one. He was succeeded by an AID Director who was not very good at his job but was an amiable person. There were some people of excellence in the Embassy in Rangoon. They had credentials and ability.

Charley Salmon was a fine officer on his second tour as a DCM. Charley went on to be Ambassador to Laos and has now just retired. He was a good, solid DCM. We had a combined Political and Economic Section. I had brought out of EAP the Deputy Director for VLC [Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodian Affairs], David Halstead. David was an outstanding officer. As a matter of fact, in my view we had a fine group of officers--particularly the first group that I assembled. This was a particularly good group for a post which was relatively unimportant.

Ambassador Pat Byrne was great about getting out and around the country. She had very good relationships with the Burmese. They liked her. They thought that she was a very sympathetic figure who, on a couple of issues, had been very helpful to the Burmese. Since I had visited

Rangoon a few times, I already had a certain amount of acceptance by Burmese Government officials.

When I arrived in Rangoon, there were two different problems. At the personal level I had a problem of “slowing down,” having come from five years in senior level Washington jobs. When I came into the Embassy and during my first Saturday in the office, I had to come to grips with the fact that there was no conceivable reason why I should be in the office on Saturday.

*Q: Being in the office on Saturday usually meant that some of the officers would gather together for a general conversation...*

O'DONOHUE: Something like that. I didn't “force” anyone to turn up. However, the question that I asked myself after one Saturday was, “What am I doing here?” The second conclusion for me, and I had always been viewed as a “workaholic,” was that there was no way that I could spend eight or 10 hours a day running that Embassy without driving the DCM and everyone else “wild.” I felt that it was inappropriate to leave the office at 4:30 PM, but by 5:00 PM, I left. Thirdly, I had to find other things to do outside the Embassy. That was another consideration that led to traveling around the country and golf. In an Embassy that size, and since I had always been fairly energetic, I just had to find some other ways to use up my energy. I always liked reporting and did a lot of it. However, I also had to develop new activities. From my point of view serving in Rangoon meant “slowing down” and reordering myself for a very different pattern and pace of activity.

With the exception of the AID Director, the DCM, and the Pol-Econ Counselor, it was also a matter of energizing the rest of the staff to focus on the achievement of specific Objectives. Burma, at the very personal level, was surprisingly comfortable. Government-owned housing was available, and for most of the people--the best housing situation I had seen in the Foreign Service. At the most superficial level, between our Embassy Commissary, the Embassy club, and the rest of it, if one's life was bridge, swimming, golf, and tennis with a small, but not uncongenial, foreign community, it wasn't a bad place to serve. This was so if you didn't have, say, a serious health condition, because locally available medical services were abysmal.

Many of the people on the Embassy staff may have chosen Burma because of the 25% “differential” and because it was a backwater. It may not have been obvious to them at first that they were going to have to have a little more energetic focus imposed on the mission. That led me to what I later discovered was a “rule of thirds.” When a new Ambassador arrives at a post, what he will often find is that one-third of the staff will stress that he's just what the place needs and that the previous Ambassador was useless. Another one- third of the staff believes that he is terrible, that he doesn't understand anything, and that his predecessor was great. The remaining one-third just wants to be left alone. Whoever the Ambassador, they hope that he will never bother them! I think that the percentages may vary, but in any Mission you find these attitudes.

As I said, I was blessed with the key officers who were assigned to Rangoon. They were energetic and effective. Not that they didn't work hard. But, if there had been a couple of more people like me, even the self-restraint that I displayed would not have been enough.

Travel around the country was an important part of my life in Burma in many ways. First, I got to see the country, which is valuable. Secondly, travel was another occasion when senior Burmese officials could deal with me informally and as a person, rather than being surrounded with strictures and limitations. Thirdly, I was able to see what the patterns were outside of Rangoon. So I consciously decided to expand Embassy travel very significantly. This was not easy. Burma is one of those countries where Embassy employees needed permission to go beyond the city limits of Rangoon. If you were going to Mandalay and the “tourist spots,” such as Pagan and Taunggyi, you could send over a notice of travel to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and you didn’t have to wait for a reply. They would let you go to a few other places, but it would take you forever to obtain permission.

One of the places I visited was Myitkyina, the site of a victorious battle won by US forces during World War II, in which Merrill’s Marauders and other US Army forces took part. It was a victory that was of some significance because it deprived the Japanese of the use of the airfields and allowed the airlift over the “Hump” to China to fly at much lower altitudes. As a result, the aircraft could carry far more freight, and the flights were much less perilous. It was one of the few ground battles where Americans fought in the British Southeast Asia Command area, Admiral Mountbatten’s theater of operations. Secondly, Myitkyina was the center of some very, major OSS [Office of Strategic Services] operations. The Burmese let military attaches visit Myitkyina once a tour before they left the country. They also allowed Japanese to go up there because of the large number of Japanese troops who had been killed there. The Japanese were allowed to fly up commercially to Myitkyina, get off the plane, have a memorial ceremony to commemorate their war dead, and then catch the same plane and fly back to Rangoon. The Burmese ordinarily didn’t let diplomats visit Myitkyina. I approached this question, noting that it was the 40th anniversary of the Battle of Myitkyina of 1944. I said that this was a reason for the Defense Attaché and me to go up so that we could pay our respects to the American dead still buried there.

Essentially, the Burmese Foreign Ministry view was that the reason I gave for going to Myitkyina was highly imaginative and a “nice try.” However, they said that it wasn’t going to work. But as a matter of fact, as can happen in Burma, on the morning we were to leave for Myitkyina, we were told that we had permission to get on the plane. However, permission had not yet been given for us to stay overnight in Myitkyina. Finally, they gave us permission to spend a couple of days there.

The historical perspective of World War II of the Burmese military is not the same as ours. This is because the Burmese military trace their genesis back to the Japanese occupation of Burma. You may remember the “Burma National Army,” which the Japanese set up and supported. The Burmese had little interest in the Battle of Myitkyina. On the other hand they pulled together about 15 retired officers who had held British commissions and had fought alongside the Americans. So we spent an afternoon with them. I went out for a drive along part of the Ledo Road, which had been built by Merrill’s Marauders. This Burmese Army had to put a couple of infantry companies into the area, since, once you leave Myitkyina, the countryside is unsafe because of guerrillas.



The Ledo Road turned out to be a road bed, not a road. After bumping for a mile or two on the rocks, I decided that having gone one or two miles, versus five or six, who would care? So we did this and were able to get a correct picture of the limits of Burmese Army control of the area. We also had some informal meetings to broaden our contacts. Beyond this, we traveled later to Lashio and Keng Tung in the Shan State. We went down South and to the Arakan State. So travel became important in terms of getting a picture of Burma itself. It was important in terms of developing relationships with the Burmese military. It was also great fun. The austere conditions of travel were more than compensated for by the sense of seeing the truly remote areas.

*Q: It is one of the compensations of the Foreign Service.*

O'DONOHUE: In 1962, when the Burmese military took over the country, they not merely "slowed" the economy, they wrecked it. The damage was done in a few years, but it is long lasting, if not irrevocable. As a result, you almost felt that you were in a "time warp." It's not a time warp that I would ever have wished on the Burmese. I always feel that the Burmese must cringe a little when people talk about how they preserved their national costume and the rest of it. What a price they paid for it! Nonetheless, travel in Burma was truly exotic. To go up to the Arakanese capitals, you got on a boat on the Bay of Bengal. The river at its mouth was about half a mile wide. You ended up five and a half hours later on a fast-moving stream in a district that had no outside communications. So I had these experiences for the sheer delight of it, as someone who joined the Foreign Service to see the world. Beside that, these trips were important. In visiting the Shan State, we encouraged the Burmese to move toward eradication of opium poppy production as a means of interdicting the narcotics traffic.

*Q: Obviously, narcotics was a major focus of your time in Burma. What were Burmese relations with their neighbors at the time? Did we just watch them with a certain amount of disinterest? I looked at the map, and Burma has three major neighbors--Thailand, China, and India.*

O'DONOHUE: When I was in Burma, relations with two of these countries were in transition. There was nothing much going on with the third country. If I start with India, when Ne Win took power in 1962, he probably viewed his "lasting contribution" to history as returning the economy to the Burmese, taking it away from the Indians and the Chinese. By this time the British had already faded from the scene. However, in fact, when Burma was a British territory, the Chinese played a very traditional role, similar to the one they played in Thailand and in other countries of Southeast Asia. The Chinese were closer to the Thai, in that they were not as distinct, there wasn't the same hostility toward them, and there was some inter marriage.

However, the Indians were different, because the British brought them in at every level. If you were a Burmese, you competed with an Indian dock worker, a lawyer, a civil servant, or a doctor. There were few native Burman entrepreneurs. Most local businessmen were either Indians or Chinese. As there were so many Indians, they were at every level of society. Indeed, before World War II, Rangoon was a British and Indian city, and the Burmese were a minority.

In effect, Ne Win was able to wrench Indian economic assets away. Now, the Indians in Burma were heartily disliked. They were seen by the Burmese as rapacious and, as I said, competed with the Burmese at every level. After independence in 1948, the Indians were progressively

driven out of Burma. A few, wonderful Indians who loved Burma stayed on--I think, to their utter regret. There is an Indian "underclass" in Burma which is heavily Muslim and closely related to Muslims in Bangladesh. There are a few, wealthy Indians in Burma who obviously have found a way to bribe the Burmese and so exist. What happened in terms of Indian-Burmese relationships is that former Burmese Prime Minister U Nu, a civilian, always had close contacts with India. There was a close post-colonial relationship between the two countries for a time. However, in fact, with Ne Win's 1962 takeover directed so heavily against the Indians, the result was that relations were formal but distant and with little substance. And the Burmese didn't want these relations to have any substance. Later on, after the 1988 upheaval in Burma, the Indians were actively engaged in supporting insurgent groups. They were very aggressively critical of Burma for several years and took a much more hostile attitude toward Burma. However, when I was in Burma, what struck me was how devoid of substance Indian-Burmese relations were. This seemed to reflect a deliberate attitude by the Burmese.

Regarding China, there was a different situation. There was a Chinese- supported and Sino-Burmese led, communist insurgency, which was part of the general, insurgent situation in Burma. During the 1945-48 struggle for independence the communist were part of it. They later split from the Burmese in 1946 and began a program of insurgency. By the time I was in Burma, the Sino-Burmese communist insurgency had been driven to the perimeters of the country. They still existed, on Chinese sufferance. I don't mean that the Chinese ever saw them as likely to overthrow the Burmese Government. Ne Win always attached particular importance to China and to the Sino-Burmese relationship because of this insurgency. So China figured quite differently with the Burmese. There was a much more "active" policy, vis-a-vis China, in an effort, at a minimum, to counter Chinese interest in supporting the Sino-Burmese led, communist insurgency.

When I was in Burma, I saw the beginning of something which had already happened in Thailand. That is, the Chinese, in the interest of better relations with Burma, allowed the withering away, though not the complete disappearance, of the communist insurgency in Burma. Now, in the subsequent period, I think that the Sino-Burmese relationship is a very good and close one. The Burmese objective, with regard to China, was to keep them out of Burma.

Burmese relations with Thailand were very interesting, because the Thai, when they visit their ruined old capital, Ayutthaya, see this reminder of Burmese aggression against Thailand. Until recent years, in Thai history books, there was an aggressively negative view of Burma. Burma and Thailand historically had terrible relationships. After the fall of Chiang Kai-shek on the mainland of China, for years thereafter the KMT [Kuomintang] supported units of KMT troops in the northern Burma area bordering on Thailand. The CIA had fairly close ties with these Chinese. These units eventually wound up in Thailand.

As a matter of historical policy, the Thai tended to support other country insurgencies in the Thai-Burma border area--partially to keep these insurgent troops pointed away from Thailand. So there was a history of very bad relations between Thailand and Burma. Our efforts to get Thai-Burmese cooperation to halt the flow of narcotics out of the "Golden Triangle Area" (Burma, Thailand, and Laos) met either with refusal or often fiascos.

The Thai military, starting in the mid 1980's, embarked on a policy very consciously aimed at improving relationships with Burma. They worked on this policy steadily and were succeeding fairly well. When the riots occurred in Rangoon in 1988, the Thai military, who had invested so much effort in their policy of improving relations with the Burmese military, were most reluctant to abandon it. Thai policy was not that they supported what the Burmese military were doing. Rather, having invested so much effort in cooperation with Burma, they weren't going to throw it away on human rights grounds. So relationships between the Thai and Burmese military improved to the point where there is a reasonable amount of economic cooperation. Thailand is regarded by Burma as one of the Asian buffers against US and Western .European pressures. The frictions between Thailand and Burma these days relate to economic relationships, not to historical animosity.

For their part I doubt that the Thai completely ceased their support for the Burmese insurgent groups until later. In the case of the Karens, with whom the Thai had worked for many years, in fact, decades, the Burmese had moved very far in terms of weakening them. Also, over the past four or five years the Burmese military, one way or another, found an accommodation with various of these insurgent groups in Burma. So Thai-Burmese relationships are now much closer and much more constructive than anyone could have imagined 15 years ago.

*Q: On the Burmese economy my understanding has been that Ne Win had turned his country very much "inwards." During the time that you were Ambassador to Burma, were we trying to do anything in the economic field? Leave the narcotics question to one side, for the moment. Or am I looking at it in an unrealistic way?*

O'DONOHUE: I said that Burmese acceptance of our economic assistance programs was one of the measures of the Burmese realization that the program called, "The Burmese Road to Socialism" had been a disaster and that they had to change. However, we had a very limited economic program in Burma. As far as the Burmese Government was concerned, change meant avoiding real disasters--things that were unbelievably harmful to Burma. There was little positive change economically during my period.

*Q: Could you give some examples?*

O'DONOHUE: Well, the Burmese military had confiscated businesses and tried to run them. The production of rice, a major staple food for most Thai, had fallen sharply because of rigid agricultural policies. During the 1950's Burma had been the world's largest rice exporter--larger than Thailand. By the time I was in Burma as Ambassador, it barely recorded a nominal export surplus. This meant, of course, that rice was being smuggled out of Burma, though there was also a real decline in total production. The Burmese military inherited a relatively prosperous country and ruined it within a few years. They reduced Burmese living standards immensely. When we were in Burma, we observed an effort tactically to rationalize economic policies. Ne Win was still running things, and there wasn't going to be any big change. The small changes were showing up in marginally improved living standards. The country was immensely dependent on smuggling and the black market, for instance, which operated openly in Rangoon. There was smuggling into Thailand and back. There was a very limited economic dialogue with the UN

agencies and the US In the real world during the period that I was in Burma, the actual change was very, very minor.

Then Ne Win embarked on the first of his bizarre experiments which, I think, led to the 1988 upheavals. When I was in Burma, there was a sense that Ne Win--whether it was one year or five years--was not going to be on the scene for very long. Conditions were getting a tiny bit better, and optimism was born of the feeling that Ne Win would be passing from the scene. Then the Burmese Government embarked on these bizarre, currency changes, which also had confiscatory aspects to them. They introduced bizarre denominations of their currency, issuing 75 "kyat" notes instead of 100 "kyat" notes. Allegedly, the purpose of these changes was to get the money held by the black marketers. However, this effort broke down, and it just showed once again how capricious Burmese economic policy was.

*Q: In some countries you find that you can often trace it back to the Fabian socialists of Britain at the beginning of the 20th century. Was somebody sitting there and advising the Burmese?*

O'DONOHUE: In 1962 there were a few "gurus" [teachers] who contributed to the disastrous policy of that time. But I think that what happened in 1987 and 1988, was 100% Ne Win. Ne Win would get up in the morning and decide this and that. The concept of the "Burmese Road to Socialism" was Ne Win's creation. At first he had a few policy advisors who were dropped along the way, as their policies failed. It was almost whimsical economic practices. Burmese economic policy had confiscatory aspects to it--it wasn't just bizarre. Then the Burmese Government had to back off somewhat. Later on Ne Win gave speeches that indicated further loosening, then he switched signals indicating tightening of control. I think that he introduced so many elements of uncertainty that this led to the buildup of pressure and then the blowup of 1988.

*Q: So I take it that you weren't "pounding the drums" and saying, "Invest in Burma." In the first place, I don't suppose that Americans could invest in Burma.*

O'DONOHUE: No. We had one American company that had a contract with the UNDP [United Nations Development Program]. There were other American contracts, but they were really trivial. One of the American shirt companies made shirts in Burma. We're talking about \$2-3 million per year, a trivial amount.

Now, all of this changed significantly after my time in Burma. One of the results of the 1988 upheaval was that a younger generation of military men, whom I had known and who were, by then, occupying the senior military jobs-- though not the most senior government jobs--in effect pushed aside most of the older retired Burmese military officers from Ne Win's coterie. The younger men saw the situation as so bad and serious that they put the demonstrations down brutally. Now, Ne Win was still the national strong man. However, this whole generation of his minions who truly had very little to recommend them, were all pushed aside. There was a generational change. For example, the current DDIS (Director of the Defense Intelligence Services) and the head of the ruling military junta were all in their early 50's when I was in Burma. They came into these positions while I was there and are now running the country. There is a group which focuses solely on the preservation of military control of Burma. It has no ideology.

However, these people are quite willing to deal with foreigners. Foreign oil companies came in, there are department stores run by Japanese, Koreans, and Thai. They have changed tourism into a much more aggressive industry. Now you have a far more extensive foreign presence and involvement. Indeed, UNOCA, if it isn't driven out, is caught up in the development of natural gas reserves. They are working in cooperation with the Thai.

*Q: This is Side B of Tape 7 of the interview with Ambassador Dan O'Donohue. Dan, during your time in Burma, did you feel any pressure from the ecology people in the United States concerning "over logging" and that sort of thing?*

O'DONOHUE: No, because there wasn't a major logging by the government. The logging areas were remote, the Burmese Government hardly controlled them, and you might say that ecological interests were being met simply by the very remoteness of the forest areas. It's one thing to smuggle gems, rice and opium products across the border. However, smuggling timber from remote areas, where you have to cut your way through the forest to get to them--that's something else. No, the ecological movement really didn't figure.

There was little concern about human rights. Indeed, I had more pressures in Thailand--both times I was there, as DCM and later on as Ambassador--on human rights issues than I did in Burma at any time. As I said, "placid" isn't quite the word to describe Burma, but this was a period when there was a certain Burmese expectancy that things would improve over a period of 5-10 years. This was shattered 18 months later.

*Q: Is it U Nu's daughter who was active during your time in Thailand? Or whose daughter was it?*

O'DONOHUE: U Nu was still alive when I was in Burma. I think that you are referring to Aung San Suu Kyi, who is the daughter of Aung San, a very youthful Burmese who led the first of the anti-British student groups. Then he and a group of friends called the "Thirty Comrades" were smuggled out of Burma by the Japanese in the 1940-41's to establish the core of the Burmese National Army. They came back with the Japanese in early 1942 and, by 1944, were engaged in secret negotiations with the British to switch sides, which they ultimately did. In effect, Admiral Louis Mountbatten [commander of the Allied Southeast Asian Command] saw that there was no way to reestablish colonial rule and to set back in authority the people that the British might have wished to pick to run Burma. He saw Aung San and his associates, as the "wave of the future," and as people to whom he was quite ready to turn over the government. Aung San and his associates took over the Burmese Government, which remained under temporary British control as part of the "transition" period to independence. However, Aung San and several of his cabinet ministers were machine gunned and killed at a cabinet meeting in 1948, with results which were ultimately disastrous for Burma. So Aung San passed from the scene in 1948 and became a "national martyr."

He and his wife had one child, Aung San Suu Kyi. Ne Win had been a remote, older figure who focused on controlling the Burmese Army. He was not nearly the charismatic figure that Aung San had been. There were others who were active in the Burmese Government, while Ne Win

stayed with the Army. Aung San's widow was given special consideration, but Ne Win found her "trying." She went to India as Burmese Ambassador at one point. She lived not very far from us in Rangoon.

Aung San Suu Kyi essentially grew up outside of Burma--in England. She was married to a British anthropologist. When I was in Burma, she would only come back occasionally to visit her mother. In fact, I only met her once. On this particular occasion she was only in Burma by accident. In 1988 Aung San Suu Kyi had come back to Burma to visit her dying mother. When all of these events referred to collectively as "the upheaval" unfolded, she just happened to be in the country. She didn't normally live in Burma.

So Aung San Suu Kyi at first became important as a symbol. Then, with her own forcefulness, she became far more than a symbol in terms of her leadership and courage. If "the upheaval" had happened a year before or a year after, she wouldn't even have been in Burma. At first she was seen and propelled to the front as a symbol. She spoke English and she is attractive. Beyond that, though, she has an immense amount of determination, courage, and firmness.

*Q: She won the Nobel Peace Prize.*

O'DONOHUE: At the time of the "uprising" of 1988 I think that Ambassador Levin saw her as a replica of the Philippines, where Cory Aquino emerged from the downfall of President Marcos as the major, national leader. The difference was that the Burmese military were really willing to resort to whatever brutality it took to maintain their hold on power.

*Q: Let's move on. When did you leave Burma?*

O'DONOHUE: I left Burma in March, 1987, and came back to Washington to be the Principal Deputy Director in the Office of Policy Planning.

*Q: You were in Policy Planning from when to when?*

O'DONOHUE: I started in there in about May, 1987, and left there in June, 1988, to go to Bangkok as Ambassador. So it was a brief interlude. It seemed particularly brief because by September, 1987, I knew that I was going to Bangkok. It was hard not to be focused on that.

*Q: Could you talk a bit about policy planning at this time and the role it played, because this function waxes and wanes?*

O'DONOHUE: The importance of the Office of Policy Planning (S/P) derived almost solely from the influence of the Director. That, of course, reflects the importance the Secretary of State attaches to it. When I was in S/P, George Shultz was the Secretary of State. Dick Solomon was the Director of S/P. At times the Secretary of State has put in someone very close to him as Director. Then S/P, at least to a degree and usually in specific areas--almost never across the board--plays a dominating role. Institutionally the Department of State has great difficulty in dealing with policy planning.

What I found in that job, having come from a whole background in a regional bureau where I was heavily engaged in policy at a given time and in a given place, was that the regional bureaus were very content to have S/P draft the Secretary's public speeches. They were even content to have S/P explain what we should be doing in their areas of concern 10 years into the future. Being so heavily oriented toward their own concerns, you could probably, though with increasing difficulty, move the time frame of what we should be doing to one year into the future. However, the regional bureaus have no interest in having S/P play any role in anything that is current and ongoing. That is the problem you always have with S/P. That is, to find some balance in this inevitable conflict between the regional bureaus which believe--usually rightly--that they know more about the area concerned than S/P does.

Officers assigned to S/P often include people of great ability, who might well know as much as, and have a deeper historical perspective, than officers in the regional bureaus. These officers are in S/P either because they are academics or officers who hadn't found a job somewhere else and are more or less "marking time" till another assignment comes up. So you have a whole range of people in S/P. What determines S/P's role is the importance and weight given to the Director. If the Director is close to the Secretary of State and has the Secretary's "ear," S/P can play a major role, usually in the areas where he and the Secretary are most deeply interested. The problem is that S/P then tends to be "operational," which is what the regional bureaus fear.

*Q: Can you explain the difference between "operational" and policy planning, as perceived...*

O'DONOHUE: The American military doesn't have any difficulty with this. They have the idea that "planning" is distinct from operations. The Department of State has a problem with this distinction. I think that this problem is ingrained in the Department of State. I do not intend this as a criticism. The Department of State is concerned with ongoing activities which must be dealt with and, therefore, have consequences for the future. Policy is viewed as inherently operational.

*Q: You're talking about the time you were in the Department.*

O'DONOHUE: No, I'm talking about right now. The Department of State has never been able to function effectively without the regional bureaus playing a major role in their respective areas. The regional bureaus sit astride communications, and so, with strong and effective leadership, they have unmistakable influence. The functional bureaus in the Department--and S/P was not a bureau--always have to come to grips with that problem. That is, the regional bureaus have an intrinsic influence which the functional bureaus do not have. The functional bureaus may be dominant in certain areas. For instance, PM [Bureau of Political-Military Affairs] under Les Gelb, Reg Bartholomew, and later Rick Burt, when I was there, "dominated" the most important EUR [Bureau of European Affairs] security issues.

As soon as these people left PM, EUR became dominant again. EUR was there forever, and the functional bureaus wax and wane. This was particularly true with S/P under Winston Lord, during the 1970's when Henry Kissinger was Secretary of State. Kissinger assigned certain roles which S/P played. They were not dominant, because Kissinger had Larry Eagleburger, Helmut Sonnenfeldt, and others in his immediate entourage. In other areas you had to deal with Winston Lord. When Tony Lake was Director of S/P, he had a very close relationship with Secretary of

State Cyrus Vance and Deputy Secretary Warren Christopher. I don't think that S/P was very effective during that period, but Lake was undoubtedly a major player in the policy process. Paul Wolfowitz came in as Director of S/P under Secretary of State Haig. I don't know what his relationship was with him.

When I was in S/P, toward the end of 1987 and early 1988...

*Q: We're really talking about the situation at the end of the Reagan administration.*

O'DONOHUE: When I was in SIP, it had, I think, a fairly limited role. We prepared speeches for Secretary Shultz but we never had "great speechwriters." Shultz always knew what he wanted to say but never could articulate it very well. So that made it rather difficult.

The period when George Shultz was Secretary of State was one of the "golden periods" of the Foreign Service. In terms of the issues, at that point in time...

*Q: This is what I get from other interviews.*

O'DONOHUE: The other "golden period," in my experience, was during the time when Henry Kissinger was Secretary of State. However, the Department of State under George Shultz was "run" by the Foreign Service. When I was in PM [1978-1981], EUR [the Bureau of European Affairs] was comparatively weak. However, when George Shultz was Secretary of State, EUR was very, very strong. EUR ran Russian, or Soviet policy. The SIP role in those areas was limited to peripheral and carping comments. As it turned out, SIP didn't contribute a whole lot.

Charlie Hill, the Secretary's executive assistant, "ran" the Middle East, under Secretary of State Shultz. Charlie did look to NEA [Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs] for policy inputs. NEA had its own difficulties in these relationships, but that's where the focus was. We had a "super" officer, Dan Kurtzer in S/P. Because of his personal abilities, Dan played a major role in Middle Eastern Affairs, even though he was "housed" in S/P. I was more heavily engaged in East Asia policy as Deputy Director of S/P. We dealt with the Korean elections, Thai issues, the Philippines had things going on to which I could contribute. We probably played a rather active role in East Asian affairs, but it should not be exaggerated. Apart from these matters, my year in S/P was fairly quiescent.

*Q: Where did Dick Solomon fit into all of this?*

O'DONOHUE: Dick is very much a person who moves at his own pace and in terms of his own "clock." Secretary of State Shultz was meticulous in allowing S/P to play its role. For instance, we sat in on almost everything, and Dick traveled with the Secretary. You just couldn't complain at all about access. However, it wasn't an intimate role. Secretary Shultz turned to Dennis Ross or to Charlie Hill, as I said, on Middle East questions. So Dick Solomon didn't have a dominant role as a major policy adviser to Shultz. Dick, like me, mainly had East Asian experience. Personally, he hadn't had a lot of experience elsewhere. Under Shultz, S/P itself was a subsidiary,



though constructive, player. However, it was not a dominating player in any area, including East Asia.

Now, this situation varied. Under Secretary Baker, Dennis Ross became Director of S/P. He had had experience with the Near East and he had experience with Russian affairs, and he was well connected politically. Then he had Bill Burns, who was only about 37 but was a super career officer, who had displayed such good judgment in all sorts of other areas.

So S/P has never been an “omnipresent” entity, because usually, when there is a strong Director of S/P, his agenda and that of the Secretary of State are the ones he is most active in. Also, there has always been difficulty with the concept of policy planning. Is S/P a “policy” entity or is it a “coordinating” entity? I mean “coordinating” in the sense of “operations.” “Policy” means that you are more detached from specific actions. There has always been confusion in that aspect. For instance, as I said, Tony Lake tried to be the “resources management coordinator” when he was the Director of *SIP*, meaning that he did most of the negotiations with AID. None of this worked very well because the S/P staff at the time was not suited to deal with these kinds of issues. There was a fine AID officer on the S/P staff under Tony Lake, but S/P institutionally was not suited to this kind of bureaucratic coordination. By contrast, under Secretary Haig, James Buckley was suited to his job as Under Secretary of State for Security Assistance, followed by Bill Sneider. There they developed major roles because they had a clear operational orientation as did their office. They looked to the regional bureaus for input, and were then more effective.

I think that the first thing to say about S/P is that it is what the Secretary of State makes of it. Secondly, its major role and influence in the Department depend on the Director. Thirdly, there is an innate conflict, if not tension, between S/P and the bureaus the closer it becomes involved in ongoing policy-- to “real world” issues.

*Q: All right. Let's stop here, and we'll pick up the next time about your appointment as Ambassador to Thailand. We haven't talked at all about how you got the appointment to Thailand. We'll pick that up the next time.*

*Today is October 29, 1996. We are continuing with the interview of Ambassador Dan O'Donohue. Dan, how did your appointment as Ambassador to Thailand come about? This is a major country--not one where the position of Ambassador just gets “tossed out” as a “reward,” or something like that.*

O'DONOHUE: As I mentioned, I had come back from Burma in March, 1987. I started in S/P as the Deputy Director. Within a few months, by mid-summer, 1987, I was approached about being assigned as Ambassador to Australia. As it turned out--I didn't know the circumstances then--the Ambassador to Australia at the time, a non-career man, had received a very bad inspection report, dealing with his personality. He was debating giving up his position as Ambassador to Canberra. The EA Bureau approached me. I thought that it was unreal in that no non-career Ambassador was going to go there. However, I said that if they wanted to put my name down on the list, go right ahead. Then it turned out that Mort Abramowitz, who was a close friend, was really interested in the post of Ambassador to Australia. Mort was worried about me if he threw his hat

in. I laughingly told him to go right ahead, as neither one of us was going to be appointed to that job.

As it turned out, the incumbent Ambassador stayed on, and that assignment simply evaporated. Within a very short time after that, it turned out that the position of Ambassador to Thailand was coming open. Now, the post of Ambassador to Thailand should have been coming open in accordance with the three-year schedule for the summer of 1988. By this time or maybe by early fall, 1987, the EA Bureau had put up another officer. However, in those days the assignment of senior career officers was still very much a Foreign Service/Department of State function. The process was highly institutionalized. The EA Bureau had put someone else up as Ambassador to Thailand. The group that made the decisions consisted of John Whitehead, the Deputy Secretary of State; Mike Armacost, the Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs; Ron Spiers, the Under Secretary of State for Management; Mel Levitsky; and Charlie Hill, George Shultz's Special Assistant.

*Q: Charlie Hill?*

O'DONOHUE: Charlie Hill played a role. And then George Vest, as Director General was the Executive Secretary of the Committee.

Frankly, in the group of potential Ambassadors to Thailand, as far as three or four of these people were concerned, there was only one officer who could seriously be considered, and that was me. Armacost, Spiers, and Vest picked me. The others agreed quickly. So, as a matter of fact, as the process proceeded, it was a foregone conclusion, given my background. I had served in Thailand as DCM, I had been Deputy Assistant Secretary for Southeast Asian Affairs, and then my service as Ambassador to Burma added to the record. It ended up as a fairly straightforward assignment, unlike the way Ambassadorial appointments are now made, and I was assigned the job. This was about September or October, 1987.

This had its effect as far as my job as Deputy Director of S/P was concerned. After a few months in S/P my thoughts were heavily directed toward Bangkok. The formalities involved in this assignment proceeded quickly enough. I was always puzzled, not so much that I was selected, but that Charlie Hill, with whom I had a good enough relationship, was so easily giving up on Bill Brown. It turned out that this was because they wanted to put Bill Brown in Tel Aviv. So that's why the process seemed to ensure that I would be out in Bangkok in no time, since they were pressing Bill Brown to go to Israel.

Then it went even faster. Once you finish the selection process, which normally takes a few months, it turned out that in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee I had nearly no opponents, and they didn't see any need to have a hearing! So I thought that I would be out in Bangkok in March or April, 1988. Little did I know. There was a combination of factors. First of all, Bill Brown really didn't want to leave Bangkok early despite the pressure on him to move to Israel. On the Hill [Congress] I learned a few lessons from this process. Even though my hearing was waived--I did not have a hearing--I simply paid a courtesy call on the Chairman, Senator Claiborne Pell [Democrat, Rhode Island].

There were people on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, from both parties, who had known me. For slightly different but not conflicting reasons, they were all delighted that I was going to Bangkok. Senator Hatfield [Republican, Oregon] was at the time the ranking Republican on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. He was deeply upset at what he considered Embassy Bangkok's inattention and insensitivity in the handling of Indochinese refugees. Actually, Embassy Bangkok was not particularly sensitive to the plight of Indochinese refugees at this time. Moreover, as I found out when I got out to Thailand, this was more a problem of perception than reality. Consequently Senator Hatfield wanted me out there in Bangkok. On the Democratic side at that time, the people who knew me were favorably inclined. So the view was that, since I had previously been approved as Ambassador to Burma, my qualifications as Ambassador had been established and no hearing was needed.

I thought that I was just sailing along. However, getting Bill Brown out of Bangkok was no easy task, as it later turned out. Also, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee had weekly administrative meetings. For those meetings they had to have a quorum present. Those are the actual meetings which clear things for the Senate floor. Week after week went by, but they were never able to get a quorum for this meeting. By the time my nomination finally got to the floor of the Senate, something like 15 other Ambassadors had caught up with me. I waited for months, with nothing happening. When these nominations got to the Senate floor, Senator Dole [Republican, Kansas, and Republican Leader in the Senate] held them up for a couple of weeks. There was some kind of battle with the White House, so I wasn't approved by the Senate until the beginning of July, 1988.

My meeting with Senator Pell was truly a "throwback" to an earlier, quainter, and nicer age. Since the Senate Foreign Relations Committee had waived my hearings, they thought that it would be appropriate for me to pay a courtesy call on the Chairman of the Committee. I did this. I went up with a representative from "H" [Bureau of Congressional Relations]. Senator Pell had his staff of three or four people. They had prepared their briefing for him. As we sat down, Senator Pell asked me, "Whatever really happened to Jimmy?" His staff was baffled: they didn't know "Jimmy." Well, I knew what he was talking about. Indeed, I had met Jim Thompson's sister in Bangkok years before. So then I picked up and talked about Thompson's sister, whom I had met and had lunch with. Pell's staff was baffled. They wondered what we were talking about.

After a short time, I had mercy on them and got into the conversation the fact that Senator Pell was referring to Jim Thompson, who had been in OSS [Office of Strategic Services] during World War II and had gone to Thailand at the end of the war. He had fallen in love with Thailand, stayed there, and, among other things, was the man who recreated and established the Thai silk industry. He went out into the rural areas of Thailand where the weaving skill still existed. He started showing them new patterns and created a market for Thai silk. He started Jim Thompson's Silks Stores. He was an extremely well known, exotic figure on the Thai scene. Probably, the image was more than the reality. Nonetheless, here was this enigmatic figure and highly successful businessman, living in Southeast Asia. There were suggestions that he was in the intelligence game, and all of that. These things swirled around him and made him one of the more "glamorous" figures in Southeast Asia at a time when there were a lot of exotic figures.

Well, Jim Thompson went off to a holiday with friends at Cameron Highlands in the Federation of Malaya. He walked out of the house where he was staying one afternoon for a smoke and was never seen again. This created a whole aura of mystery about what had happened to him. He was never found--indeed, no remains were ever found. There was all sorts of speculation as to whether this was a result of communist activity, business rivals, or whatever. This was what Senator Pell was referring to. Jim Thompson had actually come from New England. As I said, I had met Thompson's sister, whom Senator Pell knew.

After we had that discussion, I explained that Thompson was obviously dead, but nobody knew how it had happened. The conversation then proceeded in a somewhat eccentric vein, ending up with Senator Pell bringing up the request of a retired Methodist Bishop of Rhode Island, whose son was in Bangkok, married to a Thai and who got into difficulty one night, trying to scale the walls of the American Ambassador's residence, because he wanted to see the Ambassador. Actually, the man had been distraught. His Thai wife's family had tried to "commit" her to an insane asylum. Nonetheless, because of that, Senator Pell was saddled with charging every American Ambassador who went out to Thailand to take care of this American, when the poor man would probably have wanted to have his experience forgotten, not remembered.

*Q: So the system worked.*

O'DONOHUE: It was the last vestige of the old system. Those who made the selection were officers with a fair amount of experience. It was still an "institutional" decision, although in this case not an EA Bureau decision. Deputy Secretary Whitehead had a view and presided over the selection committee, but essentially deferred to the others--not because of timidity, but simply because the other members of the committee knew the career officers concerned. So this system worked well. It's another indication that the last "golden era" of the Foreign Service was under Secretary of State George Shultz.

**ALOYSIUS M. O'NEILL**  
**Chief Consular Officer**  
**Rangoon (1986-1988)**

*Mr. O'Neil was born in South Carolina and raised there and in other states in the U.S. He was educated at the University of Delaware and Heidelberg University. After serving in the US Army in Vietnam, Mr. O'Neill joined the Foreign Service in 1976 and was posted to Korea. He subsequently served three tours in Japan as student of Japanese and Consular and Political Officer. He also served in Burma, Korea and the Philippines as well as in Washington, where he dealt primarily with East Asian and Pacific Affairs. Mr. O'Neill was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 2008.*

*Q: Soviet Military Power which was a gross exaggeration as I recall. Obviously there was a Soviet threat that was not to be discounted, but the fact was that you could take this publication and say in some cases it didn't pass the smell test.*

O'NEILL: It was fascinating. I think I still have one or two copies of it just as a souvenir. This large glossy booklet, Soviet Military Power, was produced every year at least in the Weinberger years. It was sent in large quantities with great fanfare to all U.S. embassies to be distributed to foreign defense attaches and host government offices dealing with military affairs and the Soviets. In many parts, it was a gross exaggeration. The tendency in the book was to count everything that the Soviets had as being of the greatest military importance whether it was a tank or a ballistic missile, etc., then to essentially downplay the U.S. counterparts of that equipment. For example, it would look at vast numbers of tanks and ignore the fact that the Soviets still had many that were post-Korea vintage and were at least obsolescent. Nor do I think it made much mention if at all of Sino-Soviet hostility, their eastern flank. Indeed, the Soviets were prepared to invade the west if needed or if circumstances arose, but there was never a mention of the intense difficulties that the Soviets would have had in dealing with their Warsaw Pact allies like the Czechs, the Hungarians, the Poles and to a lesser extent the East Germans.

That was not a pamphlet that put much weight on NATO and the strengths that NATO brought to us and our other alliances, too, with Australia and Japan and Korea, etc. It was the U.S. vs. the Soviet Union on a world scale. I always considered it a DOD budget document as much as anything else. It was a way to say to Congress "We're just completely defenseless. You need to double our defense budget now and give us everything we want." It was emblematic of the time.

*Q: It's probably a place to turn when you went to...after two years there?*

O'NEILL: Right. I fled from the Department after 23 months to an assignment in Rangoon as the consular section chief. There were a lot of reasons for this. I had come into the Foreign Service as a consular cone officer. When I took the written exam in 1974, you had to take the functional field test in one of the cones. For a variety of reasons, I took it in the consular cone. I was ignorant of what the Foreign Service was and how it was structured, etc. I really had no familiarity with the Foreign Service. Anyway, I'd come in as a consular officer. As soon as my class entered in 1976 the personnel people told us that there was no cone system for junior FSOs which, in fact was untrue. Nonetheless, I had this consular cone designation all along, but I'd only done consular work in my very first year in Seoul. Thereafter I'd been either an ambassador's aide or a political officer of one stripe or another.

George Vest, one of the great directors general of the Foreign Service, had come up with the idea of a multi-functional promotion system for people who weren't often working in their specific cones. It was a way of reducing the rigidity of the cone system and allowing for a little bit of realism so a person could compete for promotions the outside of his specific cone under certain restrictions. Well, "the system" quickly grabbed hold of this and began putting into place implementing regulations which undercut George Vest's wonderful idea. I learned indirectly that he was quite frustrated by this development.

I realized several things. First, that I was not going to get promoted any further unless I did consular work after an absence of eight years. Two, I had not had a hardship assignment, and I thought the best thing to do would be to go to a hardship post that I wanted to serve in rather than have the Department send me to Lower Slobovia or Atlantis where I didn't want to serve.

Rangoon was a 25% differential post, then the top hardship rating. Also, I wanted a section chief's job plus, as I mentioned, my father had been in Burma in the Army Air Forces at the end of World War II, and I'd grown up on Burma stories, hearing about places like Myitkyina, Shingbuiyang and Lashio. Once in 1945, my father was rescued from the jungle by Kachin tribesmen after he had to bail out of a crippled transport plane. As another factor, I knew from people who had served in Rangoon that the international elementary school was remarkably good despite its modest circumstances. The teachers were terrific, and as my son was going into seventh grade, this was another attraction. The upshot was that I got the assignment as consular section chief from 1986 to 1988.

It was a fascinating assignment in a lot of ways. People used to ask "What's the time difference between Bangkok and Rangoon?" The joke answer was 50 years. In fact, it was 30 minutes, because the Ne Win regime had decreed that time difference as one more way to separate Burma from its neighbors. Ne Win had been in power since 1963. He was very xenophobic and had pushed out all the foreign missionaries who had been in Burma since the 1800s, had pushed out almost all the foreign companies, at least the ones that were resident there as distinct from ones that might be operating on, say, Asian Development Bank or UN projects on a temporary basis.

My wife and son and I arrived in Rangoon in August 1986 at either the height or the depths of the rainy season depending on how you want to look at it. That year we had 120 inches of rain — 10 feet — in Rangoon from the beginning of June to the end of October which was not an unusual rainfall. Burma being a tropical country you had three seasons: dry, hot, and rainy in sequence.

Rangoon was a 25% hardship differential post largely because it was so isolated and because the military government was so restrictive but also there were major health hazards. If you think of central Africa as the health environment of Burma, you get a good picture. Almost every disease known to mankind was endemic there including things like polio and measles, not to mention typhus and malaria in areas north of Rangoon. For a variety of reasons, I had a lot of contact with the embassy doctor Eldon Bell. We used to talk about what I called the "comprehensive disease program." There was almost nothing you couldn't get except yellow fever which is a Western Hemisphere disease. So keeping yourself and your family from getting too sick too often was a major task, although everybody got sick fairly regularly. The idea was to manage the severity and the frequency of whatever illnesses you got.

The diseases we were concerned about were endemic among the Burmese. I once asked a Burmese pediatric surgeon about the main types of operations that he and his pediatric surgical colleagues performed. One was repairing cleft palates. Another category was children whose stomachs were so impacted by worms that they couldn't eat and would starve to death without surgery. Medical care throughout the country was rudimentary unless you were a senior military person or a senior member of the Burma Socialist Program Party in which case you might have pretty good medical care, but even that was dicey.

I became friendly with the Anglican archbishop of Burma who was an ethnic Karen, Archbishop Gregory Hla Gyaw. We had him and his wife over for dinner a couple of times. He used to see me with visa cases of at least reasonable merit. His *bona fides* added merit to the case, and that's

how I first met him. He was a tragic example of the medical system there. Once I went one time to Bangkok to get some dental work done. We didn't dare get dental work done in Burma, and we would always go to the Joint U.S. Military Advisory Group — JUSMAG — in the embassy in Thailand, which had a dentist. When I got back a week later from one trip Archbishop Gregory was dead.

He was diagnosed with an allegedly cancerous kidney. There was an operation to remove the kidney, which turned out not to be cancerous. While he was trying to recover in the hospital, he died, and that was that. He was I guess in his late 40's or so. It was really quite tragic. That kind of thing just happened all the time.

The whole business of having nannies taking care of kids was a health concern. Parents always had to be terribly concerned about what the nannies might feed the kids because for example kids got typhoid fever easily if they ate Burmese ice cream. Typhoid fever was a constant problem among the children at Embassy Rangoon.

At that time, of course, by the time I got there I'd spent two and a half years in Vietnam, two years in Korea and four in Japan, so I had a certain amount of experience with Asia. But the Rangoon experience opened whole new vistas. The Burma desk officer at the time referred to Burma as "the world's largest outdoor museum" because it was so locked in the past. You entered Burma from Bangkok by air because all the land borders of Burma, with Thailand, Laos, China, Bangladesh, and India were closed, because the Burmese government didn't control their border areas. They were all in the hands of either ethnic insurgent groups that had been fighting for autonomy since the 1940s or '50s or held by the Burma Communist Party in some parts of far northern Burma.

The many ethnic rebels did not want to overthrow the central government. They wanted to get the majority Burmans off their backs and have autonomy or independence in their traditional ethnic areas. These struggles had been going on decades before I got there, and were still going on after I left.

Burma was a fascinating place, and people who served in Rangoon at whatever time, when they find a fellow Rangoon survivor will talk about it for quite a while. This is partly because it didn't change very much no matter when you were there, and because it is so different from almost every place else they had ever served. It was and is a deeply Buddhist country. The overwhelming majority of all Burmese whether they were from the Burman majority or not, were Buddhists. Some of the other ethnic groups were Christian. For example, one of the major subgroups of the Karen ethnic group was largely Christian, partly because of American missionaries going back to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

*Q: The name Seagraves sticks in my mind.*

O'NEILL: Doctor Gordon Seagraves was a Christian medical missionary particularly among the Kachins of the northern highlands of Burma before and in the early years of World War II. He was still during his work as a medical missionary in 1942. When the Japanese invaded he retreated from Burma with American and Chinese and Burmese under the leadership of

Lieutenant General Joseph “Vinegar Joe” Stilwell. Seagraves later wrote a book called Burma Surgeon about his work.

After he took power in 1962, General Ne Win established what he called Burma Socialist Program and Party the BSPP, and put forward the so-called “Burmese way to socialism.” In many ways, in terms of the economic and political structure, all that differentiated Burma from communist countries was that Ne Win hated communists, and he decreed that Burma wasn’t a communist country. In fact, one of his great rivals from years past was the Burma Communist Party which was largely either underground or in the jungle in the north in those years. However, in terms of his harsh one-party rule and economic autarky, it was difficult to distinguish the main structures of Burmese politics and economics from a communist country.

Ne Win was a charismatic figure, a very frightening figure for Burmese. Burmese almost never spoke his name. They normally just referred to him as Number One. He terrified most of the people who worked for him. By the time I got there in 1986 Ne Win had given up his position as the president of Burma and retained supreme leadership as chairman of the BSPP. The president, such as he was, was another general named San Yu, a man who gave new meaning to the word “nonentity.” His job was to meet foreign dignitaries, which is one of the reasons why Ne Win ditched the job of president. He didn’t want to do that. San Yu’s other major function seemed to be to look on with rapt attention as Ne Win gave “necessary guidance” about something or other. A scene like that was usually the top photograph on the front page of the newspapers every morning. As you know, Kim Il-Sung used to give on-the-spot guidance, and his son still does. Well, Ne Win gave “necessary guidance,” which was the same thing.

The embassy was relatively small — by U.S. standards. We had about 55 Americans I think. There was a combined political-economic section in addition to the consular section. The U.S. Information Service had a fairly large operation, mostly Burmese employees trying to get our word out to the Burmese population. AID, the Agency for International Development, had a pretty large presence there. There were not that many American AID officers but quite a large number of contractors throughout the country on projects like cooking oil production and cultivation of edible beans. There were also some projects that were, I think, largely funded by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) in aquaculture, particularly shrimp farming, and a few road building projects.

Rangoon was an interesting place. It was, of course, very run down. There were many buildings that the British had put up. Rangoon had not been a Burmese capital. It was a British capital, founded by the British when they completed the takeover of Burma in a three-stage process from the 1820’s through the 1880’s. The traditional Burman capitals were up country in places like Pagan, Mandalay, and Ava, far from the coast and reached from the south only by boat up the Irrawaddy River.

The Burman kings were traditionally xenophobic just like Ne Win and his successor generals, and they wanted to keep themselves as far away from foreign influences as they could. In Rangoon, you were more likely to encounter large British style colonial building than you would in other parts of the country. Those buildings, whether they were government buildings, churches,



or hospitals, etc., were still in use but were in great disrepair. They had been built long before the advent of air conditioning and it showed.

There was a small foreign community. If you totaled up the foreigners in Burma during that time, they probably didn't number more than a thousand or twelve hundred in the entire country, almost all in Rangoon. They were almost exclusively diplomats and UN personnel. UNDP and UNICEF were there. They had a lot of work to do.

The foreign community was quite close because it was so small and concentrated in Rangoon. You were always going to various embassies' parties. Most of the embassies were quite small. A lot of them like the Egyptian and Israeli embassies, for example, had just an ambassador and a single junior officer. We, the Japanese and the British had much larger embassies. The Koreans had a fair size embassy, partly because, as in the case of the Japanese, there were several Korean companies working on either road or dam building projects, UNDP or ADB-funded projects. Of course, the Japanese had equities there going back to World War II when they took over the country.

Most of my work in the consular section was fairly routine. We did a lot of non-immigrant visa work, almost exclusively for Burmese officials who were going to the United States on exchange programs of some kind. There were relatively few visitor visas because the Burmese were not allowed out of the country for visiting. Consular work in Burma gave you a good view into the oppressive nature of the Burmese government and the internal prejudices that were institutionalized in Burma. Basically, if you were of Bengali or Indian or Chinese or Perian descent in Burma, you were almost always considered a foreigner by law. It didn't matter how many generations you and your family had been in Burma. To be considered a natural-born Burmese citizen and to escape being designated as a foreigner, you had to have been born to an ethnic group that was within the borders of present-day Burma by 1823. Eighteen twenty-four was the first British invasion of Burma, the first of a succession of three invasions that ultimately resulted in the conquest of Burma. Anybody else was a foreigner.

Those foreigners had additional restrictions on their ability to move from one place in Burma to another, and that was really important because your residence certificate got you your ration card for your government allocation of cooking oil grain, etc. But even Burmese citizens had to resort to what we knew to be fraud, say, to visit somebody, a friend, or a relative in the States, because that person had to get a work passport to depart. In Burma there were only two types of ordinary passports. One was for emigration in which you'd be leaving Burma permanently, and the other was a "work passport" which would allow you to earn foreign exchange abroad which you would then bring back to enrich Burma. At one point in 1988 a couple of months before I left, Burma's total foreign exchange reserves amounted to a mere \$13 million. That was it. So getting foreign exchange into the country was a big thing. The government was willing to do anything they could to earn foreign exchange. One of the most sought after jobs in Burma was as a merchant seaman or "shippy" as they were called. They were among the most eligible bachelors in Burma. Even cabinet members' sons wanted merchant seaman certificates to be able to get out of the country and earn foreign exchange. If merchant seamen were out of the country a certain number of months then they could import things like stereo equipment, maybe a motor cycle or motor bike, etc. If they were out longer they could perhaps even import a small used sedan, a

Toyota or a little mini truck of some kind which they could convert into a taxi. They could hire somebody as a taxi driver and earn money from that. Being a merchant seaman was very desirable.

Other Burmese who wanted, say, to go to the U.S. to visit had to bring us a work passport with what we knew to be a fraudulent job offer of some kind what they had used to get the passport. Interestingly, too, in Burma the passport issuing authority was not the Foreign Ministry or even the Ministry of Justice. It was police special branch, the intelligence arm of the national police. That illustrated how the government viewed their citizens when they were trying to get passports.

*Q: Did you learn to turn a blind eye on these fake documents?*

O'NEILL: Absolutely. In fact, we would tell people, "Whatever you do, don't show it to the INS inspector at the port of entry. We know you're going as a visitor." We would give them combined business and visitor visas. That was the only way, and you really went into extra gyrations for people who were emigrating from Burma going to the U.S. as immigrants. Most of the immigrant visas that we issued were for brothers and sisters of American citizens or parents of American citizens. The Burmese government would tolerate emigration for ethnic Burmans and would issue a passport for that purpose, so we didn't usually have too much trouble with processing those. When it came to foreigners, say, Chinese or Indians, they couldn't get a passport because they were stateless. The only thing that the Burmese government would give them was ... I think it was called Foreigners Emigration Certificate. It was a large sheet of brown paper on which the person's passport photo was affixed. Printed on it in large letters was the main point: The bearer is "is leaving Burma for good," and would have no right of return to Burma under any circumstances, including the death of a parent. That was not a travel document as we know them, so we wound up having to get an U.S. INS waiver for those people.

*Q: Was there a Burmese-American community anywhere?*

O'NEILL: Nothing concentrated that I know of. I would guess in California there may well have been, but the concentration of Burmese of various different ethnic groups was not large. Most of the people who emigrated to my recollection were from the minority groups, mostly Karens, many of whom were Christians. The majority of the emigrants to my recollection were not ethnic Burmans but from the other groups: the Karens, the Kachins, Chins, and Mon, for example, and Chinese and Indians who had been born in Burma.

One of the people that I issued an immigrant visa to was the father of one of our FSNs, Foreign Service Nationals. He was a legendary figure, a Kachin, Major Duwa Shan Lone who had fought against the Japanese during WWII and was very highly decorated by the British. He had both their Distinguished Service Order and their Military Cross. The British were very stingy with decorations, even to British officers, and these were among their top military decorations for valor in combat. The DSO was for sustained valor over a long period of combat. The Military Cross was more likely given for a single instance of bravery. Major Shane Lone was a hereditary Kachin chief and his daughter Elizabeth worked for us in the embassy.

There were lots of vestiges of World War II around. There was a large British Commonwealth War Graves cemetery north of Rangoon Airport, and every year there would be a ceremony on November 11, Remembrance Day for the British, Veterans Day for us. The Commonwealth military attachés and the American military attachés and I would go and others would, too, for a small ceremony to commemorate the thousands who were killed in the Burma campaign in World War II. People who had served during World War II were all around. One of the clergymen that I knew was also another Karen, an Anglican canon whose name was John Matthews. Canon Matthews had been a chaplain with the British Army's Border Regiment during World War II. He was still with the Anglican Cathedral in Rangoon.

Let me speak a little bit about the American services part of consular work in Rangoon, which was quite strange. There were severe restrictions by the Burmese government on tourists and where they could go. At that time tourists could come into Burma for a week's stay normally. In those days about 42,000 tourists per year would come into Burma, from all countries. Americans were, oddly enough, the largest group, usually 5,000 to 6,000 out of the 42,000.

These folks would usually come in on the Thai International flight that flew three days a week. Sometimes they'd come in on Burma Airways Corporation, BAC, which had a total of three Fokker-28 twin jet, 60 passenger planes they used for their international flights. Very few airlines served Burma in those days outside of those two. The others were Nepal Airlines, Aeroflot, CAC the Chinese central airline, and Biman the Bangladeshi airline, so that didn't give you a lot of choice. If you wanted to be sure of surviving your flight, you flew Thai International. It was certainly then and perhaps is now one of the best airlines in the world. As you may imagine, BAC was not.

The American tourists were a mixed bag. Some of them were coming in on package tours and were taken around to the main tourist spots. Others were backpackers, and they would come in with a small amount of cash, their backpack, and several bottles of Johnny Walker Red and several cartons of 5-5-5 cigarettes, which was the real financing of their trip around Burma. They were still restricted to the seven day stay, but they were more likely to go out in the areas there the Burmese government prohibited foreigners to be, and that sometimes caused some problems for us.

One of the odd things about the Burmese situation was that a lost passport was not particularly the crisis that it was in other countries. To my recollection, every single stolen U.S. passport during those two years was ultimately mailed back to the embassy by the thief because what they were trying to steal was the camera or purse for the money. They weren't trying to steal the passport. It really had no value to them. When someone would come in and say, "My passport's been stolen along with my purse, my camera bag," it was, even if our computers were down, was pretty easy to figure out that the person was, indeed, an American. You could check with Burmese immigration. They were a little lethargic, but they were usually reasonably responsive. You could figure this out in no time and issue the person a new passport.

There were times when this adventurism on the part of backpackers would cause problems. One time an American tourist had along with I think two Austrians and another European had rented a Jeep with driver in Rangoon because they wanted to drive up towards Pagan, the great old

capital along the Irrawaddy River. That was an area where foreigners were not allowed to drive to. The Jeep blew a tire and flipped over, broke the driver's back, killed at least one of the Europeans. The American had a broken pelvis and a number of broken ribs. He endured what I imagine was a wide-awake ambulance ride from the scene of the accident to Magwe, far from Rangoon, where we learned through Tourist Burma that the man was hospitalized. Amazingly, I reached the hospital by telephone and talked to the chief doctor who was very kind. He told me they were doing everything they could to take care of this American. Magwe was served once a week by a BAC Fokker-27 and fortunately, the next flight was in a day or two. They arranged not only to put him on the plane down to Rangoon but also had a nurse go with him. Nobody ever mentioned any expense, either for the nurse or the flight. Doctor Bell and I with a couple of Burmese from the embassy went out to Rangoon Airport to meet this character and take him to Rangoon General Hospital.

Rangoon General Hospital was this enormous sprawling sandstone confection put up by the British sometime I would guess in the 1880s or 1890s. It had multi-layers of dark red and lighter colored sandstone with pseudo-Mogul architectural flourishes here and there. Alas, the British did not put in screens or window glass, nor had the Burmese thought to do this in the 40 years or so since the British had left.

As we were bundling the man out of the embassy van and getting him into a wheelchair to move him into the ward, I looked down one of the open corridors in the hospital, and I saw this little dog which aroused itself from its nap, shook itself off, and wandered farther down the corridor. We got him upstairs, and as you're going up the wide stone staircases in Rangoon General, you pass family members who are camping out in the hospital hallways and stairs because they have to provide food to the family members who are patients. As we were going down one ward, we saw birds flying around inside and geckoes on the wall. We were being helped by the local representative of Tourist Burma a wonderful fellow, Saw Nimrod Paw, a Karen and a Baptist. He kept saying "Don't worry. All the nurses on this ward are Karens. They'll take great care of him."

The next morning I went back to bring the man some magazines. As I was approaching the nurse's station ahead of his ward, a kitten ran out of the head nurse's office and jumped into a drawer of the desk in front of the office. I went on past and there was our man and, indeed, there were two or three Karen nurses with him. Saw N. Paw was hovering over him making sure he was all right.

Fortunately despite the broken pelvis and the cracked ribs, the American was able to sit up and so we were able to get him on the next Thai International flight to Bangkok and out of my consular district. I never again heard a word from him. No note of thanks to Eldon Bell or to the Tourist Burma people who helped him. To the best of my knowledge, he was never billed for the flight down to Rangoon, for the nurse, or anything else. The Burmese could be extremely nice people.

*Q: You keep mentioning being assured there were Karen nurses. Was this significant?*

O'NEILL: Well, Saw N. Paw was just trying to assure us that this American would be well taken care of. I didn't infer from him that a Burman nurse would have treated him badly or anything like that. It's just that was his way of assuring us that this American would be in good hands, since he was a Karen too.

Burma's just a very strange place. Of the 21 years that I spent in Asia, it was the strangest place that I ever lived. Fascinating in its own way, but it certainly had its trials and restrictions. Again, the threat of various fascinating tropical diseases was very real. One embassy personnel officer came down with amoebic dysentery and was quite disabled for a long time. An embassy secretary got hepatitis which was omnipresent in Burma in various forms. Many Burmese died of hepatitis. My wife got one of the many kinds of typhoid, which made her quite sick and once my son had intestinal worms and later a serious rash caused by bug bites. As I mentioned, typhoid fever was also a common problem among the embassy's children and there were so many varieties in Burma that inoculations were of no real use.

*Q: What about your son? This must have been anxious for you all.*

O'NEILL: It was something everybody thought about and you just kind of tried to prevent problems by being watchful. He was a seventh and eighth grader, and a particularly mature one. He was quite alert to that kind of thing. Younger kids would not necessarily be.

Speaking of the elementary school, one of the interesting things was that International School in Rangoon's — ISR — faculty was largely Burmese. They had an American principal. That was an example of the Burmese cooperating in circumventing a regulation that they had made. You couldn't openly hire an expatriate principal for an international school, so we had to hire an American, usually a person whose spouse was also a qualified teacher. The State Department would give that person an official passport, a maroon passport as the U.S. embassy's "education attaché" and wife would be the assistant attaché for education. They were so listed on the Rangoon diplomatic list. The Burmese had to know what it was all about because the Burmese military intelligence apparatus was omnipresent and yet they played along. That was part of the weirdness of Burma.

The Burmese teachers at ISR were by and large wonderful. They had grown up in the British education system, and they imbibed all that. Things like elocution contests were part of the curriculum. I want to tip my hat to the British in the field of education. The ISR faculty recognized that there was almost nothing safe for kids to do in Rangoon outside of the school environment or the embassy compound environments, and so they really went all out to arrange all sorts of activities to keep the kids occupied and interested. This included a science fair every year and the elocution contest I mentioned which was a big deal at the elementary school level. Finalists were judged in a competition in the U.S. Embassy Club, and there were trophies for the winners.

The school faculty really stepped up to their unusually manifold responsibilities, which was one of the things that drew me to Rangoon. Then there were school trips here and there to Upper Burma, to places like Pagan, Mandalay, and Taunggyi. It was really a terrific experience for my son and also a real eye-opener for him because he was old enough to realize the difference

between the way we lived and the way the overwhelming majority of Burmese lived which was in real hand-to-mouth poverty.

*Q: Who was the ambassador when you were there?*

O'NEILL: I had two ambassadors and two DCMs. When I got there the ambassador was Daniel O'Donohue, a long time East Asia hand. He was succeeded after a year by Burton Levin who was a China hand, who had also been DCM in Bangkok.

*Q: How did you find Daniel O'Donohue because I've heard he doesn't have the greatest reputation by people who worked under him? I was wondering what you thought of him.*

O'NEILL: He was an extremely intelligent person, but he was not a good leader. Usually when we would be in discussion with him, whatever the subject, he started off his response by saying, "You're not thinking . . .," and then he would elaborate. It didn't matter who he was speaking to, including his DCM. He was a micro-manager to say the least. And he would, as I recall, approve every single cable that went out of the embassy regardless of the subject. Eventually, as the consular section chief I gained his confidence to the degree that I could sign out on my own the cables that returned immigrant visa numbers to the Department at the end of every month.

*Q: Which is as routine as it comes.*

O'NEILL: I don't recall that anybody else had that amount of liberty and leeway in signing out cables. That had a distinctly negative effect on embassy morale. As I say, he was very smart. He had a good grasp of the Burmese situation, and he was very energetic.

*Q: Was Aung San Suu Kyi a factor while you were there?*

O'NEILL: She arrived in May of '88 just months before I left. She had been at Oxford for years, having married a Brit who was a professor of Tibetan studies. They had two sons. She was the daughter of Aung San the great Burmese independence hero who had been allied with the Japanese. When the British reinvaded under General Bill Slim in '44 and '45, Aung San told the Japanese that he was marching his Burma Independence Army northward to confront the British. They said, "Great idea." He went off and promptly surrendered his forces to General Slim. Slim said to him, "You're just doing this because you know we're going to win," and Aung San, who then was a very young man said, "You're right. Absolutely." This won Slim over very quickly. Believe it or not, the day Aung San marched off to surrender to Slim was still celebrated as Burmese armed forces day.

Sadly, Aung San was assassinated by a right-wing rival before he could become the first prime minister of an independent Burma. That was a real disaster because Aung San, though he was from the Burman ethnic majority was one of the very few Burmans, and certainly one of the few Burman political leaders, who had actually won the confidence of the Chins, Karens, Kachins and Mons and all the rest of the minority peoples of Burma. Had he lived and become prime minister there is every reason to believe that the history of Burma would have been quite different from the mess that it has been.

Aung San's daughter was their only child, the only one I ever heard of, anyway. In May 1988 her mother became terminally ill in her 80s. Aung San Suu Kyi came back for that purpose and then in a couple of months got caught up in the democratization movement, which she has inspired ever since. The embassy was aware that she had arrived...

*Q: But she wasn't a factor.*

O'NEILL: There was nothing for her to be a factor in, so to speak, at that point, although... I shouldn't quite say that. She had no intention of getting absorbed into the Burmese political scene that I'm aware of. This is kind of jumping to the end of the story a little bit, but she arrived at a time when Burma was going through a cycle of major demonstrations of increasing intensity and decreasing duration between the episodes. We'll get into that later, but she was not the political factor that she became starting the month after I left.

We'd jumped to May of '88. Let me mention just a couple of things that I got involved in, my major preoccupations, one of which was this increasing cycle of violence which ultimately led to the major blowup in August of '88, the month after I left Burma; the month that I arrived in Seoul.

Repression was the norm in Burma for decades under Ne Win, and one of the things that the government without warning on the first Saturday in September 1987 was to demonetize most of the currency. Some years before, I think it was in 1985, the largest currency note was 100 kyat which was demonetized by decree. At the official rate it was about \$16.00. Ne Win established the official rate at 6.25 kyat per dollar, which was a basically meaningless figure. But he decreed that there was no inflation in Burma, so he set the kyat rate. When we arrived, the so-called "free market" rate was about 27 or 28 kyat to the dollar and when we left two years later it was about 40-45 kyat per dollar. There had been rumors for quite a few months in '87 of another demonetization but nobody knew what was going to be demonetized or when.

*Q: When you say demonetize...*

O'NEILL: To demonetize meant that the certain currency notes would be declared no longer legal tender, would be scrap paper. It would be like the U.S. government saying that the 100 dollar bill was no longer of any value.

Without warning, these rumors would peak and then peak and fall, and then peak and fall. At one of the troughs in this rumor cycle the Burmese government struck, on the first Saturday in September in 1987. What they did was vastly more sweeping than they had done before with the 100 kyat note which was never replaced. They demonetized the top three remaining currency notes: the 75, 35 and 25 kyat notes were immediately no longer legal tender. This left the 15, 10, and five kyat notes, and the rest were just coins. To make it even worse, the decree said there would be no restitution for the demonetized notes. If you had those valueless notes, they were simply compost.

When they demonetized the 100 kyat in 1985, ordinary people could turn in 100s and get a 75 and a 25, for example, in return. No restitution this time. The only concession was that the government would pay the army and the civil service their August pay — which they had just received — in legal tender: 15, 10, and five kyat notes. But for everybody else it was too bad.

Obviously, all the embassies had large holdings of these demonetized notes. The embassies collectively went to the foreign ministry and that it would violate the Vienna Conventions if the embassies were not reimbursed. Ultimately the Burmese government had to acquiesce in the embassies' taking duffel bags full of demonetized paper down to the Myanmar Central Bank (as it was even called in those days), to be exchanged. The demonetization, particularly the brutality of simply wiping out people's savings which they didn't put in banks, began a process that led to a real explosion over the following year, followed by even greater repression.

It happened that that weekend I was the control officer for a group of senate staff members. I think they were from a subcommittee on refugees. On the Saturday of the demonetization announcement, I was supposed to take them out for lunch at a Burmese restaurant which was a very hazardous thing to do in and of itself, but nonetheless, we were going to do it. (Hazardous for health reasons.) In Rangoon restaurants, you always brought your own ice, forks and spoons and chopsticks, and the restaurateurs, if they minded, didn't indicate that they did. Anyhow, I told the owner that we didn't have any valid Burmese currency. Could I give them U.S. dollars? He said that was against the law and he was afraid to take them. I showed him my diplomatic ID and said I would give him whatever the kyat equivalent was in the coming week which I did. Our visitors got an instant introduction to Burma.

Following this whole brutal demonetization process, anti-government ferment was bubbling below the surface. However, it got promptly overlaid in my life by something entirely different, my biggest American services case. Early every morning, seven days a week, a twin engine 44 passenger Fokker-27 turboprop would take off from Rangoon and make a circular flight to Pagan to Mandalay to Taunggyi, then back to Rangoon. It would repeat the circuit in the afternoon. On the Sunday of Columbus Day weekend 1987, that morning flight hit a ridge near Pagan, in fact, the only elevation anywhere near Pagan, which was on the broad Irrawaddy plain. The plane flipped over and went down the ridge killing all 49 people on board including 14 Americans.

This started something that carried me through the remaining nine months of my time in Rangoon. Under normal circumstances a plane crash, even a relatively small one like this, would be a tragedy. It was an extremely complicated major tragedy in the case of Burma. None of the Americans had any relatives or contacts in Burma. In fact, most of them were travel agents or tour guides mostly from California who were being invited by one of the big tourist agencies in Bangkok to look at Burma as another tourist destination. In addition to the Burmese crew and Burmese passengers including a baby which was the 49<sup>th</sup> person killed, there were 14 Americans. There was also one Thai and there were Australians, Swiss, Germans, French and Brits, 36 foreigners in all.

Unfortunately there was one local connection. Heather Harvey, the Australian vice consul, lost her father and stepmother in that crash. She had seen them off that morning at the airport. Heather was devastated and had to be flown back to Australia right away. From Ambassador



Burton Levin to Chris Szymanski the DCM, to the defense attaché's office, everybody was extremely helpful to me. Eldon Bell, the doctor and the GSO people-General Services Office people who dealt with logistics matters — were tremendously helpful to me in sorting out what was a real mess. Because we had the largest number of foreigners involved and could call on outside resources, we were the ones that had the lead for all the embassies.

The bodies and everything else, the plane, personal effects, etc., were in central Burma outside Pagan in an inaccessible place. The people who did get to it first were the local villagers, followed by the police. The police got the bodies over to Pagan airport from which Burma Airways flew the bodies down to Rangoon on the afternoon of the next day. We were immediately in contact with the American citizen services office in the Department's bureau of consular affairs to get help. We had no idea who the U.S. victims were, first of all, and we were trying to find that out from immigration records and flight manifests on that Sunday. We learned very quickly that there were numerous errors in the flight manifest both in terms of names and their alleged nationality.

The two planes with the bodies on them came down on Monday, the next day, and when they approached, consular officers from different embassies were on the tarmac with police and army officers and other officials. The smell of the bodies just came wafting over us as the planes pulled up. I don't know how the crews could stand the 45 minute flight down from Pagan, but they did.

About 40 hours elapsed between the time of the crash and the time the very first bodies got refrigerated at all. Of course, the condition of the bodies was very bad. You can imagine: the plane flipped over on its back and then went down a nearly mile-long ridge so the bodies were in extremely bad shape. A lot of them were decapitated. The only good thing was everybody died instantly. They could barely have had any idea that anything was wrong when the left wingtip clipped the ridge. It was a mess, trying to identify all the bodies, the different national views on what constituted identification, starting with the Burmese and going through the Swiss and others, as well as the complications of dealing with the Burmese government. I think there were five ministries involved including Foreign Affairs, Transportation, Health, Home and Religious Affairs (which included police and immigration).

The command from Ne Win to the Burmese officials was that those bodies which they had gotten on Monday would be identified by Tuesday morning at 6 o'clock. Despite a lot of flaws in their procedures, the Burmese did some very useful work, Tourist Burma and the police in particular. Not all the bodies had hands, you realize, but in those cases where they could, they took fingerprints, and that proved to be enormously helpful later.

Under that order from "Number One," the working level officials brought to the morgue at Rangoon General the Tourist Burma ladies who had helped see the plane off at the airport that morning to help identify these bodies which, of course, produced nothing of any use. By six on Tuesday morning they told us the foreigners were all identified. Almost all the so-called identifications that they did under such duress were proved totally erroneous in the following weeks.

Meanwhile, we were working through the State Department to get FBI fingerprint experts out of Washington and also army forensic identification specialists from CILHI, the U.S. Army Central Identification Laboratory in Hawaii. They normally worked on identification of war remains from World War II, Vietnam, Korea, etc. We were dealing with deep suspicions on the part of the Burmese that these U.S. officials were coming in to investigate them or to investigate the crash itself which they considered their sovereign responsibility.

We were constantly hampered, among other things, by the fact that it was not unusual to take two and a half hours to get a phone call through to the States. Burma had a manual phone system. You had to contact an international operator from your house to start the call. Getting cut off in mid-call was not unusual, which added to the frustration. While there were certain things that we could do by cable, there were things that we really needed to do by phone.

At one point, we lost track of the FBI team of five or six forensic experts and a special agent. They were supposed to arrive on Monday a week after the crash. We didn't know where they were and nobody else knew either. All of a sudden they showed up on the Thai International flight on Tuesday. They had managed somehow to get hold of a Burmese embassy officer in Bangkok after hours which was an extraordinary achievement, get visas, and get into Burma.

They came in, though, with a video camera which was a normal tool of their forensic work. One of Ne Win's decrees was that no video cameras could be brought into the country by anybody for any reason. Right there in the airport, we got into a great discussion with the Burmese officials over what to do. Ultimately, we agreed that the FBI camera had to be impounded at the airport but they would allow a Burmese state television crew to go to the mortuaries to tape their identification work. In other words, bless their little hearts, the Burmese did find a way for the FBI people to do what they normally did in these crash situations, but they just didn't do it the way we originally planned.

The CILHI, the U.S. Army Central Identification Laboratory in Hawaii sent two experts, one of whom was the Army's only forensic dentist, and a civilian woman who was a forensic anthropologist. They did amazing work and so did the FBI people. We were encountering endless difficulties with the various Burmese bureaucracies over all sorts of things. When the bodies were removed from the crash site, none had any identification on them at all. They had no wallets, they had no passports. I was initially surprised at this when Dr. Eldon Bell and I first met with the police surgeon at Rangoon General Hospital, to start discussing what could be done about identification. By the way, Eldon brought with him a couple of boxes of ordinary surgical latex gloves as a little present for Dr. Bah Choon, the police surgeon (the chief of forensics). He said "This is a precious gift." I'll never forget the words.

We learned later was that the first villagers on the scene had looted all the bodies, so there were passports and wallets and ID cards scattered all over the crash site. Eventually we got all those effects, or at least most of them, but there was no association between body X and a passport and wallet.

Over the next several weeks the identification process went on even after the American experts left. One thing they did which both showed their professionalism, the FBI and Army, and also

helped grease the skids a great deal, is that they invited the Burmese counterpart experts involved in every part of the process. Another helpful thing was that most of the American dead were from California, and the Department of Motor Vehicles had taken fingerprints as part of the licensing process. For the Californian victims, once we got those fingerprint records that was a big help.

The foreigners had come from a stay in Thailand and had left a lot of luggage in the famed Oriental Hotel in Bangkok. With the help of our embassy in Bangkok, the FBI got permission to go into their luggage at the Oriental. They were able to bring out things like airline menus and other paper items from specific identified baggage. They lifted fingerprints off those menus, and using the fingerprint records that the Burmese had taken the night that the bodies came down from Pagan, they were able to identify quite a number of American victims. Others were eventually identified by dental records where such existed. Some of the bodies did have intact jaws, fortunately. It was relatively easy to rule out a number of the Burmese simply by dress if nothing else. The air crew's uniforms and bodies in *longyis* (sarongs) put them in the Burmese category.

Throughout the months we dealt with the crash, we got absolutely crucial support from the embassy in Bangkok, especially the consul general in Bangkok, David Lyon and his ACS — American Citizen Services — staff. David offered Ed Wehrle, one of his ACS officers, to help out for about a week, without my asking.

In any case, we had huge problems on the diplomatic side, because of the wildly different standards of identification among the various embassies involved. Frankly, the Swiss simply wanted ashes in urns, and they didn't care what whose they were or where the ashes had come from. They wanted ashes in urns with the name of each Swiss on it, and that was it. There was no resident Swiss embassy in Rangoon. Initially they sent a vice consul from Bangkok to be on hand for a bit.

As it happened, Phil Henry, my Australian counterpart, and I went out together to Kyandaw Cemetery which is where the main crematory was and also the mortuary where some of the bodies were kept. We happened to run into this young Swiss officer, and I just casually asked him, "How long do you plan on being here?" He said, "As soon as I get all the Swiss cremated, I'm going back to Bangkok." I said, "Nobody is going to be cremating anybody until all the embassies are completely satisfied that the identifications are as certain as possible." Phil said, "You're right, mate." We thought that was clear.

A day or so later I was trying to find this young Swiss officer, and I called an Anglo-Burman named Leo Nichols. He acted as the honorary consul for a number of the Nordic embassies and the Swiss and others who didn't have a resident embassy there. When I asked how I could talk to the Swiss officer Nichols said that he was at Kyandaw cemetery supervising cremations.

You know the expression "speechless with rage?" Well, I was speechless with rage, and as you can tell I'm a very voluble person normally. I ran upstairs, burst in on the ambassador and the DCM, and when I could actually speak, I said what was going on. Ambassador Levin said, "Go to the cemetery." Before I got out the door I could hear the DCM Chris Szymanski yelling at the

Burmese chief of protocol at the foreign ministry. I raced out to the cemetery; came jumping out of the car. The Swiss officer was nowhere to be found, fortunately for him. There was a Burmese official from the Rangoon city government who was actually a major in the Burmese army.

I identified myself and demanded that the cremations completely stop. Some of the bodies had been cremated already because of this Swiss intervention, and we later confirmed that some of them were Germans and some Americans. Within that potential horror, there was some good news: in the case of the Americans who were cremated by order of the Swiss and with the acquiescence of the Burmese, all turned out to be people whose families eventually wanted cremation. So we had dodged a gigantic bullet. All the families of the 22 non-Americans wanted cremation. In the end, there were four American families who insisted that the bodies be returned, four out of 14. Fortunately, none of them had been cremated by order of the Swiss.

One of the four was the wife of an Air Force officer who had been a POW in North Vietnam for many years. There were two things in his case: he was a Catholic, and because his wife had stuck by him all those years that he was a POW, he felt a particular need to have her body returned for burial. The identification process lasted longer than the FBI and CILHI people could stay but they were able to do a lot of their identifications from afar. The Swiss were really irritated that this process was taking so long. In fact, they sent a consul, a higher ranking official, from Bangkok to hurry the process along.

I encountered him out at Kyandaw Cemetery when I was there for the cremations of some Americans, and he complained that it was “a scandal” that the identification process was taking so long. My response, which we put in a cable to Bangkok and the State Department, was that the only scandal was the Swiss behavior in the face of the desires of the British, the French and the Germans, not to mention the Australians and Heather Harvey. Heather got her chance at this Swiss consul a bit later. After she returned from her emergency leave following the death of her father, she was at the Foreign Ministry with this same Swiss embassy officer and the rest of us. When he had the gall to repeat his complaints about delayed identification, Heather said, “You wouldn’t even care if they cremated a goat or a cow and put the ashes in an urn and sent it back.” By that time everybody felt the same about the Swiss.

In the end, we did send back four embalmed bodies, as best we could. We got four international transfer cases from Embassy Bangkok to ship them. They also sent us embalming fluid because there was none in Burma. Poor Eldon Bell, the embassy doctor, one of his nurses and a couple of people from the general services office had the truly grim task of trying to get embalming fluid into what was left of these bodies. Afterwards Eldon told me this wasn’t what he went to medical school for, but he and his staff did what was needed in terrible circumstances. Indeed, the families were quite grateful.

*Q: I was thinking this would be a good place to stop. I would like to ask you the next time there may be something else you want to talk about but also your impression of the military elite.*

*This is a continuation of the interview with Al O’Neill. Today is the first of October 2008. Al, let’s talk about... You’ve already talked about the disposition of bodies after the crash. What sort of things does one have to do afterwards? I mean getting the effects together, sorting things out.*

O'NEILL: There was a great deal of that. From the very first meetings we had with the Burmese — the afternoon of the crash which was Sunday, October 11, 1987 — we consular officials from the various embassies who were meeting at the Foreign Ministry emphasized first the need to get the remains back to Rangoon, which the Burmese were already working on. The other thing we emphasized and had to go at repeatedly was the question of effects. We eventually got many effects back. They were all brought to the Foreign Ministry in jute sacks, and we were trying to sort out the jumble of belongings. Keep in mind not only was the crash site chaotic because the plane flipped over and went down a ridge for several hundred yards but the villagers who got to the crash site first looted all the bodies and presumably got a number of valuables. The sacks of effects were soaked in hydraulic fluid from the airplane, so they had this strong oily smell. We were trying, of course, among the various embassies there — we, the French, the Australians, the British, the Germans — to see if we could figure what belonged to whom. Oddly enough in the case of the effects there was a surprising amount of foreign currency, marks, dollars, etc. Since the site was looted that surprised me, but it was illegal for Burmese to have foreign currency, so that was perhaps a motivation for people to turn the currency in. I think the embassies collectively agreed to give the money to charity.

As the identification process wore on we were able to confirm the sad news for individual families, Americans and other foreigners, one after another. One American woman, however, was distressed that we were still unable to identify her sister's remains and insisted that she would go to Rangoon herself. I had several phone conversations and also sent her cables through the State Department. I couldn't say, "Do not come," but I was certainly trying to dissuade her from trying to make the trek to Rangoon because she would have been so traumatized by what we were dealing with on a daily basis.

In the back of my mind I was fairly sure which unidentified remains were her sister's, and it turned out I was correct. In this case the FBI had no fingerprints available, no fingers to take fingerprints from, and there was nothing from which to make a dental identification. Providentially, the dead woman had broken her leg at some time, and her sister in California provided an X-ray which the Army forensic anthropologist was able to match with an X-ray of the remains' legs, and sure enough she was the one.

After probably six weeks, the FBI and CILHI forensic experts had done as much as they could with identifying remains. By that time, they had conclusively identified 31 of the 36 foreigners, including all 14 Americans. The other embassies, except the Swiss, were very grateful for the U.S. effort. The British ambassador, Martin Morland, wrote our ambassador that it was typically American that we continued the identification after all the Americans were identified. It was a terribly sad business from beginning to end.

There was also the separate business of cremated remains which stayed in the consular section in urns for a great while, as family members were arranging payment to send the remains back.

The consular paperwork on each of the 14 deaths, the FAA investigation, the International Civil Aviation Organization investigation, claims against Burma Airways Corporation, and attempts to figure out what personal effects belonged to whom and which family members wanted such

effects sent back to them, took much of my time for the remainder of my tour in Burma through July of 1988.

The International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) based in Montreal, a UN specialized agency, did a report on the crash. I couldn't find a copy of the ICAO web site when I was looking recently, but it came down on the judgment of pilot error because there was no apparent mechanical failure with the airplane, and the pilot was just inattentive. He had just flown the mission too often, wasn't really paying attention to what he was doing. I knew from the wife of another Burma Airways Corporation pilot that he and other crewmen had been out partying the night before and this was a flight that left Rangoon at 6:45 in the morning. They just weren't paying attention, and they hit the only ridge in the whole area.

With that report of pilot error, if family members in the U.S. hadn't already been insisting on compensation from BAC, they began either directly or through lawyers to do so. As I recall, most of the 14 families did. There were these little ancillary tragedies, too. One of the American victims was, I think, probably in her 60s. Her husband died within months after the crash, and the daughter wrote me that it was the loss of his wife that put him over the edge. That whole question of compensation was still going on when I left Burma in July of 1988, eight, nine months after the crash. As far as I can recall, we had wrapped up everything else to the extent we could.

There were lots of other things going on in Burma. I spoke about the demonetization of what amounted to 80% of the currency on the first Saturday of September of 1987, a month before the crash. That produced a rising tide of unrest which resulted in the closing of the universities in the days immediately after demonetization. There were larger demonstrations, including one in mid-March that resulted in quite violent rioting throughout Rangoon. That started in a large park called Maha Bandoola Park right across the street from the chancery and it rapidly spread out throughout downtown Rangoon.

The ambassador and others of us got up on the roof of the chancery which, incidentally, was a building that had been built by an Armenian banking firm called Balthazar Brothers in either the late 19th or early 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was directly on Merchant Street. There was absolutely no setback from the crumbling sidewalk at all. We were up top watching as rioters and riot police and everybody else were running in all different directions. Among other things, we could see that the main department store in downtown Rangoon — People's Department Store Number One — was set on fire which destroyed the only escalator in the entire country.

We had quite a time getting everybody home as the riot subsided. We were helping to drive our Burmese FSNs back to their houses in a situation where public transportation had totally broken down. The phone system was destroyed partly by the rioters but also as usual the government put it out of commission as a means of stopping people from communicating with each other.

That March riot in Rangoon prompted the State Department to send out an emergency action team to do some emergency action drills with us over a three or four day period. The drills were actually very helpful, partly in pointing out equipment that we did not have and needed to insist on getting. We had very poor radios; they were not very portable, and they were not very

numerous. They were mostly kept in our houses which you would want to do in any case because you had family members scattered all over Rangoon, so there was a clear need for radios at home. We did not have nearly enough radios for embassy vehicles or our own cars.

Another thing the exercise brought home was essentially incurable but very important in any emergency evacuation scenario from Rangoon. This is that if you drew a line from the chancery building on Merchant Street almost at the southern tip of Rangoon straight north to Rangoon Airport, that line would either go through or very closely approach every one of the embassy housing areas, the ministry of national defense, Ne Win's house, and many other military installations and also the International School of Rangoon. A month after I left, this situation did produce significant problems. It was more or less incurable. You couldn't change where the defense ministry and all these military installations were.

*Q: How would this cause a problem?*

O'NEILL: Well, because the military installations were going to be centers not only of demonstrations but also places from which, as it turned out, the military was dispatched to shoot down demonstrators in the street. They were peaceful demonstrators in the case of the August '88 events, an uproar that really got Western media attention. Also, it was just going to make it much more difficult to assemble convoys because, and I knew from my experience in March and later in June, that the Burmese army units when they would deploy would not be very communicative and would be operating on orders that you didn't understand. They were units of uneducated peasant soldiers with G-3 automatic rifles and in some cases little armored cars with .50 caliber machine guns on them. They were focusing on their fellow Burmese and you didn't know what exactly they were going to do. It was a pretty touchy situation. The soldiers, including their commanders, were not terribly educated people. It just added to the uncertainties and the complications.

These riots and demonstrations got increasingly violent. In March, there was one incident where male high school students were peacefully marching on Prome Road which is the main north-south road. They were near the national assembly building and across from the great Shwe Dagon Pagoda, one of the big symbols of Burma, that huge golden domed pagoda. When the police broke up the demonstration by driving trucks into those peaceful students, they killed and injured quite a number. I don't know how many. Later that day in different parts of Rangoon, five policemen were attacked at random and killed on the street by Burmese citizens retaliating against this atrocity. Those policemen's bodies were collected in a police van and taken to Rangoon General Hospital. That van was also attacked and set on fire with the policemen's bodies inside, killing the driver as well. There was a tremendous sense of public outrage at the way the Burmese government was dealing with these demonstrations, particularly the riot police.

Interestingly, and in contrast with the way things later panned out, in March, the Army got great credit for restraining the riot police and rescuing students because the riot police were just going around the streets of Rangoon beating anybody who looked to be of student age. In one case they beat to death the daughter of a famous Burmese actor. She was a university student, and the riot police set upon her and beat her to death on the street. It got worse in June; so the pattern from September-March-June was instances of widespread increasing violence at decreasing time

intervals. The June 1988 unrest resulted in a curfew in Rangoon and the other major cities from dusk to dawn which was still in effect when my family and I left in July to go to my next assignment in Seoul.

Another affair that I was involved was somewhat peculiar to Burma. There was a group of 23 Vietnamese who were actually Sino-Vietnamese; in other words, Vietnamese who were ethnic Chinese from North Vietnam or what had been North Vietnam. They at some point had been resettled by the UN as refugees in southern China. These men decided that they didn't want to stay in China. They wanted to go to the West. Knowing Laos was communist they went northwest out of southwestern China over Laos and into northern Burma where they were immediately apprehended by Burmese immigration and imprisoned. That meant essentially a life sentence for being an illegal immigrant. There was one who had relatives in the U.S., a fellow named Trieu Vy Sinh. Sinh's family in San Francisco began lobbying to get him humanitarian parole into the United States.

Even before this, the French ambassador, a humane man named Yves Rodrigues was lobbying the Burmese government, saying that France would take all 23 of them temporarily and then figure out places for them to go. The Burmese didn't agree because as best we could figure out, they didn't want Burma to become a magnet for Vietnamese refugees in transit. Ambassador Rodrigues was dealing with the minister of Home and Religious Affairs who was in charge of the police, the immigration service and the prisons as well as being the overseer of the state religion, Theravada Buddhism.

Ambassador Rodrigues kept working and working. In the meantime, we got word from the NSC staff in Washington that became the catalyst for a grant of humanitarian parole to bring to Trieu Vy Sinh into the States. We were trying to get the Burmese government to let him out and assured them that we would take all responsibility for his transportation to the U.S. and that he would never darken Burma's door again.

This led us down a very Byzantine path. Sinh was in Insein Prison, Insein being a district in northern Rangoon. This was perhaps the most notorious prison in Burma, the Abu Ghraib of Burma if you will. He wasn't there for a political reason, so he was not being tortured or mistreated other than just being in a Burmese prison system for life. He had come into Burma at age 18. He was now 25 years old; so he had spent his entire adult life in the Burmese prison system.

While Ambassador Rodrigues was trying to get the whole bunch of 23 out, we stayed in close touch with him. Ambassador Levin, DCM Chris Szymanski, and I were trying to pull our various levers to try to get Sinh out to the U.S. Ambassador Rodrigues left Burma at the end of his assignment before that happened. I was at a farewell party for him, and he told me that the minister of Home and Religious Affairs had phoned him that very day and said, "I know that you're really interested in these Vietnamese. Don't worry. We'll take care of this," which he thought was a very nice thing for the minister to do. Well, when I left Burma several months after Ambassador Rodrigues departed, 22 of the Vietnamese were still in prison. I don't know if they ever got out.



We were working all the different levels of the government that we could, Foreign Affairs, Home and Religious Affairs, Immigration, etc. I had pretty good contacts at my level with immigration people. You never knew what the Burmese were going to do in any given situation. I had a fair amount of experience in Southeast Asia and North Asia, over eight years, by that time. I always felt that I had some idea of what the host government was going to do even when it was doing what you might call un-American things, but with the Burmese even when they were doing something that you wanted them to do, you were never sure why. This was a good example in lots of different ways.

Eventually our lobbying paid off, and we got Sinh a clean bill of health at Insein General Hospital. For parole, we had to have the same contagious disease checks as for an immigrant visa. Miraculously for somebody who had been in Burmese prisons from age 18 to 25, he had no communicable diseases that showed up in the exam.

As things panned out, on Monday, Columbus Day 1987, the day after the BAC crash, I was out at Rangoon International Airport at 6:00 in the morning. This was the morning before the bodies had been flown down from Pagan. I was to take charge of Sinh from the immigration police, put him on the plane to Bangkok where he would transfer to a Northwest flight to San Francisco. That all worked fine. I brought a bag of clothes, some of mine, some of my wife's, because I knew he was going to show up in a *longyi* and shower shoes for this flight to San Francisco. We got him to change into some old jeans of my wife's, a pair of tennis shoes of mine, and off he went. That was that.

Let me mention one other thing, a movie. I don't know if you ever heard of a movie called "Beyond Rangoon." It starred Patricia Arquette. There's a consular connection, which is why I'm bringing it up. It came out some years after I was in Rangoon. The story centered on the August 1988 repression of the democracy movement which was truly horrendous and probably on a per capita basis had a death toll greater than Tiananmen Square less than a year later in June 1989. In the movie, the protagonist went to Burma with other American tourists to find herself after her husband and her child were murdered in the U.S. She loses her passport, she goes to the American consul in Rangoon, who would have been my successor, and arranges to get a replacement passport through a much more difficult process than would have been the reality. The American consul in the movie was a tall, blue-eyed guy with a button down shirt, etc.

In reality my successor as the consular section chief was an African American woman. Obviously, she didn't fit the Hollywood stereotype of the American consul who was also among other things coming on to the protagonist. The movie consul was trying to invite her out to dinner in a Burmese restaurant which nobody in his right mind would do, for health reasons. That was among many inadvertently comic touches in that movie.

*Q: Al, did you get any feel, you or the country team, about the military leadership there? You say they're hard to figure out. Was there any connection to "the people?" Compare and contrast Park Chung Hee's regime to this one.*

O'NEILL: Compared to the Korean armed forces under Park Chung Hee, the Burmese forces overwhelmingly meant the Burma Army. There was a tiny air force and a tiny navy, a coastal

defense navy. It's hard to compare. For one thing, the Korean army was far better rounded. It had all the normal units that you would expect, including the full range of logistics units to support a combat force. It had armored units, artillery units, and of course had the infantry force. It was professionally schooled in real military schools in Korea. Also many of the more senior officers, of course, go on to various command and general staff level schools and war colleges in the U.S. In those days, of course, the Korean army had quite a large number of people particularly in the middle to upper officer ranks who had served in Vietnam. Korea, you remember, had two infantry divisions and a marine brigade who were very much in the thick of fighting in central and northern South Vietnam.

So you had a real battle hardened force that was quite professional. The Burmese army had a great deal of counter-insurgency combat experience fighting the Chins, the Kachins, the Burma communist party, the Shans, and the various ethnic drug trafficking organizations, but they had never fought an external enemy in modern times; so it was overwhelmingly a light infantry force that was big on counter-insurgency.

In those days, Burmese military people of the various services went to the United States and other places for schooling. However, it seemed to me that the way to rise into the general officer ranks was to combine xenophobia and a lack of education with ruthlessness. There were area commanders who were major generals who as far as we knew had little more than a grade school education. But they knew that everybody outside of Burma was the enemy and they as the army were the protectors of the nation, even from the Burmese people. They also knew that democracy was messy and unmilitary.

Now to get back to the Korea comparison, the Korean army saw itself as the protectors of the Korean nation, too, particularly against the possible reinvasion of North Korea, quite rightly. But they were a far more internationally minded force than the Burmese were and even under Park Chung Hee and Chun Doo-Hwan were less ruthless domestically than the Burmese Army, with the glaring exception of the bloody events in Kwangju in 1980. In Burma, the combination of xenophobia and limited education and belief that they were the saviors of the nation made it that much easier for the army to be allied under Ne Win with the Burma Socialist Program Party. In turn, that made them able to crush dissent as they did very ruthlessly in 1988, and have done under various guises ever since.

Burma was potentially a very wealthy country. They had huge timber resources. They had the potential for cultivation of agriculture, shrimp farming, fish farming and also gems and minerals. If they did not have that socialist agriculture policy, they would have been the great rice basket that they had been before the 1960's. In the British era and the early independence era under Prime Minister U Nu, Burma was if not the biggest rice exporting country in the world then one of them. Even 20-something years of Ne Win's agricultural policies did not change the fact that Burma's soil was quite fertile. No matter how stupid the government was, you didn't have starvation.

*Q: Had we or somebody introduced the miracle rice?*

O'NEILL: There was still in those days up until months after I left, a fairly large AID presence. I don't know how widespread these miracle rices were or how necessary they were in the case of Burma because the soil was so fertile. You could stick a broom handle in the ground and it would sprout. The big AID projects that I remember were production of pulses and edible oils, rape seed, soy bean, developing foodstuffs largely for local consumption, at least at first. There was quite an active AID presence.

There were other aid projects, too, from Asian Development Bank and UN Development Program. Some of these were simple infrastructure projects like road building. There was an American who was the head of the Louis Berger construction project that was widening and repaving the road between Rangoon and Ne Win's hometown of Prome up to the north. He told me that after his first year he had figured out that it would probably take 250 years to finish the project. After the second year there he revised it downward, and it said it would only take 195 years. This gives you an idea of the time span of Burmese thinking and their level of diligence.

*Q: Did you get the feeling that the Burmese... Was the analysis that the Burmese officer corps was a very distinct group removed from everybody else? Also, where did the peasant soldiers fit into this?*

O'NEILL: That comes up in one's look at Burma and also at a place like North Korea which, of course, has a gigantic armed force. Obviously, the military people in both cases are not a separate species; they don't descend from heaven. They're born in the country, they come out of families and they're recruited or decide to join the armed forces, etc. There was no conscription in Burma at the time. People enlisted in the army for three square meals and clothing and a basic living. My impression was that the great source of the Burmese soldiery was the countryside. They tended to be ethnic Burmans although I suspect they still did recruit and accept people from some of the ethnic groups. I never got the impression that you would see Karens or Kachins, for example, those being among the main ethnic groups that were fighting against the Burmese government.

*Q: I want to ask you one more question back about the Burmese officer class because this thing keeps cropping up. We just had a horrendous typhoon. Over 100,000 people were killed and the Burmese rulers almost ignored the whole thing although we had ships standing off the rest of the world had ships standing off to give aid, and very little got in. It seems like a tremendous disconnect between the officer class and the people per se.*

O'NEILL: I knew people who were related to army people. I think what happened, and I think you can see this in the case of the Philippines, another country in which I gained a fair amount of experience, is that young people might come into the officer corps with a sense of idealism and a belief. Again, you had this third world mindset that we, the army, are the only organization that can save the country. When you have democracy, democracy is messy and you have foreign influences, but when we take charge, we can ensure the foreign influences stay out and that things are not messy.

If you can buy into the idea that the army is the savior of the country, you have at least in terms of a slogan an idealistic reason to join the armed forces. I think what happened was that

extrapolating from the Philippine situation which has also been dealing with various insurgencies for decades that the real soldiers are the ones who stay in the combat units and slog away at company, battalion, and perhaps regiment level for their careers and really believe that they're doing something that's necessary for the safety of the country.

The others, who get attracted to the golf courses and the fat cat life that was open to the upper reaches of the armed forces in a very poor country, the special benefits, special exchange rates, special hospitals, all that kind of thing, tend to deviate from that idealistic path of the combat soldier.

*Q: Basically the professional staff officer.*

O'NEILL: Yes, of a very venal sort of the kind that you've seen replicated throughout newly decolonized countries throughout the 1940s, '50s, and '60s, people who pulled coups in Africa and in Indonesia and elsewhere in Southeast Asia and so on. Indeed, people who took that path could live quite well in a terribly poor country. In fact, one of the things that Burma achieved during my time was the official UN status of a "least developed country."

*Q: [laughter] Is there such a thing as a least developed country?*

O'NEILL: There was certainly at that time. The Burmese worked very hard to achieve that rather dismal distinction. We helped that to the point where we got a diplomatic note thanking the embassy of the United States of America, which I've brought with me...

*Q: I'm going to read this. This is dated February 26, 1987: "The ministry of foreign affairs presents its compliments to the Embassy of the United States of America and acknowledges being in receipt of matters numbers so-and-so and dated 18 February and has the honor of expressing its gratitude and appreciation to the United States' valuable support in Burma's Least Developed Country status and readiness to co-sponsor the final UN decision approving Burma's inclusion in the list of least developed countries. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs avails itself in this opportunity to renew to the United States of America the assurance of its highest consideration."*

O'NEILL: There were, as I recall, three criteria for least developed country status. One of them was dismal health conditions in which Burma was in the forefront. So the health situation was one criterion. GNP was another and, again, Burma about this time had maybe \$13 million in foreign exchange reserves for the entire country.

The last one was literacy ranking. Unfortunately, Burma was over the line on literacy rate, at least from its own official statistics. I forget what the cutoff was for the literacy rate for a "least developed country." In other words, you had to be below a certain literacy rate according to the UN statistics in order to qualify. Burma, unfortunately, was over line on this one key criterion. They got around this by saying, "Oh, well, we arrived at this excessively high literacy rate by counting everybody who finished Buddhist monastery schools, not just graduates of our own wonderful school system," schools which by the way were often closed for political reasons. "If you take away the ones who graduated from monastery schools even at an elementary level, then

we're below the line." To our shame we helped push this idea under Ambassador O'Donohue, and that saved the day, so to speak for Burma. Burma became officially a least developed country.

Burma's a fascinating place, and it's a sad place, a country of great potential wealth, certainly with a people who were able to be educated well, as the British proved, and which continued under U Nu, the first prime minister of an independent Burma. They had good schools up to the university level in the past. They were perfectly capable of taking their place in the world, but Ne Win and his cronies destroyed that.

*Q: You left there in...*

O'NEILL: July of '88.

**VICTOR L. TOMSETH**  
**Director of Burma-Thailand Affairs, East Asia and Pacific Bureau**  
**Washington DC (1986-1989)**

*Victor L. Tomseth was born in Oregon in 1941. He received his bachelor's degree from the University of Oregon in 1963 and his master's degree from the University of Michigan in 1966. After joining the Peace Corp and going to Nepal he joined the Foreign Service. During his career he had positions in Thailand, Iran, Sri Lanka, and was ambassador to Laos. Ambassador Tomseth was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 1999.*

TOMSETH: No. I think they changed the name from EA to EAP in the early 1970s. The first time I served on the Thai desk from 1973-1975, it was already the East Asia and Pacific Affairs Bureau.

*Q: So, you served there from 1986 to what?*

TOMSETH: 1986-1989.

*Q: You were what ?*

TOMSETH: Director for Thailand and Burma.

*Q: Why don't we do Burma first? What was the situation with Burma and what were our concerns when you arrived?*

TOMSETH: Actually, with Burma in 1986 when I came back, the bilateral relationship between the U.S. and Burma was considerably changed from what it had been when I was in that office in the mid-1970s. At that earlier time, it was sort of 10 years or so after Ne Win, a Burmese military strongman who had overthrown the elected government in 1962, was at the peak of what

they called "the Burmese way to socialism." What Ney Win and his government had done after 1962 was to literally cut Burma off from the rest of the world. I remember going through Rangoon in 1964 as a brand new Peace Corps volunteer en route to Nepal. At that time, you could go to Burma on an international flight, but you had to leave on the next available flight. There weren't so many international flights that it was possible to stay maybe 24 hours before the next flight came along, but no more than that. By 1986, when I came back from Sri Lanka to Washington and that office, things had opened up quite a bit. Particularly in terms of the U.S.-Burmese relationship, it was actually a fairly cooperative one. We had a USAID program in there. The Drug Enforcement Administration was very active. We were providing a substantial amount of aid to Burma for counternarcotics efforts. In the counternarcotics area, the Burmese were actually doing some things that Washington wished some of our other partners like Mexico, Thailand, and Colombia would do and that is spraying the opium crop in northern Burma. That was not without some controversy. As you might imagine, there were environmentalists and people worried about indigenous people, who were very much against the spraying program, whether you were talking about Latin America, Southeast Asia, or Southwest Asia. But from the point of view of the counternarcotics community in Washington, the view was that that was great. We wished that others would do what the Burmese were doing. That was 1986. Within two years, all of that had changed, largely because of something that came about very unexpectedly. That was a genuinely grassroots pro-democracy movement in Burma just at a time when Ney Win, who was then well into his 70s and had a history of heart trouble, decided to step back, that he actually resigned from his official positions in the regime, although many people thought that he still continued to exercise a great deal of indirect influence on what was happening. But in the spring and summer of 1988, this grassroots pro-democracy movement got underway, only to be literally cut down by the military in September of 1988. At that point, we and a number of other western donors and the UN to a substantial degree cut back very drastically on our assistance programs. Over the next year or so, the political relationship with Burma also soured very considerably as the military first agreed to have a national election, but then when that was won overwhelmingly by the opposition (under the leadership of one of Burma's founding fathers, Aung San, his daughter was in the forefront of this), the military did not follow through on its commitment to allow the winner of the elections to form a government and draft a new constitution. That really has been the history of U.S.-Burmese relations and indeed Burmese relations with virtually all of the West since the beginning of this decade. But at the time I arrived in the late summer of 1986, the bilateral relationship with Burma was actually pretty good and by historical standards much more extensive than it had been in decades, but that all changed during the three years that I was on the desk.

*Q: What was the reason? You have this reclusive military government. What was in it for them to cooperate and spray and do things like that?*

TOMSETH: When I was on the desk the first time, in the mid-1970s, my colleague who handled Burmese affairs, who had served in Rangoon before he came back to Washington, told me about a discussion that he had with one of his Soviet colleagues in Rangoon while he was in Burma. This Soviet told him that the Burmese were giving a bad name to socialism. That, in effect, summarized what happened during those two and a half decades that Ney Win was in charge, during which Burma pursued this very reclusive, isolationist policy. At the outbreak of World War II in 1939, Burma was then a crown colony of Britain, but if you think of colonial Southeast

Asia in post-World War II national terms, of the areas that gained independence at the end of World War II, Burma was by far the most developed and richest of the countries in Southeast Asia. Under the British, a very good transportation system had been developed. Burma was by far the world's leading exporter of rice. It was an exporter of petroleum. It was a big exporter of tropical hardwood, particularly teak. While there was a fair amount of damage during World War II (I think Burma suffered more physical damage than any of the other Southeast Asian countries.), it still had a very good infrastructure at independence in 1948. First under civilian governments and then for 25 years or so under Ney Win, Burmese governments took Burma from being the most developed, richest country in Southeast Asia to being among the most backward. If you go to Laos, it sort of has an excuse for being as poor as it is. It's a very poor environment, but that is not the case in Burma. It was really bad government that led them to where they were. By the 1980s, Burma, which had once been the world's largest exporter of rice, was actually importing rice to feed its own population. At that point, the Burmese military, I think, realized that they had to change this Burmese road to socialism policy at least a bit in order to turn the economy around. That really provided the opening for the United States to begin developing a relationship with Burma that was very much centered on counternarcotics issues. Burma had gone from being the largest exporter of rice to being the largest exporter of opiates.

*Q: In the 1986 period, how far did the writ of the central government run in Burma?*

TOMSETH: Almost from the time of independence, there had been at the periphery of Burma ethnic groups that wanted something other than the union of Burma that had been established at independence in 1948. That ranged from some groups that were seeking total independence from Burma to groups that wanted a large degree of autonomy within the Burmese union. In the midst of all that, there were a couple of communist groups that also were running insurgencies in Burma. In the early years, there was some question whether the government in Rangoon actually was going to survive these things, but by the 1960s when I first arrived in Southeast Asia, while these insurgent groups had considerable writ, particularly in non-Burmese areas, in the areas where ethnic minorities were a majority, there wasn't much doubt that the central government was in control of the territory of Burma in a general sense. Yes, there might be areas where they would have to mount a military campaign to go, but there was virtually no area in Burma where they couldn't go if they set their mind to it. But these ethnic insurgencies, these communist factions - and I should add that there was also a nationalist Chinese faction that arrived on the scene after 1949 in northern Burma and at first continued to carry on an insurgency into Hunan Province in China, but very quickly got caught up in the narcotics business - they too had their little fiefdom in northern Burma. But by the 1960s, certainly, there was no doubt that the government in Rangoon was going to stand and ultimately might even be able to prevail over these insurgencies. But it continued on for a very long time and still does today to a degree, although the current regime has cut a series of deals with various of these groups over the last six years or so. So, there isn't a whole lot of fighting that goes on anymore.

*Q: Was Burma in our consideration essentially a fiefdom that was run for the benefit of the army, or were they really generally committed to trying to redo the whole society?*

TOMSETH: The leading group in the independence movement that began initially in the 1920s and was a bit stronger in the 1930s, but really got an impetus with the outbreak of World War II, was dominated by the military from the very beginning. The group that formed the first government, led by Aung San, who made his name during World War II in a military force that the Japanese put together when they occupied Burma and then that group towards the end of the war turned on the Japanese... So, the military was there from the very beginning. They saw themselves as a core institution in the independence movement. I think at the outset, a lot of these people in the military were genuinely patriotic. They weren't in this purely for the sake of power itself or for the material rewards that flow from it. But over time, that certainly happened. What you have today is a military regime that runs the country for the military and particularly the senior leadership within the military and doesn't care a whole lot about the rest of the population.

*Q: During this time, who was or were our ambassadors and how did the embassy operate?*

TOMSETH: When I got back to Washington in 1986, Dan O'Donohue was ambassador in Burma. He was within a few months finishing up his tour there. Dan had been a leading force in the development of this relationship with Burma in the 1980s, first as deputy assistant secretary for Southeast Asia in the East Asia and Pacific Bureau and then as ambassador in Burma. I don't know whether you know Dan or not, but-

*Q: I've had a long set of interviews with him.*

TOMSETH: He really is an amazing person in terms of his energy and intellectual capacity. I think without his involvement first as deputy assistant secretary and then as ambassador in Rangoon, this relationship with the regime in Rangoon just wouldn't have grown to the extent that it did during the course of the early 1980s.

*Q: When he left, who took over?*

TOMSETH: When he left, Burt Levin, who also was a longtime East Asia hand, but basically a China person, took his place. Initially, Burt was very much inclined to continue this policy of trying to develop the bilateral relationship with counternarcotics cooperation being the core of that relationship, but it was on his watch that this pro-democracy movement began in Burma. In very short order, he and the embassy got very much caught up in that. It was something that was easy to support. There were a lot of students involved in this. Very quickly, Aung San's daughter, Su Chi, emerged as a leading figure in the pro-democracy movement. She is a very attractive woman from a variety of points of view. Physically, she is a handsome enough person, but she was educated in England, is married to an Englishman, is very articulate... What she was saying about where Burma ought to be trying to go was very resonant in a lot of quarters in the United States and elsewhere in the West. It was an easy enough thing for the embassy, for Burt Levin, to get caught up in this. I think the people in Washington got caught up in this as well.

But when the military cracked down on the pro-democracy movement in September of 1988, the trauma that the embassy staff experienced was very profound. I like to compare it to what happened in Teheran in February of 1979 when the embassy was attacked by several armed



groups with some casualties. That was a very searing experience for people in the embassy. For people in the embassy in Rangoon, while the embassy wasn't attacked, it sits on a street- (end of tape)

*Q: You were saying a lot of the action...*

TOMSETH: Yes. In September of 1988 when the military moved to suppress this movement, a lot of the action took place on the street and in that square right in front of the embassy. The staff witnessed people literally being beheaded in front of the embassy. So, again, it was a very searing experience for people there. After that, the embassy and the staff... We moved a lot of the staff out to Bangkok at that point, but then eventually returned them. I always thought that was a bit of a mistake, that what we probably should have done is what was decided in 1979 in the case of the embassy in Teheran, which was replace most of the staff so that you didn't have people trying to deal with this post-military intervention situation who had been so scarred by the experience of it, but we didn't. The result of that was that in the aftermath of the suppression of the democracy movement, the embassy - and Burt Levin particularly - were wholeheartedly committed to these democratic forces and were unwilling to try to engage the military in brokering a process that would lead to a civilian government. I don't know that that would have happened if you had had God himself on the scene. But I think our policy was handicapped to a degree by the view that Burt and his staff had of the situation in Burma, a view that was very much conditioned by this really terrible experience that they had gone through in September 1988.

*Q: As a practical measure, if an embassy is sitting there saying, "You're so brutal we're not going to talk to you," it has no function almost.*

TOMSETH: It wasn't that they wouldn't talk to them at all, but the quality of the dialogue certainly suffered by virtue of the post-military suppression of the democracy movement attitude that the embassy brought to the table in the discussion with the military. I have to say that the military certainly didn't do anything to make the embassy staff or people in Washington think that there might be some hope of bringing these people along. One of the things they did, even before the elections in 1990 that they had committed to shortly thereafter their intervention, was to put Aung San Su Chi, who was very much the leading symbol of this movement, under house arrest.

*Q: Where she is today.*

TOMSETH: Well, they released her from house arrest a couple of summers ago. While she isn't totally free to move about, she is able to move out of her house a bit. Indeed, the regime would like her to leave the country. Her husband recently died. He had prostate cancer. On his deathbed in England, he appealed to the regime to give him a visa to go see her one last time before he died. The regime said that they would let her go to England; she could go to England if she wanted to; it was too difficult a trip for him to make. But she was not prepared to leave because she knew very well that the regime wouldn't let her back into the country if she did depart.

*Q: When this thing broke out, Henry Kissinger was Secretary of State?*

TOMSETH: No. This was the Reagan administration, the tail end of it. George Schulz was Secretary of State.

*Q: I would assume that there was no Cold War strategic or other interests there so that there was concern, but we weren't going to do anything.*

TOMSETH: Yes. The issues of the 1950s and 1960s had really gone away. Burma was not seen as a strategic point on the Chinese periphery by the late 1980s. No, there was no inclination to try and get involved in this other than to bring pressure to bear on the regime by cutting off aid.

*Q: Were you getting information... How did Thailand play from our point of view? I know we have post interests up around the Burmese border, mainly for drug purposes. Were you getting good information?*

TOMSETH: I think you have to make a distinction between what we have done for decades from Thailand in terms of looking into Burma. That activity tends to be centered in Chiang Mai. Originally, it was very much key to the communist victory in China and the KMT (Kuomintang) remnant in northeastern Burma. Then over time, this shifted to a narcotics focus. Chiang Mai was a convenient place to do that. Certainly during the 1960s and 1970s, it was virtually impossible to get any kind of information on what was going on in northern Burma via Rangoon. The writ of the central government was occasional and we didn't have any kind of cooperative relationship with the central government in those days. So, what was done out of Chiang Mai was very critical to having a picture of what was going on in northeastern Burma.

The democracy movement in Burma that began in 1988 was very much a Rangoon-centered phenomenon. So, it was the embassy reporting in Rangoon that the Department, that Washington, relied upon to get a picture of what was happening in terms of the democracy movement, not what people based in Chiang Mai were reporting, which was very heavily focused on ethnic insurgencies and counternarcotics out of Chiang Mai.

*Q: What was the Burmese situation vis a vis China during this period? It's got a long border with China.*

TOMSETH: In the late 1980s, I guess I would characterize their relationship with China as "correct." It wasn't a particularly good relationship. It was not bad, but it wasn't very extensive. Now, that has changed a lot in the intervening decade. There is a lot of commerce, both licit and illicit, that goes across that northern border. In addition to that, when the U.S. and European countries generally cut off aid, they also cut off any kind of arms dealing with Burma. A lot of that had been purely commercial even before 1988. There weren't any significant military assistance programs. But when that happened, the Burmese military had to find new sources of supply. China emerged as one of the most important in that respect. So, these days, the relationship between China and Burma is probably much more extensive and certainly more cooperative than it was a decade ago when it was really a fairly limited relationship. There was a certain amount of black market or grey market commerce across that northern border, but that

was very much a local phenomenon. These days, it's much more with the blessing of the two capitals, of Rangoon and Beijing.

*Q: What about relations with India at that time?*

TOMSETH: Burma's relations with India have never been terribly good. One of the things Ney Win did when he came into power in 1962 was expel a lot of people who were "foreigners." Many of these people actually had been born in Burma, but they were the descendants of people that had come to Burma during the British period. That included large numbers of Indians, Pakistanis, Nepalis, and even Chinese. But the ethnic Chinese population in Burma, first of all, wasn't nearly as big as the South Asian population, but they had been able to assimilate more into Burmese society to a greater degree than the Indian population for some obvious reasons - racial, but also cultural. The South Asians were Hindus or Muslims and that sort of automatically distinguished them from Terrabada Burmese. For the Chinese, whether they were Confucian, Buddhist, or some mixture thereof, integrating themselves into that Terrabada Buddhist society was a much easier proposition than it was for the Indians. But when that expulsion of foreigners occurred in the early 1960s, that really soured Burmese-Indian relations for a long time. So, when the military suppressed this democracy movement in 1988, among Asian countries, India was one of the very few that didn't really align itself with the United States and Western Europe, but its reaction to what happened in Burma was much closer to the western reaction than the reaction in most of the rest of Southeast and East Asia, which tended to be "Well, we might not like this, but there is not a whole lot we can do about it. Burma is part of our neighborhood, so we're going to have to figure out some way to get along with them." But in New Delhi, they flirted with the idea of giving some support to exile Burmese student groups and being generally supportive of the pro-democracy movement, which didn't endear them to the military regime, obviously.

*Q: With India and Burma, Burma abuts onto a restive part of the Indian ethnic groups. At that time, was there any problem of local insurgencies spilling over between Burma and India either way?*

TOMSETH: What happened in Burma I don't think made any difference at all in terms of what was going on in northeastern India at that time and still goes on. To some degree, there is not a very clear ethnic line along that border between India and Burma. In the area, there have been over the years a variety of local insurgent groups, but while they still exist, they don't really pose a serious threat to Indian control of that area. What happened in Burma in 1988 and thereafter didn't really affect to any significant degree what was going on in northeastern India.

It may have actually had a bigger impact in terms of what was happening across the Burmese-Bangladesh border. There had been for some time a trickling of Bangladeshis into Burma across that border, mainly because of population pressure. That may have actually been given a bit of a filip by preoccupation of the military in Rangoon with the pro-democracy movement and the aftermath of its suppression, but when the military regime got its act together, it went back to doing what the military government before the rise of a democracy movement had done - and that is periodically push these Bangladeshis back into Bangladesh.

*Q: What about the Burmese embassy here in Washington? Did they do anything or were they just sort of a passive...*

TOMSETH: The Burmese ambassador at the time was a military man, as their ambassadors here had been, I think almost without exception, since the 1960s. He sort of struggled to cope with what was happening in Burma, first of all to try and keep up with what was going on in Burma. We often had better information than he did, simply because of the poverty of the Burmese communication system. Then after the military intervention, he tried in a rather feckless and ineffectual way to do what our embassy seemed very reluctant to do and that was to try and figure out where are the potential bases for some kind of dialogue between the U.S. government and the military regime, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) that might facilitate keeping the bilateral relationship on track. I liked the guy. He was a nice guy. But he was very ineffectual and his efforts just had no impact in terms of what was happening in our embassy in Rangoon and within the U.S. policy context here in Washington.

*Q: Was there any Burmese student group in the United States? Was there any movement around here or any Burmese opposition group centered in the United States?*

TOMSETH: Well, there is a very small Burmese community in the United States, but you have to look at what happened, particularly after 1962. Very few Burmese went abroad for education. As the economy steadily went downhill, even in the 1980s when things began to loosen up a bit and in theory it might be possible for Burmese to begin going abroad for education, they didn't have the monetary resources to do it. So, unlike other situations, there was no significant Burmese student group in the United States when this happened. What you had were a few people who dated from a different generation of Burmese immigrants, people who had come as students or for whatever reasons in the 1950s, and a few who had some kind of international organization connection. One that had a granddaughter who was married to a Burmese whose father was at one of the UN organizations. They were around on the circuit here in Washington and New York. There were a couple of Americans who were married to Burmese, including a congressional staffer who was on Patrick Moynihan's staff. They were very much involved in it. But their numbers were quite small. This pro-democracy movement had a very important student component of it in Burma. The post-suppression phenomenon that is more interesting from a student point of view is what happened in Thailand, not here. A lot of these students fled to the Thai border. The student community in Thailand, which typically is more liberal than whatever government is in place in Thailand at any given moment, very much identified with this. In fairly short order, some of these Burmese students who wound up on the border found themselves in Bangkok and in cooperation with their Thai student colleagues, there were demonstrations organized outside the Burmese embassy in Bangkok. The Bangkok media, particularly the print media, tended to be very sympathetic to these students and the pro-democracy movement. So, in Thailand, you have to this day a media community, particularly in the print media, who are very vociferous in telling their audience how retched this Burmese military regime in Rangoon is. At the same time, there is the Thai government - and this has been true of a succession of governments over the last decade, who don't really like the military regime very much, but who look at it in very real politik terms. "This is an important country that has a very long border with Thailand. One way or another, we're going to have to deal with it." So, you get this situation in Thailand, where Burmese students are active in cooperation with Thai students with a lot of

sympathy in the print media particularly, and that stands in contrast to the much more pragmatic "hold your nose and deal with these guys" approach that Thai governments take.

**WILLIAM VEALE**  
**Political Officer**  
**Rangoon (1986-1990)**

*Mr. Veale was born in Washington, D.C. into a US military family and was raised primarily at Army posts in the US and abroad. Entering the military after graduating from Georgetown University, he served with the US Army until joining the Foreign Service in 1971. Throughout his career Mr. Veale dealt primarily with Political/Military and Disarmament affairs, serving both in the Department of State and the Department of Defense. Among his assignments, Mr. Veale was posted to Strasbourg, Berlin and Rangoon. He also taught in the Political Science department at the US Air Force Academy. Mr. Veale was interviewed by Thomas Dunnigan in 2000.*

*Q: Bill, after those interesting years in Berlin you had a complete change. You applied for, accepted, and were put into Burmese language training in late 1985. How did that come about?*

VEALE: Well, after a succession of assignments that were either in Washington or in Europe dealing with Europe, I was well overdue for a hardship assignment. Having worked in management operations, and understanding how the system had to work, I felt I had no choice but to actively seek a hardship assignment. In looking at the various possibilities, Burma had always interested me. I had, in fact, bid on assignments to Burma earlier in my career. After talking to people who had been assigned there, there was a kind of "Terry and the Pirates" [Editor's Note: This reference is to an American cartoon strip drawn by Milton Caniff starting in 1934] mystique about the place. It had always intrigued me and my imagination but, at the same time, I thought it would be an extremely interesting place to go that only the Foreign Service could offer. There was very little commercial presence in Burma. There were some international organization presence, but it was not the kind of place that you could certainly go and live in easily in any other pursuit except in the diplomatic context.

So, from that point of view it seemed like it would be interesting. The fact that there were these ethnic insurgencies going on and it's still, at that point, efforts to maintain neutrality between China, Russia, and the United States made for an interesting dynamic. The narcotics aspects of it I thought would be interesting and the fact that it was being run by a military regime (Ne Win) made the whole picture quite intriguing. So, after studying Burmese for about ten months, our family launched off for Burma. I must say that when we arrived in Rangoon, it was absolutely mind-blowing. I had served in southeast Asia in Vietnam during the Vietnam war when I was in the Army so I was not unprepared for southeast Asia. But, instead of a bustling city, when we arrived in Rangoon, it was the middle of the rainy season and Rangoon gets about 212 inches of rain in three months during this period. So there were literally buckets of water coming straight down 24 hours a day. The buildings were whitewashed but the whitewash was washing off and

green algae was growing all over everything and any cracks, of which there were many in the buildings, was a place for vegetation to be growing. The city gave the impression that only recently it had been reclaimed from the jungle.

*Q: But, it was good for the rice crop, no doubt.*

VEALE: Burma had been a fantastic rice growing and exporting country but, as I later came to see, this military regime had literally driven it into the ground and lived off the infrastructure that had been built up by the British during the colonial period. There was no reinvestment in that and everything was running down.

*Q: Was your wife given Burmese language training too or were you the only one that was allowed to take it?*

VEALE: My wife could have taken Burmese language training, but did not at this time due to a complicated 4<sup>th</sup> pregnancy.

*Q: Who was the ambassador when you arrived in 1986?*

VEALE: When I arrived it was Dan O'Donohue who had been in Burma two years, this was his last year and I believe had served in Bangkok previously as DCM [Deputy Chief of Mission]. [Editor's Note: Ambassador O'Donohue served from Nov 1983 to December 1986.]

*Q: You went into the political section when you got there?*

VEALE: Yes, I was responsible for internal political reporting and coverage of the insurgencies and some political reporting on the narcotics front. The Bureau of International Narcotic Affairs had succeeded getting one of their own officers in to run actual programmatic aspects of the narcotics program which had been done by earlier predecessors of mine in that position from the political section. But this was now a separate officer's function. So, I was able to focus more on the insurgencies and internal political unrest, which as it turned out during my two years there was very recent.

*Q: How large was the political section?*

VEALE: It was fairly large, about 16 or so officers, not all of whom were State.

*Q: What was the atmosphere in Burma when you arrived? They were living under military authoritarianism. How did they accept that? Was it resignation or were there rumblings underneath?*

VEALE: The Burmese have put up with a lot of things that other peoples around the world would not have put up with. This may be because life has changed very little in Burma. You go outside of Rangoon and very quickly you are back several hundred years to a bullock cart society. There is very little extension of electricity in villages and bamboo structures were everywhere. In many ways you could say that Burma was the ultimate biodegradable society. We were

constantly struck by the ingenuity of recycling and the way in which people took advantage of even the slightest things. You would find World War II vintage trucks on which the load-carrier structure had been completely replaced with teak, the metal having long ago rusted away. So, it was constantly a study in surprising contrasts.

But, resignation, I think is the best word now. When I arrived there, Burma had, for some years, been functioning with all the trappings of a civilianized government with the military calling the shots from the sidelines. Ne Win was in charge and the military certainly enjoyed first position at the feeding trough. There was a civilian government structure drawn largely from former military people and there was a political party, the Burma Socialist Program Party (BSPP), which had a very unusual role. It appeared to me that it was a kind of country club elite that functioned as the personnel decision-making body in the system and which seemed to have a double check role against some of the military functions. But it became very top heavy and was feeding upon itself, very much like the communist party in the late period of the communist systems around the world. It was never really clear to me whether it had a long term role or not. It seemed to be wired in as a central player, but whether it had any long-term staying power beyond the toleration of Ne Win or Ne Win seeing it as having this double check utility, was not really clear. I don't think that really became evident until later.

In 1988, right after I left, Ne Win suggested that the party be disbanded and it basically collapsed on fairly short order in the turmoil that occurred in the summer of 1988.

*Q: Including his resignation.*

VEALE: Yes, including his resignation. And the hand of the military came out of the closet in that period after the attempted civilian rule and the democratic elections were not allowed to come to fruition.

*Q: What was the attitude towards the United States when you were there?*

VEALE: The attitude towards the United States was fairly good. In fact, the Burmese government looked at the United States as a useful balancer against pressure from China and Russia. Ne Win came to the United States for medical reasons and for a number of other personal reasons. He had some friends in Oklahoma and so forth. The desk officer at the time in the State Department really was able to ingratiate himself with Ne Win by helping to arrange things that had initially looked fairly complicated from the Burmese perspective. By making it possible for these things to happen, he literally got a red carpet treatment every time he came to Burma, far out of proportion to his rank and position in our own hierarchy. But, we at the Embassy took advantage of this and traveled on his coattails. We would give him the itinerary as to where he should ask to go and sometimes this meant that the Burmese would have to bend over backward. We met with the then Lt. Colonel who was number two in the intelligence service and is now number two in the government. He has promoted himself to I think a 3-star general.

*Q: All on merit no doubt.*

VEALE: Oh, yes, all on the merit of having survived. But, we were able to go up to the border with China and up to Lashio and to Myitkyina in the north in the Chin area, all of which had seen active insurgencies. When we went we had sizeable military escorts and when we traveled by train, for example, the train would travel very slowly and there would be several box cars full of troops and every 50 meters or so along the train track there would be an armed soldier. I guess they would roll these units forward as the train moved. The train moved so slowly that there was time for the soldiers to either be driven or whatever up ahead so that they could continue to provide this escort along the side of the road. But, nonetheless, it was fascinating. I saw quite a lot of Burma while I was there.

During the Japanese occupation, the Burmese had suffered all kinds of deprivations and a number of Burmese told me that, in spite of various difficult things that occurred during the time that I was there, nothing was as bad as the situation in World War II when they had had to put up with the Japanese and the deprivations during the war. This was all many notches below a Westerner's comfort and discomfort levels so it was very difficult to really understand how bad it had been.

*Q: It must have been very bad during the occupation for them.*

VEALE: Yes, it was.

*Q: Were there ever any threats to the Embassy while you were there? Were you personally aware of being in danger from terrorists?*

VEALE: There were a few terrorist alerts that were very general and not specific. I don't recall any specific terrorist threats. You may recall that North Korea had set off a bomb and killed a number of visiting South Korean cabinet officials.

*Q: In the airport was it?*

VEALE: No, it was at some outdoor gathering on a pavilion of sorts. That had happened five or six years before I got there. The Burmese intelligence service was everywhere and it was a low technology Orwellian police state in its pervasiveness.

*Q: Speaking of police states, what was the Soviet influence there and the Chinese Communist influence?*

VEALE: The Soviets had a large Embassy there and I suspect that they were using it as a China listening post as much as anything. There was not a lot of interaction with the Soviets there. The Chinese, on the other hand, also had a large Embassy and Ne Win looked at himself more with a Sino affiliation rather than the Sino-Tibetan background that most Burmese identify with. But, Ne Win was critical of the liberalization that China was undergoing at that time. He thought that the Chinese were doing too much too fast and I think he tended to take a kind of senior player role with the Chinese and trying to pontificate that what they were doing was not the way he would do it. I don't have the impression that the Chinese were all that influential in Burma during this period.



I think that the U.S., through its assistance in narcotics programs and communications support that we were giving the Burmese army, was very important. Germany, surprisingly enough, was a major supplier of weapons. Germany, Singapore, and South Korea were major suppliers of weaponry to the Burmese army. The Burmese army was going after drug running private armies and there was a communist insurgency as well. One of the things that I saw while I was there was what a shadow that this insurgency had become, that the Chinese support for it had withered considerably and it really was a bunch of people who were trying to maintain the appearances of a communist organization but the Burmese were very much anti-communist during this period. They were openly anti-communist in their efforts to deal with the Burmese communist party.

*Q: Did we have a military mission there?*

VEALE: We had a defense attaché's office there but no military mission per se. The defense attaché's office was engaged in obtaining the usual IMET (international military education and training) program. But Burma's involvement in that was pretty small. One of the things I tried to do was to move our military assistance more into the humanitarian assistance, medical supplies and things like that, and away from hardware.

*Q: Was there any Peace Corps in Burma at that time?*

VEALE: There was no Peace Corps presence in Burma. Often the Burmese would not participate in things like that because they did not want to be subject to pressure for similar things from the Soviets.

*Q: Given the fact that there was this Ne Win dictatorship in a sense, at the Embassy did we have access to him and to other important Burmese officials? That is, could you go and see them or were they standoffish?*

VEALE: Ne Win was increasingly withdrawing from public life. He would make trips occasionally around the country, but these were very carefully orchestrated types of things and the press coverage of them was very much about how he would go and give guidance and that was all you would know about. I guess the second ambassador we had there, Bert Levin, must have had a credentials audience with Ne Win, although I'm not actually sure that he did because Ne Win, at that point, was not performing either as president or in any governmental role. He was above all of that. I don't recall anybody meeting directly with Ne Win during my stay there. We had fairly easy access to the foreign ministry and to other ministries. It required some pushing and because of the intelligence watchfulness and concern that somebody might be divulging state secrets, or be creating an opportunity for pressure from Russia or China to get comparable treatment, there was a general disinclination of officials to meet with American officials. If we had a demarche to make or instructions came in to go and see somebody, we generally could get appointments, say on UN votes and things of this sort. Read outs on visits by other foreigners, for examples, we could generally go into the Americas side of the foreign ministry at various levels and I remember meeting with the deputy foreign minister while I was there. Also, you could go into the parliament and observe events there. But, it was a rubber stamp parliament and wasn't worth the time really to spend on that.

*Q: How were the British treated as the former colonial power? Did they have a leg up or not?*

VEALE: This was a society which in its old forms had emulated the British and I was always struck by people who if you closed your eyes you would think you were dealing with an Englishman. And, if you opened your eyes and discounted the fact that they were standing there in native attire, their mannerism and social antics, and what not were just exactly as you would expect to find in a fine club in London. But a lot of those people had been shunted aside by the military regime and there was a certain distance to the British. I don't think the British were particularly well wired in there. They had a fairly active commercial program, probably more active than ours, but I don't have the impression that politically they were well wired in with the government. If they were wired in, it was with the former players and to the extent that those people had good contacts, the British were well informed.

The Australians took a kind of leading role. They were always out front on human rights issues. There was an ambassador there who was very active on these issues and would not tolerate many of the things that the Burmese were trying to get away with. So, of the commonwealth countries, I would say Australia was in the lead of pushing the envelope.

*Q: How were American businessmen treated? Were there many of them there?*

VEALE: No. The oil companies had tried to get things going earlier, but most of them had fallen out. As I recall, the only significant U.S. investment there was in the agricultural sector and this was with breeding fish in ponds and some shrimp cultivating and getting frozen shrimp out of the country. That was about the extent of American investment in the country. Gems were a big item in terms of providing revenue for the government at that point. But, we are talking about a society where the per capita income was probably well under \$200 during the time that I was there. This was a very primitive society, although generally speaking there was always food. Some of the crises that developed while I was there were related to the fact that the system wasn't performing in the food area -- the poor distribution of rice and the harvest were not good. That was a fundamental plank in the existence of many people and when problems developed there people began to become increasingly disparaging of the government and its abilities to do things.

*Q: Was English widely spoken? Could you get by with English?*

VEALE: English was widely spoken among the older Burmese. It did not appear that enough attention had been given to English by the younger people. Although there were attempts to gradually phase in English training in the school system, it wasn't working very well. The government press appeared in a Burmese language edition and an English language edition, for example. There were three or four government-owned papers that produced English language versions as well as the Burmese editions. But, there was not much detailed news in the press, but if there was a foreign visit you could get the gist of that for example.

*Q: Did we know at the time about this remarkable woman Aung San?*

VEALE: Aung San Suu Kyi, who was the daughter Aung San. She has a very unusual name by Burmese standards because usually you don't pick up your father's name. She had married a scholar at Oxford University and had lived out of the country most of the time. By the way, the Burmese were very disparaging of Burmese who had left the country and if you left the country you could not come back. I believe a special exception was made in her case because of who she was. She came back during the last few months that I was in the country because her mother was dying and she wanted to be with her.

I mentioned some crises that were going on and I should probably go back and catch up on some of those because these were some of the pressure-cooker events that were going on in Burma during the time that I was there. In September 1987, Ne Win, out of the blue, demonetized some 70 percent of the currency. He later said that the reason he did this was because of counterfeiting. There were some other reports that it was for astrological reasons as well. This caught everyone off guard. There was a very unclear and ultimately very ineffective and unfair system for letting people cash in their money. Basically, the Burmese way to socialism, which was the ideology that was crafted to be the explanation of why the things were the way they were in Burma, was used as a political vehicle to prevent the accumulation of wealth. Ne Win did not understand economics and what he did know was that in other systems the accumulation of wealth had resulted in political power which challenged the status quo and he wasn't going to have any of that.

So, he went after any group which began to amass money. Initially when he came into power that was Indians and Chinese so there was a period in the early consolidation of his power where he went after those two groups and basically drove them out or drove them under. The Chinese continued to be important. The Indians, chiefly the Bengalis, who had come in during the British colonial period and were the money changers and lenders, had a very important role. They were despised by the ethnic Burmese because the ethnic Burmese didn't understand contract law and they were being held to that by the Indians with their British overlords. There was a great deal of residual social bitterness towards the Indians for that. During this period of demonetization, Ne Win, I think, was using it as a way of reminding people that he could still call the shots and was not going to let anybody who was beginning to accumulate wealth to rise up and challenge him.

Well, one of the things that wasn't well thought through was that this move came just as students were going back to school at the universities and all of their accumulated money to make it through the semesters and the year was worthless. So, the students went into the streets about this and demonstrated and this led to severe crackdowns by the military. There was a great deal of unrest. I was sent up to what had been a consulate in earlier days but which was closed (and had been reverted to simply being a guest house) because of concern by the Burmese that Russia and China would want to have consulates in Mandalay also. I went up there and used that as a base to interview people about what had been going on that led to the very severe suppression of students. I made that trip in kind of an unauthorized way because there was a curfew and diplomats were not supposed to move. I went with a driver late at night, by myself effectively. We got up there and I was able to report for 3 days or so before returning to Rangoon.

*Q: They allowed you to exchange old money for new currency?*

VEALE: Yes, months later. It was not right away, but two or three months later that there was a process put in place for allowing people to get new currency. The new currency was denominated in nines because this was an astrologically significant number. They got this money printed by some German firm that stepped forward to pocket the profits, I guess. We thought it was kind of despicable. At any rate, that was one event.

In March 1988, you have to understand that the society was fairly fragile at this point because these monetary issues hadn't been resolved and there was a lot of friction in the society at large. A lot of people were getting concerned because the rice harvest wasn't good and a spark could ignite things. In a tea house, in a suburb of Rangoon, a group of students wanted to have some modern rock music replace what was being played by the townies. It ultimately became a town versus gown type dispute. When this occurred, it was the spark that united all this pent up student problems again. So, the students went into the streets and the government very shortly became the focus of opposition and it was no longer a town issue or anything like that. Rangoon, over probably a good week, was disrupted by student bands that were going through the streets, soldiers were called in, and people were shot. The students were using rubber slings and shooting bicycle spokes. We watched from the roof of the Embassy as fires were set and things like this. There was a lot of unrest in Rangoon during this period. People were wrapped up and put in prison. Some 600 kids were kept in 120 degree temperature in vans and many of them asphyxiated and died. This was a very unpleasant period. But, ultimately, the government regained control.

*Q: Did Aung San Suu Kyi play any role in this?*

VEALE: No role whatsoever. She was very reluctant to come forward because she wanted to get through this period with her mother and it really wasn't until after I left in the summer that she finally relented. There were a number of people who were reformers there. There was a brigadier, Tin Ou, and several other people who were on the frontlines of efforts to try to persuade Ne Win. They would write treatises and give them to Ne Win to try to get him to understand what was going on. They felt Ne Win was insulated and the military wasn't telling him the facts and if they could appeal to him they could at least structure the situation so that he could walk away from the others. It may very well have been that he came to see the Burmese Socialist Program Party as part of the problem and that's one of the reasons, as part of his resignation later, that he called for the disbandment of the party as no longer serving any useful function.

*Q: Was he the head of that party?*

VEALE: Yes. Aung San Suu Kyi did not play a role in this, it was these reformers who were trying to take the lead, but they, I think, increasingly saw the political power that her name would represent and were subjecting her to increasing pressure to get involved in this and step forward. It wasn't until later that summer that she began to take the pivotal role through the NLD (National League for Democracy).

*Q: Your tour in Burma seems to have been rather exciting one in some ways.*

VEALE: It was in many ways. It was a very insular kind of existence, but as things began to heat up, particularly in the second year, I found it absolutely fascinating. And, of course, what happened just after we left the world knows about that now. There was this terrible upheaval with five or six thousand casualties and it was not a pretty picture and things have not changed very much.

*Q: For a people who are always thought to be rather peaceful and quiet. Well, when that tour ended, you then took on a totally different assignment. You came back to this country and became a teacher at the Air Force Academy for the 1990-91 academic year.*

VEALE: That's right.

*Q: How did this happen?*

VEALE: I had wanted to go to one of the academies and teach. Many, many years ago I had actually wanted to go off and be a cadet at the Air Force Academy. At first, I had actually been thinking about doing this State Department faculty advisor function at the Naval Academy here so that I would be more or less in the Washington area. But, that job got off cycle and the Air Force Academy opened up and I thought that would be very interesting. I had met an Air Force officer in my Berlin days so I closed the loop ...

*Q: After your years in Burma, what sort of impression did you come away with?*

VEALE: I had a deep respect for the Burmese people and their perseverance in spite of this awful government in which many of the ministers barely had an eighth grade education. It was absolutely appalling the types of decisions that we would see them make about things and their persistent readiness to hold Burma down and keep it from developing because of their own limited understanding and their own personal political and economic objectives.

I remember one of the things that will stay with me the rest of my life was during the March 1988 crisis that was going on all around the Embassy. A group of students in the heat of the unrest and the crushing action by military troops sweeping through the streets came to the Embassy and were appealing to the Embassy for protection. They wanted to have the Embassy make some kind of gesture to show that the United States was on their side so that the government forces would lay off and not treat them so severely. The ambassador appointed me to go out and talk to the students. I found myself in the portico of the Embassy confronted with half a dozen students who were very upset and agitated and wanted me to go in an Embassy car to a location where a number of female students were surrounded by soldiers and there was an expectation that they would be raped or killed or, at the very least, incarcerated. They wanted the Embassy to show some sign that it was interested and signal the government to cease and desist. My instructions were only to say that we were concerned, we would be reporting on this, and that we certainly understood what they were trying to do, but that we could not do anything to help in these circumstances. Delivering that message was one of the most painful things I think I have had to do. That will stick with me for some time.

*Q: To have done anything else would have been foolhardy?*

VEALE: Of course it would have been foolhardy and it is this crunch between matters of state and individual moral feelings of responsibility and readiness to do things.

When I look back on Burma and my two years there, and follow from time to time about what has been going on in Burma, I just see a tremendous tragedy. Many people don't realize that Burma was once the rice basket of Southeast Asia, that it was in many ways more desirable to go to Rangoon than to Bangkok. Bangkok later replaced Rangoon after years of being driven down by the Ne Win crowd. The Burmese way to socialism was a disaster. The whole way in which an ignorant, poorly educated, insular military has taken over this country and followed ethnic policies which were aimed at trying to strengthen the hands of the Burmese, who were the majority to begin with, is just deplorable. There are many Burmese around the world in various exile communities who are patiently waiting for something to happen. But, what I saw here was a reluctance of people to shed blood to change things. The students tried, but they couldn't mobilize sentiment in the population at large. They were driven into the jungles or often into Thailand. Many people don't realize that the Burmese/Thai relationship is very much akin to Germany and France. The countries have had wars over the centuries and they eye each other with a great deal of suspicion. There hasn't been a de Gaulle/Adenauer type of reconciliation between the two countries, but things have gone fairly well since the end of World War II. But there is still a long tradition of unease across each border so it has been very easy for the Thais to allow the pillaging of the teak forests and things of that sort. It has been very easy for them to push people back into the border to certain death at the hands of the Burmese army because they really don't care that much about the Burmese. They are concerned about the ethnic groups along the border because they have been crowding into Thailand as well. So, the long term picture is not a pretty one for Burma.

*Q: Is there any cooperation between the Thais and the Burmese in handling the drug problem, particularly in the north?*

VEALE: Officially, yes, but the Thais are so complicit in this drug trafficking that it can't possibly be effective. The King of Thailand gave special sanction to Chinese Nationalist forces that came out of China when the communists took over and occupied areas in northwestern Thailand. These groups have been among the key groups channeling narcotics brought to them by caravans and getting it down to Bangkok and out onto the world markets. So, I don't really see any particular accommodation there and now since 1988 the U.S. has ceased to be an effective player in curbing narcotics there. The production, when I was there, was 800 metric tons of opium and now it is over 2000. This has tremendous implications in the world markets and it has flooded the markets with heroin recently, but heroin has not been so much of a drug of demand in the United States versus drugs coming out of South America. So Burma has not had that much concern. These narcotics are going to Asia, Europe, Russia.

*Q: When I was in the Netherlands, heroin was a big problem.*

VEALE: Yes. So, the thing that strikes me as a tremendous potential of Burma if they were to get a moderate reformist government and figure out a way to deal with the military – the military

is so afraid that it is going to be punished for the travesties that it has inflicted on society that it can't afford to let go. The idea of an amnesty is one way that might very well be, in keeping with the Burmese psyche, to grant such an amnesty. Whether Western-backed human rights movements would permit that to actually take place without retribution is an open question. But the economic potential of the country is fabulous and the people are tremendous having survived under this system for so long and the niches and crannies in which entrepreneurial skills have been developed there is waiting to burst forth on a level playing field, so to speak. I think this would be a wonderful thing to happen to Burma.

*Q: What is the religious breakdown in Burma? Is it entirely Buddhist?*

VEALE: It is overwhelmingly Buddhist. There is animism in the hill tribes. There always has been present and indeed some of the animism affects some of the Buddhism. This is the lesser kind of Buddhism, not what you have in northeastern Asia. The Buddhist tradition that came out of Ceylon (Sri Lanka) years ago, I think is the one that is subscribed to in Burma now. It is seen as the more democratic kind of Buddhism and is more accessible to everybody. It is a very devoutly Buddhist society on the whole and people give a great deal of respect to the monks. The Burmese government has tried to politicize the monks, by wiring them into a government ministry of religion, because the monks were instrumental in the unrest in 1987-88. But, you have to understand that becoming a monk is something that many young men do. It is sort of like a tour in the military, in a sense, or maybe like what the Mormons do in terms of sending their young people off to be missionaries. So, you get a lot of short-term monks who are still politically conscious and aware of the injustices in the society and are concerned and motivated to do something about it. There are monks who stay in for life, but you have to understand that there is this period in a young man's life where he goes and becomes a monk for a period of time. That is a potentially dangerous political period unless things are stabilized. That may continue to be a factor. Burma will have to come up with its own formula for bringing about political change. It may be a new kind of departure, it may be in the Gandhian tradition or some variant of that, I just don't know. I think the society is not a revolutionary society and change will have to come about in a different way. In Burmese history the notion that there is a kind of sudden collapse of the karma of a ruler who goes bad in a sense and there is a political earthquake which leads to the rise of a new Buddha. The sovereign has chosen to closely identify himself with Buddhism and Ne Win has done gestures in this regard as well to cater to that idea. But, historically, there is the pattern of this sudden souring of the karma of the leader, a collapse and then a new leader arises, claiming to have the new Buddha karma with him and so therefore the people rally to that individual. Now, whether that is the type of thing that will work in Burma today in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is another matter. I would be surprised if it does not have some of those political trappings.

*Q: You mentioned the Gandhian factor. I wanted to ask you what role does the superpower India play there in Burma, because it is a next door neighbor.*

VEALE: Well, I mentioned earlier how the Indians were seen as sort of agents of British imperialists. To this day, Burma and most of southeast Asia is an Indianized culture. There is a tremendous impact of ancient Indian culture in this area. But, the overt hand of India cannot be played in this area because other societies are turned off by it. There may be a respect and

recognition of the culture of India, but as a Hindu culture it doesn't resonate against the Buddhist culture. I think there is some feeling that India, by sticking to Hinduism and not embracing Buddhism, made a wrong decision. I may be speculating when saying that but my impression is that India does not have much influence. Bengalis as a group of people are still quite evident in the western parts of Burma.

*Q: And they are Muslim?*

VEALE: Yes, they are Muslim and the Muslim religion is probably the next largest religious grouping, although animism is probably in there too. But that group has been politically neutered by the policies of the military over the 30 some years that they have been in power.

*Q: Well, Bill, any final thoughts on your tour in Burma?*

VEALE: I think those would capsule it right now.

**FRANKLIN E. HUFFMAN**  
**Assistant Public Affairs Officer, USIS**  
**Rangoon (1987-1989)**

*Franklin E. Huffman was born in Harrisonburg, Virginia in 1934. In 1955 he graduated from Bridgewater College and immediately joined IVS. From 1967 to 1985 he was a Professor of Southeast Asian languages and linguistics at Yale and Cornell. His second career was as a Foreign Service Officer with USIA where he was posted to London, Rangoon, Marrakech, Paris, Washington, Phnom Penh, and Wellington, with subsequent WAE tours to N'Djamena (Chad) and Phnom Penh. Mr. Huffman was interviewed in January 2006 by Charles Stuart Kennedy*

*Q: Well then in '87 whither?*

HUFFMAN: Well, it had been arranged before I left Washington that my follow-on post was to be Burma. Ideally a junior officer would go to a post for his year's training and then have a follow-on at that same post. But there was no opening in London, and whoever went to London was going to be there just for the training year, so it was arranged in advance that I would go on to a regular tour in Rangoon. When I joined the Foreign Service it was not with the express intention of trading on my background in Southeast Asian studies; my purpose was to broaden my horizons and go and live and work areas of the world that I would not have if I had stayed at Cornell. And although Burma was not my specialty in academia, I had studied about Burma and in fact had studied Burmese for two years, so it just seemed like an interesting and appropriate first post for me. Furthermore, the post had a reputation of being extremely family friendly. And it seems to be true that anybody who has served in Burma has a soft spot in his/her heart for Burma. We look back nostalgically on Burma even though the country is in a sad situation.

*Q: How would you describe the situation there?*



HUFFMAN: Well, the poor Burmese people have been in jail for 50 years. They haven't had the freedom to travel. They've been under this disastrous "Burmese way to socialism," basically a military socialism -- if that's not a contradiction -- certainly a nationalist socialism kind of thing. And the government has been a disaster; as it was essentially a police state, we were limited in the number and nature of public affairs activities we could engage in. For example, they didn't want to let students go to the United States in the Fulbright program because they were pretty sure they wouldn't come back. Of course, they'd be crazy to come back if they could avoid it because they had absolutely no opportunities in that society and that economy. We were severely limited as to what U.S. speakers we could bring over. I remember we did manage to bring over one or two but they were not permitted to have any contact with the students. They would give a talk at the university but students were not allowed to attend, only the staff of the university and pre-approved people were allowed to have contact with these dangerous Western ideas.

But one of the things that we did do with considerable success was put out publications. We had four different publications that we put out. We had a large staff of about 50 FSNs (Foreign Service Nationals) in the USIS section. We had a big printing press. Not many people could come to our library; it was rather risky to be seen going into the USIS library. But we did put out all these publications -- actually some 10,000 copies a month.. One was a weekly news summary; another one was a collection of stories in special English. But our most important publishing enterprise was a monthly glossy magazine -- probably the highest quality periodical published in Burma -- called *Lin Yaung Chi*, or "Dawn" in Burmese. It contained glossy pictures and feature stories that we would take from various U.S. magazines like Time magazine or National Geographic or Smithsonian or whatever -- in other words, Americana in Burmese. The idea was that as long as we did not overtly criticize the Burmese government, we could put out any information we wanted to about the United States. The only concession that we had to make was that we had to cart all of these copies over to the customs department, the censorship department, and have them stamped, indicating that they had been approved by the censors. Of course they didn't read them, it was just an exercise we had to go through. The Burmese people, as a result of the British colonial experience, by and large were English speakers and had one of the highest levels of literacy in all of Asia. But when this benighted government came into power under Ne Win back in about 1958, at one point they banned the teaching of English for about 20 years and so there was a generation of Burmese who were mid-level officials and so on who did not speak English. This ban was lifted later on and they began teaching English again in the schools but there was this generation gap, so you could speak English to the old hands and to the young kids but those in the middle didn't know English.

One important aspect of the post was that, although we could not have close contact with the Burmese, nevertheless it's quite a comfortable post for families. There was a nice American club that had all kinds of sports and in fact the PAO was the commissioner of the International Softball League. We would invite teams from all the various embassies to come and play softball at the American club. There were two Burmese teams, a British-Australian team, a Japanese team, and the U.S. embassy fielded a team from the marine guard and two from other sections of the embassy. This was a means of mixing a little bit with the Burmese under the guise of sports.

Another strategy that we used was tennis. When the British were there they built a lot of old, sort of colonial mansion type places and each one had its own tennis court. I had for the first and only time in my life my own tennis court. We were able to invite Burmese over to play tennis and we would have tennis tournaments with the Burmese community. So tennis was a prominent feature of life in Rangoon, more prominent in Rangoon than in any subsequent post in which I served. I had a pro who came and used my court to teach his students; he made money that way and the quid pro quo was that he would give lessons to my family so we all got tennis lessons from a pro. As a matter of fact he had been the Burmese national champion for 11 years, so he was quite good.

*Q: Did you have much contact with the government there? You were there, by the way, from '87 to when?*

HUFFMAN: I was there August '87 to August '89. No, we didn't. As I say, our contact with the government was circumscribed. We had some contact with some of the university personnel, the head of the library and we tried to send him to the United States on an international visitor tour, but that didn't work out. One thing that we could do was to bring coaches over because the Burmese loved sports. And historically they were really the champions of Asia in soccer and various sports of that kind. Ne Win apparently was a great lover of golf so he had his military commanders build golf courses all over the country. Burma probably has more golf courses per capita than any other Third World country.

*Q: I'm told he had people like Arnold Palmer and others over there from time to time.*

HUFFMAN: Yes, leading sports figures could come over and conduct training sessions and seminars and give demonstrations. But we weren't able to have much effective contact with the government. Of course, the ambassador could go and make representations to the government, but we had very little impact. One of our interests in Burma of course was interdiction of drugs from the Golden Triangle up there in the north where Burma and Laos and Thailand come together. And so we had a sizeable contingent of personnel from DEA (Drug Enforcement Administration) in the embassy who were somewhat at loggerheads with the State Department because the ambassador's position was that we had so little at stake in Burma that we could "afford the courage of our convictions," as he put it.

*Q: Well did the Burmese media have much to do with you or not?*

HUFFMAN: Well yes indeed. As a matter of fact journalists were more, what shall I say, bold and forthcoming and willing to meet with the Americans and with the PAO and so on than were other people. Of course they were punished for it because any time they would publish anything that was the least bit critical of the government they would be slapped in jail. The PAO and I would from time to time meet with the small brave band of journalists up in the second floor of a dingy restaurant somewhere and they would all regale each other with their quarrels and contretemps with the government and how many times they had been jailed and so on. So it was a bit of a dangerous profession to be in but journalists traditionally are more aggressive people and more willing to take risks than the ordinary.

*Q: Were you able to travel around the country at all?*

HUFFMAN: We had to request permission from the government if we wanted to travel more than 25 kilometers outside of Rangoon. Burma's major tourist attraction is the old 10<sup>th</sup> century city of Pagan up on the Irrawaddy River and that's one of the things that everybody tries to go see and it was one of the areas of Burma that tourists were allowed to go to, that and Mandalay, the old royal capital, and then later on you were able to go up to Taunggyi in the Shan states. But this left the great majority of the country off limits, especially the more remote northern areas. Burma is a very wealthy country in terms of natural resources and it should logically have been one of the most prosperous countries in Southeast Asia but for the extremely repressive economic and political policies of their government. Of course, this all came to a head in my second year there.

*Q: What do you mean by that?*

HUFFMAN: In the summer of 1988 there were the pro-democracy demonstrations where students and hundreds of thousands of Burmese were demonstrating in the streets for democracy. The soothsayers had predicted that on 8/8/88, in other words August the 8<sup>th</sup>, 1988, drastic events would take place. My family and I had been on a train trip – several families had rented a train car, complete with cook, to go up to Mandalay and to Pagan. While we were up there riots broke out in Rangoon and in Mandalay and the other towns we passed through. We came back to Rangoon as soon as we could and rebels were blowing up train tracks, some times just right after we had passed. We finally got back to Rangoon at 8:00 on the fateful morning of 8/8/88. The streets were deserted so we managed to get to our house, but later on an estimated 10,000 people took to the streets in what was just the beginning of massive demonstrations that were to take place over the next few weeks. Government radio reported 31 killed and 37 wounded in “restoring security.” The next day, August 9, the Army, acting under martial law, killed between 40 and 200 demonstrators (estimates varied widely in those days) and arrested 1500.

Foreign journalists were not being allowed in by the regime; a lone TIME photographer had made it in earlier, but was arrested for photographing demonstrations at the Shwedagon Pagoda. As a result, I was being bombarded with calls from journalists representing AP, AFP, Reuters, Washington Post, Daily Telegraph, BBC, etc. from Bangkok, Hong Kong, London and even Sydney. They would typically ask, “What is your estimate of the number of demonstrators today?” I would look out my window and make a rough estimate of the numbers of demonstrators in Mahabandoola Square in front of the embassy. On one day later in August somewhere between 100,000 and 200,000 demonstrators marched through downtown Rangoon between 8 a.m. and 4 p.m., ending with speechmaking in front of the embassy.

This was one of the rare times when a mob in front of the U.S. Embassy was not anti-American; in fact when the Ambassador's car left the embassy, the crowd would cheer him, chanting “We want democracy!” and “Freedom now!” The demonstrators congregated in front of the U.S. embassy in the hope that it would provide them both publicity and some security. They were mistaken on both counts. On September 18, the military took over the government (overtly), forming the brutal State Law and Order Council. The soldiers, who had been ordered not to fire on the demonstrators in the hope that they would vent their anger harmlessly, were ordered to

shoot to kill, and over the next week killed an estimated 1,000 people in the process of “restoring peace and order.”

In my opinion, two events precipitated the crackdown by the government: a group of demonstrators surprised and disarmed a group of soldiers on top of the bank building adjacent to the embassy, and as they had orders not to shoot, they had been drinking, which no doubt made it easier to capture them. The demonstrators, enraged by rumors that soldiers had been poisoning the people’s water supply, wanted to kill the soldiers, but Buddhist monks persuaded them to turn the soldiers back over to their commanders. This humiliation, coupled with the fact that the demonstrators were for the first time marching on the Ministry of Defense, led to the crackdown. The generals probably reasoned that if they lost control of the situation, they would lose not only their jobs but their heads as well.

A colleague and I filmed the massacre from the top of the embassy, and I think my video, which we sent out in the pouch to Bangkok and was put onto NBC, was the first footage of the massacres that was seen by the outside world. More people were killed that day than were killed in Tiananmen Square in Beijing a year later, but for some reason the world didn’t pay much attention.

*Q: What was the security situation for the embassy through all this?*

HUFFMAN: After the massacres we broke off relations with the government and in fact families were evacuated out to Bangkok, and later non-essential personnel were evacuated out. I was evacuated out and worked TDY in the Bangkok embassy for a month before we came back in. But in fact there had been more danger from general anarchy before the crackdown; after the crackdown the military was firmly in control.

But it is rather interesting to me that, after we were forbidden to have any contact with the host government, we were just as busy as before. Rangoon was a mid-size embassy, with about 60 American officers. It makes you wonder what we were doing before. It’s a rather sad commentary on our efficiency, but I’ve come to realize that it takes a lot of effort and resources to maintain a diplomatic mission in a foreign country. That experience reveals that you can be awfully busy in a mission abroad but a great deal of your work is just self-preservation, or bureaucratic wheel-spinning.

*Q: Did you in the embassy get any feel for the Burmese military? Was this an educated group or what? Where were they coming from?*

HUFFMAN: I think there’s general agreement that the military government was a bunch of uneducated clowns. I mean, after Ne Win stepped down then they called themselves the SLORC, which somehow sounds very appropriate, but it stood for the State Law and Order Restoration Council, and they’ve had various other permutations of that as one general is overthrown and another one takes his place and they give themselves another acronym. The current one is Burmese Council for Peace and Cooperation, which is of course complete Orwellian double-speak. Speaking of Orwell, you know, he wrote quite a good book about Burma called “Burmese

Days.” And the most ridiculous thing that has come out of Rangoon is that they’re going to abandon Rangoon and move the capital to the interior of the country.

*Q: Yes, well they have.*

HUFFMAN: They’re moving the capital to the village of Pyinmana, and they’re requiring all of the government civil servants to move 200 miles up there where they will not have access to the moonlighting jobs that are necessary for maintaining their families. They’ve been told that it’s compulsory that they move up there. This is typical of the Burmese repressive police state.

We visited Burma fairly recently, in August 2002, on the way back from a WAE tour in Cambodia, and Rangoon looked very nice and cosmetically cleaned up and whitewashed and everything. And I thought, why does it seem so calm? And finally one of the FSNs at the embassy said, “Well it’s because you don’t have any motorcycles in Rangoon.” I said, “Why is that?” “Because the government forbids.” Then we went to Mandalay and the place sounds like any busy Asian city because it’s full of motorcycles. The other thing is that nobody is allowed access to the Internet. The government just by fiat says you do this or do that. During our tour there they would constantly re-monetize the currency. There was a huge difference between the official and black market rates for currency exchange so when black marketing got too rampant the government would suddenly announce that the money you have is now worthless. And then they would issue new bills in weird amounts such as 35 kyat denominations and 75 kyat denominations just to inhibit black market operations, but people who held large amounts of the previous currency were wiped out.

*Q: I remember the resistance was led by a woman who later won the Nobel Peace Prize – what was her name?*

HUFFMAN: Aung San Suu Kyi, the daughter of General Aung San. She was just back for a visit to her sick mother and was caught in the uproar. She was sort of drafted by happenstance as the symbol and the spokesman for the democracy movement and her speeches would attract huge crowds that eventually led to the crackdown.

*Q: Well while you were there what was the estimation on the part of the embassy on Aung San Suu Kyi? Did she just appear on the scene at that point?*

HUFFMAN: Nobody knew much about her. She had never been politically active. She was back there on a visit to her sick mother from London, where her husband was a professor of Tibetan Studies at Oxford. When the demonstrations broke she was sort of put on a pedestal by the people because she is the daughter of the national hero, General Aung San, who was the hero of the resistance against the Japanese in fighting for independence from the British, and who had been assassinated in 1948. She accepted the mantle of the democratic movement and became enormously popular and of course in the elections of 1990 her party, the National League for Democracy, won over 80 percent of the seats in the parliament, but she was not permitted to take power; on the contrary, she was put under house arrest. She was unable to leave Burma to visit her sick husband, who later died, because she knew the regime would not let her back in, and she felt she had an obligation to accept the role that had fallen on her shoulders. We met her once in

the airport seeing off her husband and two teenage sons. As you know, she won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991 for her efforts on behalf of democracy. But she, and the Burmese people, are still in jail.

*Q: Who was the ambassador while you were there?*

HUFFMAN: Burton Levin was the ambassador and he was an extremely likeable ambassador. I've served in seven posts, and I have never seen an ambassador who was more popular among the staff than Burt Levin. This was due in part because of the battle he fought during the evacuation of embassy dependents. Even though the military by that time seemed to be in control of the situation, the ambassador and the department had made the decision that, after you've just had hundreds of thousands of people in the streets, that could happen again; you could run out of drinking water. There were all kinds of rumors that the military was poisoning the water, and it was a wild time. The safe haven in such situations was supposed to be CONUS (the continental United States), but our families wanted to stay in Bangkok in the hope that they would soon be able to return to post. They all were living in one apartment building for solidarity; teachers from the American school had also been evacuated out, and they were holding classes for the children in various families' apartments. But Ambassador O'Donohue, who was then ambassador in Bangkok and had previously been ambassador to Rangoon, did not welcome having 100 extra people using the facilities of the U.S. embassy in Bangkok, such as the commissary and the APO and all the rest, and he, along with the undersecretary for administration, Spires, were trying to force the Burmese embassy personnel to go back to Washington. The families were supported in their desire to stay in Bangkok by Burton Levin. So this put Burton Levin up against City Hall, and he lost, of course. As it turned out Levin was perfectly right because there was in the end no reason not to go back to Rangoon, and we did go, so that it would have been enormously expensive and disruptive to have relocated everybody back to the U.S. State argued, of course, that whenever you have evacuations people typically don't want to return to the States. They claimed to have enough experience to know that the average evacuation lasts from six months to a year if not more. But Burton Levin supported our using Bangkok as safe haven. He won the battle but lost the war, but he won the undying loyalty of his staff.

*Q: What became of Levin?*

HUFFMAN: Well, having antagonized the Department, his career was essentially over, and he left the Foreign Service. Actually became head of the Asia Society in Hong Kong. So he landed on his feet.

*Q: Well now, you were talking about these publications we put out, were they having any effect? I mean, obviously you had to be very careful what you were putting out.*

HUFFMAN: Well, I think they were extremely influential, extremely popular, even so much so that the glossy that we put out in Burmese, which was sort of the equivalent of Smithsonian Magazine in quality, had a secondary market -- they'd be on sale in the market and were highly sought after. No, I think that that was a very effective program. But of course one of the things that USIS always tried to do was to pick and choose those arrows from our quiver of programs -- whether educational and cultural exchanges, International Visitors, English teaching, U.S.

speakers, the Fulbright program, book translation programs, small grants to NGOs, etc. – that would be most effective in the particular host country. If you're blocked in one area then you compensate in another where you are able to operate. So while we were limited in the area of the cultural exchanges we expanded in the area of publications.

*Q: Did you get many foreign reporters? Could they get in or not?*

HUFFMAN: No, it was difficult for them to get in and every once in awhile you'd have some coming in, but usually they wouldn't come in more than once; they couldn't get a journalist visa so they'd come in on a fictitious visa, and once that was discovered then of course they could never get in again. So you had a lot of one-timers.

*Q: Well you had built your academic career on being an anthropological linguist -- ethnic groups and tribal languages. Burma is full of tribes up in the hills. What was the tribal situation while you were there?*

HUFFMAN: Well, Burma has been at war with the major minorities forever. We had no access to those parts of the country; they were totally off limits. The government was at war officially with the Karen and the Shan and the Kachins and so on. These rebel armies over the years became pretty powerful, and they were also fairly wealthy because of the drug trade because they controlled the areas where drugs were being raised. But the central Burmese government has never been able to bring them to heel. From time to time they go up and burn a bunch of villages, take prisoners and push refugees over the border into Thailand but they're not able to permanently hold those areas. It's understandable that the tribal people in those areas are intensely loyal to their own tribes and they're quite happy as they are; they have no interest in a truce whereby they would come under the heavy-handed control of the Rangoon government – they don't want to be part of the Burmese nation. You see, when the British left, they turned administrative control over to the Burmese, which was simply the largest ethnic group but by no means the only one. They have large Karen and Mon and Shan and Chin and Kachin minorities, each with its own areas and its own armies. The SLORC managed to force ceasefire agreements on many of the ethnic groups, after thousands of minority refugees fled across the Thai border, but the Karen, Shan and Chin armies continue to hold out, along with the All-Burma Student Democratic Front operating on the Thai-Burma border.

*Q: Were you getting any information from the tribes while you were there at the embassy?*

HUFFMAN: Well, there were of course personnel in the embassy whose business it was to find out what was happening. The stories that you got in the official Burmese press -- and that's about the only press there was -- was that the valiant Burmese army was making great gains against the rebel armies, and the embassy was naturally interested in getting the truth, which was that frequently, not to say always, the Burmese army was routed, and never succeeded really in wiping out the rebels. As I mentioned before, the DEA, whose mission is to inhibit the drug trade, had made planes and helicopters available to the army and in a sense could be seen in certain quarters as collaborating with this repressive government. But of course one reason the government wanted to control the drug areas was so that they too could benefit from the drug trade. So there was a certain conflict of interest between the ambassador and DEA. USAID

closed down its operation in Burma as a result of the massacres, but DEA did not. The ambassador wanted them to close down as well but they persisted and they apparently had sufficient influence in Washington that they could win the struggle with State.

*Q: One final question before we leave Burma. Did you find you were able to put to use your academic background, either with contacts in Burma or within the embassy?*

HUFFMAN: Well yes, in sort of tangential ways. I knew who the academic experts on Burma were and who would be good contacts as speakers or as Fulbrighters. When we were sent Fulbright applications from various scholars in the United States I could pretty well evaluate them, I knew their strengths and weaknesses and that sort of thing. I was also able to advise not only the PAO but the ambassador as well on the most important scholarly sources on Burma and where they might find information on this and that. But as far as interacting with ethnic minorities was concerned, I wasn't able to do that at all.

**MARSHALL P. ADAIR**  
**Counselor for Political/Economic Affairs**  
**Rangoon (1988-1990)**

*Mr. Adair, son of a United States Foreign Service Officer, was born in Maryland and raised at Foreign Service posts in the United States and abroad. He was educated at Middlebury College and joined the Foreign Service in 1972. During his career Mr. Adair held a number of senior positions at the State Department in Washington, DC, dealing with a variety of areas, including relations with the US military Commands, Economic and political issues in Europe and Department personnel matters. A Chinese language specialist, his foreign posts include Paris, Lubumbashi, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Beijing, Rangoon, Chengdu (China), and Tuzla (Bosnia). Mr. Adair was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 2011.*

*Q: Well, so where did you go after EB?*

ADAIR: We went to Rangoon, Burma. I had applied for jobs in a number of different places. The place that I really wanted to go was Chengdu, China, but I wasn't on their preferred list. Other people with more extensive credentials lined up for that from the Asian Bureau. One of the posts that I bid on was Rangoon, Burma - the position of political economic counselor.

I hoped for a principle officer or DCM position, because management experience was important for advancement in the Foreign Service, but perhaps the timing was not right. Burt Levin was the new ambassador to Burma. He had been the consul general in Hong Kong when we were there and knew me. When he was back in Washington for a visit I had a talk with him and he encouraged me to go to Rangoon. I was very frank and I said I'd love to work for him, but what I really wanted was the DCM job. He said he already had a DCM but promised me I would have plenty to do. Chris Szymanski was his new deputy chief of mission and had a great reputation. There was a possibility of a principle officer job in New Zealand, and David Burns was trying to



help me with that. However, Ginger and I talked about it and decided that Rangoon would be the best choice. Our son was then two years old. I had been pretty busy, working long hours, in Washington. We thought well, you know, nothing had happened in Burma for 30 years. It would be fascinating to go there and it'd be quiet. It would be a great place to have a good family life.

*Q: Contemplation.*

ADAIR: Right. We had heard that there was a compound there with a swimming pool and that it was good for kids and family. The family was the deciding factor. I was intrigued with it because when I worked at the United Nations back in 1970 one of my closest friends there had been a Burmese woman named Aung San Suu Kyi. She had been working at the United Nations, in the professional service. We were introduced by a mutual friend, the Bolivian man who had tutored me for the oral exam. I was curious to see this country that she had loved so much but that she had been uneasy about going back to.

So we accepted the job and headed out. Before leaving Washington I went around and did all the obligatory calls on the different departments, businesses – and I think Congressional offices. I went to Commerce, the Department of Energy and the CIA. At every place, including in the State Department offices, I asked, “Where is Aung San Suu Kyi right now?” I was very surprised to find that no one knew. I was surprised because her father had been the founder of Burma’s post WWII state.

So we went out to Burma. We arrived I think on the 20<sup>th</sup> of August, 1988. In the spring of 1988 they’d had some of the first serious demonstrations against the regime in 30 years. Ne Win, who had run the country all that time had stepped back and turned leadership of the country over to his top general, Sein Lwin. Then, there had been a severe outbreak of demonstrations on the 8th of August, 8-8-88, a very auspicious date. When we arrived there was still blood on the streets from the severe crackdown that Sein Lwin had ordered. Chris and Jean Szymanski picked us up at the airport. As we drove in, they pointed out where these things had happened.

*Q: When you got to Burma, how would you describe the government?*

ADAIR: When I arrived in Burma, the government was ostensibly civilian. Ne Win, who had ruled the country for more than 30 years, had stepped down and formally turned over power to his right hand man, General Sein Lwin. However, General Sein Lwin had also resigned after the violence on August 8. The government was headed by man named U Maung Maung, a very elegant, elderly person, who was also a former general. He was serving in an interim capacity, but there was no indication of how long the interim would be. The government had the same basic structure that had existed under Ne Win, and most people believed that Ne Win was still calling the shots one way or another.

Anyway, after the Szymanski’s dropped us off at our house, the person who was going to be my senior Burmese FSN came by the house to introduce himself. We sat around talking about a variety of things, and then I asked him, “By the way, do you have any idea where Aung San Suu Kyi is?” He looked at me in surprise, and said, “Well yes, she’s here.” She had returned in the spring to help take care of her mother who had been very sick. I thought how bizarre it was that

neither the State Department nor the CIA had known, because the embassy knew and they would have told the desk.

Two days after we arrived she made her first public speech. It was at a hospital downtown and a huge crowd gathered. It apparently was a surprise to her and to her supporters that so many people showed up. So they scheduled another speech for her to give at the Shwedagon Pagoda on August 25. My house was about three blocks away from the Shwedagon Pagoda. I walked over there with my senior political officer and with this Foreign Service National. We sat on the grass right - let's see - on the west side, I think, of the pagoda where she was going to give her speech. We listened; it was all in Burmese so I didn't understand it. But my assistant did. He translated a little bit for me and then they translated it completely afterwards. The weather was really, really hot; but there were thousands and thousands of people there then to listen to her. From that point on the interest in her and the demonstrations just kept on growing.

*Q: What was the embassy doing during this time?*

ADAI: As the demonstrations increased, Ambassador Levin increased his calls on senior government officials, and took me with him. We called first on U Maung Maung who met us with several of his senior associates. We also called on General Khin Nyunt who had been head of military intelligence and seemed to be moving into the position of overall military leader. Ambassador Levin tried to talk with them about what was happening, what they thought about it and how the government was going to respond. They were extremely polite and genteel - but had nothing to say, except to try to reassure us that it was not serious and we should not worry. By that time there were many thousands of people in the streets.

*Q: What about the political opposition?*

ADAI: There had been no legal political opposition for more than 30 years, but it had been slowly organizing and growing since the spring of 1988. After the ambassador had called on the senior government officials to talk to them about what was going on, he began calling on those who appeared to be senior opposition figures. This became easier as the government withdrew as an obstacle to their activity. The most prominent people the ambassador called on were: U Nu, the former president who had been deposed by Ne Win in the 1950's; a former general named Aung Gyi,; Aung San Suu Kyi and a former general and national hero named Tin Oo who had been recently released from prison. There were two Tin Oo's. One was a notorious former chief of military intelligence; but the one we called on was the one who decided early on to ally himself with Aung San Suu Kyi.

*Q: During this time of turmoil had you made contact with Aung San Suu Kyi?*

ADAI: The call with Ambassador Levin was the first time that I saw her in Burma. We went to her house. It was also the first time that I met her husband, Michael Aris, who I'd heard about before they were married. He was there in Burma with her at that time. Aung San Suu Kyi was in the process of establishing the "League for Democracy", and she was making regular speeches.

*Q: What was she telling you?*

ADAI: Well she believed that it was time to establish a democratic government in Burma; it was time to have a government of the people. Burma had run by a dictator for the last 30-some years, and she believed that his regime had caused tremendous problems for Burma. She blamed a lot of Burma's backwardness, poverty, and corruption on Ne Win. But she never spoke about him or his government with bitterness or anger. She was logical, practical and almost forgiving. But she was also firm and clear about the need for change. She said she had great faith that the people of Burma were capable of democratic government, would support responsible and compassionate leadership. She pursued everything that way. She believed also that the people of Burma would listen to her and support her - at least partially because there was still a great deal of affection for her father in Burma, and that was true. In fact the population was absolutely ecstatic about her.

*Q: Well when one looks at that whole area, there have been some significant women leaders: Sukarno's daughter, Indira Gandhi, Benazir Bhutto.*

ADAI: Good point, yes.

*Q: I mean, they're daughters of former rulers who were really accepted as being part and parcel of their fathers' legacy.*

ADAI: Yes, it's interesting, isn't it?

*Q: It really is. So how did things develop then?*

ADAI: Shortly after the Ambassador's calls on senior government officials, the government withdrew from everything. It stopped providing services. The police disappeared; the banks closed - and there was little response to the growing demonstrations. The government also opened all the prisons and let everybody out - political prisoners and those incarcerated for theft, murder, etc.

Then we began to hear reports of divisions not just within the government, but within the armed forces. Until that time the demonstrations had been peaceful, and we did not think there was really a danger from that part of the population - in spite of the official television reports which regularly reported various violence and atrocities that we were unable to corroborate. However, with the possibility of conflict between different parts of the military our calculation of danger had to change. The ambassador called several of us in and asked what we thought - specifically, should we evacuate the families and non-essential personnel? I remember saying that I would be more comfortable if I knew they were safe. The Ambassador decided that was what we should do, and within two days we evacuated everybody.

It was pretty ironic. Ginger and I had chosen to go to Burma for family reasons - to have more time together, and within two weeks of our arrival Ginger and Charles had to leave.

*Q: Where did they go?*

ADAI: They went to Bangkok.

The government - the authorities in Burma were very upset that we were doing this. I went over to the foreign ministry and met with the head of the American and European Bureau. He was appalled with our decision. He insisted that there was absolutely no danger to any of us, and that it was all under control. I replied that we had to take this step, but that the embassy would remain open. When it came time for us to go out, we found that the government had withdrawn all the personnel from the airport: everybody that ran the airport, the towers, the baggage, the counters, they were all gone.

*Q: Was that to shut down the airport or did it just happen?*

ADAI: That was their way to do it. They pulled the personnel out so that the airport was dysfunctional.

I'm not sure if that was before or after the Thai Airlines flight that we had chartered came in, but I think it was actually there. Ambassador Levin said we would just have to do it ourselves. So we all went out to the empty airport and essentially took it over. The assistant defense attaché was an Air Force officer and knew something about traffic control. We manned the tower, and loaded the bags onto the plane ourselves. It was terrible for all the families. They had to wait at the airport while this was being done. Of course all the air conditioning had been turned off. But we finally got all the bags and then all the people onto the plane. It took off safely for Bangkok, and we all went back to work.

*Q: Were any other embassies still there?*

ADAI: Some others left, but not on the scale that we did. In any case most of the other embassies were smaller. The Chinese definitely didn't leave. The biggest embassies were the Chinese and the Russian, and they stayed put.

That night there was actually some fighting. I stayed out at the residence of the DCM, which was further out of town than my house, and we stood out on the front porch and watched the tracer fire go over the city, with occasional explosions. So something was going on.

After that the demonstrations grew and grew until there were millions in the streets. And then we had to face a number of other issues associated with the growth of popular demonstrations and the lack of government services. One example was the possibility of food shortages, and people believed that this was partially the work of the government to try and put pressure on things.

The rice shortage issue was a concern and we had some discussions within the embassy of whether we should bring rice in from the United States. I thought it really didn't make sense. Besides the fact that it would have taken weeks or months to get PL-480 rice from the United States, we knew that there had been a good rice harvest that year. There should not have been any scarcity. We concluded that the reason for the lack of availability of rice was that people were scared. They didn't know what was going to happen so they were hoarding. Also, the banks had all been closed by the government so there was some difficulty with cash. So we came up

with the idea that we would bring in money. The ambassador had a \$25,000 discretionary assistance authority that he could use immediately. We thought that if the ambassador used that money to start buying rice it would bring the rice out of hoarding.

There was only one catch – we didn't have \$25,000 worth of Burmese currency – and the banks had all been closed by the government. The answer was to go to the Sino-Burmese business community. They had access to a separate, non-governmental financial system that spanned all of Southeast Asia. We figured this was not illegal because there was no government and the banks were all closed. We weren't violating any laws; because there were no laws operating. So I went out to see if I could find someone to change \$25,000.

It was a wonderful experience. Rangoon had barely changed since World War II. I followed my senior FSN down back alleys between picturesque old decaying buildings. There was an air of secrecy about it – skulking in dark alleyways rather than just walking – though we were not being secret at all. We eventually entered a completely non-descript door, went up a flight of stairs and entered a large room that had very little decoration and just some chairs and a coffee table.

We were welcomed with almost no formalities by an older man. He looked Chinese to me, but he was Burmese and speaking Burmese. I told him briefly what we wanted to do, and asked him if he would be able to change a large amount of money. He said, "Well, what's a large amount of money?" I told him \$25,000 U.S. Dollars, thinking he would have to consider it. He looked at me first as if I was joking, then as if I was a child – then he laughed and he said yes, he could do that. Obviously, when I said a large amount of money he was picturing something much more. I think he was disappointed.

Anyway, with that we knew that it could be done. But also with that the word got out quickly that we were asking. Before we could even begin to change money, the rice just started pouring out. All of a sudden it was everywhere and the market began to function again. In the end, we even have to change the money. We didn't have to buy anything.

So that crisis passed, but the demonstrations were still happening - and still growing. In some ways it was very exciting for us. The square in front of the embassy was a central location for the demonstrators, who would march past the embassy shouting "Deemocracie! Deemocracie!" It was nice to experience the United States being placed in the roll of hero again rather than villain. Then one day the government said, "Stop! We're not going to allow this to go on any longer. Don't come out tomorrow!" Well, many people didn't believe them. They came out anyway – and so did the military. The city was much quieter, because people were scared. But a group did come to the front of the U.S. embassy.

This time it was different. The troops pulled up at the end of the street. They got out and warned the crowd to move. The crowd didn't go - so the military just started shooting them, right in front of the embassy. They did it all around the city, wherever there were demonstrators. We estimated that thousands of people were killed; the government said no way was it that many but there was never any way of finally resolving how many. Then the government imposed a curfew, 6AM to 6PM and the city – and the country – was shut down.

*Q: While you were there during this tricky period, the government was still located in Rangoon?*

ADAI: Yes.

*Q: So they were there but not available?*

ADAI: Well, during the period when most of the government shut down the senior leadership was not available. It was not even clear who they were. The people in the ministry of foreign affairs were available to us, and defense attaché was still able to see some of his previous contacts. There were other people in the embassy such as in the DEA (Drug Enforcement Administration) office who continued to have some contacts with the military and others as well.

*Q: Well how did we feel about the government that was there? Was it in the hands of drug lords? Was the government using the drug lords for their own purposes or what? What was going on?*

ADAI: Well with regards to narcotics, we had been working with the government of Ne Win for many years trying to control the narcotics trade. There had been some cooperation and some success, but basically the production and trade of opium continued. Many believed that senior levels of the Burmese government were involved with it, one way or another. Because of that, many believed that nothing that we did would ever be completely successful. It would always be undermined by various interests within the Burmese government.

There was actually an apparently successful effort to replace opium that was being grown in the lower Shan states with coffee. The coffee did beautifully and the coffee that was produced was fantastic; some of the best coffee I've ever had. But the opium production simply moved further back into the mountains. The biggest area was controlled by a warlord named Khun Sa close to the Thai border. He was often fighting with the regime in Rangoon. But the fighting was off and on, and there was apparently cooperation as well. Burmese generals or other officials had contacts one way or another with him and seemed to be making their own profits. It was a constantly moving game. The Burmese regime was playing a moving game with all of the different ethnic groups, and there's a huge number in Burma. Many are in areas that are more or less inaccessible, and they've been constantly at war with the regime in Rangoon since at least World War II. The regime's policy had been to play them off against one another rather than to seek any real resolution and integration. Narcotics were just one piece of that overall moving game.

*Q: How stood the tribal situation when you arrived there?*

ADAI: Well the regime was constantly at war with one ethnic group or another.

*Q: Were the tribes trying to take over each other or just trying to maintain their particular area?*

ADAI: I think they were mostly just trying to maintain their particular areas.

*Q: Was there any connection with events in Thailand or groups in Thailand?*

ADAI: Sure. There were groups along the border with Thailand, the Karen down in the southeast, the Shan further north. Those ethnic groups were on both sides of the border and always had plenty of communication across the border, and legitimate or semi-legitimate trade as well as narcotics.

*Q: Did we have DEA agents when you were there?*

ADAI: Yes.

*Q: What were they up to?*

ADAI: Well, they were still trying to work with relevant agencies of the government – mostly the military - to control the larger opium trade out there in the Shan states. However, their contacts and work became more and more difficult as the government became more focused on repressing the democracy movement and as relations between our two governments deteriorated.

*Q: What was life like when the families were evacuated? Did you just hunker down?*

ADAI: Well, particularly after the crackdown and the imposition of the 6PM to 6AM curfew, we pretty much hunkered down. Since anyone out after 6PM was in danger of being shot, we all just went home after work – and we didn't work late! I would read. I would try to get in touch with Ginger and Charles in Bangkok – sometimes I could get through and sometimes not. It was sort of a hit or miss kind of a thing. When the curfew was eased to 9PM it was possible to have an early dinner with people, but even then it was a little bit dicey. You had to leave early because you never knew what you were going to encounter on the roads.

*Q: Well earlier on and maybe today the one sort of place that one could make contact with the government was playing golf. How stood that at the time?*

ADAI: That was true at one time. I tried to take up golf specifically for that reason. However, it never really worked because by then our relationship with the government was really pretty bad. We criticized them for the severity of the crackdown; and it became apparent based on the meetings that we had, that we were not going to get anywhere with them. Government officials, particularly military, were not willing or able to have any real conversations with us. The statements that they did make were almost nonsensical in light of what was going on. There was a growing sense that the people in power were not just heavy-handed or cruel, but rather unenlightened rulers. They certainly didn't have the interests of their people very high on the agenda.

We didn't know to what degree they were just pursuing their own interests or even what their specific interests were. They had a pretty good relationship with the Chinese government at the time. This was in large part because the Chinese government was taking the position that it wasn't going to interfere in Burma's internal affairs. The Chinese interest was primarily to avoid instability – including excessive foreign involvement – in that corner of the world. They didn't want a massive influx of Western economic and political activity there. There was also a

growing trade between China and Burma resulting from the economic reforms taking place in China. China was becoming much more dynamic economically by that time. There were lots of Chinese goods from across the border in Yunnan Province crossing the border and going into Mandalay and then down to Rangoon.

*Q: How about the Russians or Soviets?*

ADAI: The Soviet Union was still in existence at that time. They were fairly quiet. They had a big embassy there, and we had regular contact with them. Even they were distressed with what was happening in Burma, and with the way the authorities in Burma were handling the situation.

*Q: Did you get a feeling that the military was becoming sort of a class?*

ADAI: The military was already a class unto itself. That was pretty clear. When Ne Win had been in power, his government was ostensibly civilian, even though he himself was a former general. The military maintained the power, but took orders from him as a civilian head of government. It wasn't until after the uprising took place and the crackdown occurred that the government itself, under the leadership of the State Law and Order Restoration Commission, became clearly military.

*Q: Okay, it's probably a good place to stop. We'll pick this up in Burma after the crackdown. I'd also like your impression of the Buddhists.*

*Q: Today is the 3<sup>rd</sup> of November, 2011, with Marshall Adair. And where do we stand?*

ADAI: We had started on Burma, how we got there and what happened shortly after we arrived.

*Q: Was this when the monks came out into the streets?*

ADAI: Everybody came out into the streets; monks, nuns, businesspeople, government employees, farmers, storekeepers, even some of the military.

*Q: Well what was the initial feeling at the embassy?*

ADAI: Well it's hard for me to describe the initial feeling at the embassy because I wasn't there when it first happened. We didn't get there until the 20<sup>th</sup> of August. The first major wave of it had already happened. But when I got there it was clear that people at the embassy had been very disturbed by the crackdown on August 8 - horrified. Many people had been killed and most of the international community was shocked. However, right after that the general who had been in charge, Sein Lwin, resigned and a civilian was put in charge of the government. That seemed to be a step in the right direction. After that there were no serious demonstrations or crackdowns until after I arrived. I think that people at the embassy hoped things were getting better, but nobody knew really what the government was or what it was thinking.

*Q: Had you seen Aung San Suu Kyi before she came out?*



ADAI: Had the embassy seen her? No, no one from the embassy had called on her.

*Q: But had you?*

ADAI: I had not seen her, no; I hadn't seen her for about 18 years.

*Q: Can you talk a little more about the character of the embassy's contacts with the government and the opposition in the period leading up to the crackdown?*

ADAI: Well, as I mentioned, shortly after I arrived Ambassador Levin made an effort to call on the senior leadership of the government. During the meeting with President Maung Maung, he and his associates were extremely courteous, but there was no substance to the conversation. We tried to talk about the origins of the popular discontent and what they thought might be done to address it. However, we didn't get any kind of acknowledgement that there was even a problem. They just said don't worry, this will all pass. It was as if by saying that they believed they were absolving us of any need to worry. When the Ambassador met with General Khin Nyunt and got the same kind of "reassurance" he took a more aggressive tact. He explained to Khin Nyunt what we were seeing, gave our opinions on what it meant – and then suggested several things the government might do to address the discontent constructively. Khin Nyunt actually got quite angry and put an end to the meeting – still without giving any substantive exchange. We were quite surprised. The ambassador had been an Asian specialist for a very long time. He had lots of experience in dealing with China and the Chinese, so it wasn't as though he was a newcomer to authoritarian governments. But it was the first time that he had dealt with a government where all of his contacts were so opaque, so uncommunicative – to the extent that they themselves actually didn't seem to know what was going on.

*Q: Well, I mean, were there any other form of contact? I don't like to use the word because it's a loaded word, but were you able to penetrate the government?*

ADAI: Oh, everybody was working on it. All sections of the embassy: political, economic/commercial, military, narcotics control, consular, cultural and so on had contacts in the government. A number of them had specific contacts in the military. But few if any were really providing any insights into what the government was doing, thinking and planning.

*Q: Was the same true of your contacts with the opposition, Aung San Suu Kyi?*

ADAI: The opposition was quite different. After those calls on senior government officials and after the government began to shut down services, we concluded that we needed to really expand our contacts with the opposition. Until that time the embassy had very little contact with leadership figures that were not in the government. It wasn't possible. But when the situation began to change, we immediately started calling on the senior opposition figures. As I mentioned there were basically four: one was the former president of Burma, U Nu. A second was a retired military general named Aung Gyi, who had been Ne Win's second in command for a number of years until he had a falling out with him. Aung Gyi had not been in the government for, I think some 20 years, but he resurfaced in the spring of 1988, first to offer public "advice" to the

government and then to present himself as an alternative. The third was Aung San Suu Kyi and the fourth was the retired general Tin Oo.

We went and saw each one of them. Let's see, we saw U Nu at his home; I can't remember exactly where we saw Aung Gyi; we saw Aung San Suu Kyi at her home; and we saw Tin Oo, I believe, at an office. Those conversations were completely different from the ones we had with the government.

*Q: What were they saying?*

ADAI: Each was different, but all focused on the popular movement, the grievances of the population, the policies that had caused this, and the things that were needed to rebuild the government and the country.

The disturbances themselves had started almost a year earlier when Ne Win had demonetized a lot of the currency. Just all of a sudden, without any warning he had invalidated most denominations of currency, leaving only a few that could still be used. For many people that was the final straw after 30 years of economic decline. They had been very passive for the previous 30 years, but began to say enough is enough.

The people who we went to see were willing to talk about all of those things and more. U Nu was very old; I think he was in his mid to late 80s at that time and he was still very articulate and he advocated a stronger role. I should not go into details, but he advocated a stronger role for the United States and for the international community. Aung Gyi sounded a lot like the government officials with whom we had recently met, except that he said things should change. At the time, he basically was advocating working with the existing government to turn things around. He was not advocating replacement of the whole government, just replacement of the senior leadership with himself. Aung San Suu Kyi was the most articulate of all of them. She seemed to have and was able to express to us the most sophisticated understanding of the grievances of the Burmese population and what kinds of things were needed to redress the situation. She had been a long-time admirer of Mahatma Gandhi and his non-violent movement and that's the way she wanted to pursue things. She was very disciplined; she was very determined and she was also pretty polite towards the regime, although as time went on she became more and more directly critical of them. Tin Oo was very similar to her and eventually the two of them formed an alliance. She became the head of the League for Democracy and Tin Oo became the number two person.

*Q: People obviously change, and she certainly had new stature. Was she a different person from when you knew her before?*

ADAI: No. She wasn't a different person at all. She was definitely much more experienced. She had continued to study and to look into these issues and had a better understanding of international relations than she had had, you know, 19 years or so before but that was natural. She had more experience; she had raised a family; she had studied in Japan; she had done many things, and seen many places. She had been back in Burma for, I guess about six months. The big difference was her orientation, her commitment. Basically she said she had raised her family - her sons were both teenagers at the time. She declared she had done that job and now it was time

for her to serve her country. She said she had made that clear to her family. She was still devoted to and loved her family, but her primary commitment had to shift to her country. She was prepared to make any sacrifice for it. Her family had accepted that. Certainly her husband had accepted that. I didn't know her sons very well, but they seemed to have accepted that, at least as far as they understood it.

*Q: Well at this point when you consulted with everyone, where did you and the ambassador and all come out? I mean, what was going to happen?*

ADAI: Well, we didn't know what was going to happen. We thought it was possible that as the demonstrations got bigger and bigger the government would step back and allow a new process to take over. The population was behaving pretty well, and the opposition leadership was speaking very reasonably. We thought and hoped that the military would find some way of making an accommodation with a new set of civilian leaders in which the military would retain its role of protecting the country and maintaining order, but the government itself would be managed in a different way. Whether that was initially brought about by elections or by negotiations or whatever no one could say.

We always knew that there was a possibility that the military would come back in and crack down. We were pretty certain that if they did that it would be bad not only for the demonstrators but for the country and even for themselves. Although they had acted that way in the past, to continue their past approach would have run counter to the sort of trends that were taking place globally at that time. We hoped that they might see that – though our conversations with them certainly never gave us any support for that hope. I think that we were trying to be optimistic and we were certainly influenced by the optimism of the public demonstrations. The demonstrations got bigger and bigger; everybody was very enthusiastic and it was peaceful.

*Q: Well now you were in Rangoon?*

ADAI: Yes.

*Q: What was happening in Mandalay and other places?*

ADAI: Similar demonstrations in most of the population centers around the country.

*Q: How'd it play out?*

ADAI: Well, eventually the military made an announcement that they weren't going to tolerate any more demonstrations. One evening they broadcast, by radio and loudspeakers and so on, that there were to be no more demonstrations and everybody was to return to their homes and their offices. The next day people were very worried. It was a lot quieter than it had been, but some people still tried to come out - and one of the places that they came out was in front of the embassy. When I drove into the embassy that morning, there was already a crowd in front. Very soon however, the military came and set up a position down at the end of the street. The embassy faced a park across the street, and the military set up a barricade out to the left and again warned everybody to leave. The crowd didn't leave, and then the soldiers started shooting. They shot

everyone who couldn't take cover, and there was almost no cover. Later when ambulances came to try and help they wouldn't allow the ambulances or the doctors to go in. I don't know how many people died there in front of the embassy. I think it was less than 100 but I'm not sure. When the shooting started we told everyone in the embassy to lie on the floor to avoid stray bullets, but some still went to the window to watch. I watched very briefly and it was not a nice sight.

We stayed in the embassy until late afternoon. Then we had to leave because there was a 6PM curfew, after which we would be targets. By that time the military had allowed the ambulances to come and pick up the dead and the wounded. Some of the students had sought refuge in the embassy before the shooting began. They were brought in by an elderly monk who was sort of the first warning. He came up to the door, asked to see the ambassador and explained to the security officer that he thought something terrible was going to happen. He asked if he could bring some of the young students that were with him in. The security officer came up and asked the ambassador who said, "Absolutely, bring them in." I can't remember how many people they brought in. I think there were about 15 or 20 students. Right after that the shooting began. Later in the afternoon we very quietly let them out the back door of the embassy and hoped that they all got away safely. I knew that the monk did because I saw him again later.

*Q: Well what did we think at that time? Did we have any idea of how this was decided, what was going to be done?*

ADAI: We didn't know exactly who had made the decisions. Shortly after that the "State Law and Order Restoration Commission" (SLORC) was established made up entirely of military officers. We didn't know if that was truly the makeup of the leadership or if it was a front for Ne Win reasserting his power. I'm not sure at that time if anybody really knew. It was still being played out behind the scenes. As it turned out the generals asserted their power more and more. Ne Win, I think, continued to be a leadership focus and influence but he was less and less a force. Eventually, he too was pushed to the side by the generals that had asserted power.

*Q: This must have had a dramatic effect on the staff of the embassy, didn't it?*

ADAI: Well yes. Of course, the staff of the embassy was fairly small at that point because we had sent most people out. We were prepared for pretty much anything, and had thought that civil war might even have developed. That was why we sent the families and most personnel out. I have since wondered whether our decision to send people out might have had some kind of influence on the government making its actions less restrained and more violent than they might have been otherwise. It might have been a consideration for them. They were definitely worried about what the United States might do. When the 7<sup>th</sup> fleet was ordered to the general area as a precaution for a possible evacuation of embassy personnel, my counterpart at the Foreign Ministry asked me with alarm what it meant. He thought it might be a prelude to an invasion. I told him it was solely a precaution, which was true, but he would probably have assumed that was what I would say in any case. In the end, I don't think that what we said or didn't say had a big impact on them. Short of a military invasion by the United States, they were going to do whatever they needed - whatever they thought they needed - to do to reassert their power. We

had a responsibility to get as many people as we could out of harm's way. There's no telling whether they might have been in more danger if there'd been a larger number of people there.

*Q: Were other embassies playing any role?*

ADAI: The British were playing a role. The British were always active there. The British embassy was substantially smaller than ours, of course. They had good contacts and they had good Burmese language capability. The Australian embassy was also quite active, but I think less connected with the regime. I mean, when I say "connected" I don't mean supportive but having the ability to make contact with the right people.

Probably the most well connected and influential embassy in Burma at the time was the Chinese embassy. It was a large embassy; and had people there that spoke excellent Burmese. The political counselor at the time had been the interpreter for Ne Win when he traveled around China – and she later returned as ambassador. The Chinese had a strong interest in Burma. It was a growing interest, both strategic and economic; and they did not make the government's policies towards its population an issue in their relations. The Chinese position was: the government of Burma is the government; what it does within Burma is its business unless it affects China. They were not critical of the government; they did not try to establish contacts with the opposition, and they were not supportive of the opposition. They stayed out of it.

*Q: Well were you getting any pressure from non-governmental organizations to do something or from other groups?*

ADAI: That's a good question. I don't recall any of the international organizations coming to us and asking us to do more – in the sense of intervening. We made it as clear as we could that the United States was not going to intervene with force. We also made it very clear that we supported the democracy movement and we believed that was what Burma needed. I think most people understood that intervening with force was not really an option.

*Q: Was Washington concerned about this and at what level?*

ADAI: Washington was very interested in what was going on. This was a massive pro-democracy movement, and it was peaceful. The streets were packed, you could barely move on the streets. It was happening apparently across the whole country, and it was also very pro-American. One of the main attractions for the crowds was to come by the American embassy – to cheer and wave American flags and chant democracy, democracy. We hadn't seen that for awhile - anywhere.

*Q: It must have been pretty disheartening for you all, to see this thing sort of die.*

ADAI: It was - and it wasn't a slow death. It was pretty violent. It was crushed. Of course we were disappointed. We were particularly disappointed for the people of Burma, because after the crackdown there did not seem to be any good prospects for them. Of course the regime had said that it was doing this to establish order and protect the country. The authorities publicized all kinds of stories of terrible things that had happened, and then said they were going to allow a

democratic process to continue, that elections would be held, and so on. The regime soon announced that it would hold elections in the spring of 1989; that different political parties could be established and campaign and that people would be allowed to congregate. We were very skeptical and so were much of the opposition. Nevertheless, opposition leaders, like Aung San Suu Kyi and the League for Democracy and Aung Gyi and some others, said they would give it a try and participate in the process. They had to give the regime the benefit of the doubt.

There was a very, very tight period for several months after the crackdown. After that they took the curfews off, and allowed people to move around, not just Rangoon but across the country. Aung San Suu Kyi, in particular, traveled all over Burma. Everywhere she went huge crowds came out and they kept getting bigger and bigger and bigger. The government occasionally intervened, but on the whole it did not interfere with the campaign process, not up until the very end. Then, after the election had taken place and the National League for Democracy had won 80 percent of the votes, the government shut everything down, said it wouldn't recognize the results of the election, and put Aung San Suu Kyi under house arrest. Many other leaders of the National League for Democracy were put in jail and everything was shut down tighter than a drum.

*Q: Was there any consequence to this for the Burmese government or they had been so isolated it didn't make a difference?*

ADAI: They'd been isolated before. They were used to it. They seemed to prefer it. We tried to encourage them to open up. When the Burmese government announced that they would allow foreign oil companies to bid on exploring for offshore oil, I argued within the embassy that we should actively pursue that, and that we should encourage American oil companies to come out and negotiate with them. I thought that kind of presence and that kind of activity could help to erode the isolation that the Burmese government regime was enforcing. We did encourage the American oil companies to participate, and they did go out. It did not have the effect that we hoped for. Subsequently, some have argued that if anything the companies helped the Burmese regime to continue its policies. I'm not sure whether that is true or not.

After the crackdown the United States began imposing sanctions - a fairly extensive set of sanctions. I can't remember to what degree they were adjusted to allow oil companies to continue work that they had already done.

*Q: Did you have any contact with the pro-democracy groups after that?*

ADAI: Oh yes. We stayed in contact with them on a regular basis from then on. Well, you mean after the crackdown or after the election? After the election we couldn't have contact. There was no access. The morning that everything was shut down, I got a phone call from Aung San Suu Kyi asking me if I could come over to her house. It was 6 AM, and I replied with some surprise, "Now?" She said, "Yes, now." So I went. My driver was already there and we drove over.

When we got to her house there were military vehicles - trucks and armored personnel carriers - all over the place. The driver said to me what do we do now? And I said well, there's nobody in

the driveway; just pull in and see what happens. So we pulled into the driveway, the gate opened and we drove in. Suu came out and explained the military vehicles had just appeared. Nobody had talked with her yet, and she didn't know what was going to happen. She told me she didn't know whether they were going to take her away and put her in jail, put her under house arrest or kill her. She honestly didn't know what was going to happen. She was scared, but she was ready to accept whatever came. We talked a little bit and I said, "I have to be honest with you. I don't know what we the United States can do to help you here because we have a line that we are not likely to cross in terms of direct intervention." She said she understood that, and then I left.

As we started down the street an officer came out and put up his hand. I told the driver not to stop. He was uncomfortable, but did as I told him. The officer just stepped out of the way and let us go. That evening the driver came up to me and said sorry, but he could not continue to work for me any longer. I said I understood perfectly, and not to worry about it. He was not only scared that our encounter with the military could have turned out differently. His father was a military man. By continuing to work for me, for the Americans, under those circumstances he would have endangered not only himself, but his father and whole family. He knew that he couldn't continue his association with us under those circumstances.

After I left the house, Aung San Suu Kyi was put under house arrest and she was incommunicado. She wasn't allowed to talk with anybody. The only one person as far as I remember who could go in and out of that compound was the woman who managed her household, cooked and so on. She was allowed to go out and go to the market and get things that they needed and go back in.

*Q: Where did we see things going? Was it a position of stasis?*

ADAI: Well, that's a good question too. We didn't know where this was going. The Burmese military had the power to maintain, for at least some period of time the position that it had chosen. We did not know how to what degree there was unity within the military on this. We didn't know whether there were groups that were dissatisfied that might have either tried to overthrow it or tried to soften it.

We were pretty sure that the economy and the standard of living of the population would continue to go down. The military, of course, immediately started engaging in all kinds of cleanup operations, cleaning up the roads, painting things and stuff like that to make it look good but none of that helped the economy. And, for the last 20 years or so the economy has not grown very much, except perhaps for increased trade and investment with China.

One of the reasons the Burmese regime was able to survive on this course was that it had the basic support of the Chinese government. There was a lot of economic activity with the Chinese, particularly trade going across the Yunnan border. Even before the events of 1988, there were increasing numbers of Chinese products in the Burmese marketplaces.

*Q: What was going out of Burma to pay for this?*

ADAI: I don't really know. The Burmese had rice to export. I don't think China really needed rice at the time, but they could have transported it on to other markets. There were other natural resources like timber – teak – and rare precious stones – rubies and jade. There were still narcotics exports, and we believed that through a variety of mechanisms the heroin that went out from the Shan states area of Burma went through China – though it is hard to believe that the Chinese government would sanction such trade, given their previous history with narcotics. Burma also had potential oil resources, which the Chinese would have a long term interest in.

*Q: What was the role of the Thai during this period?*

ADAI: The Thai weren't playing a very big role, didn't seem to be playing a very big role in Burma at the time. They had a very important border which was problematic for them. The Thai government and many people in Thailand were very upset with what was going on for two reasons. They were disturbed by the human tragedy; and they were concerned because disturbances in Burma could – and did - result in population flows across the border. That put Thailand in the position of having to care for their humanitarian needs, and having to deal with some social and political disruption in Thai communities along the border.

The southeastern part of Burma along the Thai border is home to different ethnic groups of Burmese who have often been disaffected with the government. The campaigns that took place in ensuing months caused significant refugee flows into Thailand.

*Q: Did the government up its campaign against the tribes?*

ADAI: Not right away, except in so far as they deemed it necessary to crush the democracy movement. However, the regime did get back into the cycle of war with those different ethnic groups eventually.

*Q: So the crackdown comes; was the embassy able to operate?*

ADAI: Yes, and about four weeks after the crackdown we brought all the families back from Thailand. Life resumed. We still had a curfew but in some respects that made things easier. You knew you had to be home before a certain hour, so you didn't work late, didn't go to diplomatic events - you just went home.

We continued to look for ways to stay in touch with people on the political and economic side. As soon as it was allowed, we started traveling around the country. I made several trips around Burma. It was always a bit iffy, because you never really knew whether the government was going to give you permission to go or not. I made a trip up to Mandalay and into the northwest part of the country. I also went down to the Delta, and then up into the eastern part of the country. On those trips I would try to talk with as many people as possible. Often the government people were not available. We were also followed – which meant we had to be careful not to compromise those with whom we met. People could get in trouble for their association with us.

I went into the Delta area of Burma with the agricultural attaché from the embassy in Thailand. He had regional responsibility and did an annual or bi-annual study of the Burmese rice crop.



That was fascinating because we went into all the villages and talked with the village leaders and the farmers. We stopped along the road and talked to people that were working in the fields. The rice was spread out on mats on the roads drying. The agricultural attaché had been there before. He could compare the situation then with before, and he was able to estimate whether the crop was sufficient for Burma's needs and how much would be available for export.

But it was a struggle; it was a struggle to find people that would talk with us, to find people that knew anything – and then to piece it all together.

*Q: Well you must have been hit, from time to time, with the media, with Congress, with the State Department and other area departmental groups coming to see what the hell this was all about.*

ADAIR: Well not so much because it was pretty difficult to visit Burma. It was difficult to get permission, to get a visa. It was probably hardest for journalists so we rarely got visits from journalists. When they did enter the country it was usually incognito and so they had to be careful about visiting the embassy. I only remember one congressional visit, and that was Stephen Solarz. He visited just before the crackdown and called on both government officials and opposition leaders. We didn't get very many visitors, and we were not a target for either Congress or the media. There wasn't pressure on us in that regard. We were providing more information from Rangoon than anybody else in spite of the access difficulties. The other factor was that anybody in Congress that was in the least bit interested in Burma was primarily interested from the human rights/democracy perspective. We were actively supporting that, so there was no incentive to criticize us there. Overall, we got pretty decent support - at least moral support - from the Department and from Congress. The only real exception to that was during the evacuation of families and staff. The Department tended to be very bureaucratic. The administrative people in the Department tried to tell us that we had to send all the families back to the United States.

We avoided that for two reasons. First, we knew that if we sent them back to the United States it would be extremely hard to get them back to Burma - because the Department would have inertia and that inertia would be against us. Second, we were also confident that the evacuation would not last long. We were pretty sure that the window of instability was small, the danger was limited, and it was going to be over soon. The real danger that we were concerned with was the possibility of a split in the military forces and civil war. That would endanger the lives of the families and personnel. After the government crackdown there was no longer any possibility of dissension and conflict within the government; and we were ready to bring them back. We started arguing, I think, within two weeks after that to bring everyone back. The Department dragged its feet for another several weeks. However, if they had gone back to the United States, it would have been virtually impossible to get them back within any reasonable period of time. Throughout all this time there was a fair amount of anxiety on the part of both family members and people in Rangoon, because we never were sure what was going to happen with the families in Bangkok. It was difficult for the embassy in Bangkok, too. They didn't want that burden and there were plenty of rumors that some in the embassy were lobbying with the Department to send everyone back to the United States. Nevertheless, I think that most there were supportive. They did their best to help, and those of us who were under stress probably tended to worry about it more than we needed to.

*Q: Just looking at the map, India has a border with Burma. Did they have any issues or anything?*

ADAI: As I recall, the Indian government was one of the hardest on the Burmese regime. They were one of the most categorically opposed to what the Burmese authorities were doing. I think it took a fair amount of time for the Indians to reestablish normal diplomatic relations. They didn't close their embassy but they were the most critical. Bangladesh was worried, because of the potential for refugee flow. The Southeast Asian nations were concerned and didn't like what was going on, but were reluctant to be openly critical of Burma.

*Q: Well you left there when?*

ADAI: I left Burma six months earlier than planned. In the late fall of 1989 I got a call from the State Department asking me if I would be willing to break my assignment in Burma and go up to Chengdu, China. I had always wanted to go to Chengdu. It covered western and southwestern China, and included in its consular district Tibet. I just thought that would be fascinating, but I'd been unable to get on the Department's list because there were others who wanted to go, and I was relatively new to the China field. In this case, the person who had been sent out there as consul general had gotten sick and had to leave post. The Department waited for awhile, hoping that he would be able to return. By the fall they realized that he wasn't going to go back soon. It had been almost six months since the Tiananmen disturbances, and there were still difficulties associated with that all over China. The Department decided it shouldn't wait any longer to get somebody else out there. The China Office was aware of my sustained interest in the area, and so they called me up and asked me if I'd be willing to go. I talked to Ambassador Levin, who was not enthusiastic about the idea. Nevertheless, he knew that I wanted to go. Things were shut down pretty tightly in Burma still, and there was a limit to how much the embassy could do. So, he agreed. I left in January of 1990 and went directly up to Chengdu.

*Q: Before we get to Chengdu, how did the effects of Tiananmen hit Burma?*

ADAI: Well, first of all, I think it served to reassure the Burmese regime that its actions - cracking down on the demonstrations, voiding the election results and imprisoning the opposition - had been right. It removed any possible doubt that there would be any pressure on them from China.

What was particularly interesting for me was that in the fall of 1988, after the Burmese crackdown, the people in the Chinese embassy that we knew were as distressed as we were. They were shocked and appalled by what the Burmese government had done. One very senior person commented with some force that this would never happen in China - the Chinese government would never turn its guns on the Chinese people. That was not a casual comment.

Then, less than a year later, Tiananmen happened. One has to wonder in this case if it was the Burmese who influenced the Chinese. Did the Chinese government draw conclusions from the Burmese action that influenced their decision to employ force against the demonstrators in Tiananmen and elsewhere in China? Perhaps not; they did what they thought they had to do.

**MARILYN A. MEYERS**  
**FSI, Burmese Language Training**  
**Washington DC (1994)**

**Chief of Mission (Charge d'Affaires ad interim)**  
**Burma (1994-1996)**

*Ms. Meyers was born in Virginia and obtained degrees from Southwestern University and Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies. A Japanese and Burmese language officer, she served tours in Tokyo, Yokohama and Fukuoka in Japan and as Principal Officer (Chargé d'Affaires) in Rangoon. Other assignments include Johannesburg, Canberra and Washington, where she dealt primarily with economic matters. Ms. Meyers was interviewed by Thomas Dunnigan in 2005*

*Q: Well, then we go on to the next chapter. In 1994, you went into Burmese language training. Was that something you had asked for?*

MEYERS: No. I had sought the assignment to Rangoon but the training took place happened because I had a rather long gap -- about three months -- between my departure from Canberra and my departure from Washington. I had had breast cancer and I had to make sure I had the medical clearance to go out to Burma. So during this time I had abbreviated Burmese language training.

*Q: I see. I was going to ask you how long it lasted, but several months.*

MEYERS: Not more than two or three. We covered some of the pleasantries and elementary conversation , no reading.

*Q: Then you went to Rangoon as chargé. When had the Ambassador left?*

MEYERS: The last ambassador, Burt Levin, left in the summer of 1990. It was now '94. Due to the bloody put down of the democracy demonstrations by the junta in 1988, followed by rampant human rights abuses and their failure to allow the subsequently elected Parliament to take office, we did not assign another. The DCM served as chargé from 1990 to 1994 and that same pattern continued with me.

*Q: How large was your staff there?*

MEYERS: The American staff was quite small; the Burmese staff was quite large. There had been a tremendous down-sizing of our programs after the debacle of 1988 -- all our aid programs were gone. We continued to employ a number of Burmese to show support for them and also because their other employment prospects were pretty dim. The economy, as mismanaged by the generals, was pretty much in chaos. So, I'd say, American officers totaled, counting our military

attachés, USIS, oh probably about 12. The Burmese, maybe 40-50. That would count all the security guards at the residence, and the other two housing compounds. And then we had our own wonderful Marine guards at the Embassy -- about six of them -- so eighteen Americans in all.

*Q: Did we have consular agencies anywhere in Burma or was Rangoon the only post where the flag was flown?*

MEYERS: Rangoon was the only post that we had. We had had a consulate in Mandalay but it had been closed a few years before. We still had the property there; a lovely old Tudor style house, combined residence and office. So we still owned the property in Mandalay but the consulate had been closed.

*Q: What were your relations like with the government, I gather with the military officers who ran the country?*

MEYERS: I would say distant, icy. And no access.

*Q: Did they ever call you in?*

MEYERS: The leaders, of course, are generals who have been running Burma since 1962. The only time I got to meet one of them, formally, on my own, General Khin Nyunt, was to present my credentials. The only other time we ever got to meet with the generals -- usually Khin Nyunt who was head of military intelligence -- was when we had an important visitor. For example, we had three or four CODELS -- all Senators -- that came out while I was there and they met with him. Khin Nyunt was sort of the junta's, to use a Japanese term, *gaijin* handler -- he was the one who met with outsiders of sufficient rank. He understood some English but always used an interpreter. He met with Madeleine Albright when she came to Burma. She was then Ambassador to the United Nations and had just been to China for the Women's Conference held in Beijing in the summer of '95. She very much wanted to come to Burma to meet with Aung San Suu Kyi, the democracy leader who had recently been freed from house arrest. Our main window of access, of course, was the Foreign Ministry. Even there it was difficult to see anyone of upper rank. They were not available, they were too busy, they were whatever, whatever. And it wasn't simply that I was a chargé and did not have a full ambassadorial title. Most of the other Western ambassadors had the same problem. It was easier for the Chinese ambassador, for example, to see somebody in the Foreign Ministry -- and the generals.

*Q: Were you able yourself to meet with Suu Kyi when she was under house arrest?*

MEYERS: No, when she was under house arrest she was not available to foreigners. One exception was made before I got there. About February of '94 then-Congressman Bill Richardson from New Mexico came and he was allowed to meet with her, along with a reporter from the New York Times, and one of the officers from the embassy. But that was the only time. As a rule she was not available to foreigners, nor the Burmese public, when she was under house arrest. When she was released in July '95, it was another matter. Everybody flocked to her compound except me.

*Q: Oh?*

MEYERS: Because, obviously, military intelligence was sitting there right by her gate, watching everybody who went in and out. The French ambassador, the West German ambassador; I think the British were between ambassadors, so it was the British chargé. They, the junta, say that she's a puppet of the West, the colonial powers, and particularly the U.S. So why do I need to confirm that by charging right in? So some of my lower-ranking officers went to her house because we obviously wanted to know what was going on. I thought it best that I not be in the newspapers, on the TV news, seen sitting cheek by jowl. So I didn't go, although, of course, I was dying to be there. But I sent a note saying, "I would like to meet with you when you feel the time is okay." Word got back to me a few days later and I went, with my political officer, to meet her then.

*Q: Well, she seems to be a remarkable woman. Did we carry on normal business in the sense of visas, things like this? Was there much demand for visas from Burmese?*

MEYERS: Well, the answer is there wasn't much demand for visas, because the government is very tight in issuing passports and most Burmese are too poor to travel anyway. The junta would issue passports to a few businessmen to travel overseas. And we certainly did not welcome or invite any of their higher level people to the United States. And we had a general policy that no high level Administration people should go out there either. So I pretty much became the funnel through which any contact went.

*Q: What about such things as Leader Grants, and Fulbrights?*

MEYERS: This is one of the areas where you would just sit back and say "Oh, if only..." Because you could see there were so many areas where such grants or exchange programs would be of tremendous benefit to the Burmese. Sending professors to teach in Rangoon University, for example, whose medical school, years ago, was cross accredited with the University of London. Or sending a Burmese agronomist to the U.S. to study how to increase crop yields. What we would find when we tried to do leader grants was that the government would issue a passport to one of their own lackeys – some eminently unqualified person. Their choice and not ours. And this was not acceptable to us. So that was the real tragedy, because you could just see what was lacking and how many of our programs could help and it just wasn't possible.

*Q: What about commerce? Did we import much textiles or other things?*

MEYERS: Very little trade. There were some U.S. companies that were manufacturing garments in Burma. I think those operations, due to human rights and shareholder pressure, have pretty much shut down. Some U.S. oil companies were doing exploration for natural gas offshore; they've pretty much left. So anything that was going on in terms of investment was pretty much gone. And very little trade, which was one reason why human rights is a major issue in the relationship with Burma.

*Q: Was there any opportunity for you to do any speaking?*

MEYERS: My little farewell address at the dinner that the Vice Foreign Minister gave for me two nights before I left. I'm trying to think of a single instance where I was invited to come and speak publicly and I think the answer is no. We traveled as much as we could to find out what is going on in other parts of the country, especially because we couldn't get any information out of anybody in Rangoon. Of course, diplomats were required to obtain advance permission to travel more than 25 miles out of Rangoon. You had to file a note with the Foreign Ministry to request permission and, of course, they forwarded it to military intelligence, MI, who gave thumbs up or down. And usually, if you're trying to leave on a flight on Thursday, by Wednesday at 5:00 p.m., you hadn't had an answer. So you went to the airport Thursday morning and hoped it all worked out. And usually it did but it was always this sort of last minute thing. So I did travel around the country quite a bit but no public speechmaking. The generals did not want the people to think the U.S. had any presence or interest in Burma. But, informally, people were usually glad to see us.

*Q: That's what I wanted to ask you. Were the people themselves, the man on the street, were they friendly?*

MEYERS: Oh, yes, very, and very appreciative of any foreigners who did come to Burma. They were glad to see foreign visitors. Some of the Burmese had set up quite successful small travel agencies to work out domestic travel for foreign visitors. A foreigner coming in for travel, having obtained a visa, could go right up to Mandalay whereas we diplomats had to get permission to go there. The Burmese themselves were very receptive to foreign guests though they had to maintain a distance as the junta was watching them closely.

I remember one of the rare groups that came which I was delighted to host at the residence. The American Museum of Natural History in New York was observing its 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary and had organized a trip for its patrons to fly around the world in a chartered aircraft to several countries – “back of beyond” sort of countries – where, at some time in that 125 years, the museum had carried out some sort of project. The itinerary included places like Madagascar and Papua New Guinea, and Burma and I hosted a reception for them. I invited Burmese guests too. We found that private sector people such as business people and a few Burmese lawyers would come. Invitees from the ministries -- in this case the one dealing with cultural affairs -- and the Foreign Ministry would not come. Military Intelligence always came because they wanted to keep watch on everybody else. So we could count on their being there. And then my embassy staff, my American officers, political and econ and so on. And it was an exciting evening because the American guests were all movers and shakers and were very interested in what was going on politically and economically. One of the travelers was the publisher of Washingtonian Magazine and when he got back he wrote a fantastic op-ed piece for the Washington Post recognizing the hard work that diplomats do in these off-the-beaten track countries. And he cited a couple of other people, and me, by name and how hard we were working for democracy. “After all the CNN cameras have picked up and gone home,” he wrote, “these diplomats will still be pursuing their task.” And of course telephone service in and out of Burma was nonexistent. Not nonexistent, but dysfunctional because the system they have is basically the one left by the British when they pulled out in '48. And one morning out of the blue, I got a call at home from a friend in Washington. And she said “I'm calling because there's this op-ed piece in The Washington Post this morning and you're mentioned.” And I said “Oh, God, what did I do?” As

a diplomat, your first reaction is “No, not in the papers, by name! What did I do?” She said “No, no, no, this is wonderful!” So then she read it to me and mailed me several copies which I still have here someplace.

So it’s a fascinating journey back in time to go to Burma. Thailand has boomed economically and so has Singapore and now Vietnam in the last ten years. And here, left in the dust, is this country that was a fractious democracy on the road to development in the Fifties. Then the military took over in ’62 and it has been run by the military ever since. The generals tried the Burmese road to socialism, which was an absolute failure. The currency is worth absolute zilch. It’s just shocking the way people live. I think they’re poorer now. I left in October ’96. I had a chance to go back a couple of years ago in February 2003. I went to Vietnam with an organized tour and thought “As long as I’m this close.” And fortunately one of my Australian friends was the Australian ambassador in Rangoon at the time. So I went and stayed with Trevor and Christine, his wife, and spent a week there. The country’s gone backwards. The only thing that’s changed is more cars and trucks crowding the roads in Rangoon. Once you get out in the countryside, you still see the oxcarts and broken down buses.

*Q: Do we have an airline connection to Rangoon?*

MEYERS: Do we have a U.S. carrier? No. You can fly a U.S. carrier to Bangkok. Then it’s about an hour’s flight on Thai Airways or Burma Air, north to Rangoon. But I noticed that air service in and out of Rangoon had been severely cut back since 1996 when I was there. There were far fewer flights both in and out than before.

*Q: What do you foresee for the country? How long can the military group hang on?*

MEYERS: Unfortunately my crystal ball is dark. I see little glimmer of hope in the short term. How long can these guys hang on? The first generation hung in there from ’62 until the late 80’s. Until ’87, ’88 when Ne Win formally stepped down after his disastrous Burmese road to socialism policies left the economy in ruins. And then the next group replaced him. And now Khin Nyunt, head of military intelligence, the one designated to meet with foreigners, has been removed by the junta. Too forward leaning, too inclined, perhaps, to try to have some sort of dialogue with Aung San Suu Kyi. So he is under house arrest now and has been replaced by a hardliner who roughed up her and her entourage in May, 2003. Some of her people were killed and she was injured. And now she’s again under house arrest and really isolated, all her political supporters having been kicked off her compound. She’s stuck there all by herself. I hope she has her cook, at least, so she can get some meals, she’s so slim, too slim. Changing the system there is not really important enough to any outsider and the Burmese people themselves have been ground into the dust. The Chinese have certainly moved into there in a big way commercially.

*Q: They have no interest in changing the government, presumably.*

MEYERS: No. So long as they can get what they want – trade, construction contracts, increasing influence. I think the Japanese have been eager to go back in with aid projects. But they’ve held the line and not done it. I think it’s very, very tough. I don’t know, frankly, how much longer Aung San Suu Kyi can hang on.

*Q: Do the Indians play a role there?*

MEYERS: I'd say, politically, not really, and economically, yes. They held quite an impressive trade show while I was there, and that was seven years ago. So they were developing commerce and trade. I think the generals are happier to deal with them than any of the Western powers. But it would be the Chinese who would be number one.

What was interesting overall was the different approach we and the Europeans took to demonstrate our disapproval of the regime. The U.S. pulled out its ambassador and left a DCM to function as chargé. The Europeans -- Germany, France, the UK, the Italians -- kept their ambassadors but withdrew their military attachés. We kept our military attachés. I, for one, thought that was a good way to handle it. We registered our disapproval but we kept our two men in military uniform to liaise with this military government, at least at a lower level. I don't want to push this too far but military have common experience and language and I always felt we had better contacts at the lower level because of our attachés. And I really don't think the European heads of mission had any better access higher up simply because of their ambassadorial titles.

*Q: Marilyn, you don't paint a very optimistic picture of conditions in Burma and the future. But I gather that's the way it is.*

MEYERS: I think that's the way it is, not much hope in the near future. Actually, I have a video given me by one of the officers who was serving in our Embassy during the democracy demonstrations in 1988. You see these hordes of Burmese parading in the street in front of the Embassy and, when I first heard the audio, I couldn't figure out what they were saying. You're hearing this "democracy, democracy, democracy." They were chanting "democracy," with the emphasis on the first syllable. That was a time of hope and the government squashed it brutally. About three thousand people were killed by the military. Young students made it to the steps of Rangoon Hospital and, as the doctors and nurses came out to help them, the soldiers began shooting the doctors and nurses. Just awful! Now, this was 15 years ago -- 1988 -- but there's been harsh repression ever since. And even though the National League for Democracy won the election in 1990 by a landslide, by 85 per cent, the generals have never ceded power. So, I'm sorry, Tom, I would love to be able to say, a week from Tuesday or two months from now things will change but I just don't see it.

*Q: Any other comments on your time there in Burma?*

MEYERS: Simply that I'm so gratified I had the chance to serve there. I went basically because I wanted to run my own embassy and knew that the DCM was chargé. But the experience of seeing that multi-faceted country, and of listening to Suu Kyi the year she was free and would make speeches of hope and encouragement to the throngs who gathered at her gate each weekend -- these things will stay with me for the rest of my life.



**MARIE THERESE HUHTALA**  
**Director, Office of Burma, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam Affairs**  
**Washington, DC (1996-1998)**

*Ambassador Huhtala was born and raised in California and Graduated from Santa Clara University. Joining the Foreign Service in 1972, she studied Thai and Chinese languages and became a specialist in East Asian and Pacific Affairs. Her overseas postings include Paris, Quebec, Hong Kong and Chiang Mai (Thailand). In Washington, she dealt primarily with East Asia and Pacific Affairs. From 2001 to 2004 she served as US ambassador to Malaysia and, from 2004 to 2005, as Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs. Ambassador Huhtala is a graduate of the National War College and the State Department's Senior Seminar. Ambassador Huhtala was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 2005.*

*Q: Where did you go in 1996?*

HUHTALA: In 1996, I went back to the Department, to the East Asia and Pacific Bureau, EAP. While I had been away, since I left VLC in 1992, they had combined the offices of Thailand and Burma with Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia. So there was a new office called BCLTV – Burma, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam Affairs. It had come together in the winter of 1995. In the summer of 1996 I took over as the second director of that office. Right off the bat there were some organizational and administrative challenges, because the two offices were not yet functioning as one. There was a deputy for each side of the house and there was no real interchange or interplay among them. I came in with a new deputy director and we rearranged the responsibilities so that, for instance, the Thai desk officer would have backup duty on Cambodia and the Laos desk officer would be back up on Burma. In that way the two offices would become better meshed.

We had a lot of challenges in those two years in BCLTV. The first one had to do with Burma, a country with a horrible human rights record, where Nobel Peace laureate Aung San Suu Kyi had been kept under house arrest for many years. In the summer of '96 the Congress had passed an amendment to one of the appropriations bills called the Cohen- Feinstein amendment, which mandated economic sanctions if its human rights record deteriorated further.

*Q: Was this pointed at Burma?*

HUHTALA: It was Burma-specific, yes. In the fall of '96, late fall as I recall, a student uprising occurred. Students began resisting the regime, which was called SLORC, State Law and Order Restoration Committee. It sounds like something out of a James Bond movie, the SLORC. But it was a very repressive, ugly regime and students had come out in the streets protesting. The regime responded by closing all the universities in the country and driving tanks in the street to repress the students. We don't know how many people were killed but it was dreadful. That having occurred, it became necessary for us to look at whether that action triggered the sanctions. Personally I don't think sanctions are a very effective means of diplomacy, even in places where they've worked, like in South Africa, where it took many, many years. But I knew that we were

charged with upholding the law. In early '97 we started a series of interagency meetings, sub-cabinet level, to hammer this out. To my surprise some of the people who had been most anxious to condemn the Burmese authorities, for instance the human rights director at the NSC, were getting cold feet about the application of sanctions.

*Q: I find it hard to think of anything the Burmese would want from us other than golf clubs for their generals .*

HUHTALA: No, in fact there were several large American corporations still working there, Unocal, Chevron, and Motorola, I believe. Unocal was involved in building a pipeline. There are serious natural gas deposits in Burmese waters in the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea. Unocal was building a gas pipeline from southern Burma into Thailand. There were lawsuits filed in U.S. courts charging that Unocal was complicit or at least benefiting from serious human rights abuses, including forced labor. There was some other American investment in the country and the sanctions prescribed by the Cohen-Feinstein Amendment would place a ban on any new U.S. investment in Burma. We looked at the issue for a period of months, in a series of interagency meetings, and I was among those who came to the conclusion that the legislation had in fact been triggered. As a result, at our recommendation, in the spring of '97, I think it was in April, the President issued an executive order imposing economic sanctions on Burma.

The problem with that was that once we'd imposed sanctions we'd used up one of our few remaining tools of diplomatic leverage with a regime that was very impervious to our concerns anyway. I remember in the fall of '96, before this crack down had occurred, I made my first trip to Rangoon as office director, and I remember sitting down with a director general from their foreign ministry and saying to him, "Well, our relationship is not very strong. We don't agree on very many things. I'd like to explore areas where we could try and get closer, have better relations." He just looked at me and said, "We're not interested in having better relations with your country. We don't need you, we're fine by ourselves." When you have that kind of an attitude it's pretty hard to move forward. That was one of the major challenges of the first year.

*Q: During your time, how did it play out?*

HUHTALA: We had the sanctions in place. There was no new American investment. There was a lot of pressure on the few companies that still had investments there to pull out, and some of them did. I think that's when Chevron and Motorola closed their doors. Unocal was still engaged. The problem was that European companies did not face similar sanctions and we'd not been able to get a lot of traction in persuading European governments to enact similar measures. Our sanctions also included a visa ban for officials above the level of director general or colonel in the military. We also had to refrain from positive votes for Burma in international financial institutions. There was a whole package of measures. The Europeans enacted a few of those things but not all of them. The French company Total was very active still in Burma. And a few months later, I had occasion to brief Senator Feinstein herself on the situation in Cambodia. She drew the conversation around to the problem of Burma and said, "Well why did you impose sanctions? We never intended for them to be imposed. We just intended to send a warning." That really flabbergasted me. I said, "Senator, it was the law. You enacted a law that said if the human

rights situation deteriorates we must impose sanctions.” She seemed to be sort of taken aback. I found that really fascinating.

*Q: What about the drug business in Burma during your time?*

HUHTALA: It was as bad as ever. There were serious problems of narco-trafficking with collusion by the government. We had a small program going on through the UNDCP, United Nations Development Cooperation Program, doing crop replacement in Burma. We were contributing to that at that time and we had a small DEA office that was actually getting some cooperation from the Burmese police in halting individual shipments of drugs. During that period, in the ‘90s, the output of drugs from Burma was shifting away from heroin for the international market, to methamphetamines aimed primarily at the Southeast Asian markets. So the direct threat to the United States was diminishing. But nevertheless there were serious, serious problems there. There were major narco-traffickers allowed to live freely in Rangoon and to have investments. There were big banks and hotels in Burma that were complicit. We were tracking all of that pretty closely. We were of course refusing to certify Burma under the International Narcotics Control Strategy Report, as required by law.

*Q: What about relations between Thailand and Burma? What was happening there?*

HUHTALA: They were tense and they were continuing to be tense. One of the main markets for the huge Burmese methamphetamine production was Thailand. In subsequent years the Thai society was deeply ravaged by the availability of cheap meth being sold in grammar schools on up.

*Q: Could you explain what these methamphetamines were?*

HUHTALA: It’s a synthetic chemical that can be made in a bathtub. In the old days in Burma, in the ‘70s and ‘80s, the problem was heroin refineries just on the Burmese side of the Thai border which would take opium and refine it into heroin. The process gives off distinctive chemical signals, and you can see the smoke, so it was very easy to pinpoint where these refineries were. When they switched over to making methamphetamines, it became much harder. Meth production does not have nearly as identifiable a footprint. It is made in the form of pills which are easy to ship, very hard to detect, and it’s highly addictive stuff. The users in Thailand were either swallowing it as pills or crushing it up and burning it and inhaling it. I guess that way it goes much more quickly to the brain. For the first time in history in Thailand, the segments of society that were being affected by illegal drugs were the middle and upper classes, not just the street people who used to smoke number three heroin. No, these were the kids of the movers and shakers in Thailand who were being affected. So it was a very serious challenge to Thai stability. There was also a continuing problems of refugees coming into Thailand from Burma, along with illegal workers and trafficking in persons (which is something we focused on a few years later). It was thus a very testy relationship.

*End of reader*