

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

DAVID J. KRAMER

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INTERVIEW

Q: Let's start at the beginning; when and where were you born?

KRAMER: I was born in Malden, Massachusetts in December of 1964 and my parents were both from Massachusetts. I am the youngest of five sons.

Q: What do you know about the Kramer family on your father's side?

KRAMER: Comes from Latvia. In 1912 my grandfather left Latvia and came to Massachusetts where there was already a cousin who had immigrated to the United States. My father went into the clothing business. In 1919 he opened a clothing store for women and children in a small town in Massachusetts called Middleborough, Mass. He ran that store until he died in 1952.

My father took over the store and my mother also worked in the store with my father. The rest of my father's family on his father's side stayed in Latvia and unfortunately, were all killed by the Soviets except for one cousin of his who survived 17 years in a Siberian labor camp. We wound up meeting her for the first time in 1983.

Q: On your mother's side, what do you know?

KRAMER: My grandparents were both born in the United States but had roots coming from Russia but they were both born in the United States and much beyond that I don't know. My mother was 39 when I was born; my father was 40 so my parents were up there in age when I came along. My oldest brother is 14 ½ years older than I am so there is quite an age differential.

Q: I assume this was a Jewish family, wasn't it?

KRAMER: Yes.

Q: How Jewish would you say that you were aware of?

KRAMER: My mother kept kosher when she first met my father. She tried to maintain a kosher house but my father wasn't terribly cooperative in that department and so she abandoned that fairly quickly. She was raised in a kosher household.

My brothers and I all went to Hebrew school when we were young. We were all bar mitzvahed. I was actually bar mitzvahed in Israel of all places, in Tel Aviv. After that I stopped going to temple but I still identify myself as being Jewish though I am not practicing at all and haven't been in a temple other than for a wedding or funeral in 20 some odd years.

Q: What about the Latvian influence? The Baltic States weren't exactly benign regarding Jews. As a matter of fact some of the worst stories that came out particularly Estonia but what were you getting as a kid about Latvia?

KRAMER: On Latvia I think the formative experience for me was the visit that my family and I took in 1983. That is when we met this one surviving relative. Before that in the 1960s she had written to my grandfather whom she didn't know had died years before. A letter, keep in mind this was coming out of Latvia which was part of the Soviet Union, in which she described how for many years she had been carefully watched. This letter was written in Russian so my father who did not speak Russian took it to a

surviving relative who did speak Russian and reading between the lines he could figure out that she had been in a labor camp for many years.

We stayed in touch through letters. My parents would send money and support to her, which was critical I think to keeping her and her husband alive. In 1983 we decided to take a trip and it was that trip that was formative for me in many different ways but it also connected me to my roots -- my family to my roots. My parents had never been to Latvia before -- at that point the Soviet Union. We did the Moscow, Vilnius, Riga, Tallinn and then Leningrad trip. That was maybe not the only way to get to Riga but one of the few on a Soviet Intourist trip. Those were the days of the evil empire as Reagan described it so relations weren't terribly warm between the United States and the Soviet Union.

After meeting my father's cousin for the first time I then returned there in 1992 and almost every year after that I continued to visit my relative until she died in 2003. I would go to Riga.

She was not a huge fan of Latvia. Because she was Jewish, that's how she was identified. That's how they did it in the Soviet Union where if you were Jewish, that was considered your identity or ethnicity. She and I had a conversation once back in 2001, 2002 where I tried to get her to answer the question, "If you weren't Jewish, would you consider yourself Latvian or Russian?" It was a conversation that went around and round in circles because for her, her identification was Jew and yet she grew up in Latvia. I think she did identify herself much more as being Latvian than not but she was also sympathetic to ethnic Russians whom she thought were not treated all that well although she also understood that the Russians treated Latvians very poorly too. She lived a rather conflicted life, frankly for many years.

Q: This is one of the real problems that we know about the former Soviet Union, all these ethnic groups.

KRAMER: Yes, ethnic groups and minorities that emerged at the break up, absolutely.

Q: You grew up basically in Malden?

KRAMER: I was born in Malden but grew up in Middleborough, Massachusetts which is about 50 minutes south of Boston and is on the way to Cape Cod, near Plymouth, Massachusetts.

Q: What sort of town is this?

KRAMER: Lower middle income. It is where Ocean Spray Cranberries is headquartered. It is known for cranberry bogs. It is the second largest town in terms of land size in Massachusetts after Plymouth. It wasn't the most exciting place to grow up. I went to public schools in Middleborough. I was the only Jewish student in my school system and for the vast majority of time that wasn't an issue or problem. I had maybe one or two incidents but other than that nothing while I was growing up.

Q: I assume it would be mostly Italian, Portuguese, something like that?

KRAMER: Portuguese, exactly. Irish, a fair bit. That's essentially the mix that was there.

To go to Hebrew school I would have to travel about 20, 25 minutes to Brockton which was the nearest temple. I got a decent education. My parents attached enormous importance to the education of their sons. My father used to like to say that his sons' education was the best investment he could make and so my parents put all of us through college and in some cases, graduate school, and law school. Middleborough was where I spent my youth.

Q: I don't know if you ever knew Princeton Lyman. His father came from more or less the same background. He took one look around and named his sons Harvard, Yale, Princeton and I think Stanford.

KRAMER: My father inherited the clothing store from his father. It was a pretty big business in Middleborough. My father was active in local town politics and he was very well respected and well liked. My mother was the same. My mother was on the school board for a number of years. My father was on the local town council or board of selectmen, as they called it. There was no pressure from my parents on me or my brothers to take over the store. I think they realized none of us was terribly interested in doing that.

Q: Where did your family fall politically?

KRAMER: Growing up my parents were split. My mother was a Democrat, my father a Republican.

Q: This comes up again and again and again.

KRAMER: I would say neither of them was that ardent on either side but that's sort of where they broke down.

Q: Massachusetts is quite a political state.

KRAMER: My father knew Elliot Richardson and in fact, when I was a kid my father and I came down to Washington with two friends of mine. Richardson at that time was the secretary of Commerce. I remember that very well. He wasn't there, unfortunately at the time but he had this little basketball net over his trash can and that impressed me very much that this guy was a pretty cool guy.

I got to meet Richardson later when I was in college and he was running for the senate seat in Massachusetts.

My father was a Republican, leaned toward Republican but in later life he was sort of much less identified as a Republican.

Q: Of course, Massachusetts Republicans are different breed of cat.

KRAMER: They are indeed.

Q: Elementary school; what was your school like?

KRAMER: Pretty basic. I confess hasn't left a lot of lasting memories on me. Mrs. Clay in fourth grade and Mrs. Dunnigan in fifth, Miss Russel in sixth. All the teachers knew my mother from the school board and I did well in school. They liked me. I wasn't a problem for the teachers.

Q: Were you much of a reader?

KRAMER: When I was a kid I wasn't and it is one of my greatest regrets. I am now but when I was a kid, in fact, my brothers used to tease me because of how little I would read. It is relative, I think. My brothers read a lot more when they were young than I did when I was young. I used to watch a lot of TV and that is one of the biggest regrets I have.

Q: What sort of a family was it? Did you all sit around the dinner table at night and discuss things or did you all do your own thing?

KRAMER: My father used to describe my mother as a short order cook because counting my father there were six boys she had to feed. Granted by the time I was five or six my oldest brother was already off in college. When we would all be home, there were some things we liked and didn't like and our mother would cook according to our desires which was very sweet of her on the one hand but she probably should have been a little stricter about it. She also worked during the day. Looking back on it, I just have the greatest love and respect for what she did for her family.

We would have some serious discussions around the table. Sometimes some of us would want to watch TV while we were eating. Our parents didn't particularly like that but they didn't block it. There were a lot of conversations about politics, about things in general. If my brothers would come home from college, about their college experiences.

My father started a spelling bee in town that was named after his father. All of us competed in the spelling bee. Two of my brothers won the spelling bee. I did not. This is in the fourth grade. I lost on the word Valentine because I didn't capitalize it. That was an indication of the importance my parents attached to education that they would sponsor those kinds of things.

My parents would also around the holidays leave care packages for families in need and do it as anonymously as possible. I look back on what they did and they did an incredible

job of providing for five boys. I have two brothers who are twins which also wasn't the easiest thing on my mother. My parents were very generous and giving to other people in town and were widely respected in town, widely respected.

Q: Was news an important factor; newspaper, TV, radio?

KRAMER: Yes. We would watch the news a lot. I still remember watching Walter Cronkite every night. Watching news was a very important thing to us. Reading the paper every day was very important to us, the Boston Globe and on Sundays we would get the New York Times and that was a treat. If my brothers were home my father would get the papers, they weren't delivered. My father loved to go out to the coffee shop and get the newspapers. He usually would get up early but sometimes took his time and was chit chatting with his friends; we would give him a hard time when he came back because we were all up waiting for the newspapers. We fought over the newspaper.

Q: Do you recall as a kid up through high school any events that particularly struck you?

KRAMER: I had a pretty normal childhood. I drank quite a bit in high school because there wasn't a lot to do. I hung around with good kids, relatively speaking and am still in touch with several of them. On weekends we would go out and drink. This is before all the drunk driving laws came into being but it reached the point by the time I got to college, drinking wasn't a big deal for me so I actually focused more on my studies.

Q: What high school did you go to?

KRAMER: I went to Middleborough High School which is a public high school, about 800 people.

Q: How did you find it?

KRAMER: It was OK. One of my brothers went to a private high school because that was when a new high school was being built in Middleborough and so they staggered the junior high with the high school attendance so my parents decided to send my second oldest brother to a private high school. I went to public high school for four years. It was fine. I actually had some good teachers.

Q: Did you get involved in any extracurricular activities?

KRAMER: I did. I was the editor of the yearbook in my senior year. I played baseball, varsity baseball team. I refereed basketball. In junior high school I was the editor of our yearbook then too and also a little newsletter I did. I sort of was active in those kinds of things. I took my studies pretty seriously in high school.

Q: By the time you got to high school were there any African Americans students or not?

KRAMER: There were a couple. I was a good friend with one of them, Mark Barbosa, who went off to the military after high school. We would hang out quite a bit.

Looking back on it, did they experience any problems? I don't think so but to have been in their shoes, I might have a different answer.

Q: Also you had what was happening in Boston.

KRAMER: That's right. By the time I was going to high school, and I went to high school from '79 to '82 the problems in Boston had calmed down somewhat so it wasn't quite the flare up that had occurred earlier. I would say Middleborough was a fairly quiet town in that respect when it came to whether it was religious or ethnic minority issues.

Q: Was the Kennedy name still something?

KRAMER: Yes. Senator Kennedy still carried a lot of weight, yes, he did.

Q: Where did your brothers go to college?

KRAMER: My oldest brighter went to Cornell. My second oldest went to Stanford. My twin brothers did the exact same thing; one went to Cornell and one went to Stanford. I went to Tufts which is where my parents went. It was the only school I got into. I was panicked. Fortunately, Tufts was a first school I heard from. I applied to Cornell, I applied to Stanford. I think I got wait listed at both. I applied to Harvard and Williams, a whole bunch of places. I didn't get into them so I was in a panic and wound up going to Tufts and I loved it. I loved the place.

Q: What attracted you towards Tufts?

KRAMER: Beside from the fact it was the only school I got into, it didn't leave me a lot of choice. I didn't want to go far away from home. I was pretty attached to home and the idea of being an hour away was very appealing to me. Even though I lived on campus just knowing I could hop in my car and go home was important to me. It was a small school which was also what I preferred. It was strong in liberal arts and political science, international relations which is what I thought I wanted to pursue and so I did.

Thinking back what one of the things that struck me as I was going through school was the availability of Russian language. When I was in high school we had a choice between Russian and French and I took Russian. It just so happened we had a teacher who knew Russian who had spent time in the Soviet Union and it was a little unusual that Russian was being offered at that time. That probably was also a formative experience for me to have taken Russian because I pursued it in college and the fact that in this small little public high school in Massachusetts, Russian was an option. That probably had a big impact on my career as well as the fact of my interest in my family roots.

Q: How would you describe Tufts? You were there from when to when?

KRAMER: I was there from '82 to '86. My last semester I had done most of my credits and so I was the editor of the student newspaper my senior year which was a great experience. I played baseball my freshman year and then I got mono my sophomore year. I always like to say I think that kept me from signing a multimillion dollar contract. That's when I actually joined the newspaper, the Tufts Daily, my sophomore year. That turned out to be a much better experience in the long run for me.

Q: At Tufts, how close were ties to the Fletcher school?

KRAMER: You could take classes there and I did. There was a fair bit of overlap and there were some good courses that were offered from Fletcher professors but I didn't particularly have an interest in going to the Fletcher School after finishing my Tufts' degree though. I had a very good experience at Tufts. I was a resident assistant my junior and senior years and enjoyed that experience.

The funny thing though is I have not stayed in touch with any friends from college. I have lost all contact with my college friends.

Q: Particularly when one goes abroad a bit, that really cuts out an awful lot. Also where people come from; if you don't live in one of these sort of breeding grounds of one these universities or colleges you really do lose touch.

KRAMER: And yet I stayed in touch with some friends from Middleborough to this day. But friends from college, I have lost all touch with.

Q: Were there any issues that dominated, being on the paper and all?

KRAMER: I would fairly regularly meet with the president of Tufts, Jean Mayer, who was a French nutritionist. I grew quite attached to him. I thought he was really an impressive and very smart guy. So just developing a relationship with the president of the university was a very interesting experience.

There were times where having to make decisions on whether to run an article or not run an article, dealing with people who were my age and making those decisions. I enjoyed working on the newspaper very much. To some extent it is a good thing my senior year that I had finished most of my requirements and credits because I was spending an awfully lot of time on the newspaper but have no regrets about that whatsoever.

I majored in political science and Soviet studies. Sally Terry who was a professor of Soviet studies and political science was my adviser at that time. I got to know a few other professors there pretty well. Dan Mulhollen who was a history professor with whom I had a falling out, unfortunately. Tony Smith, a political science professor. I enjoyed the experience there very much.

Q: How was the political science department because some have gone way over on the quantitative side and others haven't? How stood it at Tufts?

KRAMER: Funny you ask that. Tufts was much more on the non quantitative side. It is exactly for that reason that I did not go to get a PhD. I went and got a master's after Tufts in Soviet studies so I was much more interested in the regional kind of focus.

At Tufts there was a little less move toward quantitative. When I was finishing at Tufts in '86 and went to Harvard for a master's Harvard was definitely moving in that direction. I was not the least bit interested in that kind of pursuit.

Q: I am really looking at this I find it, I am not even sure what the attraction is. In the first place it doesn't advance any particular cause.

KRAMER: It just seemed to me so divorced from reality. I was more interested in reality and dealing with specific issues, specific countries, regions, specific problems and not the quantitative approach.

At Harvard I had a professor, Adam Ulam, who was a well-known Soviet expert. He hated, hated the quantitative approach that some of his colleagues in the government department at Harvard were taking and I agreed with him and out of that he had a lot of influence on me. It was an avenue I just didn't want to pursue. I don't have any regrets about not getting a PhD because I did see that's where the political science field is headed.

Q: You were at Harvard from when to when?

KRAMER: I was a master's student from '86 to '88, got a two year master's in Soviet studies and then was a teaching fellow for Ulam from '88 to '89. I enjoyed that experience very much, hanging out at the Russian Research Center with some real giants in the field was a great experience.

Q: What were you picking up both at Tufts and at Harvard about the Soviet Union? Obviously you were there at a critical time. The Soviet Union was on its way out in '92.

KRAMER: But the rest of the Warsaw Pact had disintegrated in '89.

Q: Prior to that was there intimation that people were looking at this?

KRAMER: I would say most of the people I associated with, dealt with and learned from were pretty negative on the Soviet Union. There weren't any softies. Sally Terry, my adviser at Tufts took a pretty critical approach in terms of Soviet foreign policy. That is where she focused most of her energies. Ulam was certainly a staunch critic.

Q: What was his background?

KRAMER: He was a Polish immigrant. He and his brother left Poland just before the war and the Nazi invasion of Germany. Other than his brother the rest of his family perished and his brother, Stanislaw, was involved in the Manhattan Project. He was a brilliant mathematician. Ulam then went to Harvard and became a Soviet expert there with Merle Fainsod and others, wrote some phenomenal books; Expansion and Coexistence, the Bolsheviks, Stalin, became a real giant in the field. He had only been in the Soviet Union once in his life. He was a narrative historian and he was somebody who had a lot of influence on me and someone who was very critical of the Soviet system and the Soviet period. I became very good friends with him. I got to know him toward the end of his career. He and I would play tennis. This was a pretty big, lumbering guy who was getting up to 70. Seventy was the retirement age at Harvard. We would play right across the street from Mt. Auburn Hospital which I used to joke was a good thing just in case something happened to Adam. I would always try to hit it in his general direction. After we would play tennis, we would go back to his apartment near Mt. Auburn Cemetery and he then felt very proud to have a scotch afterward because he felt he had earned it.

So Adam and I and a few others used to play poker occasionally. Dealing with Ulam was a very good experience. The Harvard years I enjoyed very much.

I also had Dick Pipes as a professor but only for one class and a number of other people so it was very good.

I had a brother who is also in the Soviet field and he was at the Russian Research Center at that time.

Q: Would you say by this time Russian studies as you came across it in various places had sort of the Marxist professors kind of gone by the wayside?

KRAMER: Yes, I think that is right. There were some who were a little softer. Joe Berliner is one that comes to mind. I don't mean it critically at all because Joe was a wonderful guy and very smart but he was a different bent than Adam.

Marshall Goldman was there although he didn't teach at Harvard; he was the associate director of the Russian Research Center at the time. He was a professor at Wellesley but I got to know Marshall quite well. Marshall was not as critical as Adam; few were as critical as Adam.

There were some other people I hung around with, did some research together with who were also very critical of the Soviet system. They had a few émigrés from the Soviet Union there and they tended to be very critical. There is no question that had an impact on me but you are absolutely right. It was a very interesting time to be there.

In 1991 I was still hanging around the Russian Research Center, and I was still living in Cambridge but I was doing some consulting work for a company called Arthur D. Little in Cambridge at the time. I was doing some lecturing at Clark University out in Worcester, Mass. and also teaching at a high school program at U. Mass, Boston. When

the coup attempt happened in August of 1991, nobody else was around the Russian Research Center so I became the guy that people went to for interviewing on what was happening with the coup attempt in August of 1991 and that was my first experience dealing with TV. I enjoyed that a lot, very much and I wound up on what was then called the Christian Science Monitor television network, which then went out of business in 1992 because they were tapping in the church fund to run the network. They had me on TV all the time talking about the coup attempt and the collapse of the Soviet Union. That was a very interesting experience.

Q: Communism or Marxism often had a, because it is a system, it has a certain attraction to students. It would drive their parents up the wall but I think by this time this had pretty well gone.

KRAMER: It had. I think the bloom was off that rose by then. I think by '89 with the revolutions happening in Eastern Europe, I think the illusions about the communist system were gone. I was focusing on this region in the 1980s when I think a lot of illusions were no longer there.

Q: What did you have in mind? To be a teacher, or to be a professor?

KRAMER: I wasn't sure. When I was a graduate student getting my master's I thought being a professor was what I wanted to do but then as we discussed the move toward more quantitative approach in political science turned me off. I also realized I don't like grading. I still don't like grading because I have been teaching a course the past two years at GW (George Washington University) and I hate grading. I realized that probably isn't what I wanted to do.

Dealing with the media was of interest but then I started to become more interested in policy and I realized that if I was really interested in policy then Washington, DC was the place for me to go and so I started to shift from a more academic focus to a more policy focus. Starting in '92 to '93 I started looking for opportunities in Washington whether on Capitol Hill or in the think tank community and that's how I wound up in Washington in 1993. So '93 I moved to Washington.

Q: Had you been keeping up contact in Washington?

KRAMER: I had two brothers who lived here at time; my oldest brother who had lived here for a long time. They are both still here and my second oldest brother who had moved here not long before. That was very helpful because it gave me a base to sleep when I would hunt for jobs down here.

The way I wound up down in Washington was with the think tank, CSIS the Center for Strategic International Studies. Steve Sestanovich who was the director of the Russia program was a student of Adam Ulam's and so Ulam put in a recommendation for me and based on that recommendation, Sestanovich hired me. So in '93 I moved down to Washington and started my career here and I have been here ever since. Coming now on

18 years I will have been in Washington. It has been a great experience and one I haven't regretted at all. It came at an interesting time for me.

Q: Was there a significant other in this business?

KRAMER: No.

Q: How did you find Washington, society is the wrong term but the Washington milieu or whatever you want to call it?

KRAMER: It is very different than Cambridge. I discovered it is a pretty small city. Everybody knows everybody. I sort of get a kick out of it, frankly. I realize it is not for everybody. I can understand those who don't but I have been here 17 1/2 years. I now think of myself as a Washingtonian.

Q: It's addictive.

KRAMER: I now have been one of those who have gone through the revolving door, both when I came down here I was out of government in the think tank world then I went into government. Now I am back out of government. I do imagine I will go back into government some day. I know there are those who don't like that but I actually think there is something positive about it.

Q: The system works quite well. It can sort of take care of changes in the political atmosphere but it is a continuum, no matter.

What did you start doing? You left Harvard when?

KRAMER: I finished my master's in '88. I was there for a teaching fellowship for a year. I started my own company with my brother and a few other people from Harvard in 1989.

Q: Doing what?

KRAMER: A consulting company called East West Consulting Group, Inc.

Q: How old were you?

KRAMER: I was 23, 24. Since you have never heard of it, you know how well it did. We were sort of a bunch of people associated with the Russian Research Center at Harvard, including my brother and none of us knew the first thing about business. We also made the mistake of being too honest because this was 1989 and everybody was all excited about the fall of the Berlin Wall and the revolutions in Eastern Europe and everybody wanted to jump in and do business and we were saying not so fast. Easy does it. There are lots of problems yet to sort out. Nobody wanted to hear that message. It didn't last very long. It was a good experience on how to put together a business. I was doing some lecturing at Clark University. I was involved in a high school program for advanced city

high school kids at U. Mass., Boston but I just decided it was time to get a little more serious about a regular job. I moved down in '93 with Steve Sestanovich at CSIS who was a student of Adam Ulam's and it was based on Adam's recommendation that I came down. I became the associate director of the Russia-Eurasia program at CSIS.

Q: What was the Russia-Eurasia program?

KRAMER: It included Steve Sestanovich who had served in the Reagan administration at the NSC (National Security Council) on Russia and a well-known Russia expert. Gabe Schoenfeld who was a fellow there as well, a few other people and we essentially would hold meetings. You know, the luncheon meetings that are well-known in the think tank world here in Washington. We would produce publications including a newsletter and would occasionally publish little books on developments in Russia and the former Soviet Union. My job was to help raise funds for that, to manage the programs, to oversee everything and it was a great experience. That was only for a year though.

In '94 Sestanovich was asked to run the Russia-Eurasia program in the Carnegie Endowment by Mort Abramowitz who was the president of it at that time. Steve very nicely asked me to join him and so I went. I was at CSIS for a year, I left there in '94, joined Steve at Carnegie, which used to be at 24th and N and is now over on Mass. Ave and together we ran the Russia-Eurasian program including the creation of the Carnegie Moscow Center which still thrives to this day. I was with Carnegie for five and a half years.

Q: Let's talk a bit about the Carnegie. What were they after?

KRAMER: This was Mort Abramowitz's idea. Mort was an FSO, I think, ambassador to Thailand, INR assistant secretary, ambassador to Turkey, a wonderful guy. I still get together with him every now and then. Mort thought it was time to set up a center in Moscow and so he asked Sestanovich to come. Dimitri Simes had been at Carnegie before. But Dimitri wasn't all that interested in setting up a center in Moscow and then left not long after. As the president of Carnegie, Mort decided this was the time to do it. It was a pretty bold and risky thing to do because Russia was a bit like the Wild West in the early, mid '90s. We set up a center there. We hired a number of Russians. It was run by Americans and I with Steve ran things until Steve left in '97 to go into the Clinton administration.

Then Arnold Horelick came on board to run the Russia-Eurasian program and then he left and then I left in '99. I quit the Carnegie Endowment in '99.

Q: I had have a little taste of this period in that I went for three weeks I was a consular officer in the Foreign Service and they wanted somebody to go there and talk about consular work, I had retired by that time went on a USIA grant. All these young Americans and others eager to forward the word of God. Some were missionaries but whatever it was you know, this was the way you should do it. Lawyers you, know which struck me as these weren't really particularly well qualified people to put it bluntly

because they weren't practical. There is a tendency anyway as Americans do to talk down to other people. We've got the word and all that.

KRAMER: Yes, and some of them knew nothing about the region and didn't appreciate the unique history and culture of the region and so sometimes that just doesn't work, absolutely.

Q: Did you find there is a problem with this? What were you all trying to do?

KRAMER: We were trying to create a research institute and a think tank in Moscow that would help to promote mutual understanding between Russia and the United States. We thought it was very important while an American was the head of the office, we thought it very important that the vast majority of the staff working were Russians and not Americans who would be guilty of exactly of what you were describing. Ninety five percent of the staff were Russian and still are Russian. In fact, now for the past couple of years the center had been run by a Russian. We also thought it was important to have some American presence there in order to make sure it was a U.S.-Russia organization.

It was viewed as an American organization because it was funded by the United States and by Carnegie but I think it was a very important contribution by for promoting mutual understanding. I give full credit to Mort Abramowitz for coming up with the idea. It was Mort's baby. Mort also when he left the Carnegie Endowment in '97 also came up with the idea of the International Crisis Group which remains very active and effective these days so Mort was a real ideas guy with new institutions and that was great.

Q: As you were doing this were you looking over your shoulder seeing if this country is going to slip back into the bad old days which it appears to be doing? Was this part of the equation?

KRAMER: Very much so because we had some programs that focused on the internal dynamics of Russia. In the '90s and I tended to be a little more negative about what was happening in the '90s than some of my colleagues. In the '90s I think there was an overall tendency to view things with a glass half full kind of approach. Now I think it is the glass half empty kind of approach.

Looking back on it I think in fact it was wrong to describe Russia as a democracy in the '90s because Yeltsin was more interested in economic form. With the collapse of the Soviet Union there was greater freedom, there's no question. Russians took advantage of that and they traveled and they could do things that previously were prohibited but I don't think that Yeltsin was really all that serious about democratizing Russia in the 1990s.

Think back to '93 when he shelled the Russian parliament, in '94 when he launched the first war with Chechnya, in '96 when his election was pretty rigged and on and on. There weren't a lot of things if one looks back on it with a clear eye I think speak all that well about developments in Russia in the '90s but certainly the collapse of the Soviet Union

was a terrific thing. It gave people a lot more freedom than otherwise would have been the case.

We wanted to make sure that we weren't being Pollyannaish about the place, that it had a long way to go and I think we have seen some of that recently.

Q: Did you see the rule of law as being a major factor during its slippage?

KRAMER: Absolutely and the lack of rule of law I think even more notable these days but the lack of attention focused on institutions in Russia in the '90s, I think is coming back to haunt the country now. Where it was from the war in Chechnya in '94 to '96, the election in '96 that really didn't pass the test, the shelling of the Russian parliament in '93, all those developments have had a lingering impact and it goes to show that sort of the strong arm of the leader is what the Russians are accustomed to and what they have had been resorting to certainly under Putin. I think the lack of rule of law has been a big problem. It was in the '90s, it continues to be a big problem now and I think there is not enough attention devoted to rule of law issues even to this day.

We just saw this with Khodorkovsky so it remains a big problem.

Q: One thing one can't think help thinking about what does Russia produce? Oil and pretty good fighter planes.

KRAMER: Even that is questionable these days. Oil and gas, timber.

Q: Were you seeing developments towards an entrepreneurial class that could produce rather than manipulate?

KRAMER: In the '90s, not so much, no. Keep in mind the price of oil wasn't that high in the '90s. It only really started to go up after Putin became president. But they weren't very good at much else. Their military went through wrenching times in the '90s. What you had in '95, '96 was this loans for shares unfortunate adventure where oligarchs in exchange for providing loans to government which went to helping Yeltsin's reelection campaign received shares in state owned enterprises and if the state didn't pay back the loans then the oligarchs would keep the shares. The most treasured assets at that time were energy companies because that's what Russia was good at. That is still largely what Russia is good at. The metals, the aluminum industries are also good at but those two are resources. Talk about modernization and trying to diversify the economy, frankly, I don't take that all that seriously. Plus the price of oil has gone up again.

Q: It is a drug.

Was Carnegie developing a group of people saying hey, we've got to diversify?

KRAMER: Definitely. I think over the years, both when I was there and after I left in '99 Carnegie was producing a group of scholars, researchers and analysts who I think have

really stood up very well over the test of time and a number of whom focused on economic issues, others focused on the political. I think the analysis that Carnegie has done over the years, not all of it of course, including my own analysis, but a lot of the analysis has held up very well over the years.

Q: You are developing people who are looking at this place objectively. We can sit here and we can see some of the major problems. Do you see any developments that would mean that other people who are really important are really doing something about it?

KRAMER: Paying attention, yes. In the '90s I think people in the Clinton administration did pay attention to Carnegie, in part because we were a very convenient place for officials who would go to Moscow to go and talk to experts and analysts or to convene people who didn't even work at Carnegie but were in Moscow. I think there was a lot of attention paid to the Carnegie Moscow center. When we would bring our experts from Moscow to Washington, U.S. officials would meet with them and other analysts in town would be interested in hearing from them. I think Carnegie did carry some weight. Was it listened to all the time? No. I think it still carries some weight. I mean they still have people who work there, some of them worked there in the '90s, who are very highly respected Russian experts. Again, I think that is a lasting tribute to Mort Abramowitz for the idea he had to launch the center.

Q: When you left Carnegie, where did you go?

KRAMER: I quit Carnegie without having a job to go to. I had a bit of a run in with the successor to Mort Abramowitz, Jessica Matthews. Briefly I had an affiliation with something called the Project for the New American Century and then in April of 2000 I became the executive director of something called the U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy and that was my first government job.

Q: Today is April 26, 2011. We left off in 2000. You had left the Carnegie place. You said you had a dispute. Was this a bureaucratic thing with Jessica Matthews?

KRAMER: I guess you could put it that way, yes.

Q: Was there a difference in outlook or what?

KRAMER: There was a difference of opinion on the way forward with the Russia program and the Moscow Center which had been launched by her predecessor, Mort Abramowitz who preceded Jessica. By 1999 we had the question about how to handle the management of the program. That's what it boiled down to.

Q: When you left, did you feel it was going in the right direction?

KRAMER: I felt good about the Moscow Center that had been set up but I did not feel as confident about the Russian program in Washington. I had been there for five and a half years and it was also time for me to move on.

Q: I had a little taste of refugee politics. At one point my first job was dealing with refugees, now more the term émigré. Had there developed here in Washington sort of a cadre that was kind of out of touch with what was happening in Russia in a way or not?

KRAMER: I wouldn't say that was the case at Carnegie. At that period in the '90s there was a lot of travel to Russia so there was I think better experience and familiarity with the country than there used to be in the Soviet period. There were people who saw the glass half full and others who saw it half empty when it came to Russia, both in the '90s and then in the subsequent decade. I think that's maybe how the differences broke down.

Q: Then you come to the U.S.

KRAMER: Advisory Commission on U.S. diplomacy.

Q: OK. What was this? 2001? What was this about?

KRAMER: After I left Carnegie I needed to pay my bills so Paula Dobriansky who was a member of that commission put me in touch with the chairman, Harold Pachios from Maine, a lawyer from Maine so I interviewed for the job of executive director of the U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy which is a commission that has been around for a long time. It used to oversee USIA and then by the time I joined it in April of 2000, USIA had been merged into the State Department so our focus then became how the merger was working out between USIA and State and that's what we focused on.

The commission itself is made up of seven presidentially appointed members depending on the party in the White House. At that time it was four democrats and three republicans. They are Senate confirmed positions. It was a very interesting job. I had not worked in public diplomacy before that so it was opening new horizons for me. I enjoyed it immensely. I enjoyed the commission members too.

Q: I have been doing these interviews for 25 years and I did not come from the public diplomacy field. I was a consular officer. It always struck me as how important and vital the public affairs officer and his or her apparatus was at embassies abroad and then you talked to people who had a USIA assignment in Washington how they ended up tending the nuts and bolts personnel and really having very little input. It just seemed like a horrible waste of extremely talented people. One of the things you thought about was well, if they amalgamate, this crew will now be able to be more influential as they should be. Did you see that developing or not?

KRAMER: When I was at the commission it was the first year of the merger so it was very early on and the commission took the view that merging USIA into State was the right thing to do in the belief that marrying public diplomacy with overall diplomacy was also the right thing to do. I think the merger, or maybe even absorption is maybe even a better way to put it, of USIA into State has had mixed results. I think a lot of people who joined USIA would much rather be in the field. I think the public diplomacy officers

really are some of the first people that foreigners interact with and so I think they feel that there is, they really are the face that many people see for the first time in reaching out to different communities and other things. I think they play a critical role.

It has been said since the merger that now every Foreign Service officer is a public diplomacy officer. I am not sure that's true because I think public diplomacy does in fact have some unique skill sets that not all Foreign Service officers acquire. It is important I think for all Foreign Service officers to acquire public speaking skills and know what to say and how to say it and things like that. In dealing with foreign audiences those are very important skills.

There has been frustration or there had been. I don't know if there still is. There had been frustration among former USIA staff when they merged into State; the feeling that they got the short end of that stick.

Q: I did a history of the American consular service. In 1924 it was absorbed into part of the Foreign Service and the diplomatic side immediately grabbed control and the consular service larger and in many ways more experience than the diplomatic service got the short end of the stick and I would suspect that the public diplomacy would have the same fate.

KRAMER: I think almost by definition just given what happened which is to say rather than call it a merger in retrospect, it was an absorption of USIA into State. By that I mean that State was in charge and the highest level public diplomacy official was at the undersecretary level. Evelyn Lieberman was the first one and that undersecretary would report to the deputy secretary and to the secretary. I think there was no question that that separate sense of identity got lost in the merger/absorption.

Q: There is almost a difference in philosophy and I don't know. That's why I am putting it to you if you sensed at the time that the old USIA cultivated the press and all was selling America's story and that was the overall goal whereas diplomats are trying to sell the administration's goals. It is a short term or tactical goal as opposed to the old USIA's strategic goal. Did you sense at all that this had changed there?

KRAMER: I think those who came up in the USIA culture still tried to preserve those elements where it isn't simply selling the administration's policies. That's a little more for the political officers and the econ officers or the DCM or the ambassador. I think the public diplomacy officers as you point out, their objective is to sell America essentially and the American story. They are not divorced from or completely separated from the policy.

Q: There is a difference.

KRAMER: I agree with you. They have a broader objective than say the POL officer or the Econ officer. The public diplomacy officer wants to explain what the United States is

and to increase understanding. I think that probably has been slowly eroding since the merger/absorption.

Q: Let's talk about what you were doing. How did you find the commission that you were dealing with and what sort of issues were you dealing with?

KRAMER: We decided to focus on how the merger was going and so we decided to take several trips to visit the posts in the field and get their assessment of how things were going. There was a trip to Southeast Asia, Indonesia, Vietnam and Korea, South Korea. There was a trip also to Russia and Ukraine. Those I think were the two main ones. I was there only a year. There wasn't a great deal to focus on.

I also met with virtually every senior public diplomacy officer in the State Department at that point. The commission was located at the old USIA building on 4th Street and so there was easy access to people in that building. We focused on producing a report which is what the final product of my time there amounted to was this report that we produced on the integration of USIA into the State Department.

Q: What was your sort of the thrust of your report?

KRAMER: We came out from the same point where we started which is we thought that the merger/absorption was the right thing to do but we thought there was still a lot of work to be done in order to make sure that the former USIA staff did in fact have a major say in their activities in public diplomacy, that it was important to make sure that they had promotion opportunities, that there was sort of cross fertilization across cones so that those that were not in the public diplomacy cone could come in and experience public diplomacy and vice versus for the public diplomacy officers to be able to move up the chain in embassies not solely in the public diplomacy cone.

The merger/integration was uneven in many places. Some bureaus were ahead of the game; others were real laggards. It varied from bureau to bureau as well.

Q: You were there during 9/11?

KRAMER: I was at the State Department. I had already left the commission in June, 2001, joined the Bush administration, working for the undersecretary for global affairs, Paula Dobriansky as her senior adviser. I started as a Schedule B which is a term appointment that's, I started actually at the advisory commission as a Schedule B too. That was the fastest way to get me to move from the Commission to Paula Dobriansky's office so I kept my Schedule B status. I started June, 2001 and then I was at the State Department. Paula was in a meeting with a Mexican delegation at the time of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

Q: Undersecretary of Global Affairs?

KRAMER: Yes.

Q: What did this entail?

KRAMER: I was her senior adviser. I focused on several different things. I focused on any issues dealing with the former Soviet Union because that was my background. I also focused on the issue of HIV/AIDS which was gaining more attention in the Bush administration and involved working closely with colleagues in the OES Bureau as well as in the White House's Office of AIDS Policy and was involved, I certainly won't say played a major role but played a minor role in helping to put together the PEPFAR Initiative, the president's major HIV/AIDS initiative for countries around the world.

I also helped the undersecretary with personnel issues and got somewhat involved, although I wasn't front and center on the issue of trafficking of persons which was an issue that was getting more attention. A new office had been created at the State Department dealing with the GTIP as it is called; G standing for global affairs. That's where I reported, straight to the undersecretary and provided general advice to help Paula with writing articles and speeches and so on.

Q: Your boss was Paula Dobriansky?

KRAMER: Exactly.

Q: What was her background?

KRAMER: I believe she started as an intern at the NSC under Brzezinski and then worked in the Reagan administration and the Bush Senior administration and I believe her last job at that point was as a DAS in what was I guess called the HR Bureau, the Human Rights Bureau at that time. She then left and wound up at the Council on Foreign Relations directing their Washington office. CFR rented space from the Carnegie Endowment and so I would see Paula occasionally. She also had a background in Russian and Eurasian affairs and so we would often see each other at meetings so we got to know each other in the '90s, became friends and then when I told her I had left Carnegie, she very nicely put me in touch with the chairman of the U.S. Advisory Commission. Then when she joined the Bush administration in May of 2001, she then asked me to join her in her office as her senior adviser.

Q: You were there for how long?

KRAMER: I was in the G office, as it is called, the Global Affairs Office, from June, 2001 until October, 2003.

Q: As a Russian expert did you sense that we were probably, when push comes to shove, were paying more attention to Russia because of what it had been than what it was? It was no longer the great menace. The great menace in a way has been described as Ivory Coast with missiles. It is living off a reputation if you are looking at it globally, it is not that big a deal or not? Correct me if I am wrong.

KRAMER: I agree in part with what you are saying. In 2001 George Bush came into office intent on trying to establish a good relationship with his counterpart in Moscow, Vladimir Putin. In the famous Ljubljana meeting he had with him he made the comment of how he looked into Putin's soul or looked into his eyes and could see his soul, a line that he never really lived down. He was interested in improving bilateral relations.

I think that paid off when he wanted to abrogate from the ABM treaty. He got Putin's support when U.S. forces went into Afghanistan through Central Asia and even in the initial round of or the next round of NATO enlargement, Russian objections weren't that serious.

It then started to deteriorate I think both because of the deteriorating situation inside of Russia on human rights exemplified most notably by the arrest of Khodorkovsky in 2003 but also with Russian opposition to the war in Iraq. Of course, Russia wasn't the only country to be opposed to it.

Russia did start to rebound under Putin, largely thanks to the increase in the price of oil which meant that Russia's importance in the world did increase in the past decade.

I think your point is a valid one which is that even in the '90s but including the early Bush period the focus was as much on what Russia had been as much as it was or is or would be.

Q: Talk a bit about the HIV program. I think one of the things that Bush II is not given much credit for is the fact that he really pushed this.

KRAMER: Yes, absolutely. It is an issue that he cared deeply about. There were two aspects to it; one was an international organization set up called the Global Fund to Combat HIV/AIDS/TB and Malaria. The U.S. played a critical role in founding that and providing seed money for it.

At the same time the president also launched his own U.S. initiative called the PEPFAR program for AIDS relief as part of his presidential initiative for prevention and AIDS relief. It was a real breakthrough in terms of focusing U.S. attention on trying to stanch the spread of HIV/AIDS, particularly in Africa but not just in Africa; in Southeast Asia and other places. It focused on, I think, a dozen countries, initially to provide significant assistance in getting preventive measures in place, for treatment and also for dealing with issues like condoms and others. The condom issue was a very controversial one in the Bush administration.

I agree. I think that this was an initiative that the president deserves great credit for and I think also President Obama does as well because he has continued it in this administration. It is one of those issues that had bipartisan support.

Q: Why would the condom issue be a, this is for historical purposes. A condom is a condom. What's the big deal about it?

KRAMER: Some people didn't like the idea that you would be distributing condoms, that they encourage sexual activity outside of marriage so there were those concerns about it.

Q: Was this mainly the Catholic Church?

KRAMER: It wasn't only. I think that the church had some issues with it. There were certain conservative factions, I think it is fair to say, that also had issues with it. At the same time part of the program was distributing condoms so not withstanding concerns or objections, it still happened.

Q: I interviewed Prudence Jones and she was in Africa Bureau and they were, one of the brands they were circulating says, 'Use prudence', you know.

KRAMER: Exactly.

Q: How did you see your bureau interacting with the rest of the Department? I have talked to people who worked for the Human Rights Bureau early on under Patt Derian and she sort of inserted herself rather strongly but became quite effective. How did it work with you?

KRAMER: In the case say of HIV/AIDS the OES Bureau, the Oceans, Environment and Science Bureau played the key, the lead role so my role was more as advisory and helping out, providing the support at the undersecretary level. The OES front office including; Bud Rock who was a P/DAS at that time and Ken Brill who had been involved and then later John Turner, working very closely with Jack Chow who was a DAS responsible for international health. He and his team including Judith Kaufman who was terrific and a number of other people were involved; Bill Dilday who is still working at the office dealing with international AIDS. They were the ones leading the charge. I was simply helping them out in a supporting and advisory role. Sometimes they would need the help from the undersecretary's office so I was able to provide that but Jack and his team were really the ones who were intimately involved in all this, including dealing with the setup of the global fund to combat HIV/AIDS/TB and malaria. OES was very important.

Then when the White House created this new office to deal with the PEPFAR Program it kind of took the issue of HIV/AIDS out of OES and so OES kind of lost one of its key functions in launching all this work on HIV/AIDS. It was set up in an office that was essentially autonomous and run by somebody who reported directly to the secretary.

Q: How did you find in dealing in the bureaucracy of the State Department? The secretary and Paula, how did they get along?

KRAMER: Secretary Powell and Paula? They seemed to get along fine. They got along very well I think and then Paula had, Paula was there for all eight years. Paula had a reputation of getting along with everybody. Everyone liked Paula. She is a very decent person, smart person, very active, very energetic and so I think she and the secretary had a good relationship.

Q: I guess the African Bureau would be where the center of HIV business was although Asia was beginning to show up but there were some trouble spots in Africa, weren't there?

KRAMER: There were. It is working with the Africa Bureau most closely but most of that work done with the regional bureaus was done by OES so I wasn't directly involved in that kind of activity unless there were problems between OES and the regional bureaus and then I would try to weigh in in any way to be helpful but AF was certainly a major focus of it.

Q: Where did your bureau look in congress? Did you have sort of a constituency or connections to congress?

KRAMER: When I was working for Paula at that point the main interaction would be between Paula and members of congress or even staff so she would be the one front and center. I would be involved in it. I would meet with staff on the Hill but she would, I would go with her. I would help her with this. She would meet with members on trafficking in persons and other kinds of things.

That was a controversial issue at the time. There were some concerns about where that office was going so it wasn't just about the HIV/AIDS initiative. Jack Chow also played an important role on the Hill in interacting with them, explaining to them the administration's thinking and plans for dealing with the HIV/AIDS issue.

Q: Well, as you were looking at Russia, had been looking at it for a long time, what was your impression during the time you were in Global Affairs of where things were going in Russia?

KRAMER: I was concerned even before I joined Paula's office when Putin became president. He's a guy who came up through the KGB ranks and usually if you get somebody with a KGB background that he had you are not going to get someone who is enamored with democracy and human rights. I was concerned early on.

That concern was reinforced in the time I was working in the Global Affairs office as Putin began to take over the TV stations, nationwide TV stations which in retrospect was a brilliant move on his part because TV is the main means by which Russians get their news and information. That meant that the state controlled what Russians were seeing and hearing.

I was concerned early on about where Russia was going. You have to keep in mind too in 1999, again before I started in the government Russia had reinvaded Chechnya in the north Caucasus and terrible abuses were taking place in that war. That was under Yeltsin. It started under Yeltsin before Putin became president. I was very worried about where that was going, about the situation inside the country, about Putin's efforts to concentrate and centralize power and I would say those concerns would turn out to be very warranted in light of where he went.

Q: Looking at it in the long run, Russia has never really had a democratic government. In mega terms did you see this as a perhaps a necessary step towards getting somewhere or maybe a complete reverse?

KRAMER: In the '90s when I was at Carnegie I was not one who thought that Russia under Yeltsin was becoming a wonderful democracy. I thought Russia in the '90s was a bit of a mess. I think most Russians would agree with that assessment. It was a time of chaos, weakness. The Soviet Union collapsed. They were left with half the population. They were going through economic turmoil and financial dislocation, the ruble plummeted, the financial crisis of '98 and on and on and on. Russia in the '90s was not a thriving democracy. I think those who at that time were describing Russia as a democracy were actually discrediting the concept and notion of democracy. Most Russians, if that was democracy to them, they didn't like it.

I think if you start from that basis, then I think what we have seen under Putin has not been a step in the right direction. Putin owes a lot to Russia's revival, to an outside force to which he had no influence; the price of oil, exactly right.

If the price of oil had shot up as high as it did under Yeltsin, Yeltsin would have been a very popular president, I dare say. Putin benefited from that tremendously and as a result, his numbers went up. Meanwhile, he made sure he kept the opposition down and dealt with any potential threats. So you had people who were getting killed who posed any serious challenge, including journalists and opposition figures. It wasn't just inside Russia's borders as we saw with Mr. Litvinenko in 2006 or 2007. He was killed in the UK, poisoned with polonium. You have the leader of Chechnya, Mr. Kadyrov who kills opponents, wherever they may be. This is a problem not just within Russia's borders. It is a problem beyond as well.

Q: You left Global Affairs in?

KRAMER: October, 2003 so right before I started in Policy Planning, right before the arrest of Khodorkovsky in October of 2003.

Q: Then where did you go?

KRAMER: I was in Policy Planning for a little less than two years and I focused largely on Russia Eurasia issues at that time. Barry Lowenkron was the acting director. Richard Haas had been the first director in the Bush administration. He left in 2002. Barry hired

me. Mitchell Reiss came on as the director and Barry returned as deputy director and my focus was on Russia and Eurasian issues.

Q: Policy Planning has gone through a whole series of things. George Kennan thought, he established it. It is basically going to be whither the next ten years or something of the State Department and then at a certain time, it turned into speech writing.

KRAMER: Speech writing. Sometimes it ran the building. With Dennis Ross, I would say, it was possibly at its most influential.

Q: How stood it when you were there?

KRAMER: It was more of a think-tank, I think for the secretary but at the same time I think Policy Planning staffs have this challenge all the time; you risk getting sucked into the day to day stuff which means you have less time to do the sort of stepping back and thinking long-term. I think that was true when I was there. We would often get sucked into the day to day.

You have to keep in mind when I started there the Iraq war was very much front and center and so there was a lot of focus on that. In my part of the world there was this concern that was growing about the human rights abuses in Russia, the centralization of power and the problem of corruption in Russia too.

Policy Planning, I enjoyed it. It was kind of like a think-tank job inside the government where you would write policy memos. Your audience instead of the public at large was the secretary of state. Unlike in a think-tank, you could deal with classified information.

So I enjoyed it. How much influence we had, I am not sure to be perfectly honest.

Q: Did you find yourself in competition with INR or not?

KRAMER: No. I worked closely with INR. The people who do Russia in INR are terrific and so I found INR actually to be a valuable resource and I let them do the intel and the analysis and I tried to focus more on what it all meant for policy. I worked closely and well with the folks in INR. That, by the way, continued when I moved on to my other jobs. I think INR is a really great bureau.

Q: I have a personal bias looking at INR. I served two years there dealing with the horn of Africa way back in the '60s but I have always felt that unlike CIA, INR could be fast on its feet where when you have a bureaucracy, and you have a report it goes through layers. Somebody is always if you say such and such will happen, such and such might happen. It is possible such and such, you know. Qualifiers. This is the nature of bureaucracy and then it doesn't even get to an action officer.

KRAMER: I agree. I think INR's small size is a huge advantage. Sometimes it is stretched thin when it is tasked things but its ability to turn things out that are quality but also quickly is very important.

Q: Somebody I know was the Jordan desk officer by himself. He got tired of things and moved over to the CIA where there were six officers dealing with Jordan. This is a problem with size.

Although it wasn't your focus, what was the attitude of your colleagues towards our initial and later involvement in Iraq?

KRAMER: It wasn't my focus. From a personal standpoint based on what I read and heard and knew, I assumed Iraq posed a threat with WMD and so I was in support of the intervention. When all that turned out not to be true, it was very troubling. I think it was very troubling to a number of people in the Department.

I would say there were a number of people who were not in favor of intervening militarily. There were a few people who quit, in fact, some rather publicly. I respect people who resign out of principle. I think it was a difficult time for a lot of folks at State and a feeling that the Pentagon was calling the shots too much, that State was not throwing its weight around sufficiently. So it was a very difficult time, I would say.

I did go to quite a few meetings, coordination meetings, early in the morning that would deal with Iraq and how to prepare for all the fallout and everything. Those were mutually important. I am not sure at the end of the day they amounted to very much though.

Q: Was Russia much of a focus during the time you were in Policy Planning?

KRAMER: For me or in general?

Q: In general.

KRAMER: No, it still was. Bush invested a fair amount of time in developing his relationship with Putin. I do think that the arrest of Khodorkovsky in October of 2003 did have an effect on Bush's perception.

Q: For the record, explain who he was.

KRAMER: Khodorkovsky was the richest Russian oligarch. He had acquired assets in the 1990's through what's called Loans for Shares. He became very rich. He ran the Yukos Oil Company. In the period when Putin became president he tried to launch reform of the corporate community and he was also talking to people in the opposition. He was talking about selling a stake in his company to foreign investors. He was talking about building a pipeline to Asia. He was rather defiant of Vladimir Putin and to make a long story short for probably a number of reasons, Putin decided in October, 2003 to arrest him. He was seized on his own private jet with guys with guns boarding his plane,

thrown in jail and has been in jail ever since. He has been convicted now twice on charges that many people think are rigged through a court process that many people think has been fraudulent.

In October, 2003 when he was arrested, I would say that was an eye-opening experience for people in the administration. I think it showed them that dealing with Mr. Putin meant that it was not going to be all love and kisses.

Russia of course was important because of its opposition to the war in Iraq and so trying to deal with the after effects of that. It was important as the president started thinking about further enlargement of NATO and it was important when the president was also dealing with missile defense and trying to create a missile defense system. Lastly, it was important when it came to Iran.

Of course, it came very much on the radar screen in 2008. I had already moved on to the DRL Bureau at that point but in 2008 when it invaded Georgia.

Your earlier question I think is right. I think there was a tendency to inflate Russia's importance in that whole period. That may not have been a very healthy thing to have done.

Q: There is always a lag in government in outlook.

You moved over to DRL?

KRAMER: I moved from Policy Planning. I then joined EUR. I became a DAS in EUR in July of 2005, working with Dan Fried who was the assistant secretary at that time and I became the DAS responsible for Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova as well as nonproliferation issues in the region because most of those dealt with Russia.

So I was there from July of 2005 until March of 2008. That's when I went to DRL.

Q: What were the proliferation issues in those countries?

KRAMER: It was a range of things; it involved discussions about agreements with the Russians on cooperating on nuclear waste and nuclear weapons, it involved dealing with the Russians on the 123 agreement that was eventually signed by the Bush administration and then ratified or gotten through the congress by the Obama administration which is working with Russia in dealing with nuclear waste that results from nuclear weapons development, it meant dealing with missile proliferation and nonproliferation efforts and all those kinds of things, arms sales. There were a lot of different activities on the nonproliferation side.

Q: Where were our concerns on nuclear grade weapons material from these various countries? Was there a lot of stuff around there?

KRAMER: From the breakup of the Soviet Union Belarus, Ukraine and Kazakhstan agreed to give up their nuclear weapons and that was done in the 1990's but there was still material that was needed to be secured and transported to Russia. That continues, by the way. Last year Ukrainian President Yanukovich signed an agreement to transfer highly enriched uranium to Russia. All these things continue in Belarus today. We are still dealing with the legacies of the nuclear weapons period where some these countries even where they have given up nuclear weapons still have the leftovers from it.

Q: Belarus has a rather nasty ruler and all. During the time you were dealing with them, was this a problem?

KRAMER: It sure was and was one I spent a lot of time on. In 2006 Belarus held a presidential election that was condemned by the Organization for Security Cooperation in Europe. Based on that and based on violence carried out against members of the Belarus opposition, the U.S. together with the European Union imposed sanctions against Belarus in the summer of 2006. I was very involved in that issue. I was among the lead officials dealing with the situation in Belarus.

The U.S. continued to impose additional sanctions. I worked very closely with colleagues at the NSC who played an instrumental role in that. In November, 2007 we imposed a sanction against a major Belarusian state owned enterprise, Belneftekhim and then two months later Lukashenka started releasing political prisoners. I have become a firm believer that those kinds of sanctions can work in certain situations.

Q: Why would they work with Belarus?

KRAMER: Because 80% of the Belarusian economy is state owned, which essentially means it's Lukashenka-owned or run so when we imposed sanctions against Belneftekhim, we were hurting Lukashenka. We made it impossible for him to engage in trade with the Europeans or with anyone else and so in order to relieve the pressure that we were applying as a result of these sanctions, Lukashenka knew he had to release these political prisoners and sure enough he did.

So those sanctions worked in securing the release of those political prisoners in 2008.

Q: It is one of the few examples of sanctions that worked. An awfully lot of times sanctions are just a way of letting off steam and saying we are doing something but we are really not really.

KRAMER: Exactly right. To be clear, ultimately we want to see Belarus become a democracy. The purpose of the sanctions was to secure the release of the political prisoners.

In 2006 to 2008 we are talking about less than a dozen people in jail for political purposes. Fast forward to now, you are talking about almost 40 people. The situation now is much worse. When I was in EUR I was very involved. I traveled to Europe a number

of times to persuade the Europeans to get on board with sanctions. This was an issue I felt very strongly about and continue to to this day.

Q: How about the Poles? They are right snuggled up.

KRAMER: They are indeed. They are a critical country dealing with Belarus. I did go to Warsaw at one point, to Lithuania as well and to a number of EU member states to try to persuade them of the importance of sanctions.

Q: I would think there would be an awful lot of cross border trade. This would be hurting

KRAMER: Yes, the Baltics states as well. It means the Lithuanians and Latvians in particular had been reluctant to impose sanctions. There was also a fear that if you get too tough with Lukashenka we would drive Belarus toward Russia. I don't think that is a serious fear.

Q: How did you read Lukashenka? How did you read him?

KRAMER: A crafty, crazy leader. A nasty guy, as you said. He 'disappeared' four people, which means he killed four opponents in 1999 and 2000. He jails and beats up and harasses his opponents and goes after the opposition and civil society. He has been rightly called the last dictator in Europe and he still is. My hope is that he is on very thin ice now and that he falls through it.

Q: In 2008?

KRAMER: March, 2008 I had hearing before the SFRC at the end of January for my nomination as assistant secretary for DRL and got confirmed in March while I was in Brussels, I believe. On one of my last trips I was with the secretary in Moscow for a two plus two meeting with the Russians. Secretary Gates and Secretary Rice were there with their Russian counterparts and I came back and started in DRL. I served until the very end of the Bush administration. I was there for less than a year.

Q: Secretary Rice, her field is the same as yours. Did you run across her much?

KRAMER: Not much before State. I certainly was familiar with her work and everything. One of my brothers who is in the same field knew her but I certainly got to know her. I got to know her when I was in EUR but I got to work more closely with her when I was in DRL.

Q: DRL is what and known as 'drugs and thugs'.

KRAMER: No, that's INL. DRL is Democracy and Human Rights and Labor, so the old HR Bureau. I was assistant secretary so I was responsible for running the bureau. I did a good bit of traveling then. I had less than a year to do what I wanted to do so I had to cram a lot in in a very short period of time. I led the resumption of the human rights

dialogue with the Chinese. I went to Beijing in May of 2008. On that same trip I went to Hanoi, did the same with the Vietnamese, traveled to the Caucasus, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, went to Ethiopia twice because of the situation there, traveled to Nigeria and the DRC, and also Guatemala, Mexico, Pakistan and India, a lot of places.

Q: OK. Let's take this time. Your time is basically limited. You traveled around. Where did you find you had a focus?

KRAMER: I spent a lot of time on China, resuming the human rights dialogue with China was very important and then the fall, after the May dialogue was also very important. I am disappointed at what little we accomplished frankly but I did spend a lot of time on that.

Q: What was the situation at that time with China?

KRAMER: Remember they were hosting the Beijing Olympics in August, 2008? George Bush had decided quite a while before he was going to attend and I think in retrospect we did not use the president's decision to go to the Olympics enough as a point of leverage to try to get the Chinese to concede on some human rights issues and release political prisoners at a minimum. China was certainly a major focus.

Q: Was this the president's decision to go to China? This was a political move.

KRAMER: The Chinese wanted him to go. The president was interested in sports. My first day on the job as assistant secretary in the Department of Human Rights and Labor, the president just coincidentally was coming over to the State Department for a briefing on three issues and one of them was about democracy and human rights. So my first day on the job I briefed the president of the United States. That's a pretty interesting way to start.

The issue of the Olympics came up and we talked about that and he asked me whether I thought he should go. I said that he should as long as we used his decision to go as a point of leverage and he agreed with that but at the end of the day we didn't succeed in doing that. There was a lot of focus on China.

Q: Were we doing much in the way of dialoging with the Chinese on human rights or was it there wasn't much conversation going on?

KRAMER: Well, the dialogue had been suspended in 2002 by one of my predecessors, Lorne Craner. It didn't resume until 2008. The dialogue, I think it is fair to say, and there is about to be another one with my successor this week with the Chinese is probably not the way to advance human rights issues with the Chinese. It is a way instead in fact for them to stovepipe and marginalize the issues outside of normal channels of interaction. I think we really have to rethink the situation with the Chinese.

Q: Is it with the Chinese as it is with the Orient, face comes up. Actually, it is true in every country but it seems to be more important. Is it that if we push the Chinese publicly then they are not going to give? Is it possible to deal sort of around?

KRAMER: I think it has to be a combination of public and private. I think private has to be strong but you need a public element to it. I understand the saving face quality or need but at the end of the day, you also have to let people inside China know that you are pushing on these issues. I don't think we did enough on that.

Q: You left there?

KRAMER: January, 2009 with the change in the administrations.

Q: So you are now what?

KRAMER: I went to the German Marshall fund which is a think-tank here in Washington and I was there until October 2010 when I started here at Freedom House as executive director.

Q: Could you just quickly explain what Freedom House is?

KRAMER: Freedom House is the oldest human rights organization in the U.S. This is its 70th anniversary. It promotes freedom, democracy and human rights around the world through advocacy, through programs and through analysis. We issue reports including Freedom in the World which has been issued since 1972 in which we rank countries as free, partly free and not free. We have offices around the world too. We are about 120 people total. It is a great organization working on issues that are like motherhood and apple pie.

Q: I think we will stop.

End of interview