

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

RICHARD AKER

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy
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INTERVIEW

Q: Alright. Today is the first of February, 2010, and this is an interview with Richard Aker, A-K-E-R, and this is being done on behalf of the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, and I'm Charles Stuart Kennedy. And do you go by Dick or Richard?

AKER: Richard.

Q: Richard.

AKER: Actually, my full name is Warren Richard Aker II, but my parents always called me by my middle name, so everyone else did.

Q: Well that's what I am; I'm a Charles Stuart Kennedy, but I put the whole thing in because in my, you know, biographic register and all it's Charles Stuart, Charles S. Kennedy and I'm known as Stu so I put the whole thing in.

AKER: This continues to cause problems even with my State Department personnel records, with minor things, security updates. Well, being in the same situation you know what it's like.

Q: Yes.

AKER: You are called all your life by a name that is not your first name.

Q: Many of us, at least, suffer a bit.

AKER: Yes.

Q: But it's handy with salesmen because salesmen will call, say hey Charles. I know when someone calls me Charles that ain't my friend.

Okay. Well, let's start at the beginning. When and where were you born?

AKER: Well, I was born in 1949, on August 3, in a rural part of the American South, in eastern Arkansas, in Mississippi River Delta country, between Little Rock and Memphis. My father was a farmer, primarily of rice, cotton, and later soybeans, because that crop became more prominent as the years went by

Q: Okay, let's talk a little bit about the family. Where did the Akers come from?

AKER: From Indiana, on my father's side. My father's father had moved to that area from northern Indiana -- near South Bend -- in order to farm rice. This was during World War I, and there was a boom in rice farming at the time, so he decided to move down there. My father was born there and lived there most of his life.

Q: Why did Arkansas have a huge rice crop; somehow, I think of coolies picking rice and wading through the thing. What is there in Arkansas?

AKER: Arkansas, Louisiana, and maybe Mississippi are among the largest rice growing states. Eastern Arkansas has an ample supply of water, making it very easy to irrigate; it also has a lot of rainfall and long, hot summers. It is apparently nearly ideal for rice.

Q: Sticking with your grandfathers and your father, what sort of education did they have?

AKER: I don't know if my grandfather on my mother's side had any formal education beyond grade school. It's possible that my paternal grandfather was a high school graduate. I don't know. He certainly never went to university. He did become, though, a substantial landowner and was on the board of one of the local banks.

My father went to college. He did not graduate, though, because he was drafted during World War II, in 1942. He never went back to college. He had two years of college total.

Q: Do you know where he served or anything about his military career?

AKER: Yes. In early 1943, he went to North Africa. I think he landed in Morocco or Algeria -- I'm not certain which -- and then went on to Tunisia. They were fighting in Tunisia; he was sent as a replacement to a unit that had been decimated by Rommel's forces in the mountain passes there.

Q: Oh yes. That was America's first real clash with the Germans and we were badly beaten.

AKER: Yes. His unit was sent in to fill out the ranks of the people who were killed or wounded. The fighting continued for a few months longer. He was in Tunis, in Bizerte, and then he was in the invasion of Sicily. Then, in September of '43, he landed at Salerno, which was very tough.

Q: Very, very difficult.

AKER: On October 1 -- I know this because of a telegram from the War Department that we still have -- he was badly wounded near the Volturno River, north of Naples. We had taken Naples at that point.

Q: Volturno is just north of Naples.

AKER: The truck he was riding in was bombed and strafed by German fighters. There were seven people in his truck and only two survived. My father took some shrapnel, but he recovered and went back to the front. He was then at Monte Cassino, which I think for him was the most difficult period of the war.

Q: Do you know what division he was in?

AKER: I don't know what division he was in at Monte Cassino. He was in several different divisions in the course of the war.

Q: That was some of the most difficult fighting. I'm reading a book about that right now, "The Day of Battle" by Rick Atkinson; it's an excellent book. It talks about that whole period.

AKER: I think they were there from the late autumn of '43 until May 1944 -- at least six months; The Allies ended up bombing the monastery, which he felt was a tragedy because it was a very historic place, one of the oldest monasteries -- if not the oldest existing monastery -- in Europe. We bombed it and it turned out that the Germans were not even in there. We had accused them of using it as an observation post but that was not the case. We obliterated the monastery, more or less.

Q: Did he talk much about the war?

AKER: Not really. He belonged to the American Legion, but I don't think he participated in many activities -- certainly not during the time I was growing up. He did have a Purple Heart and a couple of other medals, including a Croix de Guerre from the French, but they were not displayed. They were just sitting in a small box.

Q: What about on your mother's side? Where do they come from?

AKER: My grandfather was from Arkansas. His father, my great grandfather, came from the Ozarks of southern Missouri and was a Civil War veteran on the Union side. I remember there was a large photograph of him in uniform in their house. He died when my grandfather was six years old. My grandfather, probably, did not attend school more than a few years before he had to start working to help support his family. He had done all kinds of things in his life, grooming horses, farming and cutting wood. He was drafted in World War 1 and received a small disability pension all his life because of frostbite he suffered while in the service; despite this, he worked hard into his 80s.

His wife, my grandmother, was from Tennessee. Her father was an itinerant painter who did a circuit every year painting houses in Tennessee, Mississippi, Arkansas, and Texas. My grandmother never went to college but was very bright and well read for her time and place. Of all my relatives, she was the one I was closest to.

Q: Well, looking back on my family and others I've talked to in the last couple of generations, an awful lot was self-education; books were terribly important and people really read and probably educated themselves perhaps better than just a standard college education.

How did your father and mother meet?

AKER: I know they met in 1946. He had come back from the war. I believe they met at a dance, and they were married in June of 1948. My mother had received a temporary

teaching certificate during the war, and then started teaching in 1944. While continuing to teach (except for a few years when my brother and I were small), she went back to summer school and got a college degree in the late '50s, early '60s. She continued to teach until a few years before her death in 2001.

Q: Well then, how big was your immediate family?

AKER: My immediate family was very small, just my parents, my younger brother and me. He was two years younger.

Q: Where did you grow up, as a small kid anyway?

AKER: I grew up near a town of about 10,000 called Stuttgart, named after the city in Germany.

Q: Oh, let's talk about what was it like being a small kid in this small place?

AKER: My childhood was average. I had friends and playmates of both sexes. We played all sorts of games, told stories, went hiking and did other things together. I remember when we got our first television, which I think was in 1953. At that point, I think we got only one channel. A little later, we got all three networks. Television played a big part in my life then. I went to the movies often, too. The Saturday matinees, usually a double feature, were very cheap.

Q: What about the racial mix?

AKER: It was very segregated. There was absolutely no integration of schools. In fact, until I graduated from high school in Stuttgart there was a separate black school at every level. I think they integrated the year after I graduated high school, which was in 1967. I never attended school with a single black student. There were lots of blacks around, but there was still very little interaction beyond the workplace or the fields.

Q: Do you know where your family fell or was it at all interested in politics?

AKER: They were strong Democrats, but in those days, everybody there was. They loved Adlai Stevenson. I remember seeing President Eisenhower on TV in '56 when he was running for re-election. He looked nice and I asked them to vote for him. Their reaction was "no way." But they were, despite being Democrats, pretty conservative.

Q: What about religion? What religion?

AKER: Methodist. They were regular churchgoers.

Q: Were you much of a reader?

AKER: Yes. I was an avid reader.

Q: This is from your mother?

AKER: She undoubtedly encouraged it, yes, but I think I got the taste for it on my own early on.

Q: Did they have the equivalent to a Carnegie library or something?

AKER: There was a good public library and I went there a lot. My mother was there a lot because, every week or so we would go and check out a pile of books. We also had books at home. We acquired a sizeable library, including things from sources such as the Book of the Month Club.

Q: The Book of the Month Club was an important instrument, really, from probably the late '30s through the '40s and farther up -- very good books.

AKER: Yes .

Q: It really brought good stuff to the home.

AKER: Yes, it was good. We also subscribed to "Readers Digest" and several other magazines. I remember the biggest thing that happened -- in 1957 or '58 -- my parents bought a set of very nicely bound encyclopedias.

Q: Oh yes.

AKER: I think this was very typical of that era.

Q: Absolutely.

AKER: It had 20-something volumes. It was faux leather, gilded, and it came with a nice coffee table bookcase, which was in our living room. I would spend hours reading the encyclopedia. It was called "The American Peoples Encyclopedia."

Q: Yes, there were various ones. I remember something called "The Book of Knowledge" my aunts had.

AKER: I remember that one too.

Q: That was the turn of the century at that time; some of the stuff was dated but it gave me a good feel for the Victorian period.

AKER: Some of our friends had "The Book of Knowledge." It was in an ornate art nouveau binding.

Q: Yes.

AKER: I loved the patterns on it, the covers. But the encyclopedia we got was actually pretty good. It had a lot of nice color illustrations, plates, and tables.

Q: Just seeing that, would open up all sorts of areas that otherwise you probably would never know about.

AKER: Absolutely.

Q: Do you recall any books that you read, say when you were in elementary school and during that era, that particularly struck you or series or anything?

AKER: I remember when I was about eleven years old I fell in love with Edgar Allen Poe. I read all of his stories. I read a lot of classics: Dickens, Stevenson, Melville, and some Shakespeare plays. I also read fantasy and science fiction; Alfred Hitchcock had a monthly magazine anthology that I loved. I enjoyed some comic book series, such as Tarzan, Superman, and others.

Q: In elementary school, what sort of a student were you?

AKER: I was a good student. I would generally make A's -- very occasionally a B, almost never a C in my entire elementary school career. My parents always pushed me to have good grades.

Q: Looking back on it, where did your family fit in the social scale?

AKER: I would say they were in the middle to upper middle class for that time and place.

Q: Yes. In that time and place, was there an elite class?

AKER: In the area I was living in, there were a few people. For example, the managers at the rice mills or some of the very large landowners. One of the latter was Edgar Monsanto Queeny, the head of Monsanto, who had a country estate there named Wingmead. His estate manager was the father of one of my friends. My best friend's father was the manager of a large rice mill. They were prominent members of the country club. I would often stay with them, starting with fourth grade, and he would come and stay with me. Their house had a beautiful library.

Q: Where did you go to high school?

AKER: I went to high school there in this little town, Stuttgart.

Q: How was the high school?

AKER: It was a typical American high school. In addition to studies I did school and community sports. I played football, basketball and baseball.

Q: Any teachers, either elementary or high school, stand out?

AKER: My first grade teacher. Her name was Mrs. Zimmerman. I was very taken with her. I think it was because she was the first non-relative who was an authority figure in my life. Later in elementary school, a teacher named Mae Wilhelm really encouraged me as an artist. I was very interested in the natural sciences and loved to draw pictures of dinosaurs and other prehistoric animals. At her behest, I put together a book of prehistoric animals that she tried to market to publishers. She had a positive influence on me.

Q: Was your family pointing you towards a university?

AKER: No. They assumed that I would go to college, but they did not press me to follow any particular field of study. An exception was when they contacted two of our members of Congress, Senator William Fulbright and our local US Representative, Wilbur Mills, who was the chairman of the House Ways and Means committee, to nominate me for an appointment to West Point – which they did. I was invited for a week of competitive evaluations at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri in early 1967. There were a lot of other high school seniors there -- all boys, of course. I was disappointed when I learned afterward that I had not been selected.

Q: You graduated from high school in what year?

AKER: Sixty-seven.

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Q: Oh, '67.

AKER: The Vietnam era. Of course, I was very aware of Vietnam because it was on the news all the time. After I graduated from high school, on my eighteenth birthday I went to the county seat and registered for the draft. But, as you can recall, in those days you were automatically deferred if you were a college student. I had friends who did go. One was wounded; he made a full recovery, but I remember he came back pretty shot up.

Q: Where did you go to college?

AKER: I went first to a good liberal arts college in Conway, Arkansas, called Hendrix. I was there for two years. I did not, however, like it very much. It was a small school and I wanted to mix with a larger group, so I later went to the state university, the University of Arkansas, the Razorbacks. I graduated from there.

Q: What was a small liberal arts college like when you went there?

AKER: The school had some very good professors and it was and was highly rated. I remember the first protest against Vietnam that I experience took place there in the fall of '67, my freshman year, when General Hershey, the head of Selective Service, spoke on the campus. Several of the professors and many students were wearing black armbands. It

was my first firsthand experience of the antiwar movement and the social turmoil of the late '60s. I had only seen things like this on TV before.

Q: How did you all, you and your family feel about the Vietnam War?

AKER: Initially, it was interesting to follow the news. I wrote a high school essay when I was 15, in early '65, saying escalating the war in Vietnam was a big mistake. I was proud of it, actually. My parents were not at all keen on the war. They would occasionally make disapproving remarks.

Q: While you were going through high school, did the outside world intrude much?

AKER: Just watching Walter Cronkite or Huntley and Brinkley on the evening news. My uncle, my mother's brother, was career Air Force and was stationed in Korea and then Japan. He also served for many years in New England, at Otis AFB and in Maine. He did a tour in Vietnam in 67-68. His children, my three cousins, grew up overseas or in different parts of the country. During his Vietnam tour they lived near us.

Q: Well at your liberal arts school, Hendrix, what was the student body like??

AKER: I think at that point there were probably around 1,000 students, pretty equally divided between male and female. Most people there were from similar social backgrounds to my own. I felt rather confined there. I wanted a larger world.

Q: Okay, so University of Arkansas. You were there, what, three years?

AKER: I was there two years finishing undergrad and then I went to law school for three years.

Q: Let's talk about the two years you were there as an undergrad. What was your major?

AKER: My major was in German. I was interested in German largely because my step-grandmother was actually German and spoke German. In addition, at Hendrix I had a wonderful German professor. His name was Hal Allan and he made a great impression on me. He further increased my interest in the language.

Q: Looking back, can you figure out what was his method or spark or what have you?

AKER: I don't know; he was just an extremely empathetic person. I responded to that.

Q: Did- How about the student body? This is Arkansas; one thinks about it as certainly a football college but what else was going on?

AKER: Well, certainly football. In the late '60s there was also quite a bit of counterculture, marijuana, etc.; but here was not as much political activism as at some other public universities.

Q: Was Bill Clinton a figure at that time?

AKER: He was not at that time. However, I happened to have a remote connection. I was active in high school in a national organization called DeMolay, which is affiliated with the Masons; my father was a Mason. Bill Clinton was also active in DeMolay. He was three years older, but he had been very active in the state organization.

Later on, when I was in law school, he was there teaching law classes and preparing to launch a political career. I would see him around. He made a striking appearance.

Q: Did you get involved in Vietnam politics and all?

AKER: No.

Q: At the university, was there a group that seemed to seize the initiative to practice their leadership abilities?

AKER: Well, obviously Bill Clinton was doing that. Of course he went to university elsewhere but he was definitely working on that when he was teaching in law school, and, while still a law school professor, he ran, in '74, for Congress, unsuccessfully. People I knew got involved in that campaign. Some of them stayed with him throughout his career.

Q: How did the racial business work at Arkansas when you were there?

AKER: There weren't that many at the university. I remember in 1970 they had their first black football player.

Q: Nineteen seventy?

AKER: Yes. That's pretty late.

Q: Good God, yes.

AKER: His name was Jon Richardson. He was a good athlete but I think there must have been a lot of pressure on him.

Q: What about the other very important thing about college, dating? What were the dating patterns and what did you all do?

AKER: Well I think it obviously varies with each individual but basically there were a lot of parties, fraternity parties or, if you weren't in a fraternity, dorm parties, dances, people going to the movies, going to have a beer.

Q: Were the girls' sororities important?

AKER: They were important but also the girls' dormitories for non-sorority girls, which I suppose were the majority. I think they had at least one co-ed dormitory during the time I was there, but most of the dormitories were strictly boys or girls and you got demerits if you violated this by being in a dorm of the other gender outside visiting hours. The penalties were not severe but they tried to keep the sexes apart.

I might mention here the high point of my undergraduate career: in my Junior year I represented the university on a nationally televised show called the "General Electric College Bowl." You may recall the "GE College Bowl," it came on every Sunday afternoon.

Q: Oh yes. It was a TV quiz program.

AKER: Yes. The host was named Robert Earle, and the show ran for many years. I was on the University of Arkansas team. Four of us were selected through internal competition and we went to NBC studios in New York's Rockefeller Center right before Christmas in '69, and we won, we beat a four-time winner, Merrimack College from Massachusetts.

Q: Good heavens.

AKER: Five was the maximum number of appearances allowed. After that, teams retired as champion. We went there and soundly defeated them. Then we went back two weeks later, in January of '70 right after the Christmas holidays and we played against the University of Connecticut. That game ended in a tie; it was one of the only times it ever happened. They had a sort of sudden death playoff and, unfortunately, the other team pressed the button faster.

Q: How did you get selected - Were you a trivia man or did you have a specialty in this or what?

AKER: I was pretty much a trivia man. I know that in the university-wide competition I had the highest cumulative score, but other people had greater strengths in certain areas; I just had a broad general knowledge, which I think is typical for people in the Foreign Service, a certain dilettantish quality.

Q: Absolutely. I found my trivialness plays very well in these oral histories in that my knowledge is sort of like the Missouri River, you know, a mile wide and a foot deep.

AKER: That was a lot of fun. Of course, I still relive that playoff moment.

Q: Oh yes. These things live with you.

AKER: I have relived that moment many times.

Q: You graduated in what?

AKER: Seventy-one, and then I went to law school for three years.

Q: Why law?

AKER: That's a good question. I really have often asked myself that. It was not really the best fit. I can't really give you an answer except that I was interested in possibly working in government, especially in the Foreign Service.

Q: Well even today law is sort of a fallback position; you don't know what you want to be and it keeps you in school for awhile plus it seems to be practical.

AKER: Yes, I think that's a good nutshell explanation and a lot of people who went to law school were there, as you say, for those reasons.

Q: Yes. Was the draft off by that time?

AKER: The draft was not off but – I think it was at the end of '69 -- it went to a lottery system and you drew a number. It was done by birthday. I was born on August 3 and my number was around 160. That was in the middle range, which made it unlikely that I would be drafted, so I felt relieved. My best friend, born on June 8, which was number 366 (they made a date for leap year), was completely safe. But by this time, we were already trying to-

Q: Pull out.

AKER: Yes. So I don't think they ever got above number 100. Obviously, the people with single digits had to go.

Q: I realize you were some distance away, but did the Kent State episode with the National Guard and protestors have any impact on your campus?

AKER: Yes. I remember general dismay about the whole thing. Most of the students, the great majority, were opposed to the war.

Q: I take it marijuana was the recreational drug of choice or something?

AKER: Yes, but beer was also never far away.

Q: I just think of the Ozarks being full of marijuana.

AKER: I am sure there were a people growing their own,

Q: Ah. Well then, you're at law school; what did you feel that didn't fit?

AKER: Well I liked certain aspects of law. Some subjects, such as torts, contracts and property law, interested me. But other subjects didn't interest me at all. But, for the time being, I was going to be doing it because I had a degree in it.

Q: So how did things work out?

AKER: When I got out of law school, I was hired by the state Department of Transportation. I was helping draft legislation. I did that for about a year. Then I got an offer to be a lawyer for a private import/export company, which turned out to be a mistake as the firm was losing money and I left after a few months. Then I worked as a judge for the state Unemployment Compensation Commission. A few months later, I was hired by the FDA, the US Food and Drug Administration here in DC.

Q: Well did you get any feel, while you were in Arkansas, as to the politics of Arkansas?

AKER: At that point, the state had been overwhelmingly Democratic since Reconstruction. Even now, compared to a lot of the southern states where the Republican Party has become dominant, it's still pretty Democratic. Both senators are Democrats.

Q: Well Rockefeller was-

AKER: Rockefeller was the first Republican governor they had had, but he was an anomaly in that he was quite liberal, as was his brother, Nelson.

Q: Yes.

AKER: But, starting with Reagan, the state has tended to be more Republican in presidential elections.

Q: Well you came to Washington when?

AKER: January 1977.

Q: And what were you doing?

AKER: I was a legal analyst for the Food and Drug Administration.

Q: How'd you find that?

AKER: Well I had I just filled out a basic SF-171 generalist form and sent it in to a general address for civil service jobs. I don't believe I applied for any particular position. I don't know if you can still do that.

Q: That was just a government application.

AKER: Yes. Then someone called me in the autumn of '76 and asked if I would be interested in working for the Food and Drug Administration, and he actually went there, interviewed me, and hired me. So I came here in January of '77.

Q: What were you doing?

AKER: Drafting regulations and working on proposed legislation that the administration was putting forward to the Hill.

Q: How did you find it?

AKER: I actually liked it. But I had already taken and passed the Foreign Service examination, so I was in a holding pattern before joining the Foreign Service.

Q: And what attracted you to do such an outlandish thing?

AKER: Well, I was always interested in traveling, going abroad, visiting foreign countries.

Q: Had you had any chance to do any foreign travel?

AKER: No. My brother had been living in Europe for several years. He was in the Netherlands and was working at an international trading corporation in Rotterdam. This further piqued my interest. But I wanted to go overseas and the Foreign Service seemed like a logical way to do it.

Q: Had somebody pointed this out to you?

AKER: No. I arrived at it on my own. When I came to Washington I was already aiming for the Foreign Service.

Q: I assume you passed the written exam.

AKER: Yes, I took the written exam December of '76; in those days it was only given once a year in December. Then in March or April '77 I took the oral in Washington.

Q: Do you recall any of the questions in that oral?

AKER: No, but I do remember the in-basket management portion of the exam. I didn't do so well on that but I ended up with a high overall score.

Q: While you were in Washington did you come across any of those exotic creatures called a Foreign Service officer?

AKER: Not until I joined the Foreign Service. A year after I took the written exam, and nine months after I had taken the oral, they offered me a position in December of '77 for

the class starting the following February. I decided to go with USIA (the United States Information Agency) rather than the Department. Looking back on it I'm not sure that was the right thing to do. I really couldn't tell you exactly why I did that, except that public affairs attracted me.

Q: So you came in '78.

AKER: February 6, 1978.

Q: What was your basic officer course like, how was it constituted, what was your impression of it?

AKER: In those days we had separate USIA training. We did part of the A-100 course, but a lot of the time was spent at USIA. I don't remember the exact chronology, but we started out, I think, doing public affairs and then we were thrown together with the A-100 class for a while and then went back to public affairs. I remember doing things like learning how to use a television camera and how to take photos; this, of course, was the pre-digital era; there was a lot of technical stuff, more than I expected. In those days, you may remember, the government, and particularly the Foreign Service, was technologically backward. Of course, email didn't exist, faxes didn't exist. We were still using typewriters.

Q: Well at least it wasn't the quill pen anymore. Now, how was your officer group constituted, male, female, race and all that?

AKER: Well in our USIA component there were only 19. They took in several classes a year but they were all small. I think I was the 75th USIA class; It was around the 150th A-100 class. There were 15 Foreign Service Officers and four management interns --19 of us in all. It was about 50/50 male/female, from all over the country. I was near the middle in terms of age- I was 28. I think the youngest was about 24 and the eldest was about 45.. There was one black, one Hispanic and one Asian. The rest were white.

Q: Did you have any feel for what you wanted to specialize in and where you wanted to serve?

AKER: I was open. I wanted to go to as exotic a place as possible. In a way, I did. I was assigned to Iran, which was my first post and still the most interesting in many ways, because I was there for the fall of the Shah.

Q: So you went to Iran from when to when?

AKER: I joined in February '78. I think we were given our assignments around April. Then I got Near East area studies and 10-12 weeks of Persian language training – just courtesy level because it was not a language designated post for a junior officer. They sent me to a private language school near DuPont Circle. I don't remember if it was

Berlitz or one of the others. I learned some basic Farsi and then, in July '78, I flew to Tehran, stopping a few days in London en route.

Things had been simmering in Iran for several months. There had been incidents of shootings of anti-Shah demonstrators and unrest was clearly growing, but people here, for the most part, were not very worried about it. I remember talking to people at the Iran Desk in the Department and being told that everything was under control.

Q: Before you went, were people saying that you were really going to a hot spot so you'd better be careful?

AKER: No, not at all, even though there had been ample news coverage of the anti-Shah demonstration. There had been a massacre --in Tabriz, I believe -- in early '78 and after that, every 40 days there was another big demonstration commemorating that event. But people in Washington were myopic about the situation. I'd been reading up a lot, obviously, as anyone in my situation would, on the history of Iran and US-Iran relations and the Shah's first overthrow back in '53, after which he was reinstated. I was amazed how people I talked to did not seem concerned. Even when I first got out there, it seemed like a normal post. People were playing tennis and there was an air of complacency.

Q: What were you picking up from your Farsi teachers?

AKER: I only had one. It was a one-on-one course. I don't know what his politics were. I suspect they were whatever the politics were of the person he was speaking to at the moment. I do think there was a belief that SAVAK, the Shah's secret police, was ubiquitous and he was being careful.

Q: Well what was your job going to be?

AKER: I was a junior officer trainee. At the beginning, I did a lot of press attaché-type work because the designated press attaché, Barry Rosen, was kept here learning more Farsi. He did not arrive until November, so I was helping the press section for the first three or four months. That was very interesting. Later, after Barry got there, I worked in the consular section. By then Iranians were trying to get out of the country in increasing numbers and the section was a visa mill, with long queues from opening of business to close. I did that for about six weeks and then, for the last couple of months or so, until I left Tehran, I was working in the ECON section. I was rotating, essentially.

Q: Okay, you were working at the embassy from when to when?

AKER: From August 1978 to February 1979. The Shah fell on January 15 or 16 I believe.

Q: What was the feeling that you were getting from your fellow junior officers?

AKER: I didn't know many junior officers there beside myself. It was a big embassy. We had an ambassador named Sullivan who had been ambassador to Laos during the Vietnam War., and then to the Philippines. He was used to crises. He was in the Philippines when Marcos declared martial law. I think the line that was sent down was that we support the Shah and everything is okay. But around Labor Day there was a major shooting downtown that had apparently killed hundreds -- probably nobody knows to this day how many. The official Iranian media didn't mention it at all, whereas the dissidents claimed that thousands were killed. I remember going to a cocktail party that night and everyone seemed relaxed. There was a sense of unreality about the whole thing. It was clear that there was a crisis. Acts of violence were taking place, not just in Tehran but all around the country. A fire was set in a cinema in Ahwaz, killing hundreds of people trapped inside. At this point, though, there was no strong sense in the embassy that things were getting out of control.

Q: Did you feel there was any dialogue between the mullahs and the embassy?

AKER: None, as far as I know. Many US officials who supposedly knew Iran best were not too worried about Islam, about the mullahs. The Shah had a wide variety of enemies. He had lost the support of most of the middle class -- which had never really liked him anyway -- because of his repressive policies. They had supported Mossadegh back in the '50s, the popular prime minister who nationalized the oil and forced the Shah to flee into exile in Rome for a brief period. Although the mullahs now were becoming more visible and vocal and Khomeini was sending in audiotapes that were being played in mosques, I don't think we were so much worried about him. I think we were more worried, in the early autumn of '78, about a leftist takeover. There was a small but --we thought -- potentially powerful communist, pro-Soviet party called the Tudeh Party and, next door in Afghanistan that's precisely what had happened in the spring of '78. A pro-Soviet regime had assumed power. I think we were more concerned about that happening in Iran than about Khomeini at this stage.

Q: Were you able to get out and mix and mingle at all?

AKER: To some extent, but after the beginning of November, things became very difficult. On November 4 or 5 there were massive riots all over Tehran. Banks and shop windows were smashed and we were told to leave the embassy.

We were transported across the city in vans with mobs in the streets. We drove by crowds who were smashing windows and setting fires. Things looked out of control then and never really got back to normal. From that point on we had nightly, deliberately staged power outages. Night after night, shortly after dark, around the same time all the power would go off throughout the city and then you would hear people out on their rooftops shouting, and the reverberations of thousands of people chanting in the darkness "Death to the Shah" and "Allahu Akbar" was unforgettable. This whole period was in some ways the most interesting I ever had in the Foreign Service. It was clear things were deteriorating and the government was not really on top of the situation.

Q: Well, coming to February you were- was it February 14?

AKER: I was out by then. I have forgotten the exact date that I left but the Shah left the country around January 16. But instead of mollifying the situation it just got more and more out of hand, because there was no real authority figure. The man they left there, the prime minister, was ineffective and there was this eerie period between the Shah losing power and the Khomeini takeover, which was around a month later. The place was in limbo.

I was given orders to go; I think I'd probably already received the orders because the situation was really unmanageable. I was not getting training. They wanted to move me. Because I had German, I received orders to go to Munich.

Unfortunately, the day that I was to leave the city was in the grip of a general strike, there was a power outage, and the airport was, essentially not functioning. There were flights scheduled but there was often nobody at the ticket counters or at the gates to check in passengers and luggage, long queues at the few open counters, people avoiding the few visible security personnel to get through unattended gates and try to find their planes. It was really pandemonium. I ended up running across the tarmac to get on a Pan Am flight that was getting ready to taxi for takeoff. I was the last person to get on the plane. I have never been so happy to leave anyplace. I flew from there to Rome and ultimately to Bonn.

Q: So when you got to Bonn it was still February?

AKER: Yes. While I was there the Khomeini forces struck and took over.

Q: They took over the embassy for a short period of time.

AKER: That's correct. That was just a couple of weeks after I left. It was February 14; it was a very memorable day because not only was the embassy taken over but, next door, on the same day in Kabul, our ambassador, Spike Dubs, was kidnapped and killed. I was following these events because all my household effects were still in Tehran. Most of it was looted or destroyed. A few items eventually arrived at ELSO, the State Department warehouse facility in Antwerp. I remember seeing one white suit I had, about the only thing that came out of there -- it was scorched. But at least I was personally out of danger.

Q: Well you went to Munich?

AKER: Munich. Although I first went to Bonn for about a month.

Q: Well, because we were back in business after the February takeover but were you out of there -- what was your feeling?

AKER: I thought that our policy of continuing to run a business as usual embassy in Tehran under the circumstances was mistaken. We were sending more people when it would have been better to take a lot of them out. That's the way it appeared to me and others, I think. The period from February to November turned out to be the proverbial calm before the storm. We were sending in more people. We were showing that we were going to stay, to try to work with the Iranians. Some of this was due to bureaucratic inertia, but there was also a conscious policy, I think.

Q: At a distance it seems like such a scary period.

AKER: It was, but there wasn't that much violence at that point. The Khomeini people were pretty much in charge, despite occasional bombings and factional infighting. But I thought it was crazy to continue sending more people there. They had taken the embassy once and there was a lot of anti-Americanism because of our support for the Shah.

Q: No, the State Department was still assigning people to Vietnam while the place was falling apart. I mean, the machinery just doesn't stop.

AKER: Exactly.

Q: Did you get any feel for the media in Iran at the time?

AKER: Well there were a large Western-educated people in the media and other professions, especially in Tehran. A lot of people had been to the U.S., a lot of people had been in Europe. Most of these people, I would say, had not liked the Shah but they certainly were not pro-fundamentalist. I think that they would have preferred a more middle class government. Indeed the first couple of prime ministers were actually relatively worldly people who were more representative of the interests of the middle class in Tehran and the other large cities and did not represent fundamentalist Khomeini ideology. It wasn't clear how this was going to go. I think most of the media largely reflected this middle class, Western-influenced sector.

Q: Yes. So you ended up in Munich, and you were there from when to when?

AKER: I got there, as I said, in February of '79 and left there in December of '81.

Q: What were you doing there?

AKER: I was the director of the America House, which was a very nice cultural facility.

Q: Well actually it sounds fun. Was it?

AKER: It was great. It was a wonderful place to be, it was a fun job, beautiful surroundings. The city is great and the Alps were there, although I sometimes regretted having left Tehran because it was so interesting and I never really got a chance to know the country.

Q: How stood relations with the Germans in the area? This was after Vietnam. There must have been a residue of anti-Americanism.

AKER: There was some, but the problem now was not the past. The big issue now was the revival of Cold War tensions with the Russian SS-20 missiles-

Q: Yes.

AKER: -which were mobile intermediate range missiles, and our proposed response, which was to put Pershing II and Cruise missiles onto U.S. bases in Germany. This was very, very controversial in Germany and in fact rekindled a lot of the anti-American sentiment of the Vietnam era, and in some ways even more so, because, concerning Vietnam, people could get angry on a moral or political level but it didn't affect them directly. But here was a situation where many people felt that not only were their anti-war principles being disregarded but that they were being made targets. Because putting these missiles there automatically made the people living around them targets. So the revulsion against war, which had been very strong in Germany since World War II, was coupled with anger that they were being made hostages or potential victims against their will.

Q: Was the Green Party a major factor at that time?

AKER: No, but it started to be, and in late 1981 they got into their first state legislature, in Bremen, This was partially due to the anti-war, anti missile issue.

Q: Well, you know, we had a perfectly logical rationale for putting the missiles in because the Soviets did it first.

AKER: Exactly. No question about it. In fact, to some extent, we were doing it at the behest of Helmut Schmidt, who was chancellor and even today is probably considered the best chancellor Germany ever had in the post-war period-

Q: Oh yes, a very, very smart guy.

AKER: He was considerably more centrist or closer to the right than many members of his party, the Social Democrats. He put his political capital on the line to support this response to the Soviet SS-20s, which in the end ultimately ended up in his losing power a few years later.

Q: And did you feel you were in the middle of this controversy?

AKER: Yes, in the sense that there were some demonstrations, against the America House and the U.S. Consulate, and I was actually going out and doing public speaking, explaining why we needed to do this. Often they were friendly groups, older people, pro-NATO. Younger people were more likely to be opposed. So I did a lot of talking and debating in German on this issue. I became something of a specialist because I had to be.

Q: Was the past of Munich, the Hitler time and all that sort of with you all the time?

AKER: Not really, because this was already more than 30 years after the war. But I think there is no question that Germans were very haunted by this and people then in their 30s and older carried a lot of baggage because of it. They tended to be very critical of German society because they were ashamed of their parents' generation. They carried this over into their views on current politics and so were prone to be very anti-war in general and morally purist on issues like capital punishment and other things. They tended to take a very black and white view of the world in general and were certainly very critical of their own society.

Q: Did you find the Germans tended to have the attitude that there are rules and you obey them and authority is important, or was this breaking down for them?

AKER: I think that was true, although it has declined somewhat over the years. I was struck, when I was first there, by behavior that an acquaintance characterized as that of a country of self-appointed policemen. I think there was, and still is a certain element of people preaching at you. Having served in Germany many times since then, although I think that it is not as prevalent as it was.

Q: I remember, back in the '50s, my wife and I had a brand new baby and we would be taking her in a stroller down the street; then we would be stopped and the blankets would be rearranged and we'd be told we were not doing it right.

AKER: Exactly. They still do that. There is an urge to intervene, or rather interfere, in cases like that especially.

Q: It's not awful. I mean-

AKER: No, but it is disconcerting. Other people want to mind your own business.

Q: Yes, I know.

AKER: It must have been really bad 100 years ago.

Q: Did you get any feel for the student- university student body?

AKER: Yes, that was one of the groups I interacted with, probably more than anyone else because I was on the Fulbright Commission and was doing other exchange programs and going to universities to talk to students on the SS-20 issue and about American society, I had quite a few friends and acquaintances among both students and faculty members.

Q: I had the impression -- around that time I was in Naples and you have a feeling that the Italian university system was really almost doddering. The Signore Professore would appear and read yellowing notes to a huge class, and then walk away and there was not much interaction or what we would call real passing of knowledge.

AKER: Yes. This is the way it was in Germany then, and probably, as you were saying, the way it still is in continental Europe generally.

Q: Yes.

AKER: Yes, the professor comes in, reads, and leaves. People sit in these vast halls and then they have one exam at the end of the year. Here in the US, we have networks of student advisors. Our universities have a “in loco parentis” attitude.

Q: Yes.

AKER: That was not true there.

Q: My impression was that you better feed back to Herr Professor what Herr Professor said if you're asked a question, not develop it on your own. I don't know but did you get that feeling at that time?

AKER: Yes. I even found this attitude, at times, among academics that had studied in the US, who were professional American specialists.

Q: Yes. How about Germans who came to the United States on Fulbright grants and getting degrees and then going back -- were they accepted or was there a problem?

AKER: One area where there were problems was accreditation. German universities do not always give credits for courses that people took here. That was particularly a problem with certain German states. It is a federal system, and some states were less likely than others to recognize American coursework or degrees. I don't know whether people had other problems reintegrating

As an aside, I would say that most Germans who came here to study came away with a lifelong affection for this country and were ambassadors of good will for the US.

Q: Maybe this is a good place to stop. When did you leave Germany?

AKER: I left Germany at the end of 1981. I had been assigned to Hong Kong.

Q: Oh, they're really moving you around. How did the Foreign Service in USIA strike you by this time?

AKER: USIA was at that point undergoing its last period of growth because of President Reagan.

Q: Oh yes.

AKER: His wife had a best friend whose husband was Charles Z. Wick. Reagan made him director of USIA. He was a character, a real Hollywood type, but very good at getting funding.

Q: Yes. He had the idea of WORLDNET too, which was really quite good.

AKER: A lot of his ideas were very good. He brought in fresh approaches that, in the stodgy world of diplomacy, and -- even though some people found him personally difficult -- there's no question that he, more than any other person, kept USIA from being reabsorbed into the Department, because that had always been an issue. When I first joined USIA in early 1978, CU, the cultural division of the State Department, was moved to USIA. There had been an Undersecretary for Cultural Affairs.

Q: My understanding is this was because of Arkansas, because Senator Fulbright didn't want to see cultural affairs in USIA.

AKER: Fulbright had been defeated in 1974; he had kept the CU in the State Department. Finally, in the Carter years, it was combined, but with the proviso that USIA change its name. So it changed its name to the U.S. International Communication Agency.

Q: That didn't hold very long.

AKER: No. I joined in February and I think in April we became USICA or ICA for three or four years and then went back to the old name.

Q: Because it got so close to CIA (Central Intelligence Agency).

AKER: Right. The problem was that that information agency in many languages and cultures sounds like intelligence agency. That was a problem that Fulbright and others had with USIA. . But the acronym they chose to replace it was very bad.

Q: I know.

Q: Today is the 18th of February, 2010, with Richard Aker. Okay, so where did we leave off?

AKER: We were talking about my time in Iran; we talked about the revolution there and that I was evacuated and sent to Germany in February of '79, 31 years ago this month.

Then I was talking about the big developments of that period in US-Germans relations, especially the renewed arms race with us installing Pershing II and Cruise missiles in Germany.

Q: In response to the SS-20.

AKER: The SS-20s, right. That turned out to be the last major flare up in the Cold War; in addition to that, because of the Soviets in Afghanistan, it was a period of fairly high tension internationally. You may remember the 1980 Olympics when the U.S. beat the Russians in hockey at Lake Placid; the Winter Olympics were in Lake Placid, New York.

Q: Yes.

AKER: And that was in February to March and we beat the Russians in hockey, which was one of their strongest sports and it was a huge event, and I remember the pandemonium and it showed that sports can be a substitute for war.

Q: Yes, we're now, as we're talking, going through the Winter Olympics in Vancouver and it all seems a little pallid because before, you know, the question was, were the Soviets going to get more medals than the Americans? Now the Russians are in there and the Chinese, but it's not quite the same.

AKER: No, I think it's- It was a game of counting medals and counting points and- not just in the Olympics. It was always who's up, who's down.

Q: Well when you left Iran, where did you go, did you have sort of a permanent place?

AKER: Yes. I was still a junior officer trainee, and I was assigned to Munich as the deputy public affairs officer and director of the America House. In that period Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty were still in Munich; a pretty large operation.

Q: You were there from '79 to when?

AKER: December '81.

Q: Okay, let's talk about, I mean obviously the Iranian hostage business was going on during a good part of that time; how was that for you personally, having been there, and how was it regarded within the consulate general and in Germany?

AKER: I think there was a lot of sympathy for the U.S. on the part of the German public. I remember when the hostage taking began, in the first few days in November of '79, the Catholic archbishop of Munich arranged for a special service in one of the major churches in the city, which was primarily for Germans, of course, to express solidarity and to pray for the welfare and wellbeing of the hostages. Of course over time I think the issue probably became sort of routine but initially there was a great outpouring of support.

Q: How did the consulate general strike you? I mean, the staffing?

AKER: It was quite large. All the posts in Germany had a lot of padding in those days. I think they still do in many cases. But that was a relic, of course, of the Occupation and

the Cold War, when Germany was a central point. There was also a pretty large presence of the military and other agencies, scattered among the- several bases.

Q: Munich was very much almost equivalent to Switzerland with so many various nationalities running around it.

AKER: Exactly. And of course as I've mentioned Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty were there. There was also a powerful with VOA (Voice of America) relay station nearby. We were broadcasting to every Central and Eastern European country. We were not far from the border with Czechoslovakia, as it was then. So it was pretty much a sort of frontline city, not quite like Berlin but similar to Vienna in that respect.

Q: What were you doing?

AKER: Well mostly cultural programming but also going out to schools and talking to groups, mostly in German, about things like why we needed to put these missiles in Germany.

Q: Where did Bavaria fit into the sort of political equation over the missile business?

AKER: Bavaria was under then a long-serving governor, Franz Josef Strauss, who was a very formidable figure, a polarizing figure in German politics. He had been famous many years earlier, during the so-called "Spiegel" affair in the early '60s when he was defense minister under Adenauer and had to resign over some Watergate type of scandal. He then come back and was governor of Bavaria for decades, playing to his rural voter base, very anti-communist, very anti-social democratic. The state was and is dominated by the Christian Social Union (CSU), allied with the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) nationally but with a separate organization that only exists in Bavaria. It was very conservative, very Catholic area, in that respect pro-American but with a certain difference in that it has also a certain Gaullist kind of empathy. This is due to history, going back to the Napoleonic period. Bavaria has followed France in a lot of things, so they weren't as solidly pro-American as the neighboring state of Baden-Württemberg, for example, where I later lived: it is also conservative, but in a more mainstream way, not as idiosyncratically as Bavarians.

Q: Being a young officer, were you given sort of the student assignment at the universities?

AKER: Yes. I went to schools, talking about American society and other topics. An issue many Germans got upset about was the death penalty in the United States. At that point, the death penalty had just been reinstated, after several years during which it was suspended by the Supreme Court. Now it was once again permitted. Each execution was covered extensively in the German media because Germany had abolished it years before and Germans had a certain sense of moral superiority on this issue.

Q: Yes.

AKER: There were many other issues too, including of course the SS-20 debate.

Q: What was your impression of the universities?

AKER: I worked a lot with the various universities, particularly the University of Munich, which is a very large university. It's like one of the big American state universities, it probably had 30-40,000 students. It is an extremely hierarchical system where the professors rarely interact with students. There is no "in loco parentis" attitude on the part of German and European universities. It is not like here, where you have your student advisors and you are somewhat coddled. In Germany, people are left to their own devices. If you go to these big lecture halls, at least at the undergraduate level, you listen to the professor or an assistant reading the paper and then you have to show up for final exams; otherwise you are on your own. It does require more self-discipline and motivation to succeed.

Q: Was there the equivalent of American studies? I mean, you've taken German studies-

AKER: Yes. The German Association of American Studies was and remains one of our most important contacts and publishes papers, organizes conferences, and is very active.

Q: During your first period there was this the case?

AKER: Yes, it was already very active, organizing conferences on specific themes, for which we provided speakers, academic and otherwise. We would also co-sponsor seminars with other organizations, mostly for university students, on specialized topics such as, for example, black or feminist literature or the American Indian.

Q: Indians are big there.

AKER: Yes. It is an ongoing fascination.

Q: These tribes, of course with Old Shatterhand and all that.

AKER: Yes, Karl May.

Q: I've seen pictures of these German tribes; they get more authentic than the Native Americans in the United States.

AKER: That is absolutely true and it's one of the things that never ceases to amuse me; it was quite startling to me, this fixation with Native Americans, and the reenactments, which are similar to the Civil War reenactments here. They have Indian encampments and other things of the sort. And a lot of this apparently goes back to Karl May-

Q: Karl May, yes, who did this series of books with Old Shatterhand.

AKER: Right, Old Shatterhand and Winnetou was the name of the-

Q: Winnetou was his-

AKER: His Indian scout - like Tonto.

Q: Like Tonto, yes.

AKER: May lived near Dresden in Saxony, and had a luxurious villa which is still there; it's sort of a pilgrimage point. Every kid in the German speaking countries for the last 150 years was raised on these books.

Q: A series of books.

AKER: Lots of them. He actually wrote other books; he was very prolific and also wrote adventure books, many of them set in the Middle East.

Q: Well it's kind of like Edgar Rice Burroughs.

AKER: Yes.

Q: With "Tarzan" and then-

AKER: The Mars books-

Q: Later Mars books,

AKER: Yes, I read many of those books.

Q: Tell me again, what was your impression, at the time, of how the universities and society as a whole were dealing with the Hitler era?

AKER: For the middle-aged and young generations- not so much the generation who were veterans of that period but for younger people, those born after the war, or those who had memories of the war as children, it was difficult, most of them saw it as a very oppressive burden on their society and felt a lot of guilt.

Q: It's a very hard thing. I was told by one of our interns, a German, that at the University of Munich they have a copy of the anti-Nazi pamphlet that was thrown from balconies by students engraved on the floor -- was it the White Rose?

AKER: Yes, the White Rose. It was the action of Hans and Sophie Scholl, brother and sister.

Q: Brother and sister, yes.

AKER: They were executed. Their courageous act, of course, was constantly commemorated. The Third Reich was a major theme for the younger generation then. I would say that this is dissipating now for people under 30, but for people now in their 40s and 50s it was a tremendous weight. Many of them seemed to be in a state of denial about being German at all. They would call themselves Europeans.

Q: Yes.

AKER: And this is why many people seemed to have, I think, rather overblown-expectations for the EU (European Union) or the EC (European Commission) as it was then, because it was a sort of flight from their nationality. Of course, there were also many older people, including people who were in the war, who didn't feel guilty at all.

Q: They lost that one but-

AKER: Yes. There was, I think, a certain -- not pro-Nazi -- but pro-nationalist strain in quite a few of the older generation.

Q: From the USIA point of view when you were there, I would assume this is not a theme that we would pursue. I mean, there's no point rubbing people's nose in the thing; they had their own problems. I assume we were doing other things.

AKER: Yes. This was not at all a theme on our part. Many Germans were quick to tell you how bad they felt about it. You would see things such as, for example, a lot of people who were not Jewish at having a menorah or some other Jewish symbol in their home. I guess it was to make a point of showing their rejection of the past.

Q: Yes. I served there back in the '50s and, obviously, it was still there, quite a difficult time. Near Munich, they had a concentration camp -- it wasn't a death camp but-

AKER: Dachau. Actually one of the first times I noticed this, people having Jewish symbols in their homes, was at the house of a teacher at the Gymnasium -- high school -- in Dachau. He invited me to lunch at his home after I spoke to his class. It's a pretty little town; it used to be an artists colony in the 19th century.

I have always thought how difficult it must be, when traveling abroad, to have your address be from Dachau. Because most people had no idea it's a town; they think it was just a concentration camp.

Q: Yes. As a matter of fact, one of our interns that we had here about two years ago graduated from Dachau Gymnasium and I'd always introduce her as being from the Munich area.

AKER: That's what I mean.

Q: You know, there are names you can't use.

AKER: Right. Of course, in Germany it's not the case, because people are aware that it's a town.

Q: Well how did you find the work there?

AKER: I thought it was a lot of fun. America House had one of the best jazz venues in Munich and jazz was extremely popular with young people. This was at a time when, in the US, you hardly heard jazz; it was mostly just pop, rock, or country. Jazz was confined to the fringe, whereas, there, we would have Chet Baker or Lionel Hampton performing. We just provided the venue and we thought it greatly served our purposes to have the America House seen as providing this kind of talent and really attracting young people. We actually were seen as kind of a hip venue. Maybe our politics were not so great, but we had good music.

We also shared the House with the University of Munich's School of Journalism, which was perfect for us: USIA and young journalists. Under one roof.

Q: Yes. Was the Green Party and Petra Kelly and her ilk-

AKER: Just starting.

Q: Did you feel they were at odds with us?

AKER: Yes. Of course, Petra Kelly is an interesting case because her father was American, a GI.

Q: Yes.

AKER: While I was there the Greens got into their first state legislature, in Bremen. The embassy was focused on this phenomenon, thinking that it portended a radical anti-Americanism. But, of course, it didn't. The Green Party now has settled into the German scene, but it never gets more than about 10 percent of the vote nationally. At that point, it got a lot of impetus from the protests against the missile deployment.

Q: How about the Baader-Meinhof business? Was that over?

AKER: Yes. Its heyday, when most of the spectacular thing happened, was in '77 and '78, so it was very recent. Some sporadic things continued to happen in Germany, though, for quite a while. The head of the Treuhand, the trust that handled the assets of the former East Germany after reunification and compensated people whose property there had been nationalized, was assassinated by a remnant of the Baader-Meinhof gang as late as 1993 or so. But the main action was already over by the time I was there in the late '70s.

Q: How did you feel that USIA fit into the Foreign Service establishment in Munich?

AKER: We were not co-located; we were in the America House. Except for the weekly or twice-weekly staff meetings, we had very little contact with the Consulate General where the other sections were housed. So I think that hampered us being full-fledged members of the team. I mean, co-location is important. Of course, there were advantages to not being in the consulate too. However, the consulate had a great location: it was right on the English Garden, a huge park.

Q: Oh yes.

AKER: During the summer, people would often strip completely at lunchtime. They would take off everything and you'd walk through there to have lunch at a beer garden resembling a Chinese pagoda, and you'd see people lying down or playing volleyball in the nude. It was really quite striking, coming from the U.S.

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Q: At one point the America Houses were really a key element in the German educational system, because they offered a library and much more freedom than the university library or whatever passed for a public library. How stood it when you were there?

AKER: I served in Germany on several more occasions and so I personally experienced the demise of the America Houses, including closing two, in Berlin and in Frankfurt. They are all gone now. We were already starting the process in the late '70s and early '80s; some of the houses had been turned over to the state governments; in one case to the local university, in Kiel. Some took on a new life as binational centers, with mixed boards of Germans and Americans, with financing coming mostly from the German side: from the foreign ministry, the state governments and the municipalities as well as membership contributions.

Q: Did you get any feedback from German students who went to the United States to get all or a part of their education and who returned to Germany? In some places they might have gotten a good education but the establishment sort of isolated them. How stood it when you were there?

AKER: In Germany it very much depended on the individual state's willingness to give credit for courses taken abroad. Now there are EU-wide standards for accreditation that are more or less the same in most of the countries; but that was not the case at that time. Accreditation for studies anywhere outside Germany was not guaranteed, particularly since our system -- the way the universities are set up -- is quite different than theirs. Many people did have problems. Often they suffered a short-term professional setback by doing this because they were not following the tried and true groove.

On the other hand, with very few exceptions, people who did study in the U.S. were the best ambassadors for the United States. Almost all Germans came back with a tremendous wealth of goodwill toward the US.

Q: Were a significant number of the ones who went going to get the equivalent of a Masters of Business Administration, MBA's?

AKER: Yes, I am sure, because Germany did not excel in that area then. I think either in business administration or in the sciences, because our universities were and are among the very best in the world in terms of scientific research.

Q: Well is there anything else we should sort of cover during this period? Did you have any adventures or interesting episodes you can think of?

AKER: I think we've covered it actually quite a bit.

Q: Did you get any feel for the labor movement? Back in my era, in the '50, I was astounded, in Frankfurt, by how they shut down everything on the weekend because of the labor laws. When I went back there in the late '90s, the business district was still pretty well shut down on Saturdays and Sundays.

AKER: Germany has probably, even today, the most stringent shop closure regulations of any country in Europe. But it has loosened up dramatically, especially in the last 10 years. In larger cities, most shops are now open until 8:00, 9:00 or even later at night. But in those days it was awful. To go buy some groceries or before store closing hours at 5:30 or 6:00 PM, people would get out of work and dash to the shops. Then, from noon or 1:00 on Saturday, nothing would be open until Monday. What this resulted in -- this may have started after your initial period there -- was that service stations developed into little supermarkets because they were open all the time. The laws allowed them exceptions so you could buy things there. So every service station in Germany, probably, has a sizeable shop resulting from that period. But it was really terrible for the consumer.

Q: It was really designed to protect the small shopkeeper, really.

AKER: Yes.

Q: So they can have their nap in the afternoon and a free weekend and it had nothing to do with the customer.

AKER: Exactly. Even now, the idea that the customer is king is foreign to the German mentality, or German ways of doing things. But there has been some noticeable improvement in the last 10 years, in terms of opening hours, not necessarily in the attitude toward the customer.

Q: Okay. Well then, you're in '81 or-

AKER: Eighty-two now.

Q: Eighty-two; whither?

AKER: This turned out to be one of the worst decisions that I made in the Foreign Service because nothing came of it. I was assigned to Hong Kong. Which was great, but I

had to spend a year learning Chinese. I spent more than a year, from January '82 until April of the following year, '83, learning Mandarin Chinese.

Q: Mandarin?

AKER: Yes. They required Mandarin, which in terms of Hong Kong at that time was not very useful. It was a lost year from a professional viewpoint. I spent a lot of time and effort learning Chinese, but only got to the 2/2 level; and, since I did not use regularly it declined. It turned was a poor investment of my time and USIA's training funds.

Q: Well you were in Hong Kong from when to when?

AKER: From April of '83 until January of '85.

Q: What were you doing?

AKER: I was Information Officer, with primary responsibility for providing support to our public affairs operations on the mainland. In that capacity, I did quite a bit of travel in China because Hong Kong was a logistical base of operations for our embassy in Beijing and our consulates in Shanghai, Guangzhou, and other cities.

Q: Hong Kong was getting ready- was it '87?

AKER: It reverted to China in '97. At that point, this was still some years away and it was still very much a colonial place. I was surprised by the colonialist mentality of many British expatriates who were there. I had no idea that this mindset still existed. But during the time I was there the British, under Margaret Thatcher, agreed to return Hong Kong to China in 1997. There were a lot of upset people in Hong Kong who had never wanted to believe that this day would come. Of course, much of the population had been refugees from communist China. And even though China was already embarked on the sweeping economic and legal reforms begun by Deng Xiaoping, there was still a huge gulf in living standards and political freedom between Hong Kong and mainland China.

Q: Did we have an attitude on this thing?

AKER: No. We had recognized China officially in '79, and had already, under Nixon in '72, signed the Shanghai Declaration acknowledging Hong Kong and Taiwan to be parts of China. I don't think we had anything to say at all. It was strictly between the British and the Chinese.

Q: What were you doing?

AKER: Most of the time I was acting as a glorified supply clerk for the USIS section of our Beijing embassy and USIS operations elsewhere in China, getting things they wanted sent to them and occasionally taking it up myself, to Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou. It was a support operation for the embassy because that was where the real show was.

Q: I assume you probably had a very competent Foreign Service national staff.

AKER: Yes.

Q: Yes, I would think, since Hong Kong is a small area, your foreign services nationals probably knew everybody who was anybody to know.

AKER: I was also accredited to the government of Macao, which was Portugal, of course. I was over there often. It was interesting, totally different.

Q: What was it like?

AKER: Macao was and is a major gambling resort. It had a Mediterranean charm and Old World atmosphere very different from Hong Kong, which was already full of high rises everywhere. Macao resembled a Portuguese city in many ways, looked a lot like Lisbon in its architecture, and was very sleepy except for the casinos.

Q: Were you getting information that it was run by gangsters pretty much?

AKER: Not really. Obviously, when gambling and associated activities are the principal economic activities, people might make that assumption. But officially, Macao had a governor from Portugal, just as Hong Kong had a governor from the UK.

Q: Since you had to in many cases, actually carry stuff up yourself to our information service in Beijing and elsewhere, how did you find Chinese bureaucracy?

AKER: Pretty awful. When I had to fly to Beijing or Shanghai, I had to go in person to the Hong Kong office of China Airlines to get my plane tickets. Nothing was done over the phone. They didn't have computers and they didn't take credit cards; you had to go down to the office and deal with these very rude people who sold you a paper ticket and you paid in cash. That is the way they ran things. And that's pretty much the way things functioned in China itself at that point.

Q: It wasn't a fun experience, then?

AKER: No, but as I said, it obviously had improved since the Cultural Revolution days. I was struck by how different the Chinese were from the image we had grown up with during the Cold War. I was amazed at how lively and individualistic the Chinese were. What really struck me, especially after Germany, was how people would ignore or defy the police. In China, people would brazenly jaywalk or bike past traffic cops who were signaling them to stop. Their attitude was quite different from what I would have expected. It was repressive in many ways, but the traffic police really struggled.

I was also struck, in Shanghai particularly, by the sheer mass of humanity. I've never seen anything like that in my life before or since. In the main boulevards, like Nanking

Road, there was an overflow of people from the sidewalks into the street, which mean there was, at most, one lane open for cars to crawl through.

Q: What was USIA doing in China?

AKER: We were doing a lot. Obviously, we couldn't operate as freely there as in Western Europe, but we were doing a lot to support for the nascent American studies and English language courses, things like that; it was not hard politics. It was basically American society, American culture.

Q: What about leadership grants and all? Was this a big thing?

AKER: Yes, we did a lot of leader or International Visitor (IV) grants, and also helped fund and support American Studies and English teaching.

Q: Well, after this -- almost a parenthesis in your career -- where did you go?

AKER: I went to South Africa, to Durban, as the PAO in the consulate there. So at this point, after my initial six to eight months at the embassy in Iran, I had served in consulates for several consecutive tours. I was at the consulate in Munich, the consulate in Hong Kong (of course, that was a de facto embassy, it was huge) and the consulate in Durban. I got to South Africa just as things were really starting to bubble; anti-Apartheid violence was breaking out in the townships.

Q: You were there from when to when?

AKER: Eighty-five to '88. I got there in February of '85 and I left in March of '88. At the beginning of that period P.W. Botha, who had been prime minister since 1978, became president. They had changed the constitution the previous year to a presidential system. They also created two new houses of parliament, one each for the Indian and the so-called Colored (mixed race) populations. These were in addition to the already existing all-white chamber.

However, the black population, which was of course the overwhelming majority, two-thirds or more of the whole country, was given no representation. Rather than defusing international criticism and internecine violence, this change actually intensified both. It was analogous to the situation in Czarist Russia after 1905, when the Czar created the Duma and a somewhat more inclusive system that still failed to go far enough. It seems that, when a repressive regime starts to liberalize, it usually creates a greater backlash than when it is ruling with an iron fist. South Africa was a classic example. Since the 1960 massacre in Sharpeville, near Johannesburg, when the police killed dozens of unarmed demonstrators, the country had been largely free of large-scale violence. But, starting about the time I got there, there were violent clashes in some of the sprawling unofficial suburban ghettos, called townships. This was largely black on black violence between the supporters of the ANC (African National Congress) and supporters of the Zulu leader, Chief Buthelezi. He was-

Q: A Zulu Inkatha.

AKER: -the head of the Inkatha Party, exactly. The Zulus are the largest ethnic group in the country and historically the most important. Inkatha, dominated by Zulus, was a rival movement to the ANC, the African National Congress, which was the then-outlawed resistance movement led by Nelson Mandela. Many in the ANC viewed Buthelezi as a traitor to the cause because he didn't go with them. He had his own semi-military organization.

Violence was spreading but you couldn't really see it -- at least not if you were white middle class living far from the townships. South Africa resembled Southern California in many ways. Life revolved around surfing, barbeque and sports. It was outwardly placid. But storm signals were gathering.

In my first year in Durban, There was a large fire in one of the nearby townships that raged for several days. I believe it was a result of clashes between black and Indians, You could see the smoke off in the distance. During my second year, there was a bombing of a Durban disco frequented mostly by young whites that killed a number of people. It was horrible. I actually witnessed it – from a distance. I was at home one night, on a hill overlooking the sea, looking toward downtown, when I saw a flash of light and heard an explosion. I found out that the disco that had been blown up when I saw the headlines next morning That was the only time while I was there that I had any personal experience of violence.

Durban was the center of the Indian population in the country so we worked a lot with them. Mahatma Gandhi had lived there for decades; he got his start in politics in South Africa. And in fact, one of his granddaughters still lived there. She was active in politics. I met her. The Zulu population was also based in northern Natal, now KwaZulu-Natal, so I was there many times. I met Buthelezi and the Inkatha leadership. We reached out to anti-apartheid elements across the racial spectrum, We sent people who'd been imprisoned to the US on IV leadership grants.

When I first got there, we had an ambassador named Herman Nickel, who'd been a senior editor with "Time" magazine. He was German by birth who had emigrated to the U.S., and become a successful journalist. He was a Reagan appointee and at that point the Boycott South Africa movement was getting bigger; a lot of the churches here in Washington -- black churches particularly – displayed signs saying "Boycott South Africa." Randall Robinson was leading the boycott movement. The Reagan Administration was seen as being too soft on the Botha government, on the apartheid government.

Then Congress, in 1986, passed important symbolic sanction legislation against South Africa. This led to a backlash among many whites, especially the Afrikaners, people of mostly Dutch and French Huguenot descent who were the backbone of the government. I

remember, the day after the legislation passed, my front lawn was strewn with printed leaflets saying “Yankee go home. You have a bad track record“.

Q: Did you feel that you were riding the tiger, pushing the tiger, stopping the tiger or what?

AKER: The Reagan Administration was seen as being far too soft on South Africa and this became a big domestic political issue. Then Congress passed the legislation. In response, President Reagan, in late '86 or early '87, appointed a black ambassador to South Africa, Ambassador Perkins. He was an experienced career diplomat who had been ambassador to Thailand, I believe. His appointment was viewed by many South Africans as a symbolic gesture designed primarily for domestic US consumption; I don't think that the South African government was really bothered by it. He was a solid professional, but I don't think his presence there really did much to change things. However, we as a government did become more vocal, even before he got there, in response to the congressional and public pressure to become stronger in our support of, and outreach to, the anti-apartheid forces and to be more critical of the South African government. But things had taken on a dynamic of their own. I think we were only a minor player in the drama that played out in South Africa. A year later, after I left, Botha resigned because of ill health and F.W. de Klerk took over. Shortly thereafter, they were releasing Mandela. These were all internal South African decisions.

Q: Yes really, you know, everybody wants to feel good about it but it was South Africans who did it.

AKER: It was an internal dynamic. The thing that people who were never in South Africa didn't appreciate was how lively and intense the domestic debate was within the white population. Of course there were some really bigoted people, but for the most part I think there was a tremendous moral dilemma that people were facing all the time. For the most part, these were people struggling with a really difficult problem. They didn't feel good about what had happened; they did not feel good about running a system that disenfranchised and deprived the majority of the people, but they had inherited this system and there was a real fear of what would happen to them if they were to lose control.

What I found remarkable about South Africa was that I met some of the most interesting people there, across the racial spectrum, of my Foreign Service career. I would put it, in that respect, close to the top.

Q: Were you given jobs to go around, sound out what was happening? Did you really feel things were moving?

AKER: I didn't think it would move as fast as it did. I don't think anybody at that point thought that Mandela would be released so soon. We knew that there were negotiations, even long before I got there and probably there had been negotiations between the government and the ANC for years or decades and there had been many offers over the

years to free Mandela under certain conditions. The situation was, obviously, unsustainable in the long run, but I expected it to take a lot longer than it did.

Q: When you got there, you're the new one on the block, what were you getting initially from your fellow officers about Mandela? Was he considered a little bit too radical or, I mean, was he considered to be almost a wild card in the thing or not?

AKER: He was a mythical figure for us because he had not been seen in public since 1962 or '63 when he went to prison, so no one - I may be wrong, but I don't believe any foreigner had actually visited or seen him for more than 20 years.

In the US embassy the country PAO, Robert Gosende, was an impassioned advocate for the ANC and black South Africans and was a great admirer of Mandela. He was probably a little to the left of most people in the mission at that point; there were some other people who were concerned that the ANC were communist or a pro-communist organization.

You also had, next door, so to speak, in Angola, a civil war in which the South Africans were supporting Jonas Savimbi against the Angolan government, which was backed by Cuban troops. I would say that Washington viewed South Africa at that point in terms of this Cold War struggle going on in Angola and, to a lesser extent, in another former Portuguese colony, Mozambique. South Africa bordered both of those places and supported the conservative forces. The ANC was seen by many in the context of a Communist threat to the region.

Q: Did you feel either a push or a restraining hand on what USIA was doing at that time?

AKER: Our country PAO, Bob Gosende, was pushing us all the time to reach out, to get out more, and to engage with the more radical forces and with the forces of resistance. USIA was very focused, largely because of him. I'm not sure the rest of the embassy was pushing much at first, certainly not under Herman Nickel; I think it did change later, not so much because of Ambassador Perkins, but because of events in Washington that forced the administration to become more active. After late '86 or early '87 there was more of a push, but early on USIA was way ahead of the embassy as a whole.

Q: Well what was your impression of Buthelezi?

AKER: He's a very cool operator. I saw him quite a lot. He definitely was a person used to wielding power. He came out pretty well in all of this in the end. He still maintains his hold among the rural Zulus and - although I have not been following events that closely - I think he is still a major player after all these years. He has a limited base but has been very good at maintaining that base.

Q: What about- Was there a white establishment in Durban? What's the area-?

AKER: Natal.

Q: Natal.

AKER: Natal is different from the Pretoria/Johannesburg area, which is the center of the country's wealth, with the gold mines; it is also different from the Western Cape region, which is Cape Town. In both of those areas, Afrikaners form the majority among whites. Natal's white population is largely of English ancestry. Among them, there was a historical antipathy against the descendants of the Dutch -- against the Afrikaners, or the Boers as they were often called -- going back to the colonial period. They tended to be critical of Botha and the apartheid system, for the most part, and perhaps were more liberal in their sentiments on the whole, but there weren't many people who were actively pushing to change things. So I don't think they were all that liberal.

Q: Was there a feeling that this thing is going to end up with the night of long knives?

AKER: Yes, I think almost everybody felt it would go on for a long time but eventually it would come to some, probably bloody, confrontation. The fact that it hasn't happened is quite interesting. What happened, apparently, is that the ANC essentially left the economic power structure and the system intact, which means that the country has maintained, for Africa, a high standard of living. I think that is the biggest reason there has been relatively little violence -- not that there hasn't been some: crime is apparently much worse now than it was in those days.

Q: You left there when?

AKER: Eighty-eight. Mandela got out in February of '90.

Q: Did you so want to get out?

AKER: No. I found it oppressive but fascinating at the same time. It was a real human drama, full of moral dilemmas and larger than life characters. I remember one man particularly, named Aronstein, an outspoken Communist and ANC member. He was probably in his 70s; he was a so-called "banned" person. You remember this was a term used in the U.S. press. It sounded horrible, as if you were made into an unperson. He was banned, yet he would show up at parties and receptions. He was one of the wittiest raconteurs I ever heard in my life; he was the life of the party and yet he was "banned." I mention him only because I can think of so many interesting people that I met there. I met Alan Paton, who wrote "Cry the Beloved Country."

Q: Oh yes, quite a-

AKER: Quite a character. Desmond Tutu, archbishop and Nobel Prize winner -- he's still around. He played a very constructive role afterwards. He was one of the main forces behind this reconciliation committee. You know, they've gone through a process -- in which a lot of the figures, including Botha and others, actually got up and apologized. Nobody was imprisoned -- or very few people were -- but they had to go to public hearings and talk about their role.

Q: Yes.

AKER: I don't know if "healing" is the right word ,but it seems to have been very effective.

Q: You know, it's interesting because the Chinese had what sounds like the equivalent but was really for persecution. You know, people were beaten to death and all.

AKER: Self-criticism, during the Cultural Revolution.

Q: It was the same idea except it was the reverse side of the coin.

AKER: Yes. I think South Africa is, in a lot of ways -- I thought it when I was there --one of the most interesting places in the world because things like that happen. It is an extraordinary place.

Q: Well did you have much contact -- I realize Natal was not their stronghold -- with the white tribe of Africa?

AKER: There was some. For example, I worked a lot with the University of Zululand and its director. It was definitely under Afrikaner control. It is in the northern part of Natal, which is closer to the Transvaal; there are a lot more Afrikaners there. They were definitely more conservative. Many of them were strong Calvinists; they came from a very strong religious background. It gave them sort of a sense of biblical mission, they felt that they had come to Africa, they'd been driven out of the Cape by the British, then they had this Great Trek from the Cape to the interior, a little like Moses going crossing the wilderness to the Promised Land.

Then, when they discovered gold in the Transvaal, the British suddenly took that too. They had this historic sense of persecution. Their mindset was, I think, that they had been persecuted and exiled like one of the lost tribes of Israel, but having a sense of truly belonging to South Africa, which people of British descent probably had to a much lesser extent. This was their home, they'd been there for centuries, and they had survived much travail themselves. However, this strong religious feeling played both ways, because as Christians they had a sense of guilt about the situation, which I think played a big role in ultimately undermining apartheid.

Q: Was there much interest among all sides there, in developments in the United States, because we are working on our own racial problem?

AKER: Yes, t there was a huge interest in the United States. We brought a number of black American scholars and speakers to discuss the US experience and its relevance to the South African situation. We particularly highlighted the success of the non-violent approach of the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Q: You left there when?

AKER: Eighty-eight, March '88.

Q: But you say you- at the time when you left you weren't particularly optimistic.

AKER: No. I thought things were probably going to get worse. I was very surprised when things happened so quickly.

Q: How did you find social life there?

AKER: The social events I sponsored were deliberately mixed groups. I was invited to people's homes, including those of many Indian acquaintances and some members of other groups. There was an active cultural life, but it was largely confined to the white population and the Indian middle class. They would be the majority at concerts, the theatre, and other events. Of course, they tended to have more money and free time.

Q: Well it's still, here in the United States -- there's mixture but it's really at the edges.

AKER: You're right. We tend to ignore our own shortcomings. There is a biblical expression about seeing the mote in your neighbor's eye and not the beam in your own.

Q: Yes.

AKER: That is true. Even in Washington, D.C., it's just amazing how much things are disproportionately one race or the other.

Q: Yes. This is probably a good place to stop for this session. When did you leave there and where did you go afterward?

AKER: I left in the spring of '88 and spent the next four years here in Washington.

Q: Okay, so we'll pick it up then.

Today is the 1st of March, 2010, with Richard Aker. And we're in 1988, and you're returning from South Africa. What were you up to then?

AKER: I came back and worked for more than a year in the operations center of USIA. We had a small operations center.

Q: How did that work? I mean, I've talked to many people who've worked in the State one but what was the USIA Ops Center like?

AKER: We were not co-located with the State one; we were in what is now SA-44.

Q: That's off Independence Avenue, isn't it?

AKER: Yes, it's close to Capitol Hill, between 4th and C Street, SW, very close to the Air and Space Museum. We did work closely with the State Ops Center and, like them, worked shifts. We were providing up to date news to the Director and other USIA officials. That was our primary function; different from the State one, which does lots of things, including setting up special task forces when a crisis arises. We would sometimes be included in these, but our basic function was to provide up to date information.

Q: I would think that there would be less of a sense of immediacy, because so often, at the State Ops Center, you're dealing with missing US citizens, with disasters. On the USIA side, it was a different set of circumstances.

AKER: Absolutely. It was quieter, although, if there was a breaking news story, we had to alert principals, not just in USIA but in State as well. There was a lot going on in that period.

Q: Oh yes.

AKER: We had the collapse of various communist regimes: the fall of the Wall, the peaceful revolutions in Eastern Europe, and the bloody overthrow of Ceausescu in Romania. We also had the invasion of Kuwait and the buildup to the first Gulf War.

Q: Did you find, while you were there and doing that, that some news outlets were more reliable than others?

AKER: We regularly monitored Reuters and AP, with some checking of AFP and UPI.

Q: Were you coordinating what you did with State?

AKER: Yes, we coordinated. They would call and ask us for stuff and we would often get people in touch with State as well; they would call us for some reason.

Q: Did you have any particular sort of "in" with the news services?

AKER: No. We were passive in that sense. This was not like the job I had later as director of the Department's Press Office. At USIA we were consumers of news, not producers.

Q: Did Congress pay any attention to what you were doing? In other words, were you passing stuff on to some place in Congress?

AKER: No. Just within the Executive Branch bureaucracy. However, think that Congress did pay quite a bit of attention to USIA in those years because of the breakup of the Soviet Union and of the communist system; we were starting major exchange and democracy building programs to promote the rule of law and build democratic institutions.

Q: Did you have any piece of that action?

AKER: Not at the Ops Center. However, in December, 1990 I moved to my next job, where did get deeply involved in these events. I was a policy officer in the European bureau of USIA -- we called them area offices, not bureaus. I was a policy officer there for two years and-

Q: All hell was breaking lose.

AKER: Yes. In that period, from '90 to '92, we in the European area office of USIA were responding to the changed environment. We were opening new embassies in all these countries, the former Soviet republics, Eastern European countries, states that were being formed out of the former Yugoslavia. We had major budget issues. We were getting money for information and cultural work in the new countries and newly liberated countries, creating positions at the new embassies and adding positions to current embassies; My job was helping decide where we would allocate our new resources.

Q: When you moved over to the European Bureau after the Wall came down, was there an effort to avoid overplaying this, not to engage in triumphalism or whatever you want to call it?

AKER: That was a decision that the Bush Administration made. I remember, the day after the Wall was opened, President Bush was asked, on television, what he thought; he said I'm not going to crow about this, that is not our place. He was criticized for that, but in retrospect, on the issue of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, former President Bush -- Bush 41-- handled it, whether intentionally or not, with consummate skill.

Q: I think it was probably intentionally. I mean, the man probably is one of our most skilled diplomats, really.

AKER: Yes. Well, he had been ambassador to the UN, he'd been ambassador to China, and he'd been head of the CIA.

Q: Yes. He'd been around a lot and spent a lot of time cultivating contacts.

AKER: There was a feeling of exhilaration during that period, as you may recall, and some people in the media and elsewhere were criticizing the administration for not being more celebratory; but I think it was the proper policy. We did respond, by increasing resources for the posts involved. But we refrained from statements or actions that might have caused a backlash in what was still the Soviet Union at that point.

You may recall, though, that in August of '91, when Gorbachev was temporarily ousted, by a coup, Bush came out with a very strong statement, in contrast to how the Europeans had reacted. Mitterrand had been very circumspect, but Bush made a very strong denunciation of the coup and expressed support for Gorbachev, Yeltsin and other leaders

who were liberalizing the system. It turned out that he was right, perhaps because he had inside information or because he was just lucky: the coup collapsed after a few days.

Q: Yes. When you were there, were you surrounded by Soviet and Soviet bloc experts?

AKER: We had a lot of desk officers. We had people who were experts on Russia and other Eastern European countries. But of course, we were not doing policy planning; policy planning was in the Department. They dealt with macro issues and we were dealing with important micro issues that supported those, such as democracy building, strengthening civic institutions; sending resources out to the field to implement the policies that had been decided.

Q: Were we seeing, in what still was the Soviet Union, a significant opening of the news media?

AKER: Absolutely. It had started under Gorbachev in 1985 and accelerated exponentially. Gorbachev started out slowly, but, from the beginning, he set a different tone and, after Reagan went to Moscow in May of '88, he came back filled with enthusiasm. He talked about the new atmosphere and he said this is no longer an evil empire. The USSR officially went out of business in the autumn of 1991 but things had changed tremendously before then.

Q: It really was sort of a startling change. How did the invasion of Kuwait, hit you all?

AKER: I was still in the USIA Ops Center at that time. A crisis task force was set up by the State Ops Center. I attended its meetings from August of 1990 on, until I moved to the European bureau – the area office – at the beginning of December. From that point I was no longer directly involved in the issue, but I followed developments. .

I had not been involved in that part of the world since I left Iran in '79 but I knew that we had leaned toward Iraq throughout its war with Iran, which was actually initiated by Iraq; and we had looked the other way when the Iraqis had severely damaged a US warship in the Gulf. I also knew that -- going back to the early '60s – all Iraqi governments had claimed at least part of Kuwait as their territory.

I was surprised, therefore, by the speed and magnitude of our response. I did not anticipate we would send such a massive force there.

I didn't see any possibility of us not going into Iraq and kicking them out. We were talking about sanctions; in fact, our head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Crowell, was very strong on sanctions and actually the military very dubious about the whole thing. It was an interesting time, actually. Unfortunately, a really positive act on the part of one gentleman, George H.W. Bush, led to probably a much more questionable action on the part of his son later on.

In USIA, was there any doubt about how we should proceed?

AKER: We were taking our cues from the State Department and the President. We were dutifully going along with it. As the war wagons started rolling I think most people got on board whether they were enthused about it or not.

Q: Did USIA have anybody in Kuwait?

AKER: I think so. I don't remember who.

Q: It took us a while to leave. We were hanging on, and the Iraqis wanted us to leave and we were not going to leave. Then finally, around Christmastime we got everybody out.

AKER: I recall that President Bush at the time tried to make the case that our diplomats were being held hostage in our embassy in Kuwait. They were hardly hostages because we were keeping them there.

Q: But Saddam was also playing a game by taking foreign nationals and sort of chaining them to strategic locations. He stopped that after awhile.

AKER: Yes, I've forgotten all the circumstances but I do recall this thing about using American citizens, supposedly, as hostages to prevent-

Q: Bombing.

AKER: Yes, was a major issue for several months in the fall of 1990 but -- by the time the war actually started in January, this issue had been resolved.

Q: Yes.

AKER: And supposedly, Saddam had stopped playing this game in the hope that it might reduce some of the impetus to kick him out of Kuwait.

Q: Yes.

AKER: It didn't help.

Q: No.

Turning to Europe: with your perspective on the European side of things, were we setting forth policy for our European colleagues?

AKER: I think that, during that period we saw pretty much eye to eye as far as Russia -- the former Soviet Union -- went and I think the Europeans were very happy with the adroit diplomacy of the Bush Administration. There were differences of opinion, though. The real problem at that point was Yugoslavia, where the U.S. was not really involved.

Q: You know the European Union had announced "this is a European problem; we'll take care of it."

AKER: Right. And we were apparently quite happy to do that at that point. Not until much later, going into the mid-'90s during the second and third year of the Clinton Administration did we started changing our view. In fact Ambassador Warren Zimmerman, who was in Belgrade, was widely criticized by people we would now call neo-cons -- the term hardly existed at that point -- who wanted to see a much harder line vis-à-vis the Serbs and who favored independence for Croatia and Slovenia and Bosnia, etc. Kosovo at that point was still not much of an issue.

Zimmerman had taken, basically, a hands-off attitude. He supported the idea of a general settlement, but the parties themselves had to work it out. We were not necessarily opposed to Yugoslavia breaking up, but he thought anything that was not worked out in some sort of grand scheme in advance was doomed to set off all kinds of bloodshed. Of course, he turned out to have been accurate.

Q: Absolutely.

AKER: Were you in Belgrade?

Q: A long time ago but actually Warren Zimmerman at that time was the vice consul or the third secretary, I think.

AKER: I think he was unjustly criticized for not jumping on the independence bandwagon.

Q: Yes.

AKER: Slovenia and Croatia declared independence in the early summer of 1991. Fighting began on a substantial scale between Serbia and Croatia. There wasn't much fighting in Slovenia because Slovenia does not share a border with Serbia. The Serbs seemed to be not so much concerned with the Slovenes; Croatia was their traditional enemy and the area along their common border was very ethnically mixed.

Q: Yes.

AKER: And so this developed into a large-scale conflict. Then the Germans in December of '91 broke with other European states -- they might not have been alone but they were certainly the most important country to do so -- and unilaterally recognized the independence of Slovenia and Croatia. The other Europeans had been more inclined toward the Zimmerman approach, which was that the parties should all work this out and only then should there be general recognition -- But Germany went ahead and of course they were blamed by many for pouring oil on the flames. I think that was probably unfair because there was nothing that would have stopped this at this point anyway.

Q: Well it did strike me, as an old Yugoslav hand, to have Germany recognize Croatia out of the blue. For the Serbs, the German-Croatian combination was really nasty during

World War II and the paranoia in that part of the world is probably the highest of anywhere, and to have the Germans and Croatians seem to get together just raised the level to unthinkable heights.

AKER: I can see that. Of course there was also a historic German connection to Slovenia, which had been part of Austria; both of them had been part of Austria-Hungary. People in the Balkans have long memories.

Q: Well, my time in Yugoslavia was 1962 to '67 and everything revolved around 1389, the Battle of Kosovo. Memories go way back and actually they go back even farther to 800, which is when they drew the line between Orthodoxy and Catholicism.

AKER: And of course it runs along the Croatian-Serbian border.

Q: Yes, yes. Oh God.

AKER: Then it was in April, I think, of '92, the Bosniaks declared independence unilaterally. Again, I think, Germany was the first country to recognize the independence of Bosnia, and that of course developed into the nastiest by far of all of the-

Q: Well what were you doing, what were your responsibilities at this time?

AKER: Basically just following developments and helping start new programs to fund democratization and establish the rule of law in these countries, including the countries that were emerging in the former Yugoslavia; also helping allocate resources for opening embassies and cultural centers. We were not making policy.

Q: No, but were you feeling the constraints. Secretary of State Baker, when the Soviet Union split up, did not ask for any significant funds to build up new embassies and all; that must have been quite a strain on your operations?

AKER: Yes because we were cutting back on embassies and USIA offices in Western Europe to send these resources to the East. So just as we were opening new posts in many of these places, we had to cut back somewhere because we did not get much of an initial budget. Some programs were funded, and of course, Congress had created the SEED program with money that was used to support Eastern European democracy, hence the acronym. USIA was the lead agency for carrying that out.

But, for the most part, we were cutting back in Western Europe and closing posts that no longer had priority: smaller consulates in Italy, France and Germany and other places, where we had, for historical reasons, exceptionally large posts. There was some fat there, no question about it.

Q: Well it was interesting. You must have been running around trying to pick up money here and cut off money there.

AKER: Right. I spent much of the time looking at spreadsheets and trying to figure out where we could cut.

Q: In a way a very exciting time politically, but economically, for the posts it was, as we use the term, a “challenge.”

AKER: It was a challenge, exactly. Looking back on it, I think, it wasn't just that the amount of US Government aid was paltry. Especially in Russia, many questionable decisions were made. We would send advisors like Jeffrey Sachs and others to Moscow to tell people how to create a market economy. Some people there were quite happy, I think, to use the rhetoric to justify their taking advantage of the situation to get rich. In fact, I saw a figure the other day that over half of all the billionaires in the world are expatriate Russians, people who bought up state assets in the '90s and now live on the Riviera or wherever. Russia did not have many strong institutions at the time. This is why, apparently, Putin is so popular among Russians: he appeared to try to put a stop to what was seen by many as the looting of the country.

Q: Were we aware that we might have been helping in this plundering of the former Soviet Union?

AKER: I think we were rather naïve about what was going on there. We tended to see it from a Pollyannaish perspective. The U.S. Government gave constant lip service to the idea of free market capitalism without really looking as to how it might operate on the ground in a country without strong institutions and without a functioning civil society.

Q: Well you did this for how long?

AKER: I did this until '92, the summer of '92, and then I went back to Germany.

Q: Where in Germany?

AKER: I went to Stuttgart.

Q: What were you doing in Stuttgart?

AKER: I was the PAO. It was available and I wanted to get back overseas after four years in DC.

Q: Stuttgart is Baden-Württemberg?

AKER: Yes, it's the capital.

Q: Where stood Baden-Württemberg politically at this time?

AKER: It was and is generally one of the more conservative and wealthiest German states, and of course it's where Mercedes-Benz is located, as well a lot of other large

companies. It is probably, after Bavaria, the most conservative politically of all the states. Unlike Bavaria, which has its own separate party -- the Christian Social Union -- which is affiliated to, but not part of, the CDU -- the Christian Democratic Union, Baden-Württemberg is a stronghold of the CDU, the national party. At that point it was ruled by a coalition, which is one of the few times it's happened since the war. The CDU headed a grand coalition with the more leftist SPD (Social Democratic Party). The Minister - President -- governor -- was from the CDU and the deputy Minister-President was from the SPD.

Q: Well did you have a green movement there?

AKER: Substantial, but it was not in power but it got considerable votes, and still does, in the 10 percent range, maybe, which is about as much as it gets anywhere in Germany.

And the FDP (Free Democratic Party), another small, more libertarian party, has its stronghold historically in Baden-Württemberg so they're also in the high single, sometimes double digits.

Q: Do we still have troops there?

AKER: Very few, but the headquarters of the U.S. European Command and also U.S. AFRICOM, the African Command, which was just set up in the last three or four years, are both in Vaihingen, which is part of Stuttgart. The most substantial troop presence we have in Baden-Württemberg is farther to the north in Heidelberg and Mannheim. The U.S. Army European Command is in Heidelberg. That's being moved to Wiesbaden now, in Hessen, but as of right three of the major commands outside of NATO Brussels are in Baden-Württemberg,

Q: You were there from when to when?

AKER: I was there for about 18 months, from the summer of '92 until early '94. At that point Ambassador Richard Holbrooke, who had just arrived, asked me to come up to Bonn to be the press attaché. I went off to Bonn and was there until late '96.

Q: Okay, well let's talk about the Stuttgart period. What were your main jobs?

AKER: Well we still had an America House there, which I was director of, among other things. Going back to what you were saying about closing posts in the West to help fund the East -- at this time we began closing some America Houses which had been institutions since the end of World War II and had played a major part in the so-called re-education of Germans -- as we called it-- in the late '40s and '50s. I was ordered to cut down the operations of the Stuttgart America House and to conduct a RIF (reduction in forces) of personnel. It wasn't my decision but I had to carry it out, I was the person who had to go tell the people you're fired. It was painful.

Q: Well did you have a feeling that we were beginning to lose the next generation of German students and all coming up?

AKER: When I was in Munich earlier, that was the last major period of the Cold War -- the arms race with the SS-20s and the Pershing and Cruise missiles. By the early '90s, the times had really changed. That was a different era. I think at that point we had a good relationship with younger people and the younger people had become much less political, more interested in business, start-ups, IT, this sort of thing. It was a much less political generation. So I guess this was after Generation X, this would be Generation Y or later and young people were not really that interested in politics for the most part.

Q: Well I would think that there would be both excitement and disappointment, all sorts of emotions going on as East Germany was getting absorbed into West Germany; did we look upon this and say well, good luck fellas, and not try to get involved?

AKER: We did open a new consulate in Leipzig, which had been a center of protest movement in the old East Germany. One of the reasons we were cutting back on America Houses, etc., and closing a couple of posts was to help pay for the consulate in Leipzig as well as expand Berlin, which had become officially the capital, but neither the government nor the embassy had moved there yet. However, we were getting ready. We were beefing up operations in the East, and in most of our exchange programs the East had a higher quota and a higher priority. We were diverting resources to these. But again, not a lot. We were not throwing a lot of money into Western Europe, including Germany, anymore.

Q: Well I would have thought that we would have tried to transfer the America Houses over to the eastern side-

AKER: Well we didn't. We opened a consulate in Leipzig, but it was not large. It did not have an America House associated with it, because the whole America House concept, by this point in the '90s, was in decline, and not just in Germany. Umberto Eco, a writer whose book "The Name of the Rose" was very popular, wrote an essay about the closure of the American Cultural Center in Milan. I think it appeared in the "International Herald Tribune." It was a critique of US shortsightedness in cutting back on its cultural presence abroad.

This also tied in with the slow dying of USIA. Congress was not very interested in cultural diplomacy and thought it was a waste of money: "Germans have libraries, Italians have libraries. Why do we need to have another library there?" This was the attitude. So there was no constituency in Congress for doing anything cultural.

Jumping ahead to my most recent German experience, in 2006 we closed the America House in Berlin and then closed the last America House, in Frankfurt. After that, the Spanish embassy took over the Frankfurt property and made it into an Institute Cervantes. I thought it was very revealing. We are a wealthier, larger, and more important country than Spain, yet they had no problem getting the funding for a cultural institution. And this unilateral cutting back on our cultural presence overseas continues. The attitude I think

many people had, especially on the Hill, was that everybody sees our television and films, they must know everything about us. That may be true but it doesn't necessarily always project the image we would like to present.

Q: No. Also the libraries and their activities were much more dynamic in the European context, particularly a place like Germany, than any German comparable institution. I mean, the ability to search for books on a shelf and take them out wasn't European.

AKER: The America House libraries had been great role models for German libraries in the postwar era. In Berlin, there was also the Amerika Gedenkbibliothek, the American Memorial Library, which I think was funded by the Rockefeller Foundation in 1954 in West Berlin and is an icon to this day. The Germans ran it themselves, but we initially funded it and dictated how it would be run; it was open in the evening and offered free access to shelves and free lending. And until '61, when the Wall went up, people from all over Berlin, including East Berlin, could come in and use this library. People in Berlin still talk about how much they loved this library when they were kids and what it had meant to the city. After the Wall came down, people from the East showed up at the library with overdue books that they had checked out in 1961 and they couldn't back for 28 years. Of course, the fines were waived.

Anyway, we were getting out of the cultural affairs business. And not just in Europe.

Q: Was there a feeling that this was a very bad mistake?

AKER: I think there were people, even in USIA, who shared the view that it was fine to take this tough-minded approach. The argument -- beyond the fact that people, especially in Europe, had the resources to do this sort of thing themselves -- was that we needed to get out of our institutions and go out among the people instead of having people come to us, we needed to do things with co-sponsors. It forced us to be more proactive. I'm not sure it's particularly valid. It's true that institutions or buildings create a certain stasis and routine, but they also provide continuity and you just can't do things as consistently or regularly when you don't have a place to hang your hat. Although it's good to get out and share venues with co-sponsoring institutions, I'm not sure we do much more of that now than we did before we started closing the institutions that we had. But I don't mourn, on the other hand, the old America Houses because to some extent they were anachronistic.

Q: Were you sensing a new Germany with unification and or was this a continuation of the old West Germany?

AKER: I think mostly it's a continuation of the old West Germany. Essentially, it was a corporate takeover. West Germany was larger and more populous, and the West Germans certainly weren't interested in taking over any ideas, even some good ideas, from East Germany. I think reunification has worked incredibly well on the whole. It has been very expensive for the West Germans but now -- it's almost like the division never happened. Germans love to moan and groan about everything, but certainly, compared to almost everybody else in the former Soviet bloc, the East Germans came out best.

Q: When you were in Germany this second time around, this peculiar mixture of extreme right and extreme left, like the Baader-Meinhofs and the skinheads; were they running wild during your time there?

AKER: No but there was, the second time around, more of the skinhead sort of thing. There were occasional instances of violence against foreigners, particularly immigrants from visibly immigrants from visibly foreign backgrounds.

Q: You're talking about foreigners, you're really talking about Turks and others.

Yes. There were isolated but very well publicized attacks on foreigners, as the Germans called them, even if they'd been there for generations. These attacks got a lot of attention in the media. But, at this point, there was very little leftist violence anymore. To the extent that there was violence, it was coming more from the skinheads.

Q: How did the Balkan conflict play in Germany while you were there?

AKER: Bosnia was in full swing and Ambassador Holbrooke went back to the Department in the autumn of '94 to be assistant secretary for Europe, primarily to address the Balkan conflict. He asked me to come back with him; I chose not to, even though it was a big mistake from a career point of view. (I didn't go, but stayed on as press attaché through the following Chuck Redman era.) I was at Holbrooke's residence every morning to do a press briefing and met many people there. He was very involved with people on their way to and from the Balkans: Commerce Secretary Ron Brown, who died on a trip to Sarajevo; Peter Galbraith, our ambassador to Croatia, who was a frequent Holbrooke houseguest; and many others. Germany was very involved in the whole mess. This continued during Ambassador Redman's tenure: I remember a lot of visitors and meetings in the run-up to the August 1995 Croatian offensive that kicked the Serbs out of the Krajiina. You remember, there was a surprise Croatian offensive that drove thousands of ethnic Serbs out of Croatia back into Serbia.

There was an accident outside Sarajevo in which Robert Frasure and a couple of other senior people were killed. They had stopped in Bonn on the way. I had seen them in the ambassador's office a day or two before, so this very personal for me. Clearly, Germany was an important player in our covert support for the Croats and the Bosnian forces.

Q: Do you think that we were far too late in exerting real force into the peace efforts?

AKER: I don't know. I think even 15 years later it's hard to tell what sort of future Bosnia is going to have on its own, if it can ever have a future on its own. It's the Balkans in miniature in terms of complexity.

Q: Oh yes.

AKER: It's being held together by glue and an understood threat of force and each of the three main groups seems to be supported only by their own community. I'm not an expert on this, although later on in Romania I got involved a bit during the Kosovo campaign. But Bosnia still seems to me to be key. It may be a futile exercise. The Turks stayed there for several hundred years, the Austrians for about 50 and, of course, it was the proximate cause of World War I.

Q: Yes.

AKER: And the place is still a complete mess today.

Q: Yes, We've stopped the fighting but the tensions are still there.

AKER: Absolutely. It isn't talked about much because there hasn't been any overt fighting for a while, but it's a very tense situation. So I don't know if we should have got involved earlier or if we should have not got involved at all.

Q: Yes. So how long were you in Bonn?

AKER: Until December of '96.

Q: What was your impression of Richard Holbrooke?

AKER: He has a larger-than-life personality. He really has charisma, an animal magnetism that is quite remarkable. And he is articulate; he has the ability to talk in sound bytes so he's very good in testimony and very good with the news media.

Q: Well, as his press officer, you were enmeshed in that; how did that work for you?

AKER: I got along great with him because he trusted me. He doesn't need a lot of public affairs support; he's so good by himself. He would invariably make a great impressions on the journalists, in terms of what they were interested in, which was a story. Good press made him happy, which made him happy with me even though I really had little to do with it. It was fun being around him because he was a great networker; he really knew anybody who was anybody in Washington and elsewhere.

Q: Yes.

AKER: Holbrooke was, and is, one of the more colorful diplomats of his time. You know, he was assistant secretary for East Asia under Carter; after being assistant secretary for Europe he was ambassador to the UN. Now he's special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan. He has always been in the news.

Q: Well he's a remarkable presence.

What was the feeling about moving to Berlin?

AKER: In Bonn the local population was very opposed during that period. There were regular demonstrations against the move, calling it a waste of money. Of course, the city and its surrounding area were afraid they would lose a lot of revenue.

I was always for the move to Berlin. I thought it made no sense to stay in Bonn. But the German government was carrying out the move in a very deliberate way. They didn't get around to actually moving until '98 or '99. At the same time, we moved the embassy as well. I thought they should have moved to Berlin much earlier just to get it over with. In the early and mid- '90s, they would fly bureaucrats back and forth all the time between Bonn and Berlin, which I thought was a waste of money. I felt that, once people actually moved to Berlin the issue would be dead because Berlin is incomparably a better place to be than Bonn. I lived later on in Berlin, there is just no comparison. Berlin is really one of the great cities.

Q: Well then, you left Bonn when?

AKER: I left Bonn in December '96 and was assigned to Bucharest. I came back to Washington and took Romanian.

Q: Okay, Romania from when to when?

AKER: Ninety-seven to '99, just two years.

Q: Was this a different world than Germany?

AKER: Yes. Romania, of course, had been one of the most repressive of all the communist states. I guess it was the closest thing that Europe had to North Korea.

Q: Yes.

AKER: There was still a sense of that in the late '90s. That huge building that Ceaușescu built, the Casa Poporului, the House of the People, you have to see this thing: it's like a Disneyland construction. The country had been traumatized but I think historically they've had a very difficult history long before Ceaușescu and the communists.

It's an interesting place though -- kind of a spooky place. It's a beautiful country, physically. It's probably one of the few places in Europe that still has a genuine, living folk culture.

Q: Yes.

AKER: It's got a very nice language -- a Romance language. It sounds a lot like Italian or Spanish and you can practically read the newspaper knowing almost no Romanian at all. In that respect, it's an easy introduction to Eastern Europe because the language is much easier.

It is the home of Dracula; his picture is on one of the main currency notes, Vlad Tepes Dracula. It's an interesting ethnic mix too, with the Romanians as the majority but lots of Hungarians -- in some places they are in the majority, as in parts n Transylvania;. And lot of gypsies as well, Roma. It was fascinating. The country had been traumatized; it was very backward economically compared to Germany. I think that, in the '20s and '30s it had a much higher standard of living than it has now, relatively speaking.

Q: Well they have really a fine cultural base or they should have.

AKER: Yes, Bucharest actually has many grand buildings; there's a great concert hall and great opera. In that respect it was interesting.

One of the interesting historical things about is that it fell on the Orthodox side of the Orthodox/Western divide, so Romania (and neighboring Moldavia, where Romanian is the majority language) are the only Orthodox Romance Language countries. I found the churches and monasteries very interesting. There are some beautiful wooden monasteries that are famous for their artwork.

Q: I've seen pictures of them.

AKER: They are in Bukovina in the north and Transylvania. They're really magnificent, on the UNESCO world heritage list.

Q: Yes. Did the Romanians relate much to the United States during this time?

AKER: Yes, they were anxious to get into NATO and also into the EU. They were very disappointed when they didn't make either one in the first few tranches, but after I was there they got into NATO, and now of course, into the EU. Whether that was a good decision for the EU remains to be seen. I think the EU has played a constructive role in integrating Eastern European countries into the West, helping smooth that. But it's also -- given the interdependency of the economies and now the Schengen agreement for free migration -- also caused them problems in terms of unrestricted migration within the EU. Romania is a long way, and Bulgaria too, from having a well-functioning economy.

Q: Did you note the connection or lack thereof between Romania and Bulgaria? They've been neighbors for a long time, different languages. I'm told there are only one or two bridges across the Danube. They exist quite separately.

AKER: You never heard much about Bulgaria in Bucharest. I think Bulgaria served a certain purpose for the Romanians, made them feel better about themselves: "if you think it's bad here you should go to Bulgaria." But I'm not sure that is really true; I think if anything it may be the other way around.

They both share the Black Sea coast. But I have the impression that on the Bulgarian Black Sea coast, which I have not visited, they've done a much better job of making it-

attractive for tourists than the Romanians have. Romania has a terrible tourist infrastructure, which is a shame because it is such a beautiful country.

Both Bulgaria and Romania were kingdoms until after the end of World War II. King Michael, the last king of Romania, tried to make a comeback after the fall of Ceaușescu but the authorities, fearing that, would not let him into the country. He flew there but they refused to let him in. King Simeon of Bulgaria went back to Bulgaria and became prime minister. He never got his kingdom back but he was prime minister until quite recently.

Q: Yes. Did we have any policy toward the Roma, USIA-wise?

AKER: No,. We were concerned about the attitude toward ethnic minorities, but not the Roma so much as the Hungarians. Hungarians are, by far, the largest ethnic minority and there had been quite a bit of violence between them and the Romanian majority the fall of the communists. Hungarians were the whipping boy for the Romanian extreme right, largely because Hungarians had been the rulers in Transylvania for centuries, despite the majority Romanian population. We did make a point of impressing on them that they should not discriminate against the Hungarians.

The Roma were not really a big issue but they are very noticeable there. It is a very sensitive point with Romanians, particularly because of the name of the country -- which is not related to Roma, it's from Rome, of course. A deep dislike, even contempt toward gypsies or Roma was very widespread. That being said, there were an awful lot of gypsies begging in the streets. I've never seen that many elsewhere. And while some of them were relatively integrated, others were basically just going from generation to generation living by begging, which didn't help their efforts to end discrimination because they were constantly reinforcing the negative stereotypes.

Q: Oh yes.

Did we have any particular long term, likes, dislikes or anything? I mean, on what did we base our Romanian ties?

AKER: I think our Romanian ties were based very much on the geographic location of Romania on the Black Sea and its proximity to the Middle East and the Gulf. Even before they joined NATO, we had basing agreements.

When I was there, when the Kosovo War broke out, although we didn't advertise it publicly, we were using Romania as a primary listening post for monitoring the NATO bombing of Serbia and broadcasting a Radio Free Europe kind of operation into Serbia. Romania was more than happy to cooperate with us on this sort of thing.

Q: I take it that the Russian maneuvers in Kosovo did not endear them to the Romanians?

AKER: Well Romania, like every other country in that part of the world,. It's terrified of Russia, for obvious historical reasons. And they don't like the Serbs either because the Serbs have traditionally been pro-Russian.

Q: Well then, you left there when?

AKER: Summer of '99.

Q: It's probably a good place to stop and we'll pick it up for one more go at it, you think?

AKER: Yes..

Q: Okay, '99, where did you go?

AKER: To Geneva.

Today is the 17th of March, St. Patrick's Day, 2010, with Richard Aker.

Okay, Richard.

AKER: Neither of us are wearing green today; I don't know if you noticed that or not. Unless you've got some green in the shirt.

Q: Actually, my undershorts, I've got a lot of green in them but they're not on display; I'm a secret Irish. I have an Irish grandmother, as a matter of fact.

AKER: I do too,. Most of my ancestors came from Ireland.

Q: We're in 1999 and you're off to Geneva.

AKER: Yes. My arrival there nearly coincided with the merger of USIA with the State Department, by the way.

Q: What were you going to do there?

AKER: Deputy Counselor for public affairs. This turned out to be the most enjoyable tour of my career. I was there for four years.

Q: This was until 2003?

AKER: Until 2003, doing public affairs for all three of our missions there; the US mission to the UN offices in Geneva, the US mission to the World Trade Organization and the US mission to the Conference on Disarmament: all three of these things are there.

Q: You know, just thinking about it, this would be sort of a unique post in that you really have no particular work towards the Swiss public and all.

AKER: No. In fact, Switzerland was not even a member of the United Nations when I was there. Despite the fact that they had hosted the UN and before that the League of Nations since the beginning, they never joined. They had several referenda in which they had voted not to join. The last year I was there, or maybe it was the year after, Switzerland voted, narrowly, to join the UN as a member.

Q: Alright, well you want to describe the mission mix in Geneva and what you were about with them?

AKER: Well the mission mix is quite interesting because we had three ambassadors and three missions. Two of them were in the same large building; the third, the WTO (World Trade Organization) was in a different part of town, for the first couple of years. Later all three were consolidated under the same roof, but there was little coordination between the three missions. There were no regularly scheduled meetings between the ambassadors. About the only functions they shared were HR (Human Resources) and PA (Public Affairs). I worked with all three of them, so it gave me a pretty good overview of all the various things that we were doing .

Geneva is something of an idyllic place; you've probably been there?

Q: I've just been through.

AKER: It's a beautiful setting in the Alps, and the lake is gorgeous. It's a quiet, family place: not a place for you if you're looking for nightlife. But I found multilateral diplomacy, although it can be frustrating, to be about the most interesting thing I've ever done. I got quite interested in the multilateral ethos, the multilateral way of doing things, and ever since I have regretted that I didn't do more along those lines.

Q: Alright. well, let's take one at a time. What were you doing for-?

AKER: At the mission to the UN, you have several annual meetings that were key dates on the calendar. One was the UN Human Rights Commission, which met every year in the late winter to early spring. There would be votes on various issues that were tests of strength and influence; there was always a vote pushed by the United States to condemn Cuba for human rights abuses. There were various votes regarding Israel and the Palestinians and votes to condemn China for its human rights policies. These mattered a lot to people in the IO Bureau and to real wonks on these issues, but I don't think the larger public paid that much attention. It was quite interesting to see the emotion, the time, and the effort that our delegation and our mission put into them.

Q: Where was the emotion?

AKER: On certain issues, for example Cuba, there is a very devoted American constituency watching for any sign of change or weakening in our policy. And this constituency has a lot of influence in DC. We would send a large delegation every year, including several members of Congress, who'd take part in the meetings and planning sessions and would be riding herd to make sure the diplomats representing the US were absolutely firm on this issue. It was quite revealing.

The annual meetings of the Red Cross, the World Health Organization and the UN High Commission for Refugees featured similar red line votes on issues, especially was anything to do with abortion and international organization funding of abortions. People from the Hill and NGOs attended and let us know that our every action and every word were being watched closely.

Another example issue was the land mine issue. The Clinton Administration and later the Bush Administration both had the same policy: we were against banning the use of anti-personnel land mines. This came up before the UN High Commission for Refugees and other bodies. We always voted against the prohibition of land mines. We were pretty much alone in the world, along with China and I think Russia. This was a very emotional issue: activists and delegations would bring children from Angola or Afghanistan whose legs had been blown off by land mines; a giant symbolic chair with a broken leg was erected in front of the UN building there, the old League of Nations building, to highlight the issue. Many Americans were also for a prohibition. But, of course, since both US administrations were against the prohibition applying to the U.S., we toed the line.

Q: Why would we be against prohibiting land mines?

AKER: Probably because we use them more than anybody else. I'm just speculating here, but since we have so many bases located everywhere, their peripheries need to be protected. It's a way to save personnel -- instead of having a guard every few feet you just put some mines in a field and people won't go in. They can seal off that area. I think that's the bottom line. We made little effort to take the moral high ground on this issue.

Another issue that we were not on the other side of the angels on, compared to the rest of the world, was the so-called child soldier issue. The Europeans in particular -- but others as well -- wanted to prohibit using children as soldiers. The use of children combatants was common in wars in Africa, in particular. It is similar to the land mine issue.

Q: Yes.

AKER: Kids in their early teens were killing and being killed and walking around with AK-47s. Our position was that, here in the US, we allow minors to join the military. Certainly, we consider 17-year-olds ripe for recruitment. We opposed any ban on recruitment of minors because we didn't know where the line would be drawn.

Q: What was your role? We had these stands on things but there was no real public out there -- or were you preaching to the media?

AKER: There was a large media contingent, both stationed permanently in Geneva and others who came out for certain events like the annual meetings of the International Federation of the Red Cross, the Human Rights Commission, or the World Health Forum of the WHO. The press corps there was really specialists, so you had to know what you were talking about because these people had worked for years on these issues. And any time there was one of these gatherings, like the Human Rights Commission, you had a lot of administration figures who'd come, a lot of major political figures, and they'd all want to do press and I would be with them for their press conferences and TV interviews, shepherding people like John Bolton around.

Q: Well what were some of the things you did for the other missions?

AKER: I was most heavily involved -- in terms of the amount of work, with the US Mission to the WTO. The biggest issue was a new round of talks to reduce trade barriers. There had been an abortive WTO summit of world leaders in Seattle in late '99, which was disrupted by protestors. Then we made another attempt to launch a new round which finally culminated in Doha with agreements, which have still never been carried out. These were issues in which there was actual money involved, big money for some people. US industry and agricultural interests and those of other countries were very interested in everything that was going on at WTO.

Q: I would imagine that by the time you got there our stand had been reiterated 100 times to a press corps which had heard it all before and so I would think that you were almost just going through the motions.

AKER: Yes, there is a certain amount of that in any kind of government public affairs work, obviously. In my last job here, as director of the State Department press office, we had the daily press briefing. Much of this is very, very repetitive. You know what they're going to ask and you know what you're going to answer but it keeps the news cycle flowing.

Q: I would assume that at least in the World Trade Organization -- the Doha Round and all, that different commodities would be under consideration each time around, wouldn't they? So there'd be something.

AKER: Yes, there's something new all the time, some new issue takes the forefront but there are certain hardy perennials that keep coming up. One of the biggest ones, certainly in my time -- I think it is still the biggest, year in year out -- is the question of agricultural protection. Everybody does it, then points the finger at everyone else and says "you are subsidizing your farmers and this isn't fair." We certainly did. The farm bill that went through Congress the year before the Doha round raised US subsidies enormously on various crops. Yet we were saying this was not protectionism. It was the pot calling the kettle black but it keeps on going on.

Another issue that was big at that time was the issue of generic pharmaceuticals to combat AIDS and other infectious diseases. We were trying to protect U.S.

pharmaceutical companies against what a lot of countries wanted, which was essentially to make the medicine cheaper so they could be delivered en masse to poor countries in Africa where AIDS was a severe problem. We were taking the not very popular view that we had to protect copyrights and protect the profits of big drug companies. There were many other issues but those two were dominant in the early part of this decade.

Q: I think that, in France, Jose Bove was very much involved in some of this.

AKER: He was very much involved in the Frankenfood thing. This came up less in the WTO context than it did at the World Health Organization and also in our bilateral relations with many European countries. The question of product labeling actually came up more when I was in Germany again. Europe does not have a central FDA (Food and Drug Administration) like the U.S. This really became a bilateral issue between the US and other individual countries than a multilateral issue. But Jose Bove was very much around at that time. I think he had set fire to a MacDonald's somewhere in France and his trial became a cause célèbre because he was fighting against "Frankenfood."

The question of showing any genetically modified ingredients on labels was particularly sensitive. The problem was that some European countries wanted labeling which required even the most infinitesimal amount to be advertised in flashing neon letters – I exaggerate here -- that would have made US products much more difficult to sell because of the negative reaction against genetically modified organisms.

We did bring farm groups from the U.S. to Geneva to talk to the media and to the public on why GMO (genetically modified organism) crops were actually good for the environment. USDA (United States Department of Agriculture) paid for most of these, explaining that with some GMO products you could actually cut down on the number of pesticides you'd use.

Q: Sure. Did the Swiss do anything outside of act as hotelkeepers?

AKER: There was one issue where the Swiss played a major role -- the Red Cross. The Red Cross is a Swiss-run organization. On some of the issues that I've mentioned, like land mines, refugees, the Swiss were extremely critical of our policies. This was the period that included 9/11 and our invasion of Iraq. Our relations were as strained as they've been in a long time.

Q: Did you spill over into our financial relationship- our embassy in Bern?

AKER: I had very little to do with the embassy in Bern. The only thing that they had that we did not have was the consular operation. I would deal with their consular section to expedite visas, for example, for Geneva-based journalists or diplomats who were going to the US on business, or people we were sending to the US on International Visitor leadership grants.

Q: How did the 9/11 attack affect Geneva?

AKER: There was a huge outpouring of public solidarity and sentiment. On the afternoon of 9/11, I was at a WTO conference with US public affairs officers from around Europe who had come to Geneva to learn about the WTO. The Doha round was only a few weeks away, so many colleagues from other US European missions were there. Out of the corner of my eye I was watching television, which would cut away -- we couldn't hear the sound -- to show something going on at the World Trade Center. Of course, as the afternoon wore on, the magnitude of the event became clear. That evening, people came by and laid flowers, notes, wreaths, dolls -- all sorts of things -- in front of the U.S. mission. It was an incredible outpouring, because the Swiss are usually very reserved. I think everyone was quite moved. This was not only the case in Geneva, though, it was happening everywhere in Europe and around the world. It was a tremendously moving thing. I remember the next morning "Le Monde" had a big headline saying "Nous sommes tous Américains." Everybody was feeling a huge feeling of solidarity. It was very sad, as we built up to the Iraq invasion, to watch this feeling dwindle and then turn into resentment as, in many of people's eyes, we misused the situation.

Q: From your perspective and your responsibility, the lead up to Iraq really didn't particularly play, did it?

AKER: It certainly didn't play there. One of the things that I had to do every year was go to the World Economic Forum in Davos. Just weeks before the invasion of Iraq, Secretary of State Powell came. I was in charge of getting together a round table with major European journalists who were in Davos covering the conference, to have an intimate talk with him. He essentially used talking points -- boilerplate rhetoric. He did not convince anyone. He was considered to be a reasonable person by many Europeans, and the journalists were quite disappointed that he had gone along with the policy. After he was there in Davos, he made a speech at the UN, in which he talked about the "trailers of death." It was the same line he had taken in private in Switzerland. Obviously, he didn't make a very good impression at the UN either. He said afterward that it was the UN appearance was the worst day of his life.

Q: Did it have much impact on you?

AKER: I was very skeptical about our Iraq policy but I was always impressed with Powell, whom I saw on several occasions in other contexts. I found the man to have remarkable charisma and I thought he was an excellent secretary of state in many ways, especially for internal morale. He was one of the more popular secretaries since in my time, going back 30-something years. I actually worked more closely with a couple of others, including the current one and also Condi Rice before her, but the two secretaries of state that really made an impact on the people in the Department in my time were George Shultz and Colin Powell. I think they both gave you the feeling that they were straight shooters and they were team people -- that they valued the work of the people in the Department. If you ask, I think people will often single out those two as being special. I'm not talking about their foreign policy or anything else, but just about them as-

Q: In personality.

AKER: Personality as a manager of an organization.

Q: Yes. I think this is true; your evaluation pretty much coincides with so many people I have interviewed.

How was life in Geneva?

AKER: It's a quiet family place but it's a wonderful place. If you love to ski you're in paradise there, practically, because there are lots of great ski runs close by. It has good food, it's beautiful, it's a good central place to see a lot of Europe and it's very, very international. It's an interesting combination of a very international place that's also very homey because it has a small town atmosphere, almost a rural atmosphere. In that respect, it's a very pleasant place for a family.

Q: How'd you find your chiefs of mission?

AKER: They were all over the map in terms of personality. In the four years I was there I had two different ambassadors to the UN, two or three to the Conference on Disarmament and two to the WTO. The one thing that was common to most of them is that they were almost all political appointees, just as the ambassador to Bern is also invariably political. These are the kinds of jobs that get political appointees. One exception I recall was George Moose. Who was ambassador to the UN and the specialized agencies. He was a well-known career ambassador; you may recall that he had been assistant secretary a couple of times. He was the exception, though. Most or all the others were political. I was particularly fond of Ambassador Linnet Deily, who was our envoy to the WTO under Bush.

Q: Well then, you left there in 2003?

AKER: Right.

Q: Whither?

AKER: To Berlin. This was, from a personal point of view, a great place to go but it was not what I wanted to do. I was promoted to senior Foreign Service while in Geneva. The promotion came after I had accepted an onward assignment that was, because of the promotion, not career enhancing. However, I was not allowed to renege. I went to Berlin as cultural attaché, which I didn't really want to do.

That being said, Berlin is a tremendously interesting city.

Q: You hit at a time when German-American relations were not that great.

AKER: Yes, it was in the summer and fall of 2003. We had invaded Iraq. That was near the lowest point of our relations in quite a while. I talked to you earlier about previous assignments in Germany. I was there during the last round of the Cold War -- the Pershing II and Cruise missile buildup -- when we had big anti-US demonstrations. That was the late '70s, early '80s. I was back in the '90s when the Wall had come down and Eastern Europe was becoming integrated into European and Atlantic structures, as we liked to say. That was a time of relatively little friction. Now, in 2003, we're back to something like the Vietnam or Cruise missile eras. People were looking at the US with a jaundiced eye.

Q: Well, one can be dubious about our going into Iraq. But what about the Islamic fanatics who were hanging around in Hamburg and elsewhere? They were probably the perpetrators of the attack on the Trade Center.

AKER: Yes, the attack on the World Trade Center was supposedly planned in Hamburg, not in the mountains of Afghanistan. During this stretch in Germany, from 2003 to 2008, we had some major terrorist incidents in Europe: the attack on the train stations in Madrid, which killed several hundred people in 2004, and the attack in the London subway in 2005. Then, in 2007, a terrorist plot was discovered in Germany. I think several suspects were arrested after a shootout with police. The German public was critical of our invasion of Iraq and was increasingly critical of German involvement in Afghanistan. It was concerned, however, about Islamic fundamentalism. This goes back at least to the '70s, when there were already a large number of Turks and other Muslims in Germany, many of them very conservative in their appearance and behavior. Germans did not see our post 9/11 actions as really dealing with the problem. If anything, they saw them as possibly exacerbating the problem and making it more likely that there will be terrorist incidents in Germany and other Western countries.

Q: How did you evaluate, at the time, Islamic Fundamentalism in Germany?

AKER: I think it's an endemic but low-key phenomenon. As I said, there was a plot of some sort that was uncovered in 2007, but it did not result in any civilian deaths. It involved a group that was allegedly planning an attack against U.S. facilities in Germany but never got that far.

Q: Did you see any difference in sort of the spirit of the university student body coming back this time?

AKER: I think students in Germany and Europe, like those in the US, are not very political at compared to what they were like in my student days. I don't see any great movements or passion sweeping the campuses. People seem to be more concerned about the job situation than about anything else. While in Berlin, I had frequent contact with university faculties and administrators from around the country. The big issue at that time was developing more uniform European-wide standards for recognizing and accrediting courses and grades and making it easier to transfer credit for studies between various European countries. There wasn't much else to discuss. It's not like the '60s.

Q: Well who was the ambassador when you were there?

AKER: Initially we had Ambassador Dan Coats, who had been a senator from Indiana. He was said to have wanted to be secretary of defense under President Bush but lost out to Donald Rumsfeld. He was a very pleasant man. He is now running to get back into the senate from Indiana.

During the time I served under him, from '03 to '05, in his last two years as ambassador, U.S.-German relations did get better. President Bush came to Germany, in February 2005, and tried to improve relations with Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder. Then, after Schroeder was defeated for re-election in the autumn of 2005, under the current, more conservative incumbent, Angela Merkel, relations have continued to improve.

Schroeder and French President Jacques Chirac were much disliked by the Bush Administration because of their outspoken criticism of the Iraq invasion. Schroeder had managed to win re-election, barely, in 2002 by essentially running against American foreign policy. The relationship got better, as I said, after Bush came to Germany to meet Schroeder in early 2005. Schroeder softened his rhetoric quite a lot, but he lost narrowly to Merkel, who was more overtly pro-American, although our bilateral relations played little or no role in the election outcome; it revolved around German domestic issues. Although there was still a lot of skepticism at this stage about U.S. foreign policy and the involvement in Afghanistan, and particularly Pakistan, the intensity of the anger is long since gone. Germans were generous in their aid and support for victims of Hurricane Katrina.

Q: Did you sense that Marxism or a strong leftist motif was still running in the universities?

AKER: Compared to 30 years ago, no. You would occasionally see posters and graffiti on our near university campuses, but it was not a big issue. Berlin, of course, is an interesting vantage point because half of it was in the east and was the capitol of East Germany. I found little, if any nostalgia for that period at the universities there.

Q: Did you sense that Germany was beginning to feel its independent muscles now?

AKER: People have been saying this for a long time. I don't see any chance of Germany embarking on any sort of loner foreign policy. I think Germans feel that the most successful period in their modern history has been the most recent one, where they've been able to succeed by being a team player and using the system, as opposed to going it alone or actually working against the system. The German public is always irritated that Germany must always play the role of the good guy -- they're the people who save money, who have a low inflation rate, who work hard, whereas other countries in the EU are sponging off them -- they're propping up all these other countries, in a sense. I think, though, that the Germans have been very successful with this policy. I think they will

stick with it and not adopt any unilateralist policy in the foreseeable future; they will stay committed to consultation and to a sort of Pan European framework.

Q: So you left there when?

AKER: I left Berlin in early '06 to be the deputy principal officer in Frankfurt.

Q: And you were in Frankfurt for how long?

AKER: Another two and a half years. In total, that was a five year tour in Germany, from August '03 to August '08, and in February or March of '06, exactly in the middle, I went to Frankfurt.

Q: Frankfurt is particularly dear to my heart because that was my first post back in '55. Is the Consulate General still in the same building?

AKER: No, they moved out about a year before I arrived. They moved into the former U.S. Army hospital in Frankfurt.

Q: 97th General.

AKER: Exactly.

Q: I used to be baby birth officer and I was registering, I think, about 300 babies a month there.

AKER: Well that building is now our consulate.

Q: Oh.

AKER: They did a lot of remodeling and built some new sections onto it, including a huge consular section with a glass roof, which is actually quite nice. However, most of it is this vast, building with long, monotonous corridors. It's the biggest consulate in the world. When I was there it had over 900 people.

Q: What were the politics of Frankfurt and Hessen?

AKER: A CDU minister-president, Roland Koch, ran Hessen. The city of Frankfurt was also run by the CDU. It is a rather conservative state, although less so than its southern German neighbors, Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg. These are the three wealthiest states in the country and among the most conservative politically.

Q: Were there any particular military issues?

AKER: I was involved in military issues probably more than with anything else, because four of the major US commands in Europe were in our consular district: US European

Command (EUCOM); in Stuttgart; US Air Force Europe (USAFE) in Ramstein; US Army Europe (USAREUR) in Heidelberg; and US Africa Command, (AFCOM), also in Stuttgart. There were other substantial military facilities. A particularly important one was the US Army hospital at Landstuhl, which was the first point of evacuation for the wounded from Iraq and Afghanistan -- they were being flown in by the hundreds at that time.

Q: Did you have demonstrations and that sort of thing?

AKER: No.

Q: I'm surprised because German students in the spring kind of like to demonstrate.

AKER: Not in that area. We never had a single demonstrator in the two and half years when I was in Frankfurt. Back in the '60s and '70s Frankfurt had been a hotbed of radicalism, along with Berlin. However, that was no longer true.

Q: Is Frankfurt the financial capital of Germany?

AKER: Definitely. It's where the money is. The culture and the politics are in Berlin, but the financial clout is in Frankfurt.

Q: Well did that mean that you were monitoring the financial side very closely?

AKER: Yes; not only in Germany, but also the Eurozone, because the European Central Bank is in Frankfurt now. Of course, the U.S. mission to the EU felt they should be doing that but unfortunately-

Q: It's not there.

AKER: It is in a different country. The EU is peculiar; while it has multinational institutions, it is still very much a group of almost 30 individual countries, each of them jealous of its sovereignty. It is a fascinating organic growth with layers of shared or disputed jurisdiction.

Q: Well you were there during -- I don't know if you could call it the heyday because there may be another one -- of the Euro, weren't you?

AKER: The Euro was introduced as the exclusive currency of several of European countries in January of 2002. I was living in Geneva, in Switzerland, which did not adopt the Euro, and which is right on the border with France, which did. We would shop regularly in both Switzerland and France, because some things were better or cheaper on one side of the border than on the other. We lived less than a mile from the border, so it was easy to compare prices. What we saw, from '02 onward, was that, after the Euro came in, things in France became more expensive relative to the Swiss franc than they had been before. This was also the impression of many people in Germany and in other

European countries that adopted the Euro -- that things became more expensive. There was a widespread suspicion that people had taken advantage of the change to round off everything upward. I believe it, even though I can't prove it.

We're now eight years into the Euro and it still seems to be a matter of some controversy -- in fact, more so now, perhaps, than before. Look at the debate about whether it would be a good idea for countries like Greece and others whose economies are shaky to get out of the Eurozone: supposedly they'd be better off if they were not tied to the Euro. I think, though, that there is tremendous political will to keep the Eurozone intact.

Q: It would be a tremendous setback for everything to give up on it.

AKER: It would only happen if there if the economic situation deteriorates and there is large-scale unrest and it would be easier on the politicians to bail out of it than to lose their jobs. Otherwise, I think the inertial pressure to keep the Euro will keep most, if not all countries that have adopted the Euro -- which is by no means all the countries in Europe -- will keep them in it unless the economic and political situation gets a lot worse than it is now.

Q: Well being with a USIA background, how stood "The Frankfurter Allgemeine"?

AKER: We had a very good relation with the "Frankfurter Allgemeine." It's still a very establishment, pro-US paper; it always has been. It is still, probably, the closest thing in Germany to "The New York Times," the daily newspaper of record. The only challenger it has on the national scene -- and this has been true for at least 40 years -- is the "Sueddeutsche Zeitung" in Munich. As far as weekly publications go, "Die Zeit" -- a weekly newspaper and "Der Spiegel." -- a magazine, continue to be influential. Not much has changed in all these years and the "Frankfurter Allgemeine" is still the most conservative, more pro-American of the bunch.

Q: Well was there anything ; was there any residue of Baader-Meinhof types wandering around in Germany during this time?

AKER: I don't think so. I think the situation is being resolved biologically, so to speak. It seems like a distant era now. It does not mean, of course, that other bad things can't happen, but-

Q: The thing that's always struck me as an observer, mainly through TV, is that German youth and maybe the French too -- but more so German youth at the university level seem more inclined to put on costumes and get out there and demonstrate and also to take some of this left wing stuff seriously.

AKER: I think that's historically been true but I don't know if it's still true. I have not seen as much evidence of it in recent years. There was a certain look and style that was still very common in the early '80s, the sort of aging hippie look.

Q: Yes.

AKER: I think that has become less and less visible. In sort of the more exotic parts of Berlin you can still see people looking like that but otherwise not much.

Q: Well it seems that, in our left wing movement, the kids were concentrated a little more on making love, whereas the European types seemed to take issues more seriously.

AKER: I think that's true. It may just be because Germany was the home of Karl Marx, but Marxism seemed to be always taken more seriously in Germany than almost anywhere else. In fact, people would comment during the Cold War that East Germans were probably the only people who could halfway make it work because they may actually believe it. In the US, we grew up being told that communism was pretty close to the devil. Marxism was not held in high public esteem. There were plenty of Marxist professors and others, but people usually did not go around advertising the fact. In Germany, though, even in very conservative Bavaria, there will be streets named Karl-Marx-Strasse. There he was an important, respected philosopher, even if controversial.. People in the U.S. had little idea of that side of things and I think that is still true today.

Q: Well I think American students don't seem to have bought philosophical constructs the way you might say that Europeans do, for the most part.

AKER: Yes, I think it's an observation that people have made over the years that Americans are much less culturally predisposed to accept constructs, but are more pragmatic or practical. I think Europeans and maybe other cultures are perhaps more willing or inclined to accept some metaphysical constructs.

Q: Yes. You were mentioning streets. At one point I lived five years in Belgrade, at the time of Tito, and I used to say well, if we want to get together, why don't we meet at the corner of Kennedy and Lenin Streets. There was also an Anne Frank Street and -- I think -- a Mickey Mouse Street.

Well you left Frankfurt in-?

AKER: '08.

Q: '08. And then what?

AKER: I came back to DC. For the first few months, I was acting director of the Washington Foreign Press Center. Then, in January 2009, I became director of the State Department Office of Press Relations.

Q: And how long did you do that?

AKER: For nearly a year, until I retired.

Q: What was that all about?

AKER: The press office, as it is called, prepares the daily briefings. You start out with a conference call with the White House and DOD press offices (sometimes others would be involved) to discuss the events of the day and anticipate what questions might come up and what our response should be. Then you collect guidances from the bureaus, often going back to them for clarification or tasking them for additional information. You meet with the assistant secretary for Public Affairs or the spokesperson and do a sort of dry run, going through the guidances and discussing what questions might be asked. Then you would go into the briefing room where the reporters were assembled. Sometimes the Secretary herself or another senior official would come down and brief as well.

Besides the daily briefing, we would be available all day – and often evenings as well -- to take calls from journalists. We would also do frequent special briefings with senior department officials on specific topics. There were also frequent press opportunities when visiting foreign officials called on the Secretary. We produced transcripts of all public events and issued statements by the Secretary, fact sheets, travel advisories, etc.

Q: What was your impression of the media corps in the State Department?

AKER: There is a group of regulars, several of whom have been there for decades. Some of the best-known journalists in the country are in the corps. There are also journalists representing major foreign media. After the White House press corps, it's the most prestigious gig in town.

Q: Really, really top rate.

AKER: If you are a broadcast journalist you get on TV all the time, nearly every day.

Q: Yes.

AKER: And they are people who have excellent sources. They can and do, in many cases, talk to the Secretary herself or other principals around town. It is definitely one of the best positions in Washington for a journalist. Also, they get to travel with the Secretary on occasion.

Q: Yes.

AKER: It was a great place to end my career. I enjoyed the job very much.

Q: Okay. Well then, I take it you retired and-?

AKER: I did. I am currently a WAE (when actually employed), although I'm not working right now. I would be interested in working in FOIA declassification, if I were offered a position.

Q: Freedom of Information.

AKER: Yes. You go into the classified archives to help determine what documents can be, or should be, released to the public or to researchers.

Q: Yes.

AKER: That's something I would do on a part-time basis. It would be interesting. And also, it's essentially a historian's job.

Q: Sure.

AKER: Or in support of historians.

Q: All of us are adding to the great collection.

Alright. We'll stop at this point.

End of interview