

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

AMBASSADOR DIEGO ASECIO

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

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Q: Today is 7 April 2014. This is an interview with Diego Asencio. This is being done on behalf of the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training. Diego, let's start at the beginning. When and where were you born?

ASECIO: I was born in a little town in Spain called Nijar in the province of Almeria at the eastern extremity of Andalucía in 1931.

Q: OK, let's talk about your father's side, the Asencio family, what do you know about them?

ASECIO: My father became an orphan at a very young age. When he was in his teens he was sent to Argentina to be with an older brother. He became a cowboy and there is a rather funny story about this that I included in a book I wrote with my wife titled, "The Joys and Perils of Serving Abroad." He came to town with his brother for a little R&R. They were looking at the monuments and big buildings and they were dressed like cowboys of that time. This would have been sometime in the 20's.

Q: We are talking about gauchos aren't we?

ASECIO: Yes, we are. They had the floppy hat and the baggy pants and the boots and all that stuff. They came to a square where there was an equestrian statue, and they stopped a very elegant denizen of Buenos Aires known as a porteno, they asked him who the man on the horse was. Of course he took them for a couple of country bumpkins and by their accents as Spaniards. He used a pejorative term for Spaniard, i.e. "Gallegos." He said this was the fellow who made the Gallegos soil their pants. In Argentina it is a euphemism for cowardice. My father whipped out a pistol and shot the statue. He was put on a boat going north and he wound up in New York harbor which is why I am an American.

Q: Oh.

ASECIO: I eventually met my uncle, the fellow who had accompanied him. I asked him if this family legend was true. He said, "True? That stupid son of a bitch almost got us lynched." So anyway that gives you some sort of inkling as to his character.

Q: Let's do your mother. What do you know about her background?

ASENCIO: Well her parents owned a ranch in the province of Almeria. She was raised in a little town called Carboneras. Her father also worked for the local railroad as a station master. She met my father when he went back to Spain to look for a wife. He was that kind of immigrant. I am sure you have encountered those in your travels.

Q: Oh yes. I know your father was an orphan, but is there any story about what the family had been up to in Spain?

ASENCIO: All I know is that they were farmers in Nijar, Almeria and had immigrated to Oran in Algiers. I had a letter written by my grandfather saying that he was thinking of immigrating to Brazil, but he never made it. They both died very young.

Q: Well, how long were you in Spain before you moved to New Jersey?

ASENCIO: Six months. I never did learn how to dance or play the guitar.

Q: So much for the Hispanic sort of title that you have worn ever since.

ASENCIO: Exactly, although my father was a cultural chauvinist and he insisted that I learn Spanish and so I had a tutor. When everybody else was out playing ball after school, I had to be studying. So I did get some control over the language and the history of the place and did pick up some stuff that became useful later on in my career.

Q: You must have at a certain point felt somewhat akin to the poor Jewish kids who had to do the same thing, except they had to shave or something like that.

ASENCIO: Well I was raised in a very strange part of the United States. I grew up in the city of Newark in New Jersey. It was an immigrant's enclave of nationalities melding into an industrial area called the Ironbound...

You dated Irish girls took them to an Italian restaurant and drank German beer.

Q: Growing up there what was your father doing?

ASENCIO: He was a painter in the Kearny, New Jersey shipyards. He painted boats.

Q: This is during the depression.

ASENCIO: This was mostly during World War II.

Q: OK, when you were growing up how long were you in New Jersey?

ASENCIO: I guess I left at age 18 to go to college.

Q: OK, so we will stick to New Jersey. What was it like being a kid there?

ASENCIO: Well as I say a culturally diverse area. The high school I went to was not particularly noted for academic standards. However I acquired an early obsession for reading. I lived in one of the local public libraries. That is how I researched for example, what school I wanted to go to, which happened to be the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University in Washington, DC.

Q: What about your being a very small kid, was this purely an urban environment?

ASENCIO: Oh absolutely urban. It is still a multicultural enclave in Newark. Now curiously the Portuguese seem to predominate in the area. At the time I lived there it was mostly Italian, Polish, and Irish.

Q: Well, how did you fit in?

ASENCIO: Probably not well. I have always have had problems with authority figures. I was introspective and shy. For instance I made a conscious effort to be more outgoing by going out for football and other sports. I was considered a nerd.

Q: Well, you say books were a big part of your early life. What sort of books were you reading?

ASENCIO: History was always one of the principal things but novels also and science fiction. Generally my first introduction to American literature came as a result of the movies. I went to see a movie called "For Whom the Bell Tolls". I took note that it was based on a book written by a fellow named Ernest Hemingway, who I had never heard of. So I went to my library, by that time I must have been about 11 or 12. I went down to the adult section and said I wanted to borrow this particular book. The librarian said, "Well that book is not really appropriate for a child." I said, "Try me." I was clever enough to get her to make an exception and let me borrow the book. So that developed an interest in the works of Hemingway. I went to see another movie, "Beau Geste".

Q: Oh yes, P.C. Wren.

ASENCIO: So that took me into the books of Mr. Wren and so on. I got introduced to things in an indirect way. It wouldn't have occurred to anybody at the high school to mention Mr. Hemingway or Wren.

Q: Did any early book really grab you and sort of set you on your way or have a major effect on you?

ASENCIO: In Foreign Service terms?

Q: Yes.

ASENCIO: I am trying to think. Again I was rather peculiar because at age 12 or 13 when maiden aunts would pat me on the head and ask me what I wanted to be when I grew up, I said I wanted to be an ambassador. I think that was probably a result not only of the diverse cultural nature of the area but also the fact that I was studying under a Spanish tutor who was giving me all sorts of stuff about Europe and Spain. So I think even at that age I began to think in terms of wouldn't it be interesting to have something to do with Latin America. So again I studied all of the Latin American heroes at the time, Simon Bolivar and San Martin and so forth.

Q: Well did the fact that by the time you were beginning to be aware of things that were happening did the Spanish Civil War engage your interest?

ASENCIO: Well actually my tutor was a Spanish Republican refugee who had been released from jail in Spain because he had been born in Tampa before his parents returned to Spain. The American embassy got him out of jail and sent him back to the United States. That was a lesson at the time that impacted on me. That is what embassies did.

Q: did you get involved with other nationalities. Were the gangs sort of, and I am not talking about nasty gangs, but kids got together. Were your friends pretty much of one nationality or was it sort of international.

ASENCIO: It was sort of international. To give you an instance, I dated a Polish girl who happened to be a majorette who I happened to meet as a result of being a football player. The team read like something out of the United Nations. The Polish guys tended to be rather large and were usually linemen, except for me, I was a lineman. The Italians were usually swift. They were usually in the backfield. We had all kinds. I had a close friend who was half Serbian and half Valenciano. I would say it was a very eclectic group.

Q: One of the big immigrant groups in many places in that area was the Jewish one. Was that true where you were or were they really somewhere else?

ASENCIO: There were some, but it wasn't the majority. There was a section of the city called Weequahic that was heavily Jewish. For instance one of my contemporaries, Phillip Roth was from that part of town.

Q: He is the writer?

ASENCIO: Yes. Portnoy's Complaint and all that sort of thing.

That section and the high school of that area was almost solidly Jewish. Although there were some Jews in my neighborhood, they were a rarity.

Q: Where did your teachers come from?

ASENCIO: The teachers were of the middle class Anglo Saxon types. They had names like Driscoll and Kelly and Keller and Marshall and things like that, Royce. I am trying to think of others as I go down memory lane.

Q: It takes a while to kind of warm up to this. What sort of things did you do with your contemporaries after school?

ASENCIO: Well as I say my tutor sort of took up my late afternoon. But we played ball and chased girls and went around town.

Q: Was New York City an attraction?

ASENCIO: I would go there occasionally but it was rather difficult and expensive to get there.

Q: Yeah, that is what I would have thought. How about when you were a kid, what was your impression of the war effort? I mean obviously this was a big deal in the area.

ASENCIO: Yes, a lot of people from the area were drafted or went into the armed forces. I remember sort of the rationing and acts of patriotism. I even recall for instance collecting cards from bubble gum that had war scenes on it and that sort of thing. There was a lot of information and movies and radio and so forth about the war effort so there was a great deal of organization in terms of war effort. There were several people close to me in my family who were either drafted or enlisted in the army. Some of them were killed and some of them eventually came back.

Q: Did you get involved towards the end and all in working in one of the shipyards?

ASENCIO: No.

Q: You were too young.

ASENCIO: Yes. I didn't graduate until 1949. Very curiously and again an anomaly, one of the things I studied was shorthand and typing. So after graduation I went to work as a secretary in an engineering company, and did that until I left to go to college.

Q: What did you do in the engineering firm? You say you took shorthand.

ASENCIO: Yes, I would take dictation, type up letters, do filing.

Q: That is quite a bit of responsibility for a young lad I would think.

ASENCIO: I was a real shorthand ace which is incidentally something that has served me very well in the Foreign Service. I suspect that one of the reasons why I was called on to do some interesting things was that my leadership at the time liked to have me along to do the memos of conversation.

Q: Was geography of interest to you?

ASENCIO: Oh absolutely, very much so. Not only because of the diverse cultural nature of the neighborhood and the interest in this, but for instance one, of the things my tutor turned me on to was stamp collecting. So I had a substantial stamp collection that gave me a particular interest in where things were and what they might be like. It also introduced me somewhat to the leaders of those areas. They were depicted on the stamps. Some of the old stamps had references to things that were historical also.

Q: Also I suppose that people had been talking about the battles that had been fought and all. This was certainly a world war. We had names like Guadalcanal or Kiska, Berlin. I mean you name it.

ASENCIO: Oh yeah those things are very important. As a matter of fact I had a close family friend who was in places like Okinawa and Saipan. I had a very close friend who was killed at Peleliu. I had friends at Pearl Harbor so all of those things impacted on me.

Q: When the time came was your family set on your going to college or not?

ASENCIO: Yes and no. By that time my father had died and my mother was still unmarried. She was very reluctant for me to leave the area. She wanted me to go to college locally. I tried to explain to her that they did not offer courses on the Foreign Service in the areas that were available in New Jersey except maybe Princeton and I was not sure that would be the place for me. I recall she tried to bribe me by offering to buy me a car if I stayed. I finally convinced her that I had to go to the Georgetown Foreign Service School.

Q: What was the procedure of getting into the Foreign Service school in your time?

ASENCIO: I just sent in an application with my transcript of grades and letters of recommendation and I was accepted. I had a fairly high scholastic rating at the high school, and I did not have any trouble in that regard at all.

Q: Nobody sat you down and said why do you want to go into the foreign affairs field or something like that?

ASENCIO: Well it was a bit different. Most of the people I was dealing with in New Jersey thought that I was peculiar in the sense of wanting to have a career of that sort. They had very strong doubts as to whether I would be admitted. In fact my mother used to come home in outrage when she mentioned what I wanted to do and people would laugh. So she was rather proud of the fact that eventually not only did I graduate but I did go into the Foreign Service.

Q: Well just to get a feel for the period, here you are and I think it was a pretty blue collar place wasn't it?

ASENCIO: Very much so.

Q: You are talking about Foreign Service. One of the things as you know those that have gotten into it have had to fight the feeling that you had to be very upper class and go to the right schools and all that to get in. Was this sort of what you were getting?

ASENCIO: I believe so. I believe there was that aspect that here I was from an area that was called the Ironbound where it was very definitely blue collar and where there were lots of relatively recent immigrants and recently naturalized citizens and so forth. I was talking about something that they had only read about or heard about very tangentially in the distant past of their lives as such.

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

ASENCIO: I went from '49 to '52. I did a year of Law School but decided that it was not for me. Then of course I went back in '57 for graduate school.

Q: How did Georgetown strike you, the campus and the spirit of the place?

ASENCIO: Well it was, how would I say, an Irish environment, Mother Church. The Foreign Service School was a bit different from the rest of the campus in that the people who went to the Foreign Service School were quite different from the ones who went to the College. They tended to be the upper class affluent sorts whereas the Foreign Service School types were much more of a mixed bag.

Q: How did some of your fellow Foreign Service school types strike you?

ASENCIO: My classmates? Well one of the things that struck me as interesting at the time was that I guess my nerd attributes in high school made me somewhat of an alien creature in the sense that there were very few people in my high school who read as a hobby or for recreation, very few people who were interested in international affairs. If you got good grades you were considered peculiar. Whereas at Georgetown what I found was that people whom I was competing with got good grades as a matter of course, and where I really had to struggle to keep up. Does that make sense?

Q: Yes it does. Was the Foreign Service sort of where one went or were you looking at the feeling of a whole bunch of things?

ASENCIO: I was definitely enamored of the Foreign Service at the time I guess through reading and that sort of thing. Also I was thinking that if that didn't work out there were other possibilities in terms of trade with Latin America and that sort of thing.

Q: Did you develop any close ties with any particular person or subject, I am thinking of the early years there.

ASENCIO: Any particular what Stu?

Q: A particular teacher or subject.

ASENCIO: Oh yes. One of the great teachers at Georgetown was a fellow named Carroll Quigley.

Q: Oh yes.

ASENCIO: He taught a course on the development of civilization which I think had a tremendous impact on me. There was another fellow who taught political science Jack Giles who also impacted me enormously. Also I gather from reading he impacted a fellow named Bill Clinton later. There was a Jesuit, Father Frank Fadner, who was my professor on Russian history who had a very distinct effect on my training and background.

Q: This is the height of the Cold War. How was the Soviet Union or Russia depicted at that time?

ASENCIO: I think there was concern about the cold war and that sort of stuff. However I recall Quigley pointing out during one of our lectures that one had to be able to determine what was real and what was propaganda, and that the sun also shone over on the other side and they were people also. One had to take that into account. I think that had an impact on me.

Q: Did you develop an interest in Latin American affairs or did you find yourself getting spread around?

ASENCIO: I consciously concentrated on Latin America figuring that would be my key to entry in the Foreign Service, and alternatively, international trade. I also took things like the Russian history course quite seriously. I was also an American history buff at the time. So I think, in historical terms, I developed a fairly sophisticated world view.

Q: Did Quigley's course was almost more of a philosophy course wasn't it?

ASENCIO: Well it was a course about ideas, historic ideas. I guess philosophy was part of it. There were also philosophy courses. I wouldn't say it was all that philosophical; he did review some of the great thinkers. Basically I would think it was more sort of a cultural development course. Philosophy would be part of that, but not overwhelmingly so. For instance one of the things that strikes me, one of the things he went into was why the Huns had been so successful in invading Europe. That was because they had developed stirrups which had been something that had been unknown say during the Roman Empire or after. It wasn't until the Hun invasion that the concept of stirrups became prevalent throughout Europe. Did that make sense?

Q: Yeah. Did you run across anybody from the Foreign Service while you were there?

ASENCIO: One of my teachers was Ambassador John Hickerson.

Q: Ah yes.

ASENCIO: He was assistant secretary for international organization affairs and he was at the UN during the Vishinsky walkout and the vote that led to the Korean War. So he certainly was a role model. I recall going to a lecture by Averell Harriman on his return from Moscow. I belonged to the University's Circulo Cultural Espanol and we were often entertained by the Spanish Ambassador and a number of the Latin American Ambassadors. The Mexican Ambassador, Rafael de la Colina, who returned for his second tour as Ambassador to Washington, while I was Assistant Secretary was in the habit of calling my office and asking for the "Lider Estudiantil," (Student Leader.)

Q: Well did you find yourself developing a feel for the Foreign Service that was a well-founded one. I remember I was in the military when I took the Foreign Service exam. I somehow had the idea that I would be wearing a tail coat an awful lot of the time, and going to balls. I am not a very good dancer, and I thought this social side kind of appalled me. Were you getting a more realistic view?

ASENCIO: I think so. I think the course was designed to give us a pretty good concept or idea of what the Department was about and the Foreign Service and an embassy. The tools of the trade so to speak. For instance I found that when I was taking the basic officer course after coming into the State Department that it was sort of stuff that had become second nature to me. I mean I had studied things like aide memoirs and their uses. I had studied the functioning of the UN Security Council. The only concern I had at the time, I am talking about 1952, say 1949 to 1952, was that there seemed to be a period when the Foreign Service was not hiring. I was wondering whether there would be any possibility of going in at all for reasons that had nothing to do with me. I took the Foreign Service exam anyway, and I guess my passing happened to coincide with the pronounced increase in the Foreign Service in the postwar era. So I think I happened to luckily hit a period when a lot of people were being allowed to come into the Foreign Service.

Q: When did you take the exam?

ASENCIO: I took it in '52. However I was advised by the Board of Examiners to take care of my military obligations first, and so I went into the Army and didn't really come into the Foreign Service until '57.

Q: Well was the exam a 3 ½ day exam?

ASENCIO: Oh yes. The monster, yes.

Q: People cringe when I tell them I remember that I spent 3 ½ days. How did you find the exam?

ASENCIO: Well relating back again to my studies. One of the essay questions I had was to describe the security system of the Soviet Union. Of course, having taken Father Fadner's Russian history course I not only had that down pat, I had the Russian names which I probably could not possibly recite now. But I really aced that particular essay. The language part was not the problem. I got that because I had studied Spanish. The only part of the exam that gave me trouble, apparently, was the statistics section. I had not taken a statistics course when I was at Georgetown. I remember one of the oral examiners saying "How could you have such a high grade in economics and such a low grade in statistics?"

Q: Well do you recall any of the questions that were asked of you?

ASENCIO: Yes, I remember there was one nasty old sort who kept asking me the length of the rivers of the world. I would say, "I have no idea." He would say, "Guess." So I would say "3,000 miles." He would say, "Would it surprise you to know that it is really such and so." He did this with every major river in the world. I had been warned that part of the approach was to try to embarrass you. So I did not take it too much to heart. Then I recall there was another old soul who said, "Oh, I see your background is Spanish. You must know all about Spain." I thought Uh-oh. That sounds like a dangerous approach. So said, "Oh no, in fact I have never been to Spain except for the six months immediately after my birth." "Well but you have studied about it." "Oh yes, I have." "Well what are some of the major products of Seville?" I went through the litany and said, oranges, and he said, "Yes, but what kind of oranges?" I said, "I haven't a clue." He said, "They are sour oranges. They make marmalade out of them." I said, "Well you see, you learn something new every day."

Q: Well did they tell you that you had passed?

ASENCIO: Yes.

Q: Did they ask you what you want to do and where you want to go and that sort of thing?

ASENCIO: No, all they told me was to notify my draft board that I was ready to go to war.

Q: Well how stood you with the draft?

ASENCIO: Well I had enlisted in a reserve unit that was at the university and had been doing that during my undergraduate time there. I had actually been promoted to sergeant by the time I was facing my draft board. So what I did was I fended off my draft board as long as I could and then the day I was supposed to report, I enlisted, and called up my reserve unit category the day before. I actually arrived at Fort Dix on the day before my selective service class arrived. I wound up having to march them in from the railroad to the fort, I guess for my sins of getting there early and as a sergeant.

Q: Well that is the way to do it.

ASENCIO: Of course this was during the last days of the Korean War, and so one of the more interesting touches was that I became eligible for the GI bill.

Q: So what were you doing during that military?

ASENCIO: Ah, well that is a story too. Because it was the sort of the ending of the Korean War, all of the training posts on the eastern seaboard were occupied, were full with people trying to take advantage of the GI bill. So therefore my particular group was put on airplanes and sent to Fort Bliss in El Paso, Texas, where they had a section that had been used for German prisoners of war during WWII that were essentially tar paper shacks up in the hills. That is where we were based, and that is where we did our training. So I did eight weeks in wintertime. Because it was El Paso you got sunburned in the daytime and froze at night. The only advantage I had was that on weekends I would go into Ciudad Juarez and get cheap food and cheap booze. From there since I had shorthand and typing I was sent to 4th Army Headquarters at Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio as a secretary. I spent a couple of years in that area. Then when my time was up I came back to New Jersey. Of course I had married before going into the army and had a child. My wife was living with my mother and my stepfather in a place called Waldwick, New Jersey. She and my oldest son were waiting for me when I came back.

Q: What was the background of your wife?

ASENCIO: She was actually born in Cuba and emigrated to the United States in 1945 and was raised in the Washington area. I met her because her brother-in-law was one of my economics professors, and recruited me to be an escort for her prom. The rest is history as they say.

Q: Well you have been married how long now.

ASENCIO: I have to consult; hold on a minute. How long have we been married, dear? 60 years.

Q: All right I'm moving up to my 59. Did you go right out from the military into the Foreign Service?

ASENCIO: Yes, I wrote a letter to the board of examiners saying I am getting discharged on such and such a date. I am driving to New Jersey, and I will pass by Washington on such and such a day. I am poor and I would like to start working immediately. Would you please do whatever is necessary to get me on board? I got back what I now recognize as a form letter saying don't worry about a thing. We are looking forward to seeing you. Love you and all that sort of stuff. So I arrived in Washington and went to personnel and said I am Diego and am set to go. They said, "So?" I said, "I am on the Foreign Service list." They looked in the files and said "there is no file for you." "What does that mean?" They shrugged their shoulders and said, "I don't know." Fortunately I had a couple of classmates that had gone in ahead of me. I looked them up and they checked around and found that Security still had my files, and were still checking me out. So they suggested that I go home and wait, and I did.

Q: So was there a Foreign Service class waiting for you or did you have much time?

ASENCIO: I guess it took about a month before I was actually asked to report. Of course my favorite story is that I got a call from Washington saying name three places you want to go. You remember that particular ceremony. So I said, Paris, London, Madrid. And they said we will call you back tomorrow and tell you which one. So I couldn't sleep all night waiting by the phone. They finally called and said, "You are going to be assigned to the Department of State.

Q: To where?

ASENCIO: The Department of State. I said, I was supposed to be a Foreign Service officer, go abroad, that sort of stuff. They said, no for the first couple of years you are going to be in Washington. I said I went to school in Washington. I lived in Washington. I don't want to be in Washington; I want to be abroad. They said you are going to be in Washington.

Q: So there you were. Did you have an A-100 course?

ASENCIO: Yes.

Q: Do you remember the number of it, which one it was?

ASENCIO: I don't remember the number of it. I remember the guy in charge, John Stutesman.

Q: Yeah, really Stutesman never made ambassador but he made a tremendous impression on the Foreign Service.

ASENCIO: Yes he did.

Q: I mean he was one of these people who thought about the service as just being an assignment.

ASENCIO: But I went in on February 27, 1957. You can probably figure out the class number from that.

Q: Yeah. I was in class number 1. I went in on the first of July, 1955. They were doing classes of about 25 and maybe three a year or something like that.

ASENCIO: Well in 1955 I was rolling around in the desert at Fort Bliss.

Q: What was your A-100 course like?

ASENCIO: Well as I say having gone to the Foreign Service school it was sort of déjà vu. There was not anything that I really learned. I thought it was interesting in terms of interacting with my colleagues at the time, some of them are still friends. That was an important part of socializing me to the Foreign Service. But the course I did not find at all interesting.

Q: There is a tremendous, I don't know about you because you were two years after me but I remember we spent an awful lot of time on the book of Frank Auerbach on citizenship. I learned more about citizenship and visas. It served me in good stead but I sure wasn't terribly interested.

ASENCIO: We had some consular stuff but very limited. As I recall we took some sort of test to determine our consular capabilities. I am not sure I rated very high. So I do not recall all that much teaching in that area.

Q: Well what I came out each one there is a different environment in each in the State Department at different times. Germany was still very big. I went with almost all my class to deal with visas but mainly with the refugee program for Eastern Europe and all. It was an introduction to the complexities of Eastern Europe. We learned about various tribal ethnic animosities in Eastern Europe.

ASENCIO: I did not get anything like that.

Q: Well we got it as our first assignment as soon as we got to these camps. I was in Frankfurt. What sort of work did you do at the beginning?

ASENCIO: They put me in INR in something I gather no longer exists called Biographic Information. I wound up writing biographies for two years. I was in charge of Cuba and Haiti and Mexico and the Dominican Republic and I wound up putting together a book of biographies on Cuba. By this time all hell was breaking loose in Cuba. I kept asking “there is this guy up in the hills that looks like he might make it and do we really want to publish this list of biographies of the current government.” They would say, “If we stopped whenever something was happening in Latin America, we would never publish anything.” So I actually presented the book for publication just before the end of the year in 1958, and of course New Years, they had a change of government. I remember that I was at somebody’s house for New Year’s dinner and I got a call from the State Department saying come on in. They needed somebody who knew who was who. So that was kind of cute. The other thing that I remember acutely, I wrote this biography about Fidel. It said based on the information we had it was impossible to determine whether he was a communist or not, but he certainly was a radical and was no friend of ours, which I was kind of proud of. And then the one where I was not quite so proud was one I wrote about the new president of Haiti, a doctor by the name of Duvalier who had a specialty in Yaws and practiced voodoo as a hobby. There had been a couple of years where they seemed to have changed presidents every month or so and they were usually generals and very tough guys who did not last very long. I thought I had better be conservative and I gave him at least six months. Of course it didn’t quite turn out that way.

Q: Well in your book on Cuban personalities, how were we viewing Batista at the time?

ASENCIO: I wrote him up basically as a fellow who had precipitated the revolution in many ways by coming back after leaving, so I would say his first departure from politics was probably praiseworthy. His return taking over the government the second time was atrocious, and probably a forerunner of all the difficulties to come.

Q: Well, were you particularly attracted to Cuban affairs given your language and all?

ASENCIO: I was but I never got to the Island except for about two hours after I was kidnapped. So I never actually had any direct link or contact with the American embassy in Havana. Although curiously when they set up the Special Interest Section, I was the first one to be asked whether I would take it over. I pointed out that my wife happened to be Cuban and Cubans knowing who all other Cubans are, they would know who her family was and what their positions had been in the Batista government and they might want to consider this. So I was called into the Department and wound up talking to the Secretary and the Director General and all sorts of people. Finally they decided that instead of going to Cuba where they expected that eventually this would become the Embassy and I would be in place to become the Ambassador, they decided to send me to Bogotá. Talk about the ironies of history.

Q: Well so you did this, the Bay of Pigs came later didn't it?

ASENCIO: Yes it did.

Q: Were you in Washington when Kennedy was begin elected and all/

ASENCIO: No I was in Mexico first and then I was in Panama when he was assassinated.

Q: In Mexico where did you go?

ASENCIO: I was assigned to Mexico as something called the World Language Training Replacement Officer. They had a Spanish language school in Mexico and they were taking people off the line from the consular posts and teaching them Spanish. Since I knew Spanish I was supposed to fill in while they were doing that and rotate among the various consular activities and thereby getting valuable training. When I got there and called on the Consul General I heard that the head of the Protection and Welfare Office who had been there for something like 15 years had just been transferred to Paraguay, and they were desperately looking for people who could speak Spanish. So he said forget this world language stuff, you are going to be a Protection Officer. So that is what I did for a number of years.

Q: Which meant what?

ASENCIO: Getting people out of jail, shipping the dead bodies home, helping Americans in difficulty.

Q: Well this became very good background for your later job as head of consular affairs, but what was the situation in Mexico at the time for Americans in trouble?

ASENCIO: In terms of numbers, the quantities were huge. We had about 1000 cases a month. We had several sorts of indicators. In the winter time the old folks would come down for a holiday and with the altitude have heart attacks and die. We would wind up shipping the cadavers home. In the summer the young folks would come and have car accidents or get drunk and get into fights and get arrested. I became reasonably knowledgeable about the Mexican precinct and jail system, and became reasonably adept at getting people out of jail. If you had committed a crime or were arrested you would be held three days. If they decided to hold you over for regular trial, you could be waiting for a year. It was very important to get people out of jail before the end of the third day, so we concentrated on that. I became quite adept at talking to examining magistrates and handling Mexican attorneys. In fact I developed a system that was probably unique at the time. The first case I was assigned to I had absolutely no idea what I was doing, but I was told to go down and hand the prisoner a lawyers list and then to call the lawyer he had designated and let the lawyer handle things. Well I did this but the only problem was the

Embassy lawyers list consisted of the major law firms in Mexico City none of which were really equipped to handle things at the precinct level. So the guy that I was sent to help wound up getting held over for a year which left me somewhat conscience stricken. But after a while I became reasonably familiar with precinct operations and began to see these young attorneys who specialized in that sort of case. So I got a bunch of them together and convinced them to become an operational part of the protection office. We could contact them at all hours of the day or night to get these people out of jail. They got my first client out of jail as a token of good faith switching the jurisdiction and retrying him. The embassy helped by providing a communication system in the form of portable radios. In the next three years no American was indicted in our consular district. I was rather proud of that and despite my relative youth and low rank they made me chief of the Protection and Welfare unit. That was my first supervisory responsibility.

Q: Who was the ambassador at the time?

ASENCIO: When I got there it was Robert C. Hill.

Q: Did you get any feel for his interest in what was going on?

ASENCIO: Yes, I got to know him very well. He was very helpful. You could ask him to intervene in cases where it was required, and he was very happy to help. Also he took advantage of me in many ways. He loved to travel and since he did not speak Spanish I became his interpreter. He would travel through my consular district. In my memoir I have a picture of me walking hand in hand with him on the streets of San Miguel De Allende. We became I would say good friends to the point where we were still in touch with each other right until the time he died. Later Ambassador Thomas Mann was accredited and he certainly became one of my culture heroes.

Q: What happened during the Bay of Pigs?

ASENCIO: There is a state in Northwestern Mexico that has a radical history called Michoacán. It was the hometown of Lazaro Cardenas the president of Mexico who nationalized the petroleum industry. During the Bay of Pigs a radical group attacked the U.S. library in Morelia and burned the books. There were indications that tourists in this area, and they got a fair amount of tourism, might be in danger. They sent me up to see what was going on and to show the flag. It became quite a story, I have written about this in one of my books but, essentially, I was being threatened on the phone continuously after I got there and checked into the hotel. There was a group saying they were going to hang me the next day in the town square. I called on the mayor and he suggested that maybe as soon as the United States stopped its imperialist acts this would go away. I called on the governor and he suggested that I get out of town. Then I called on the local military commander, a General who was one of those good old boys that dated back to the Mexican revolution, a real Indian type. He said, "Oh no, nothing like that happens around here. I can assure you that you are perfectly safe. As a matter of fact you and I are

going to have lunch tomorrow in that square where they are supposed to hang you.” Of course, we did and listened to the speeches. He said, “have you heard enough?” I said, “Yes,” and he snapped his fingers and the troops cleared out the plaza, so we were the only two in an outdoor café table sitting there having lunch. I also got favorable calls. One caller offered me a movie of the crowd throwing books into a bonfire in front of the library. Then I got another call from a hotel, saying why don’t you come over and take a look at our hotel registry. I did and there were three Russian embassy officers who had signed in the night before the riot. I bought the page and brought all this back to Mexico City. Of course the next day we announced all these things and the left wing press immediately began to take issue with all of it saying that none was true and that this was an FBI and CIA provocation. So that USIS made copies of the movie and put it in all the movie theaters in Mexico City and on TV and also sent copies of the page from the hotel registry to all the newspapers. So that was kind of fun.

Q: Yes. Were you pressed by people all the time for visas or was there much visa pressure at the time?

ASENCIO: There was a bit but nothing unusual. I remember being approached maybe half a dozen times in the three years I was there.

Q: How would you estimate the morale was of the young officers particularly the ones who were working on visas?

ASENCIO: I would say those on the line were obviously under quite a bit of pressure, in fact what they would often do was rotate people out of the visa line to the protection office to give them a change of pace and a different thing to do. There was a tremendous amount of pressure on visas at the time. I think it was the first time they pushed record levels of visa issuance. So there was a tremendous line every morning in front of the visa section. In our case I would say we had about 1000 cases a month, which was considerable considering that we were a reasonably small office. There was a very large American community so the citizenship section also got a lot of activity.

Q: Well did you have much trouble with particularly American students getting caught up with the fast moving crowds and end up in Jail?

ASENCIO: Occasionally, not too often. There was one school where I did a semester abroad that is now called the University of the Americas, and at the time it was called Mexico City College that has an English speaking curriculum and where you get a lot of American students. But generally they took care of their own. There was an occasional problem but very rarely. Most of the trouble we had were tourists.

Q: What sort of trouble would they get into?

ASENCIO: There were a lot of automobile accidents. If you were involved in an automobile accident and somebody was hurt you would go to jail, so that was a problem. There were also a lot of indigent cases; people would run out of money. We would have to repatriate them to the border. That was probably a chronic problem. Occasionally fugitives from justice were an occasional problem that tended to be rather interesting and picturesque. There was a fair amount of people who were coming down to party who were running into trouble. There was also an unusual law in the sense that if you brought a car into Mexico as a tourist, your tourist card was stamped that you had come in with a vehicle which meant that you had to leave with the same vehicle. Of course the market being what it was in Mexico you could sell your car for two or three times what you paid for it in the U.S. because of tariffs and what have you. So a lot of people were tempted to try to sell their vehicles, then ran into trouble when they tried to leave the country. That was a huge problem, and we did a lot of those. Eventually we resolved most of them favorably.

Q: Well was it dangerous to travel around there by yourself or with your wife?

ASENCIO: Not at the time. I gather it is now. They tell me in Mexico city they don't allow officers to travel in the interior of the country, but at the time I was there I traveled extensively and developed contacts so that if anyone got into trouble we would be notified one way or another either by the authorities or by local citizens. I used to have to go to Acapulco quite frequently because of the number of tourists there. I would also get into San Miguel Allende quite frequently because they had a tremendous American community there and also a lot of tourism. We had a fair number of death cases and accident cases. Generally I would say I got to know my area of Mexico very well. When the ambassador wanted to travel in those areas he would take me along as an interpreter, guide, and seeing-eye dog.

Q: Did you have to deal with either giving advice to Americans or dealing with officials with the problem of the bite, corruption?

ASENCIO: I think that is so generally well known that I don't remember having to advise that, but occasionally it was a part of the environment. For instance I had a case where an American woman married to a Mexican man, both of them ne'er do wells and both of them alcoholics got into an argument while she was peeling lemons for a martini. She put the knife in his back, and they arrested her. They got a confession from her and then they notified me to come down to the jail. Of course, I told them that they had violated the Geneva Convention because they were supposed to notify me before she signed a confession. So I got one of my lawyer types to work on the case. He bribed the jailer to get him into the jail and not notify the examining magistrate. Then he told the lady that she didn't speak any Spanish at all despite the fact that she had lived there for 12 years, but she had signed that paper because that nice man had asked her to. He also asked her to put her arms out through the bars and he left black and blue marks. He said you were defending yourself against the bad attack of your husband. He got her off. Of course then

the next morning I got a call from the Vice Minister of the Interior. He said, "You know and I know that the lady was guilty as hell, and I would like to see her leave the country immediately. I said, "Oh, my sentiments exactly. We were already getting her ticket."

Q: Well how did you find morale at there, I mean in the consular section?

ASENCIO: In my office, the Protection Office and in the Passport and Citizenship Office there was high morale. In season and when the big lines occurred at the Visa Office it was a living hell. It was hard going, but at the same time it was such a pleasant place to live that one got compensated for it in many ways.

Q: Well was the pollution bad or had it become a problem?

ASENCIO: No not at that time, in fact I could see the twin volcanoes from my office window every morning, and now you see them maybe once a year.

Q: Yeah life is changing for a lot of things.

ASENCIO: I have to tell you my favorite story, Stu. One day I heard some sounds in the outer office. I came out my office and there was this great big fellow beating one of my vice consuls. I hit him and knocked him down and then I sat on him, and then they sent for the Marine guards. At that time you had a Supervisory Consul General and a consul. The consul called me in and said, "You can't do that. You can't go around striking our clients. What are they going to say in Washington?" I said, "Well I thought it was a good idea at the time." He said, "I am going to have to report this to the Ambassador." I thought "Oh my god!" I was fairly new then. The ambassador had a reputation for being a very tough guy who was in the habit of, if something displeased him, demanding that the person leave for the airport immediately and return to the States. I said, "Well there goes a budding foreign service career." That night I was supposed to go to the residence for a cocktail reception and essentially to work. I said I had better be there the regulatory 15 minutes early. I did and there was the Ambassador at the head of the stairs. I came up and said, "Mr. Ambassador, I am Diego Asencio." He said, "Put 'em up and show me what you got." Saved again you know. That was the beginning of my relationship with Ambassador Hill.

Q: I am just looking at the time. It is probably a good time to stop, Diego. It is getting us going. I am sorry if I am floundering around a bit but it takes a little while to pick up momentum. So, you left Mexico in '61.

ASENCIO: '62.

Q: '62, by the way let me ask, although you were a government employee and all a question I try to ask most people I interview did the election Kennedy affect you being young and ask not what you can get for your country but what you can do and all that.

ASENCIO: Oh yeah, he was quite inspiring. But I did later in my career have problems with Bobby, if you want to hear about that.

Q: Oh I do. I have to say he was not one of my favorite people I am sorry he got shot but I would have hated to see him as president.

ASENCIO: Sure.

Q: I always think of him and McCarthy sitting at the table together being nasty to people.

ASENCIO: Yes, well he was a nasty old soul.

Q: OK well let's pick this up, when you left where did you go?

ASENCIO: I went to Panama.

Q: OK and Panama this is '62.

ASENCIO: By then they had made me a Political Officer and a Second Secretary.

Q: Today is 15 April 2014 with Diego Asencio. Diego, we have got you in 1961 going to Panama.

ASENCIO: '62 actually.

Q: You were in Panama from when to when?

ASENCIO: It was '62 to '64.

Q: OK, what was the situation in Panama at the time?

ASENCIO: There was beginning to be a bit of unrest concerning the canal treaties. The Ambassador was Joseph Farland and we put together a canal treaty negotiating group. It was the Ambassador and the Governor of the Canal Zone and I was the secretary. We met on a regular basis with the Foreign Minister and a couple of legal advisors. Essentially the objective seemed to be to increase their compensation without really fundamentally changing the treaty itself. It really did not work out. In January of 1964 there was a march on the Canal Zone which turned violent. A lot of people were either killed or hurt. Panama broke relations with the United States. We would up having to evacuate the embassy to the Canal Zone. It took a while to get things back on track. Essentially it was a very tense period. It was the first time I was shot at. It was very difficult for the family. We had five children with us of course. For a while we were

living in barracks on the Canal Zone side. It took several months before it really got back to the point where we could move back into Panama. In my case I wound up getting tied up into a further negotiation over the canal because of my experience with the original negotiating group. I began working with former Secretary of the Treasury Robert Anderson, who set up a negotiating group in New York. But, instead, I wound up as the Panama Desk Officer.

Q: Well I want to bring you back to the time you were in Panama itself. In the first place, how did you view the situation we were trying to negotiate? Would you say we were remiss in not bringing it up to date or the payments or what?

ASENCIO: I think not only were we remiss with regards to the payments but it was very clear that as far as we were concerned the canal was a wasting asset and eventually would cause trouble. It was a very difficult time in terms of our relations with Panama. I think it wasn't until the Sol Linowitz-Ellsworth Bunker group got going on the negotiations that we got really realistic about the thing.

Q: I mean when you arrived there, did you assess this rather peculiar situation where the Zonians or the Americans who lived in the Zone really thought of themselves as being God's gift to the area. They were above it all and they really looked down upon the Panamanians.

ASENCIO: It certainly was a strange society. It was peculiar in a number of ways. Not only was there that aspect, but the potential for violence was really great. One of the things that I should point out was being one of the few sort of outside men at the embassy, I did pick up the fact that there was going to be a march on the Canal Zone. No one really believed me including at that time the Chargé and the Chief of the Political Section.

Q: Who were they?

ASENCIO: The chargé was Wallace Stewart, and the head of the head of the Political Section was Henry Taylor. Essentially, to assuage whatever feelings I had, they asked me to put it in the Weeka instead of sending it in by cable. In one of those very curious developments the Assistant Secretary at the time, Tom Mann called Wally Stewart and asked what was going on, and Stewart said: "Read item 5 of the Weeka," which caused quite a bit of consternation at the Department. Tom Mann later confessed that he hadn't read the Weeka in about 20 years and was a little bit taken aback by the comments. It was a very difficult situation and the most difficult assignment I have ever had.

Q: In the first place how did you get the idea that a march was in the offing?

ASENCIO: My political contacts told me so. But nobody else at the embassy heard it so it was one of those maybe you heard it but it is not true because I haven't heard it sort of thing.

Q: Have you ever thought back on that? Something as big as an organized march is getting ready, and to have only one person at the embassy get the word were you selected or what?

ASENCIO: I made a big fuss about it. We took it to the chargé, and I just wasn't able to convince him of the idea. I guess their concession was as I say to put it in the Weeka.

Q: What essentially, the organizers of the march, what were they demonstrating against?

ASENCIO: They were carrying the Panamanian flag into the Canal Zone and looking to create an incident which is exactly what happened. Basically they marched on a weekend all the way to the high school in the Canal Zone and ran the flag up the high school flag pole. Some of the Zonians pulled it down. The flag got torn in the process. There obviously was a crowd waiting for the incident, and suddenly gunfire erupted all along the Canal Zone border. There were sharpshooters shooting at the Canal Zone from the building that housed the legislature in Panama. The Tivoli Hotel was the center of the action and the military response and the police response was basically to make a stand at the Tivoli Hotel in front of the square that divided the Zone from Panama.

Q: Well, the fact that there were sharp shooters and all. Usually you don't get people shooting when there are demonstrations. I mean this sounds like this is a set up job.

ASENCIO: Oh definitely.

Q: Was this Castro or what?

ASENCIO: No, I don't think so. I think these were Panamanian nationalists. Every indication I had were that they were Panamanian Nationalists.

Q: Was there a strong move. Was it basically to take over the canal? Was that what the nationalists were after?

ASENCIO: I don't think so. I think this was an expression of whatever you want to call it, unease, and frustration on the part of the Panamanians for whatever they were getting from the U.S. government in terms of the canal. I think the Panamanian government may have been involved in provoking the crisis. I don't know this for sure. They certainly reacted to it by breaking relations. There were demonstrations again against the embassy. It was a very difficult and tense time.

Q: Well when you say there were demonstrations against the embassy, could we operate out of Panama or did we have to go to the Zone.

ASENCIO: Initially we stood pat. We hung in there. The Embassy was protected by a Panamanian National Guard platoon. The demonstrations occurred during the first day or two, and then after that order was sort of restored. After a couple of weeks we got word there was going to be an attempt to seek out Americans to injure them or to kill them. So the word was given to evacuate to the Canal Zone.

Q: Well what originally on these demonstrations to begin with. Were they looking for confrontation?

ASENCIO: Oh definitely. I think the whole idea was to cause violence. And basically it was a rather opportune time for them in the sense that it was a week end and a lot of people were away from their posts in the Canal Zone. The number of policemen was limited. There hadn't been any sort of military alert and that sort of thing. The only way the police could keep the mob from coming into the Canal Zone was to shoot at them. So a lot of people were either killed or hurt.

Q: Well this must have meant a major influx of reporters and news teams.

ASENCIO: Oh yes, we got everybody in the world coming down there.

Q: How did you all deal with it?

ASENCIO: We were interviewed continually on the situation. I recall talking to people from the New York Times, the Washington Post, and all sorts of other places. That was not at all unusual. We tried to set up a time line as to what sparked the riots and what had happened. In fact a report that the political section put together on the occurrences as I understand it is still used as a point of reference at the embassy in Panama.

Q: Well I am surprised that the police were sort of caught off guard.

ASENCIO: Well I still think that if my report had been believed, they would have been anticipating something like this, but they weren't.

Q: What was the reaction of our military?

ASENCIO: Eventually they did respond, but essentially the initial attack on the Canal Zone was faced by the police without the military.

Q: When you say police...

ASENCIO: The Canal Zone police.

Q: Now these were Americans?

ASENCIO: Yes.

Q: Now were they sort of equipped to deal with mobs?

ASENCIO: I don't think so, certainly not on those circumstances. They responded with direct violence to the violence. Essentially I don't think it was a matter of training or anything like that. Just the numbers on hand to handle the outbreak of violence were very limited, and violence became necessary to check it. It was really a very nasty situation.

Q: Were people evacuated back to the states, civilians and all?

ASENCIO: Some of the people who were I guess ill or particularly shaken by the violence were. I can only think in terms of the embassy at the time, maybe three or four, but most of us stayed.

Q: After this violence took place, how long had you been there when it took place?

ASENCIO: I guess I had been there about a year and a half.

Q: Well then you were pretty well acclimated and familiar with people by that time.

ASENCIO: Oh yes. I was functioning fully as a political officer.

Q: Well what were you getting from your contacts? I mean prior to this were any saying watch out.

ASENCIO: One of my closest contacts informed me that there was a radical group that was in fact planning a march on the Canal Zone with the thought of provoking an incident. That was exactly how it was put to me.

Q: Were we looking over our shoulders at Cuba and all at that point?

ASENCIO: Not really. I don't recall it. Earlier on there had been a sort of Cuban sponsored invasion of Panama that sort of didn't do very well. I think it must have been around 1960 or 1961. But that was the only sort of Cuban sponsored incident I saw. I saw this as strictly native.

Q: Was this at all in conjunction with the Cuban missile crisis?

ASENCIO: I was there during the Cuban missile crisis, and no, I don't think it was related at all.

Q: We didn't have an ambassador at the time.

ASENCIO: No, the Ambassador had left. This was Joseph Farland who had been a politically-appointed Ambassador. He had left and we had a chargé d'affaires.

Q: Was there any attempt to sort of hurry an ambassador down there?

ASENCIO: Eventually once relations were re-established yes, in fact the next ambassador was Jack Hood Vaughn. Later as Panama desk officer I worked once more for Jack Hood Vaughn. When he was made assistant secretary and I wound up as his special assistant.

Q: OK, well let's stay in Panama. To begin with what was your impression of the people you were meeting who were involved in Panamanian politics?

ASENCIO: There were all kinds but there was certainly an element that was universal in a sense in that there was outrage or a sense of being put upon in terms of the canal. No question about that. That permeated all levels of society. Even those Panamanians who were friendly to us felt that way.

Q: Well among your fellow officers and maybe within the Zonian ranks was there the feeling that this has got to change or was it, I take the Zonians they were ready for it to go on into eternity.

ASENCIO: Well once Ambassador Farland left the negotiating group stopped functioning. It was sort of in abeyance. In fact I recall at one point the foreign minister informing me that they had no intention of continuing with the negotiating group, that they were looking forward to establishing direct negotiating relations with Washington.

Q: Sort of looking back on it do you feel we really didn't have a policy towards Panama for the future, but we were just sort of hanging in there.

ASENCIO: No I think the policy was to try to assuage whatever feeling they had by minimal changes to the treaty and by upping the compensation which had been eroded over the years by inflation. This approach had worked reasonably well in the past.

Q: Did you feel that the Zonians have almost undue influence because I take it they were very strongly opposed to giving anything to the Panamanians.

ASENCIO: Oh there is no question about that, but the Governor I think had a reasonably healthy outlook on the thing. He was not a Zonian. He was a Corps of Engineers Army General. I think he, basically without advocating returning the Canal Zone to the Panamanians, was attempting to be as forthcoming as he could be. I think Joe Farland

was of that temper. I think he was basically very forthcoming to the Panamanians and tried to be as helpful as he could be, certainly in the context of whatever U.S. policy was at the time, which was not very forthcoming.

Q: How was the politics of Panama divided at the time? One always thinks of the National Guard and Noriega before that was I want to say I true, who was the head of the National Guard?

ASENCIO: This was civilian government at the time I was there, and a reasonably democratic government at that. The elections were at the time, at least the elections I observed were honest and it was a functioning political situation.

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Q: Well after the riots in the first place were there investigations about who shot whom and that sort of thing?

ASENCIO: Yes, the OAS sent a group down to examine what had happened. The administration sent Joseph Califano down to represent the U.S. I wound up as his interpreter. We withstood I guess an investigation that went on for a couple of weeks and basically I don't think went very far in any direction. I don't think for instance we were condemned by the OAS or anything like that.

Q: Well when things had settled down how had they settled down? I mean was it back to the way it had been or was it sort of a different dynamic?

ASENCIO: When Jack Vaughn was made ambassador he was a reasonably popular choice because he had served there before. Therefore they were looking forward to his arrival. Also there was an attempt being made to put together a negotiating group. As I say that is when Anderson came down and began the process of trying to set up a negotiating group and then was taken over by the Department of State and in effect a new agreement was reached that was much more forthcoming than anything my particular negotiating group was capable of putting forward. That is when the political troubles began anew. The agreement that was negotiated mostly by the Legal Advisor's Office but with some input from the Latin American Bureau, it was in fact discarded and I think eventually things weren't put together until the Linowitz-Bunker Initiative.

Q: I would have thought that as all of this is building up even before the violence that you would have a rather strong group in congress that didn't want to give an inch. There is nothing like the United States being able to exercise its might when you are dealing with a....

ASENCIO: I think that it is clear that the Linowitz-Bunker agreement was considered a controversial decision in some quarters. There are still people that raise this issue. Since I lecture quite a bit I often get the question to me as to whether this was really something

that we should have done and I always try to make the argument that BS is always a lot better than bullets or bayonets.

Q: But at the same time you have got to come out with something.

ASENCIO: Yes.

Q: Well how did you find you and your family find other than a shooting mob, other than that how did you find life there?

ASENCIO: It was reasonably agreeable, not the climate certainly but the city and the Canal Zone. For instance we lived in a house that didn't have a fence around it and the kids played out of doors and we would get our supplies from the Canal Zone. The older kids went to grammar school in the Canal Zone. We bought our groceries and other things at the local commissaries and PX and so forth. We could go to the theater in the Canal Zone. There were picnic areas. There was a Zoo. We could go swimming in that area and at the same time we had all of the benefits of being in Panama City itself which was not an unpleasant city. There was a lot to be done and a lot to be said. We did a lot of traveling in the republic and that was most enjoyable. The only thing I would say I didn't particularly care for was the climate. But other than that I enjoyed the assignment very much, and so did the family.

Q: Did you find that you and your kids and all, wife, were treated a bit to "them and us" by the Zonians? You were sort of if almost not the enemy you were giving away the store or something like that?

ASENCIO: I do not think so. We were well known in the Canal Zone because of my participation in the treaty negotiations. We would be invited to cocktail parties by the Governor periodically. I knew a lot of top officials in the Zone. I do not remember having a particularly difficult time dealing with them. There was no question about what their attitudes were with regard to the Zone but I do not recall my kids having any difficulty either.

Q: Well then you went back to Washington to the Panama desk in '64?

ASENCIO: Yes.

Q: By the way when you were in Panama how did the Cuban missile crisis of the fall of '62?

ASENCIO: It caused some tension but I do not recall anything untoward, except the fact that if something broke out the Canal Zone would probably be a target. I do not recall any unusual difficulties, tensions or untoward reaction on the part of the Panamanian Government.

Q: OK, well then you were back in Washington from '64 to when?

ASENCIO: 1967.

Q: With Jack Vaughn?

ASENCIO: Tom Mann first.

Q: What was your impression of Tom Mann?

ASENCIO: He was my ambassador in Mexico. I got to know him reasonably well. I remember him calling me in and saying, "I want to tell you why you are getting this job. When they asked me to look at the Weeka, I also looked to see who wrote the article. So I made sure you would be coming back to the ARA," which I appreciated. I accompanied Tom Mann on a couple of trips to Latin America. I thought he was one of our great Latinists. Jack Vaughn became the assistant secretary and Tom Mann became the undersecretary for economic affairs, and since I had been Jack Vaughn's desk officer I guess it was logical for me to become his special assistant.

Q: Before we move on I wonder if you would explain and maybe put back in the transcript, but maybe we should explain for people who don't understand our lingo, what a Weeka is.

ASENCIO: It is a report that no longer exists as I understand it, but essentially every embassy wrote a weekly report that was drawn from either newspaper accounts or low level political sources that was considered particularly valuable for the analysts in the Department of State because it gave you a continuing picture of what was going on week to week in terms of society including economic, social, political, and so forth.

Q: That normally would not be particularly noted in higher ranks in the State Department.

ASENCIO: Well as Tom Mann said he hadn't read one in 20 years.

Q: Jack Vaughn, what was his mode of operation?

ASENCIO: He spoke Spanish, had a career in AID and in the Peace Corps, was probably looked down upon a bit by the Foreign Service officers as not quite one of them. He had a reasonably liberal attitude with regard to Latin America. He was very popular. I accompanied him on a couple of trips down there including to Panama and a couple of other places. He had a very engaging personality. I think what disrupted his tenure there was the fuss in the Dominican Republic and then the invasion thereof. That was a very difficult time for all of us in that particular job.

Q: Could you describe the situation in the Dominican Republic?

ASENCIO: There had been a revolt. The president was ousted. There was a coup and a counter coup and general fighting. We sent in the 82nd Airborne along with the Brazilian army to try to pacify the place and it took a long time to bring things under control.

Q: As I recall it was somewhat controversial here in the States. How did you feel about it?

ASENCIO: I had concerns about the fact that we were invading a Latin American country. It took me back to a little earlier history. I really was not happy about it, but I did my best to help with the situation.

Q: Did you get involved with the political situation in the Dominican Republic?

ASENCIO: Only from the standpoint of whatever I had to do in the front office of the Latin American Bureau.

Q: What else was going on in your area?

ASENCIO: Well the Alliance for Progress was going full bore. The bureau had the AID portion combined with the State Department portion so that the assistant secretary was not only the Assistant Secretary, he was also the Coordinator of the Alliance for Progress, which in effect meant you were doing two jobs at once. So that was quite an active period. We were working long hours on very complicated situations.

Q: I keep raising the subject of Cuba but it certainly was a major concern to us at that time.

ASENCIO: Yes I recall John Cramming was the Cuba coordinator, and we certainly paid a lot of attention to what was going on there. I don't recall anything in terms of policy that we were greatly involved in at the front office.

Q: How about the other part. Was Venezuela going along nicely at that point?

ASENCIO: Oh yes, the dictator Perez Jimenez had left. Romulo Betancourt had come in. there had been a return to democracy. I recall we made a visit down there. There was a great deal of hopefulness with regard to the future. In Colombia, things were going reasonably well. There was some unrest and insurgency but it was a solid democratic government. There was not any particular problem. In '64 of course there had been a coup in Brazil and a military government had taken over. There was some concern about that. I recall for instance, we had the Pan American conference in Rio. I guess it was '65. There was some discussion as to whether that was the right place to do it and that sort of

thing. Chile, there wasn't a heck of a lot going on. There was a democratic government. I am trying to think of other places.

Q: Argentina.

ASENCIO: I don't recall anything unusual going on in Argentina at the time. We had a conference down there also. I don't recall any great difficulty.

Q: As you are sitting there working with ARA, did you get the feeling that the State Department as such was focused elsewhere, either Asia or the near east or Europe?

ASENCIO: You mean in terms of how the operational arm of the State Department viewed it?

Q: Yeah.

ASENCIO: I would think we were probably above Africa but below the European Bureau. We had a fair amount of contact with Dean Rusk. I think there was a very distinct, I would say, upper crust feeling about the European Bureau and European assignments. Lyndon Johnson was very concerned about Latin American policy and would call us frequently. We had Bill Bowdler at the White House as the Latin American man, and he was a very effective liaison with the president. On the whole I would say it was a highly functioning bureau. Obviously I would say I do not think we were the focal point of Dean Rusk's existence, but he did look in on us, so to speak, from time to time.

Q: How about Mexico? Anything going on in Mexico?

ASENCIO: No, I do not recall anything unusual.

Q: Which is always a nice thing happening when you are dealing with a whole series of countries.

ASENCIO: Exactly.

Q: Well when did you leave the ARA?

ASENCIO: I left in 1977. Jack Vaughn was made head of the Peace Corps and Lincoln Gordon was brought up from Brazil to be the new Assistant Secretary. So Linc asked me to stay on which I did for about a year. I had been promised that if I did my job in the Latin American Bureau for three years, that I would be able to write my next assignment more or less. So after my third year in that kind of business which I got to the point where I would rarely see my kids because I would come home after they were in bed. My wife was complaining about my lack of participation in household affairs. She claimed it was my 7-11 job. I was asked by personnel where I wanted to go, and I said I wanted to go to

Madrid. They said, "You were born in Spain so we can't send you there." I said, "Well you guys told me I could go anywhere I wanted." They said, "Well we have an opening in Portugal and it is right next door to Spain, you can drive over any time you want." I said, "Portugal. Nothing has happened in Portugal since 1928. Some of my friends in the Bureau talked to me and told me to consider this a vacation tour. You can go there and sit on the beach for as long as you like, a year, two years. And then whenever you get tired and restless call us and we will bring you back and we will give you a real job." I told my wife about this and she asked if it was a 9 to 5 job? I said, "It looks to me more like a 9 to 12." She said, "Take it." And of course I got to Portugal. I picked up Portuguese, went to the Foreign Service Institute and was assigned to Portugal just in time for the beginning of the end of the Salazar regime. The African Wars heated up. We began to negotiate the Azores base agreement; all sorts of demonstrations were occurring in Portugal. The embassy was attacked a couple of times. Again as a political officer I had a very exciting time. It was probably one of my most fruitful assignments. I stayed there for five years.

Q: Well what was your job?

ASENCIO: Well I started out as the low man in the Political Section. Then I became Chief of the political section, and then I became Deputy Chief of Mission.

Q: Well who was the ambassador, or I guess you had probably a series of ambassadors didn't you?

ASENCIO: Well two principal ambassadors. There was Tapley Bennett of the Dominican Republic fame and then Ridgeway Knight who had been replaced in Belgium by President Eisenhower's son. As a reward he was given Portugal. It was he who made me DCM.

Q: Well when Tapley Bennett, at that time was he sort of stuck with, he was the guy who called our troops in there. There was talk not necessarily in the State Department but elsewhere that we shouldn't have gone in. Was that still hanging around, that idea?

ASENCIO: Not in Portugal. Portugal, I mean I don't think the Dominican Republic was on their radar. The emphasis at that time in Portugal was on Africa, the wars in Angola and Mozambique and Guinea Bissau.

Q: OK, Salazar was still prime minister at the time wasn't he?

ASENCIO: Yes.

Q: What was your impression of him from accounts of people who dealt with him or even your own personal point of view?

ASENCIO: I saw him. He was sort of semi-deified as sort of the eminence that kept the society out of the troubles of the rest of the world and who kept them functioning as a

traditional society. He was revered in some quarters and obviously detested in others. There was a very strong opposition. One of the things that I did was to begin contact with the opposition in Portugal. One of the previous ambassadors had prevented the political section from having contact with the opposition. Ambassador Tapley Bennett did not feel that way so I was able to get to know the opposition very well and become a practiced participant in attending political riots. I discovered something that I never disclosed to my supervisors. I put it in my memoir and I will disclose it to you. I discovered that if you wore a coat and tie and went to a demonstration or a political riot, the police would not touch you because they figured you were a member of the elite. You could not have a beard. If you had a beard you were a university professor and therefore fair game. But if you wore a coat and tie they would not go near you. So I would dress up to go to these riots. I remember once I walked into a square where they had a full scale riot going on. They had the tank gun with the purple ink out. It was coming in my direction. I thought "oh hell there goes the theory of the suit." They saw me and stopped and sent it the other way. So I was always very proud of the fact that I was able to go into the most unusual situations and not be touched by anybody. It was a very helpful attribute for a political officer.

Q: Well was the opposition one of these things I have run across a number of times, particularly in Iran under the Shah and all, but other times when the political section is told you can't deal with the opposition. It always strikes me as being an abrogation of duty. What was the opposition saying to you and how did they treat American policy?

ASENCIO: They were very friendly, very democratic, and mostly socialist. The commies had been expelled sometime back and didn't come back until after the revolution. In fact let me tell you another basic secret of my time in Lisbon. There was a social club in the center of the city called the Gremio Literario. Everybody belonged. I mean the government belonged, the opposition belonged, everybody. There was a great deal of very tight control of the press and media and it was very difficult to sort of get any news on the outside. But if you went to the club and sat down by the bar outside, you could pick up whatever happened that day. It was one of my most fertile sources of information and one of the best places to make friends and establish contacts. So I figure I owe a couple of promotions to the Gremio Literario.

Q: Later and not too much later you had a sort of coup with Salazar out and junior officers leading towards the communists.

ASENCIO: I was gone by then. I went to Brazil in '72.

Q: Yes but that was sort of in the offing. Did you sense that you had basically a disaffected army?

ASENCIO: Yes. The war in Africa had gone on for a considerable period of time and had really caused difficulties in society and of course it was one of these things where youngsters were having multiple deployments and that sort of thing.

Q: Was there concern, and the Portuguese had basically, and correct me if I am wrong, milked the colonies for all they were worth and had not done much in terms of educating the Africans within their colonies. Was there concern about this?

ASENCIO: I think there is no question they were colonial structures. But I don't think the Portuguese were more beastly than most other colonial societies. I think they had a point of view that I thought was sui generis with regard to the Portuguese. That is if you were educated and cultures, it didn't matter if you were black or grey or green. I mean you were Portuguese. I think that is an unusual point of view for most societies.

Q: It seems to reflect to a certain extent Brazil didn't it?

ASENCIO: Well yes there is some of that although some of the Brazilian stuff is probably how would I say, exaggerated. In the sense that I do not think they are as liberal or benign with regard to race relations as they claim to be.

Q: Did you find in our embassy in Portugal our military attachés. Were they a good source of information or was this sort of a retirement job for colonels planning to leave?

ASENCIO: No, there were a couple of good attachés who were fully informed and fully in touch with their military counterparts. We cooperated and collaborated quite a bit. I think the military team there was quite good.

Q: How about your reporting much on the situation in Africa?

ASENCIO: Oh very much so. In fact one of the unique characteristics of my assignment there, something again I mentioned in my memoir. The African bureau set up some sort of a conference on the African wars, and did not invite the participation of either our Embassy in Portugal or even the European Bureau for that matter. Ambassador Ridgeway Knight asked me to compose a message to the Department complaining in the most severe terms about being excluded from participation in such a conference that in fact dealt with the subject of the Portuguese wars. I did. I wrote a very stiff piece. Just in time for me to be reassigned to Brazil. When I arrived in Washington I encountered my new boss, Ambassador William Rountree. He said, "Have you seen that ridiculous message that came here from Lisbon?" I said, "Yes sir. I did." He said, "Well I want you to write a reply." So I sat down and wrote a stiff response. I think it is probably one of the few times in the Foreign Service when someone wound up answering his own mail.

Q: When you left Portugal you left when now?

ASENCIO: 1972.

Q: The officer's revolt was in '74 wasn't it?

ASENCIO: I think so.

Q: Did you feel that you were sort of getting away from the volcano before all hell broke loose?

ASENCIO: Actually that was the longest assignment I have ever had anywhere. I was there for almost five years. I enjoyed it immensely. The quality of life was excellent. The job was interesting and I loved it and was resisting going to Brazil because being a Spanish speaker I really knew very little about Brazil, and was not looking forward to the assignment. I wanted to go back to a Spanish speaking country. But nevertheless, apparently they needed a political counselor. So I girded my loins and went.

Q: What was the situation in Brazil when you arrived? This would be still '74 was it?

ASENCIO: This was '72. It was a military government still. The embassy was in the process of moving from Rio de Janeiro to Brasilia. We were jam packed into the old consulate. The working conditions were rather deplorable, but the society was very interesting, and there was in fact a sort of period of détente when the military government began loosening control they had on the society and the political activity began to flourish again. I found it a very interesting society. I enjoyed my tour there immensely.

Q: I saw a French movie, I think it was called That Man from Rio or something like that but it showed Brasilia in the very early days of being occupied. You must have felt a bit like being in a futuristic frontier.

ASENCIO: Well there certainly was a pioneer society, no question about it. It was a city designed strictly for the automobile. There was no place to walk. The center of town was a six lane highway. Everybody rode everywhere. The city was divided according to functions. There was a banking sector and an entertainment sector and a business sector and a commercial sector and an embassy sector. If you were in those sectors that is all you did. So in that sense it was not a particularly well designed place, but a very interesting place in many senses. I enjoyed particularly dealing with the government and with the politicians who were quite accessible. Both the government and the politicians were accessible. I enjoyed the Brazilians very much. Let me tell you a story that will give you an idea of what it was like. When they finished the city of Brasilia the Foreign Ministry asked the embassies to move, and I think we did and I think the Brits did and maybe the Australians. Everybody else stayed in Rio. So then the Brazilians in a very Brazilian way announced that if they did not move to Brasilia they would lose their liquor import privileges.

Q: Oh my God!

ASENCIO: Of course, everybody began to move. The one hold out were the Soviets. The Soviet ambassador said that his embassy wasn't finished yet and he was not going until it was done. The Brazilians handled it in a very Brazilian way. They called him into Brasilia for a conference with the Foreign Minister. So he flew in on the shuttle and met with the Foreign Minister, and they had a chat. He left and then the next day the Foreign Minister called him again and said, "There is something I forgot to tell you." So he came back and they had another chat. As he was leaving the Foreign Minister said, "If I think of anything else I will give you another call." So he finally said, "OK, I will move."

Q: Well did you find it difficult in those early days all the high ranking people would come from Tuesday through Thursday or so and then head back to Rio. Was that the case?

ASENCIO: Essentially the idea was they did Rio de Janeiro for the weekend and then came up on Monday or Tuesday. In fact I have a story about that too. This happened while I was the Ambassador there actually. The Inspectors came to look us over. They arrived dutifully on Tuesday afternoon. Of course I met with them. They had the usual sort of briefing thing, but I like to make things at least pleasant and semi-humorous. I told them the thing you had to watch out about in Rio is that you are approached by an obvious transvestite who tries to kiss you, and while you are fending him off his confederates wipe out your pockets. Instead of getting the usual laughter there was silence. The head Inspector looked up and said, "Too late, they got me yesterday."

Q: Oh god. What were our issues with Brazil?

ASENCIO: There were several. One obviously was the trade issue. At that time they were complaining about trade discrimination and that sort of thing. Also there were arguments about population control. There was some concern about, I guess, the lack of democratic developments. On my second go around there, the issues were a bit different. By then they had revoked the U.S.-Brazilian military agreement, one of the oldest military agreements in the world, certainly in the hemisphere. We had an admiral sitting in Rio de Janeiro and a joint military staff with the Brazilians. We always had a very good special relationship with the Brazilians probably dating back to the fact that during the Spanish American War they had turned over their ship building contracts to us so we could build up our fleet. During WWI they had done convoy duty in the Atlantic and during WWII they had actually sent an expeditionary force to Italy.

Q: Yeah a whole division.

ASENCIO: They had taken enormous casualties in charging up one of those hills when they were kicking the Germans out. And of course during the Dominican Republic they supplied troops to help. So we had this very special relationship, and this was beginning

to disappear essentially because the feelings of being special were mostly on their part not on ours. We had a Latin American policy. We did not really have a Brazilian policy. So when we applied policy to Latin America we applied it across the board. I recall at one point we refused to sell jet aircraft to Latin American countries on the grounds that they were too expensive, and they were developing societies. So the Brazilians began to buy jet aircraft from France. When we began to get serious about control of atomic energy we refused to give them processed fuel until they signed the agreement, so they bought it from Germany. This went on and on like this until they decided that they would in fact do away with the special relationship. They were taking a lot of heat anyway strictly by associating with us on the part of their Latin American brethren, so they made a conscious effort to distance themselves from us. One of the first ways was by renouncing the so-called military joint Brazilian U.S. military group. Of course I am jumping ahead. This was the basic issue when I was sent there as ambassador. I have a couple of more countries to go to yet.

Q: Well at that time how did we find the Brazilian government, it was military wasn't it?

ASENCIO: Yes it was. There was a general as president.

Q: How heavy a hand was it and how did we view the government there?

ASENCIO: We had friendly relations and as I say one of the basic cornerstones of our relationship with Brazil was the members of the Brazilian expeditionary force as they became senior military officials relished or were very proud of their association with the U.S. military during WWII. So we always had very high-level military contacts with the Brazilian military including when they were running the government. This diminished as the last chief of staff who had Brazilian Expeditionary force experience retired when I was sent there as ambassador.

Q: Well were we getting involved in human rights and all this during the first time you were there?

ASENCIO: Yes, but only on very specific cases. It certainly wasn't the center point of our policy at the time. There was one case where for instance they had picked up a Time Magazine staffer in northeastern Brazil and had tortured him. Our consul at my request had gone in and protested and then we sent a very strongly worded notice to the foreign ministry that caused quite a bit of fuss and feathers at the time. That was probably the most salient human rights issue I can remember getting involved with at the time. Curiously, again I don't know if this is appropriate for your material, but one of the interesting things was, this was when I was on my first assignment. Ambassador Hugh Crimmins was the one who directed me to do that note to the Brazilian foreign ministry. A couple of days later he called me in and said, "You know I am having the impression that we caused a bit of a stir in Washington because of the adverse reaction of the

Brazilian government. It is very curious but I may in fact get into trouble over this.” I said, “I have a suggestion on how to handle that.” He said, “Tell me.” I said, “Well the Consul that went in to make the protest did so at my request. I think we should give him a medal. You are authorized to give whatever the medal was, the Distinguished Service Medal or something. It would be very difficult for the Department to be mean to the father of the hero.” He said, “Let’s do it.” So we did and we got the Richard Brown a decoration for having protested. I was very interested to see when reading Rich’s obituary, one of the things they bragged about was the medal that he had gotten in Brazil.

Q: Well did you find, I mean here is Brazil which is a huge country and all. Did you find much interest in Brazil from Congress?

ASENCIO: We had a fair number of Congressional visits, but nothing extraordinary. The only one that stands out in my mind we had a visit from Senator Pearson of Kansas, father of the Pearson fellowships. He came to Brazil and I made sure he had a very good time and met everybody and went away very happy. It was shortly after that he passed that bill. So I always figured I was responsible in a way for the Pearson fellowships.

Q: You might explain what the Pearson fellowship is. I might add it has been an extremely useful training tool for the Foreign Service.

ASENCIO: Essentially it was to take Foreign Service officers and put them into domestic either commercial or political or NGO atmosphere in the States and give them training in, I guess, societies that are not Foreign Service oriented.

Q: A significant number of Foreign Service officers have served in other branches of the government particularly in Congress as aides and all for a year. It has certainly given our officers a much better outlook on how the rest of the government works. It is hoped they have transferred their experiences to domestic offices,

ASENCIO: Right.

Q: How did you find life in Brasilia? I would think that with everybody heading for the beaches on the weekends it would make for a bit of a dull time, or maybe good family time.

ASENCIO: Well initially it was very distinctly a pioneer society. If you needed external stimuli to get your motor going you were in bad trouble. However it was the perfect place to work. Essentially you had access to almost any level of the government because there was not anything else to do. I mean I recall as political counselor I would call up a cabinet minister, and the curious part was he would answer the phone personally. I would say I am so and so, and he would say. “Oh great to hear from you. When are you going to come by? Do you play golf? How about bridge?” It was the only place I have ever been where cocktail parties were an important element of the society. If you gave a cocktail

party and you invited somebody, they came. I remember inviting the Supreme Court, and all the Justices showing up. I would invite the Secretary of the Presidency and he would come. The Foreign Minister, he would show up.

Q: did you have trouble keeping our people from getting off to Rio or I guess the cost of tickets was prohibitive.

ASENCIO: Yes, obviously there was a sort of steady stream of people going off to Rio but it was in fact difficult to get there, and expensive and staying in the city itself was expensive. I do not think it was particularly a problem. I as a political officer did quite a bit of traveling, and would go into Rio particularly. The amazing thing was after a few days in Rio I would be happy to go back to Brasilia.

Q: What about Sao Paulo? Was that sort of a dukedom off by itself?

ASENCIO: No, we did a lot of business in Sao Paulo. One of the things at the time was that the Archbishop of Sao Paulo was a prominent member of the opposition to the government, so that it was sort of de rigueur to be in touch with the Archbishop to find out what was really going on in the society. Very curiously when I went back as ambassador they had made him a cardinal. I called on him and we had a great old time reminiscing about when I used to go see him sort of on the sly to find out what was happening in the city. The meeting caused such an impact that we had to respond to a veritable press conference.

Q: How about development in Brazil. We have been concerned for many years, and we are not the only ones about Mato Grosso being the lungs of the world practically of development there. Was this an issue?

ASENCIO: Not really because the Brasilia area is above the Mato Grosso and below the Amazon. And very curiously it was an absolute steppe. The humidity index was Saharan. It was a real desert. What they did was dam a couple of rivers and created a lake in the center of the country that in fact modified the climate. It actually developed a rainy season. You are aware that in Brazil they do not have Polish jokes; they have Portuguese jokes. Well one of the Portuguese jokes was that at first they built the lake, and then they decided to put a bridge across it. But anyway it changed the atmosphere. Trees grew, grass grew, and Brasilia became a real oasis. In fact there were a series of truck farms. One of the earlier presidents had brought in a bunch of Japanese from Sao Paulo and had given them all this free land and set up these truck farms in order to supply the city with food. There is a great story about that. The president was Juscelino Kubitschek and he received a delegation of Japanese farmers who complained about the infertile soil and the difficulty of growing things. He said, "Fellows, if it had been easy, I would have used Brazilians."

Q: Did Brazil from the American perspective throw its weight around in Latin America or in world politics. I mean was this a problem for us?

ASENCIO: There is no question that they have departed from the special relationship so called, and have in fact cozied up to the rest of Latin America and have sometimes taken positions antagonistic to ours. Basically I am convinced that the concept of diminishing relationships with the military is probably part and parcel of that. But essentially we have treated them in an offhanded way, and it got to the point where they resented it. When I got there of course as Ambassador the renunciation of the U.S. Brazilian military agreement was still fairly new. One of the questions I was immediately asked was whether I had come to renegotiate a new military agreement I had to several times point out that that was not the case. But essentially I think part of what we are suffering now is the fact that we really did not have a basic Brazilian policy. What we had was a Latin American policy and we did not have people at the center of power that were all that conscious of what Brazil considered to be a special relationship. I am talking back from the beginnings of the Brazilian republic until now. There was a very curious development while I was Ambassador. One was we tried to handle the renunciation of the treaty by negotiating a series of agreements in different sectors, commerce, business, military, and so forth. The military one was hopefully to improve the relationship between the military groups. While I was there I got called in by the Secretary of Defense who I knew very well. Particularly I had known him when I had been there previously. He said, "We would like in terms of the new U.S. Brazilian military agreement to make a request." I said, "What is it?" He said, "We want an ICBM."

Q: Good God.

ASENCIO: I said, "Well I will put it in but I really think that is kind of a tall order." My conclusion was they really didn't care about the ICBM, they were asking a question, "Do you really love us?" I mean is this for real, is this a real agreement? Of course, we said no. So the response in humdrum terms was "What did you say your name was, Honey?"

Q: Oh yes. Well was the issue, let's stick to the time you were there as political counselor. How stood relations at that point and were we concerned between Brazil and Argentina?

ASENCIO: No. I mean yeah there was some concern but sometimes it reached ridiculous levels. I recall one time the Secretary of the Navy of Brazil came back from a trip to Washington. I ran into him at a cocktail party. We chatted about his visit to Washington. He said. "Listen, do me a favor. When you are in contact up there get a message to Admiral Zumwalt." I said, "Sure." "Tell him that, yes indeed, we can use a cruiser, but we would have difficulty maintaining it. We would have to work out some kind of arrangements on how to do that. Nobody said anything to the State Department or anything else about a cruiser. So I sent this message up and it caused as you can imagine quite a stir.

Q: Were the Soviets playing games down there?

ASENCIO: I am sure they were but they did not strike me as super competent or anything at that point.

Q: What about one of the things all of us in the Foreign Service have been told the Brazilian foreign service is a particularly professional one. How did you find it?

ASENCIO: Very much so. They have the Rio Branco Institute there, their foreign service institute, I think is one of the best diplomatic schools in the world. Their diplomats are very highly trained. They are drawn from the elite levels of society. You often find that Brazilian Foreign Service officers have fathers and grandfathers and great grandfathers who have been in the service. We were talking earlier about race relations. I never saw a black Brazilian diplomat. Maybe they have them now, but in my time that was unheard of. So they were integral parts of the high echelons of the society were respected, had power, and I think served their society very well.

Q: Well you left there this first assignment when?

ASENCIO: I left there in '75.

Q: Where did you go?

ASENCIO: Venezuela.

Q: Today is April 22, 2014. Let's see I had you in 1973 you were leaving the Brazilian desk, and were off to Venezuela.

ASENCIO: I was leaving the Brazilian country, the embassy, and I was going to Venezuela.

Q: And that was what. '73.

ASENCIO: That was '75

Q: OK, what was your job and what was the situation there when you arrived?

ASENCIO: I was the Deputy Chief of Mission. Ambassador McClintock was retiring and Harry Shlaudeman was going as ambassador, but he was being delayed because there was some fuss about his previous assignment in Chile. There was quite a bit of opposition to his coming to Venezuela. So I was chargé d'affaires for several months.

Q: Just to pick up on some of this, what was the problem with Shlaudeman?

ASENCIO: Well, he was tarred a bit with the Salvador Allende overthrow in Chile.

Q: This is when Pinochet took over.

ASENCIO: Yes, exactly.

Q: So McClintock you had served under.

ASENCIO: Just a few days actually. Three or four days.

Q: So what was the situation in Venezuela when you arrived?

ASENCIO: It was a bit tense. There was some talk about the nationalization of the petroleum industry, and also shortly after I got there, an article appeared in the New York Times indicating some president of Latin America unnamed had been bribed by one of the oil companies. The President Carlos Andres Perez called me in, read the article to me and said, "Unless you or the United States issues a denial there is not going to be a nationalization, I am going to take the whole damn thing over." I just said, "Mr. President, I just got here. Let me look into what is happening here. I really don't know what the situation is. Let me check." So fortunately the next day the New York Times said it was a President of Bolivia. That resolved the situation very nicely.

Q: It was a wonderful way to start your term isn't it.

ASENCIO: It was very exciting. I was impressed with the fact that I was at first seeing the President of the republic shortly after I had gotten there I had no idea that he was going to be pounding on me that way. But anyway my period as chargé was relatively smooth. I think we prepared the way for Harry to get there, and he arrived about six months later and came in without any problem at all.

Q: Well now what were your observations about Venezuela, the society and what makes it run and its government?

ASENCIO: At the time I would say a very strong government. It was a time of unusually high prosperity. It was a very expensive place to live. I would say it probably cost me money to be there. One of the things that was standard for Venezuelans with their new prosperity was that they had taken on the trappings of the hoi polloi. They knew that gentlemen drank scotch, so they would drink scotch, but they did not really like it. They were used to rum. So they would mix the scotch with coca cola. At a cocktail party, you put the bottle of Chivas Regal on the tray so that your guests would know that they were drinking the good stuff. But I would tell them in the kitchen to serve Ballantine's. But anyway I had a very good time there. I enjoyed my tour there very much. The nationalization of the petroleum industry did proceed and that was a period which was

fraught with a lot of tension but eventually worked out very nicely. We did have a very notorious kidnapping there that caused quite a bit of fuss. That is William Niehous was kidnapped there and it took them a couple of years for him to get loose. So all during the time we were there we were sort of in the anticipatory stage of trying to find out what had happened to him and where he was, that sort of thing.

Q: Who was he?

ASENCIO: He was the local representative of Owens Illinois of Ohio.

Q: What was your impression of the government? You have come from Brazil. How did this government run?

ASENCIO: Carlos Andres was a very strong president, a very colorful character. The government was accessible. We were able to have complete access to almost the entire government. The relations I would say were pretty good. I have another Carlos Andres story. This was after Harry had left to become Assistant Secretary. Viron P. Vaky was made the Ambassador. Shortly after his arrival I was called by the Minister of Information, a fellow named Diego Arria who was a very good friend of mine to suggest that I stop by for a drink on the way home. When I got to his place he handed me the phone and it was the President. Again another article had appeared saying that when the President had been Minister of the Interior and they had an insurrection inspired by Cuba, he had been on the CIA payroll. The President told me that at this moment the Foreign Minister is looking for you to tell you that we are expelling not only the regular political section but the other one too. I said, "Well Mr. President it will take ten years to get our relations back on an even keel if you do that." He said, "Don't try persuade me, I have already taken the decision." And I said, "Mr. President I was in touch with the Department this morning and I was told there was actually a letter being drafted for you from President Carter denying that you were on the CIA payroll. This is very unusual for the U.S. Government which will usually neither confirm nor deny this sort of accusation." He said, "When do you think the letter will arrive?" I said, "Well probably by tomorrow morning." He said, "Don't go home. They are waiting for you at your door. Go down to the beach and have dinner and stay at a hotel down there. They will never find you. When the letter comes we will talk again." Anyway I got in my car and I got a call from the embassy saying something has just come in for me to look at. There was this beautiful letter from Carter saying we love you. You are great and not on the payroll and that sort of stuff. I called my friend and he said, "Don't bother typing it up. Take it right off the machine, and go directly to the presidential palace. By this time I figured I had better let Ambassador Vaky know so I went by and picked him up and we went to the palace. I think every journalist in Caracas was there including newsreels and everything else. We sheepishly walked into the president's office. He was sitting there with a stern look on his face and his arms crossed. The Foreign Minister was sitting next to him. We sat down and Ambassador Vaky handed him the letter. All the journalists had followed us in. He looked up with this great big smile. Then he said, "OK, get the press out of here."

So they got the press out and then he said, “Read it to me. I don’t know how to read English.” That is one of my favorite anecdotes.

Q: Oh God.

ASENCIO: I would say it was a very exciting time. This all happened to me during our bicentennial. I had to handle that while I was Chargé. That was fairly interesting. One of the best cocktail parties I have ever given I would say. We had an unusual turnout on the part of the Venezuelan community. There were something like four ex-presidents, most of the Congress and the Supreme Court and everybody who was anybody was at the embassy that day.

Q: Well were we concerned at that time about what I have been told is the case, but the considerable discrepancy between the well to do small minority and the not at all well to do. In other words there poor levels of society.

ASENCIO: There certainly was an underclass. Curiously most of the underclass was Colombian. There had been a lot of illegal immigration into the country from Colombia. There were barrios, slums in the city, which were not exactly pleasant places. However, when I was there it was a particularly prosperous time. There was very little class tension. That perhaps happened later.

Q: How did you find relations between you and the oil company and then the oil company and the Venezuelans? I mean were they tense? Was it a problem or what?

ASENCIO: The nationalization process was long, drawn out and fraught with all sorts of difficulty. But it worked out and in the end I think everybody was quite happy. I think Ambassador Shlaudeman had handled the negotiation quite well. Again everybody was quite pleased. Essentially the government took over the oil industry; however, they made contracts with the oil companies to run it. So I think everybody was reasonably happy with the outcome.

Q: So I mean that can be a very difficult time.

ASENCIO: Yes, well there was a lot of activity certainly. But I think there was a successful outcome.

Q: What were the Cubans up to during the time you were there?

ASENCIO: They were nowhere in evidence. Basically there was I am trying to think whether there was even an embassy. They had broken off relations during the insurgency.

Q: The Cubans had landed and they did Venezuela at one point?

ASENCIO: They certainly were how should I say, underwriting the insurgency. I don't recall there having been an invasion as such, and that was actually before I got there.

Q: Were you kind of looking over your shoulder in the embassy at what the Cubans were up to?

ASENCIO: No, during our time there wasn't really any concern along those lines. It was a very pro-democratic government.

Q: Then how did you survive in the high cost situation?

ASENCIO: With great difficulty as they say. It was difficult in that sense, but not impossible. We certainly didn't save any money, and we had to really scrape the bottom of the pocketbook to get along.

Q: Did you feel sort of the heavy hand of influence of congress or other places on you there?

ASENCIO: Not really. We didn't get that many congressional delegations. As they say other than the kidnapping and the nationalization of the petroleum industry relations were quite normal, interesting, and I think well conducted, and I don't think we had any major problems.

Q: Any consular problems or was that a different?

ASENCIO: No the consular section was caused no problems at the time at all.

Q: Well then were there parties in Venezuela that were I mean uncomfortably to the left that we were concerned about?

ASENCIO: Not really. I mean, some residue from the insurgency days. People who had lived through that period and were still around, but they didn't have any influence on the government.

Q: Anything else?

ASENCIO: One of the things that I think was interesting at that time was that the government had set up a sort of a trust fund using the petroleum money to send Venezuelan students to school in the U.S. I think that had a beneficial impact on our relations. Harry Shlaudeman had gone on to be Assistant Secretary and was succeeded by Terry Todman who came to visit us, and offered me the job of Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary. I was kind of pleased with that as a future prospect except that a little while later he called to say that he had been informed that I was not the right kind of Hispanic. I was a Hispanic of European ancestry he really did not want me in that kind of position,

and he sort of disinvited me; which was a shock. But then I got a call from the Deputy Secretary of State Warren Christopher who said: “We are going to be opening up a Special Interest Section in Havana, and we think you would be perfect for that particular job. Eventually it will become an embassy and you can be the first ambassador.” I said, “Gee, I have always wanted to have a conversation with the fellow with a beard, but are you aware that my wife is Cuban, and all Cubans knowing all other Cubans they will know exactly who she is and what her family did during the Batista regime.” So I was invited to the Department to discuss this. I think we have discussed this already.

Q: Well let's cover it.

ASENCIO: I was invited to the Department and saw Cyrus Vance and met the Director General Carol Laise and a bunch of other people and they decided that yes, indeed it probably would not be a good idea for me to go. I was asked what they thought of European Hispanics in Colombia. I said, “Well the Conquistadors are held in high repute.” So they said, “We are having trouble in Colombia because we have offered them the guy who was provost at Yale and later became a Federal District Judge, but he was Puerto Rican, and for some reason or other Colombians think that Puerto Ricans are a subject colonial people, and they are not held in high repute. So in Colombian style they did not say no, they just did not answer the request for agrément. The Hispanic community in the U.S. was beside themselves and insisted on another Hispanic being named. That is what happened after Venezuela.

Q: So you went where?

ASENCIO: To Colombia as Ambassador.

Q: You know we are hearing a side to Latin American politics that one should never happen but two it is a whole different world of who you are and where you are from and all of that, the sort of thing we try to avoid but it sure is rampant in other places.

ASENCIO: What was even funnier was when I got into the Department Terry offered me a country directorship. I said, “Oh no, I have been offered this ambassadorship.” He said, “Well I don't know anything about that. I don't really see how that can be so.” I had to go upstairs and get myself formally designated as the ambassador to Colombia.

Q: Did you have any problem getting through Congress?

ASENCIO: Not at all. For some reason or other I have always been very fortunate even when there were issues. I was never held up in any way, in fact at one point before going to Brazil as ambassador Senator Helms was Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, and when I sat down before him he looked at me, smiled and said, “You are not going to have any trouble in my committee.” So I had pictures taken with him and my wife. When I got back to the Department they wanted to know what the heck that was all

about. So in fact I have a picture of me shaking hands with Helms. I guess Alan Simpson was also present at the time. Again I got to know him very well...

Q: Senator from Wyoming.

ASENCIO: ...from my assistant secretary days. Anyway the only time I had any difficulty was in fact right after my Colombian days and when I was being confirmed for assistant secretary the mother of a Peace Corps volunteer who had been kidnapped in Colombia and whose son we eventually got out of the jungle, had become convinced that if I had only answered a letter from the head of the FARC which was the Stalinist communist insurgency, that her son would have been released months earlier. So her Congressman brought that to the table and asked why I hadn't done that. You can imagine what the Department would have suggested if I had said we should write the head of the Stalinist insurgency. What was kind of funny at the time was Helms thought that what she was complaining about my not having answered her mail. So I had to explain with a little bit of nervousness that no, what she was talking about was the head of the insurgency communicating with me. So he did not have much of a problem with that. But it did cause a momentary nervousness on my part.

Q: Oh yeah. Obviously was a traumatic assignment later on but going out, what was the situation in Colombia when you went out?

ASENCIO: Basically I was preparing to go there, about the time that Time Magazine had a cover story on kidnappings in Italy with the thesis that Italian society was being torn apart by the high level of kidnappings. I am not certain about the number but I think there were about 40 kidnappings in Italy. So I asked when I got there I asked how many kidnappings were extant in Colombia. I think the answer was about 900. So I think this gives you a little bit of the idea of the tension and the necessity for security.

Q: What was causing the kidnapping?

ASENCIO: There still is a reasonably high rate of kidnapping in Colombia. There are all kinds. There are political kidnappings. There are kidnappings for ransom. Pets were kidnapped. There were little insurgency groups, political groups, commercial groups so to speak. There was a little bit of everything. It was just one of those things where there was also a high rate of crime generally; from the security standpoint it was a difficult post.

Q: I have been told that in Colombia most people are packing weapons.

ASENCIO: Well security always was a concern. Of course you have the whole narcotics situation which affects a society in many ways. You have also the different insurgency groups that always have been a problem, so you have substantial segments of the country that were not under control of the government. There were cities where the homicide rate was world class. At one point I think they were number one internationally.

Q: Well what was the drug situation?

ASENCIO: That was probably the center point of everything with regard to my assignment. Shortly after I got there I was called in by President Adolfo Lopez Michelsen, and again I was terribly impressed because I had just recently presented my credentials. A top secret DEA report had been leaked and purported to show that the leading contender for the presidency in the upcoming election was involved in the narcotics traffic. The president was convinced that we were trying to destabilize Colombia and affect the elections. I had to convince him that it was such a slick operation that it could not be us. It looked more to me like a Colombian inside job. Eventually, after chewing me out for about an hour and a half, he agreed. I had called on the particular candidate that they were talking about in the report. He called me and said, "You had mentioned when you called on me that you wanted to be my friend now and not after I got elected because then everybody would want to be my friend." I said, "What do you want?" "I want you to write me a letter saying it was not me that they were talking about." It was not actually. It was about a nephew of his. I said, "I can do that. Not only that but in the letter I can say that as one of the major points of your administration you are going to rev up the anti-narcotics policy of the government." He said, "Right on, do it." So I did. He actually was as good as his word. During his inauguration he mentioned that his administration was going to rev up their anti-narcotics situation and unleash the military on the narcotics traffickers and have military planes patrolling the areas where the drugs were being shipped out and raids into the jungle and things became reasonably interesting.

Q: How stood the relationship between the drug traffickers and the guerillas. The guerillas I assume had a different priority or was it basically the same?

ASENCIO: During my time there, there was not such a relationship. However afterwards it became clear that in fact the guerillas both the M-19 and the FARC sold out and began to receive revenue from the narcotics traffickers. So therefore there was a combination of narcotics guerilla activity that was a bit unusual, but that did not happen until I had left.

Q: Had the justice system basically broken down when you were there?

ASENCIO: There were some problems in the sense that they were trying to protect the judges that participated in the trials of narcotics traffickers by cloaking them, making them anonymous so to speak which did not sit very well in some quarters. But generally the administration, both of the administrations that I worked with, were quite pro democratic and relatively liberal in their approach.

Q: did we have any programs going on in Columbia at the time?

ASENCIO: This is one of the things that I urged greatly. I managed to convince the Senator from Florida, Lawton Childes who had been introduced to me by Governor Bob Graham. The narcotics people in the Department were really focused on things in Asia and were paying very little attention to what was going on in Colombia. Lawton Childes introduced an amendment to the appropriations bill that in fact boosted the budget for anti-narcotics activity and specifically gave Colombia the lion's share of what was coming down the pike, which did not make me very popular with the Assistant Secretary for Narcotics Affairs.

Q: How about the DEA. I assume they had a contingent.

ASENCIO: They had a contingent and a very good one. The head of the DEA at the time was a fellow named David Burnett who was first class. I also received great support from Peter Bensinger the Director of DEA in Washington. Since it was such an important activity we would have daily country team meetings at which the topic was narcotics. With the participation of the military, the successful anti-narcotics activity went up exponentially. We were doing all sorts of interesting things. For instance there was a new Anti-narcotics police that had been created at our behest. Through the DEA and the Alcohol Tobacco and Firearms people I managed to get them armed with pistols courtesy of the diplomatic pouch. I was accused of having contributed to the rise in the price of cocaine because it was becoming scarcer. Also I was accused of having contributed to the crime rate, because people who had been in the narcotics trade decided to go around robbing banks and mugging citizens because they were not making money in narcotics. So, for a while there was a very successful run on the narcotics trade.

Q: Well how was your embassy?

ASENCIO: We had a good team. Ted Briggs was my Deputy Chief of Mission, and he went on to become Deputy Assistant Secretary and then later Ambassador to Panama and then to Portugal. Then I had Frank Crigler who had been Ambassador to Somalia. He was the Deputy Chief of Mission when I was kidnapped and ran the embassy for several months.

Q: Well was there much in the way of political activity being reported on by the Embassy?

ASENCIO: Oh yes and we had pretty complete access to the parties and to the Government. I think there was a lot of very good reporting. The interaction with other diplomatic missions was also intense. We had a baseball league in which several embassies participated. On one game we beat the Cubans badly. The Cubans actually had a good team. The Cuban Ambassador came up to me at a cocktail party and said, "The umpire was on the CIA payroll." I said, "No, Mr. Ambassador it is just that subject colonial societies usually take up the games of the Metropolis but they are never as good

as the originals.” We really got into it until the Russian ambassador came over and said “Is there a problem Gentlemen?” We both said, “No, you wouldn’t understand.”

Q: Were the Colombians baseball players?

ASENCIO: Yes, they definitely were. There was a baseball league there, and they used to get some of the rejects from the major leagues coming down there.

Q: Venezuela has exported quite a few. What sort of security did you have?

ASENCIO: I had a detail of former Colombia military. They were fairly good. I had a follow car full of gunmen and a guard riding with me in the Embassy limousine. I was happy with them until I got sacked at the Dominican embassy. I think they stood me in good stead.

Q: Well let’s cover some of the kidnapping. You wrote a book called “Our Man is Inside,” which goes into it in some detail. A lot of people will be looking at this strictly from on the internet. I wonder if you could explain what happened.

ASENCIO: Sure. It was the national day of the Dominican Republic. As you know it is the custom in those situations for ambassadors to go to national day celebrations. In this case it happened to be a noon day affair. Most of the ambassadors were there. I was looking to get out of there fairly early because I had a luncheon engagement. I was actually on my way out the door when I was stopped by the Venezuelan Ambassador who had some questions he wanted to ask me. Suddenly four people walked in and began to shoot up the ceiling. Everybody sort of headed for the floor. I wound up on the floor trying to get under a sofa. Some of my bodyguards outside and the police outside began a shootout. Another eight terrorists came in behind the four. Bullets were coming in through the windows, and it was quite exciting. I always say that I delivered the most sincere act of contrition of my career at that moment. I also had this unusual flash that I remember from Norman Mailer’s book The Naked and the Dead. Most of the subject had trouble controlling their bowels while under fire, and I noted Gee I wasn’t having that problem. It goes to show you that it was based more on his imagination than on his experience. But anyway the terrorists eventually took over the embassy. They got hold of me and made me go over to the door and call for a cease fire. Fortunately the police stopped. My principal body guard had been grazed by a bullet to the head and taken to a hospital. The initial press reaction was that since it was my car that transported him that it was I who was wounded. The Embassy radio broadcasted that the Dominican Embassy has been taken over by terrorists and our man is inside, which is why I titled my book “Our Man is Inside.” Fortunately one of the doctors at the hospital treating the people from my security party was a friend of ours and called my wife to explain to her that it was not me, so she knew I was still alive. After the initial standoff, things quieted down and we tried to establish some sort of negotiating session. It took a couple of days until the Colombian government decided that they would negotiate. This was very important

from the standpoint of the victims of the situation because we were able to influence the terrorist negotiator. We had a negotiating site in a van parked in front of the Dominican Embassy. Two negotiators were from the Foreign Ministry. Then you had the terrorist negotiator who was a woman. We arranged for the Mexican Ambassador to sit in as a representative of the kidnapped. Over time we were able to convince the terrorist negotiator to take her instructions from us instead of her boss which I think was instrumental in getting us out of there in one piece.

Q: What were they after?

ASENCIO: Fifty million dollars and the release of about 360 odd political prisoners.

Q: Was the thought at the time that this could be met?

ASENCIO: The Brazilian ambassador and the Mexican ambassador and I spent a lot of our time convincing the terrorists that there was absolutely no way any government could do this and survive. Even if the President decided to do this, the next day we would be facing the Minister of Defense as the President of the Republic. What they were asking for was just not reasonable or possible. The terrorist commander read us his negotiating instructions. I took him aside after he had met with the group and said, "You can't possibly go into a negotiation with those instructions." He was somewhat taken aback and he said, "Why not?" I said, "Well they are going to say you are a savage and can only be dealt with by force. They are going to come in here and kill you. You said that if anything goes wrong I get shot first. I prefer almost any other solution." He said, "Well can you do better?" I said, "Hey I am a negotiator. This is what I do for a living. I can put your instructions in language that will be acceptable to the other side." He was smart enough to say, "Well, give me a draft." I got the Brazilian and the Mexican Ambassadors and said, "Come along we are going to redraft the terrorist negotiating instructions." The Colombians of course were listening in and when they saw my draft emerge as the basis for the negotiations they praised it. They saw this as a means of convincing the terrorists to go down a more reasonable route. That reinforced the value of our participation in the eyes of the terrorists. We finally worked out a solution that was acceptable to all sides.

Q: Were you working with the kidnappers or were you kind of doing this on the side, or were they part of...

ASENCIO: Oh, we were definitely nose to nose with them all the time. We were living together. The Terrorist negotiator and the Mexican ambassador would go out to the van that was parked in front of the embassy and participate in the negotiation. Then they would come back and the terrorist high command, the two or three top terrorists and the negotiating group, me and the Brazilian and the Mexican Ambassadors, would get together and debrief them as to what had happened and then determine what our next steps should be. So we became part of the negotiating process. Of course, in the van, the

Mexican Ambassador was guiding the terrorist negotiator and this aspect was not discussed during the debriefing.

Q: Well tell me when you are taking a set of ambassadors and put them together from various countries you are going to come up with a very mixed bag of personalities and all. How did your particular group work out?

ASENCIO: Well the Mexican and Brazilian were quite stalwart and very good guys. They were really top flight and extremely helpful in this situation, without them we probably would not have succeeded. There were a couple of others, the Venezuelan sort of flopped out and had to be medicated and eventually was left behind when we flew to Havana as part of the release agreement. The Uruguayan leapt out of a window and got badly hurt but managed to escape. Some of the other ambassadors were supportive. Some of them were sort of paralyzed by the events that were going on so there was a little bit of everything.

Q: What did they do? Was your food catered?

ASENCIO: The Red Cross would bring our food and clean clothes. A couple of times a week, a couple of the hostages would go out and unload the Red Cross truck and bring in the stuff. In fact, that leads me to one of my favorite anecdotes that also goes to your question about the kinds of reactions we were getting from our fellow inmates. The Costa Rican came into the room where I, the Brazilian, Mexican and the Israeli were sitting and discussing next steps. He said, "You know we are very unhappy at the way you guys are handling this situation." He went up to the Mexican and said, "I have been in the diplomatic corps for 32 years and as far as I can see you are just a snot-nosed kid." I said, "Well if you get out of this alive you are going to owe quite a debt to this guy so you are a little bit out of line." He said, "Don't talk to me. I am not speaking for myself. I am representing your colleagues who are all in the library, and we are very unhappy." He marched out of the room, and I thought at the time obviously we had missed something. I said, "Maybe we haven't been keeping them sufficiently informed as to what we are doing. Maybe we should talk to them more." The Mexican chimed in and the Brazilian chimed in and had ideas on how to do this. The Israeli said, "You know there is something fishy going on that I don't understand. Let me go do a little reconnaissance of the terrain." He was a military man. He went off and came back a few minutes later. He said, "You know what is wrong with your tactics and strategy. The problem is that when you and I unloaded the trucks this morning, the French Ambassador had sent us a case of champagne. You and I carried the case in and put it in the closet in this room. Your colleagues out there are convinced that we are in here drinking the champagne and haven't invited them and that is what they are mad about. So the Israeli and I carried the case into the library and dropped it in the middle of the room and flipped them the bird so to speak and went back to business.

Q: Were you concerned that there might be an assault?

ASENCIO: Yes, very definitely. That was one of the overriding things. There was a situation where one of the terrorists dropped a shotgun and it went off. There was a very loud report and we were surrounded by troops. It was the perfect sort of barricade situation. So the Mexican ambassador had to run down to the front door and opened it as the troops began to mass to make an assault and said, "It's all right. It was an accident. No one was hurt." There was another one where one of the female terrorists dropped a hand grenade that rolled down the front staircase. We were expecting it to explode, so we all sort of sat there gritting our teeth waiting for the explosion to happen. Fortunately it did not go off.

Q: Did you feel the Stockholm syndrome sort of creep into this?

ASENCIO: Actually there is quite a bit about that in my book. I am convinced the Stockholm syndrome does not really exist. It seems to apply mostly to females who have sexual problems. It does not seem to apply to hairy old ambassadors. We encountered a situation where the Mexican Ambassador felt he had been insulted by the negotiators. Since we were on the phone with our Governments, he told the Mexican Foreign Ministry what had happened, and they ordered him to withdraw from the negotiation. So there we were, our man who was in fact controlling the negotiations was ordered to withdraw. So I called the Embassy and told the Deputy Chief of Mission to ask the Department to insist that the Mexican Government to permit him to return to the negotiation. He said, "Well the Department isn't very happy with what you are doing anyway and if I tell them this they are going to want to know why." I said, "I can't tell you why." I said, "There is a terrorist listening in on the line." So he said, "Well OK, I will try." So he called back the next day to say again that the Department wanted to know why. "I can't tell you," I replied. "Then they won't do it." So we had to work out a substitute for the Mexican which was difficult. When I was eventually released and flown to Homestead Air Force Base, they had the Department's psychiatrist waiting for me. He said, "We are very interested in the fact that you were insisting in the Mexican ambassador returning to the negotiations and we want to know why." I said, "Well those guys who were sitting 3000 miles away in air conditioned comfort were making decisions based on concepts like the Stockholm syndrome. What had happened was that we had turned the female terrorist negotiator and she was taking instructions from the Mexican Ambassador and me. By removing the Mexican Ambassador you had killed our control." He said, "Oh that had never occurred to us." I said, "Of course not. What had occurred to you and our colleagues is that, after 25 years of service, I had switched and gone over to the other side. That seemed so much more reasonable." He responded, "You are sane." So I was given carte blanche to come back to the Department.

Q: Who were the terrorists?

ASENCIO: During the 20th century there has been only one dictator in Colombia. His name was Gustavo Rojas Pinilla. Very curiously he was very active in building

Colombian infrastructure and was quite popular. He eventually ran for president. The theory is that he actually won but that the political class in Colombia counted the votes and gave the election to somebody else. His political group then went underground and began to oppose the government. This was the M-19.

Q: What did the M-19 stand for?

ASENCIO: April 19 which was the day of the coup.

Q: Could you deal with what the terrorists wanted, or was it pretty much a chance to get some other.

ASENCIO: Well I had to convince them that there was absolutely no possibility of their obtaining prisoners. Again even if the government acceded, the government would fall. This was not to their benefit. If they considered themselves an alternative to the government they had to stop thinking like Chinese bandits and start thinking like politicians. Therefore they would have to seek an agreement based on principles improving the welfare of the underclass, increasing trade, all those things that politicians promote. They were still insisting on some sort of a payoff. The way that was handled by the Colombian government I thought was rather clever. Since the Israeli Ambassador was one of the hostages, the Jewish community in Colombia got together and raised the ransom. The president of Colombia issued a statement saying since the Dominican Embassy was the property of the Dominican Republic, the exchange of money between the Jewish community and the terrorists was not occurring on Colombian soil and could proceed.

Q: Well that is using diplomatic possession in sort of an imaginative way.

ASENCIO: Well the President of Colombia at the time was one of my favorite characters. I mean Julio Cesar Turbay Ayala was a great man. A very subtle figure and had been very good to me. I had complete access to the president at any time of the day. In fact I never had to ask for an appointment. I had his private telephone line. I would just pick up the phone and he would answer personally. I think I was probably setting some kind of record on the usual cables you get from the Department to go to the highest levels of government and get a response on whatever issue was topical at the time. I would do this on the telephone although I never told the Department that. I would be able to answer from the highest levels almost immediately.

Q: Did you find that the terrorists were I mean were they a pretty savvy group?

ASENCIO: No, they were not particularly savvy. The commander had been a teacher in a provincial high school and had run the teacher's union. The negotiator had been a sociologist dealing with Indians. But all the rest were either students or gunmen. There were a couple of students who were quite bright but were not commanding the group. But

as a result of their presence in the group we set up sort of an ambassadorial lecture series, and had topics that they could come in and listen to like they were going to class. I remember at one point they were arguing about the masses and their control by the capitalists. I said to the guy who was making these observations, “What did your daddy do?” He said, “Oh my dad was an admiral.” I said, “My dad was a boat painter. As I go around the group and ask you were all sons and daughters of middle class types. I am the only member of the proletariat here. I think you should take that into consideration.”

Q: Did that seem to resonate with them?

ASENCIO: They thought it was hilarious. It did not get me out obviously. It made me entertaining.

Q: Were these when you have a bunch of not overly educated people or something I would think that you would be quite nervous about what the reaction might be if something went wrong.

ASENCIO: Oh definitely. One of the chapters of my book is the proper use of obscenities in negotiating situations. For instance at one point they had become frustrated with the government’s stand and so the terrorist commander said, “Perhaps we should begin executing the hostages one by one. That would sort of grab their attention real fast.” I did not think that was a particularly desirable approach so I said, “you know, one of the things that every negotiator knows is you draw things out as much as you can so you can gather intelligence and also make the other side nervous and anxious to deal. You portray yourself as a pendejo. The approximate translation of pendejo would be asshole. “What they are doing is presenting themselves as assholes, and you are not catching on which makes you the assholes.” So they thought that was hilarious. They got away from the idea of shooting people.

Q: Did you get any feel for where they were getting their instructions?

ASENCIO: They were not getting instructions from the outside. They had gotten their instructions from the M-19 Command, most of whom were in jail. So they had very fixed instructions that they could not deviate from because they had no way of getting any changes. They brought this to my attention as a problem in a sense that there were some counter offers on the part of the Government that they considered interesting, but they were not in a position to accept them because their instructions were quite firm. I suggested to them that they make a tape of the offers they were considering and ask the Red Cross which would visit us from time to time, to take the tape to the Government. I expected that the tape would be delivered by the military or the police. They would suggest that if the high command did not come up with the right answers that they would be in bad trouble. We would be sure to get a fairly decent response. Much to my surprise, the Red Cross carried the thing in intact and the Government never touched the darn thing. We got an ambiguous and equivocal answer back that was not particularly helpful.

When I got out of captivity and went back to Colombia I had dinner with the President. We had one of those “what were you thinking of when I was thinking of” sort of situations. I said, “Why did you ignore the tape. I thought I was setting it up for you.” He said, “Well this business of copping a plea is an Anglo-Saxon custom. We do not that where the legal system is based on the Napoleonic code. Not only that but I wanted to absolutely establish the fact that I was engaging in these negotiations with clean hands for political purposes. So sorry about that, but that is the way it was going to be.”

Q: I am not quite sure what the Napoleonic code would have had to do with it.

ASENCIO: I cannot imagine but he was very clear on the fact that he realized what I was trying to do but he could not do it.

Q: Well how did your family react to this? This must have been very difficult.

ASENCIO: Well my wife was quite stoic. She had developed a distaste for Jimmy Carter. I discovered afterwards after some research that this is standard for people in that particular situation. You do not take your anger out on the perpetrators. You take it out on the nearest authority figure on your side. The psychiatrists tell me this is quite common. My kids were very concerned. My son at the time was attending West Point and was very well supported by the military. I guess they are used to dealing with these things. The others had to suffer the consequences. My oldest daughter came to Colombia and I had some contact with her, but she came essentially to take care of her mother. The others just sucked it up.

Q: What was the embassy doing while you were inside?

ASENCIO: Well I would talk to them every day and exchange what was going on, but we had a problems. I had sent the Embassy a copy of the negotiating position of the terrorists that we had drafted and asked them to deliver the copy to the embassies of all the countries represented in the kidnapping. Much to my surprise this was not done. When I remonstrated, I was told that the Deputy Chief of Mission had sought the approval of the Department for this particular maneuver, and the Department had decided that it would be unseemly for the Embassy to be circulating terrorist negotiating instructions. I took some umbrage at this as you can imagine. The terrorists became angry enough that I was afraid they might do me harm, but the Brazilian and the Mexican were quite stalwart by insisting that despite the nefarious American embassy they still needed my mental capacity in dealing with the negotiations so everybody just sucked up and took it.

Q: I mean if you were having difficulty with the Department of State could you move over and let the Mexicans carry on?

ASENCIO: Well I suggested that to my Chargé. I said, “I was working under the assumption that I was the Ambassador but obviously I no longer am, and what you did

was not very helpful. I will tell you the result. From now on I am going to be distributing material through the Mexican embassy.”

Q: Well when you came out of this thing did you have a white list and a red list of people you never get incarcerated with again and another one that you would like to have in your fox hole?

ASENCIO: There were obviously some favorites and non-favorites. I recall for instance the Swiss ambassador was quite a character; sat in a corner and barely moved except to go to the john. His wife would send him enormous quantities of food and wine and he would not share. So the Mexican Ambassador then got a bright idea. He had gotten a bottle of wine and we were standing in front of the Swiss’ corner. He said, “Diego, try this wine, it is really great. “ So I tried it and said, “Oh that is really good,” and we went on enthusing about the wine without offering him any to sort of get the idea across. I do not think it worked.

Q: The Swiss kind of play their own game anyway.

ASENCIO: Well actually when the Swiss guy from the Red Cross came in we explained that we were concerned about the Swiss Ambassador because, as I say, he sat in the corner all day and all night long. So he talked to him at some length, and then came back and talked to me and said, “He is all right. He is just Swiss. That is the way we are.”

Q: Well how did the release go?

ASENCIO: We went to the airport in a caravan of busses both the terrorists and the hostages. The Cuban Ambassador had come in to offer us a plane ride to Havana. I accepted on the understanding that we were to go to Havana and nowhere else and the terrorists were to be disarmed. I was afraid, once they got into the air, they would decide they wanted to go to Libya or somewhere else. I explained this to the Cuban ambassador. He was quite amused and said, “Coming from you that is kind of funny, especially your wanting us to disarm the terrorists,” but he understood and he took care of it. So we went off to the airport. The Venezuelan Ambassador was left on the ground because he was ill. The Israeli stayed behind, but everybody else got on the plane. It was an Ilyushin. I forget what number, but a very nice plane. I had my first square meal in a long time and a bottle of Cuban beer. I was feeling quite comfortable until I went to the bathroom, and I discovered that the toilet paper was hanging on a nail that had been nailed through the door of the bathroom. I wondered if they serviced their engines with the same care. But we made it OK. We got to Havana and I held a press conference. I also talked to the Cuban ambassador and said, “I think I really screwed you.” He said, “Well how did you do that?” I said, “I told the press that you were a good guy.” He said, “That is all right, “I screwed you first. Because I told the press that I thought you were OK too.”

Q: It is hard to go back to that period, but I think the first kidnapping was my first ambassador in Yugoslavia who was kidnapped in Brazil, Burk Elbrick. I think the Department has begun to look more closely at how to treat people coming out of hostage crises. Before it had been pretty much OK, you're out. That is it. Don't bother us. We have got other things to worry about.

ASENCIO: There is no question that there was an attempt to reward me for whatever I had undergone. The Department had made that very clear. As a matter of fact, this will lead into your next interview, but I was flown out of Havana into Homestead Air Base and they sent Air Force One down which was an indication I was going to be treated well.

Q: Yeah, that is the president's plane.

ASENCIO: On board were the Director General of the Foreign Service and the Director of Protocol. We sat in the President's compartment discussing things. My wife and friends and family were in the passenger side. One of the things the Director General told me was that they were prepared to send me to an appropriate ambassadorial post as a reward. For instance Argentina was coming up fairly soon, and I was offered the ambassadorship to Argentina.

I was actually taken with that offer because my father as a young orphan had emigrated to Argentina. I still had family there. However one of my friends, Foreign Service officer Betty Swope, was making herself useful passing drinks but mostly to be able to hear what was going on. She was running out and telling my wife what was happening. Betty stood behind the Director General and shook her head no. So then he said well then we have a couple of assistant secretary positions open. How about Consular Affairs? She went running out and stood behind him and gave me a big yes. So I said, "Ok, I will take that." So that is how I became Assistant Secretary for Consular Affairs.

Q: Great. Did you feel that they were treating you with you might say kid gloves for a while? Is this guy going to go nuts on us? Is he a problem?

ASENCIO: I think once the State Department psychiatrist cleared me I was ready for duty.

Q: It is hard to go back to the period because we have dealt with quite a few more cases including our hostages from Iran and all that, but early on, I think all of us were a bit ham handed in this. You felt that you were getting, I mean how did you feel about your handling?

ASENCIO: I told several members of the front office in the Latin American Bureau what I thought of their approach. But I probably was not as tough as I should have been because, obviously, they were trying to make amends. So I bit my tongue mostly but I did

tell them off. I am not sure they paid any attention to me, but I had the satisfaction in any case.

Q: Well here we are sometime removed. What do you think should have been, what improvements, what things should be taken care of do you think when somebody comes out of a situation like that?

ASENCIO: Well obviously having a psychiatrist check the guy is a good policy. There is no question about that. There could be after effects from a situation like that that should be taken into account. I had absolutely no problem with that. The problem I had was the fact that I was actually disregarded while I was inside. I was no longer the Ambassador. I was the hostage. I was not being paid attention to. It turned out that I was the solution to the situation and had to handle it without their support so to speak. So I think that is where I parted company. The fact that they did not take what I was saying seriously because they felt that I was being influenced by my captors or that I was subject to the Stockholm syndrome.

Q: Well another thing just going back to that era. There was a tendency not just at the State Department but other parts of the Government to consider that it was the problem of the hostages. They had done wrong and they were in situations that they should not have gotten themselves in.

ASENCIO: That I would say is the State Department syndrome. It is your candy store and whatever goes wrong is your fault. It does not matter if it is a hurricane or an act of God or a political incident or whatever. Whatever happens is yours and you are looked upon as a pariah when you come back. No question about that. In my case there was a clear attempt to get around that. For instance when Air Force One landed at Andrews Air Force Base, there was Vice President George Mondale and Acting Secretary of State Warren Christopher as well as ambassadors of all the countries represented in the hostage taking and a multi gun salute and a bunch of my friends. Then there was a huge reception waiting for me in the diplomatic entrance of the State Department and a big press conference afterwards, the presenting of the Medal of Valor by the Acting Secretary. So they made a big fuss. It was clear they were trying to break through that particular syndrome.

Q: Well your case was sort of the breaking of the ice on that whole situation.

ASENCIO: I think so. And I think there might have been some political motivation there too. The hostage situation in Teheran was still going on. There was an attempt on the part of the administration to make me out to be a hero as an attempt to show I guess whatever aspect of glory there was to reflect on them. I had the impression even while I was inside that there was underway an attempt to picture me as a hero. What I was concerned about was if they cared whether I was a dead hero or a live hero. I preferred live obviously.

Q: OK, good. Well today is 29 April 2014 with Diego Asencio. Diego we are at the time when you are head of consular security affairs.

ASENCIO: I will try to remember the exact month. It was 1980. I figure it has to be September or thereabouts.

Q: OK, in 1980, and when did you leave it?

ASENCIO: It would have been '83.

Q: You might describe what the job was when you took it over.

ASENCIO: Well essentially it was the bureau that handled the visas, immigration matters, protection of citizenship rights and passports. So it was really an amalgam of three different functions of the bureau divided into three different parts. The most startling thing about the job as I recall it was that shortly after my arrival I called on then Secretary of State Muskie. He informed me right off the barrel that one of the first things I was going to be facing was that the new budget would eliminate a couple of hundred consular positions worldwide. That sort of rocked me a bit. In fact I think it was more like 300 positions worldwide. I obviously argued and did not get very far. This eventually led to the idea of the visa waiver system. It allowed us to permit the entry of people from countries where the rate of fraud was exceptionally low. Most of Europe and parts of Asia, and one of the most interesting things about the Bureau of Consular Affairs job was that the Chairman of the House Judiciary Committee happened to be my congressman, and we knew each other quite well.

Q: Who was that?

ASENCIO: Peter Rodino. So when Muskie hit me with this I ran to Papa and we got the visa waiver law.

Q: Well had this visa waiver law been thought about before?

ASENCIO: I do not know. It might have been but it was something that was definitely needed at that point. Otherwise we would have been in really bad trouble overseas.

Q: Well looking at this as a former consular officer myself with a suspicious eye, did you have a feeling that they were taking the budget cuts out on the consular service?

ASENCIO: Well I certainly argued that, but it did not do any good. I also argued the usual thing like "What do you want me to do? Close down the consular section in London, Paris, Rome and so forth?" It did not move Muskie at all.

Q: By the way just to put this into sort of an historic perspective, you know, for decades the passport office had been run almost as a separate empire by Frances Knight and before that another lady. I can't think of her name but it was almost the assistant secretary really at his or her peril couldn't really touch this empire. How stood it in your time?

ASENCIO: There was one, I would say, challenging development. That is my first season I was faced with the natural increase every summer of passport applications. I recall that television took great glee in showing long lines of people waiting at our Passport Office in Rockefeller Center, and interviewing New Yorkers and Brooklynites who complained about having to spend that length of time in front of the Passport Office. By the second season, I mobilized the entire Bureau to handle the influx of the substantial influx of passport applications during the summer vacation period. I also increased the price of the passport which I think had a beneficial effect. I also was heavily engaged in automating the various passport offices. All of this slowly began to give us the opportunity to handle the sudden influx of applications and the media attention was eliminated.

Q: Well how stood the passport application business when you got there? How did we produce passports?

ASENCIO: This was the beginning of the period when we were photographing all of the previous passport applications in order to make a master file. One of the things that happened was that people taking the photographs were perhaps the lowest possible echelon of the civil service besides my protestations to OMB. We discovered months into the process that the machines were improperly focused so there were several months' effort that went for naught. But this was again part of the attempt to modernize and automate the passport process which probably would have been inevitable but it happened on my watch.

Q: Did you find it was hard to get a handle on the passport application process?

ASENCIO: No. the problem was the numbers. There was not any magic or any great complex problem. The problem was one of volume and one of organizing in order to meet the volume. For instance there were various problems in the automation process. For instance, this was all fairly new to the Department and to us at the time. One of the things we discovered for instance was that when Jimmy Carter decided to play with the thermostats in office buildings it caused people to sweat, but if you did that to computers they stopped working. So we had that problem often. For instance I kept the Philadelphia passport office without computers for the longest period of time because whenever we would have a problem and issuance was stopped at a particular passport office, I would shift production to Philadelphia and put them on overtime. So it was a matter of being nimble, not necessarily of being clever.

Q: Did you find that there were security issues that put you in sort of at odds with the FBI or other law enforcement?

ASENCIO: On passports, no. We did have problems on visas but not on passports. For instance, we had invited Ian Paisley to the United States and he was planning to raise funds for political purposes and contribute substantially to the Irish conflict. The European bureau wanted him to come and we were intent on making certain that we considered all aspects of regulations and the law. It wound up being pushed up to the eighth floor for a decision and my having to debate the issue with the Assistant Secretary for European Affairs and with the then Deputy Secretary Judge Clark. I won, but I think it was mostly because Judge Clark was a Catholic. We were accused by Paisley's coreligionists of being a subset of the Vatican at the State Department particularly since Secretary Haig was also a Catholic.

Q: Well the Irish, the IRA and that whole business, it is still somewhat of a problem.

ASENCIO: Yeah. But while we are discussing consular problems, I guess my secret weapon in terms of the Consular Bureau was the assistance I got from Congressman Peter Rodino, who was extremely helpful to us. I, for instance, wound up consulting with him frequently and very curiously he would not receive me in his office. I had to take him to dinner at an Italian restaurant called Romeo and Juliet. So about once or twice a month I would have dinner with him and we would review what was happening. This was also the time when the hearings began for the Immigration Reform and Control act which was passed eventually in 1987. Rodino was very stalwart in helping us defend it.

Q: Were there any particular sort of passport issues that were out there that needed to be resolved when you took over?

ASENCIO: Only the numbers as I said. I don't recall any substantive issues at the time at all. The only thing on my plate was how to handle administratively the huge numbers we were facing. Of course I would use the fact that we increased fees when I was debating budget issues, both internally in the Executive Branch and on the hill saying we were the only part of the Department of State that made any money.

Q: Nobody was talking about having the State Department take the money earned by consular affairs and turning it over to consular....

ASENCIO: I tried. Nobody would listen to me. It went to the Treasury directly. I would use the argument that if in you cut our budget directly we will in fact make less money. That sometimes had a positive effect. I recall once when they decided to make a percentage cut across the board on everybody's budget and that argument did not sell, but mostly it did.

Q: How about Americans in trouble. Was this sort of a major concern?

ASENCIO: Well of course that was probably the only area where I had any expertise at all. Again that worked reasonably well. I do not recall any great difficulties coming upstairs for a resolution. The big problem that I faced during the years I was there happened to be a with regard to the Immigration Reform and Control act. I was an ex-officio member of the Hesburgh commission that was trying to determine the best approach to the problem. The Chairman of the commission was Father Ted Hesburgh President of Notre Dame University. I also participated in Attorney General William French Smith's Task Force that was reviewing the findings of the Hesburgh commission. I wound up testifying 13 times in 1982, mostly on matters of immigration reform. That was the big sweat during my tenure.

Q: How stood things with prisoners?

ASENCIO: I don't recall any case coming up for my consideration. We obviously had a close working relationship with the consular section at the embassy in Mexico, but no particular case comes to mind. There was not any sort of spectacular newsworthy case at any other post that I can think of.

Q: Well what was your impression of how things stood regarding consular officers within the pecking order of the society of the Foreign Service?

ASENCIO: Bottom of the ladder, no question about it. I spent quite a bit of time sort of bucking people up to not feel any sort of inferiority complex, defending the bureau to other bureaus. For instance I got a call from the Assistant Secretary for Latin America who was complaining about one of the people I used as a liaison sitting in on their staffing meetings because he said the fellow had become belligerent when the Assistant Secretary said that after they had covered all their other needs if they still had funds available they would consider doing a consular conference. My guy had taken some umbrage at this. I told him that I was going to have to punish my representative because he obviously should have punched him on the nose. He did not understand this. Then I remember one of the eighth floor principals had greeted an incoming class of consular officers. They had relayed to me that he had commiserated with them. I called him up and said that I really did not think he should do things like that. He should keep in mind what the hell he was doing and the effect he was having particularly on the youngsters who were full of idealism and ready to go to work. So that would happen occasionally but slowly a lot of that went away. The only time I was not successful was a suit in one of the local federal courts by women officers who were complaining about being discriminated against by the Department of State. The Department sent me up as a witness supposedly to point out the wonderful things we were doing in the consular bureau and there was absolutely no reason to feel put upon if you were assigned there as a woman. Of course the very sharp attorney for the ladies asked me what my cone specialty was, and I had to say that I was a political officer, and she said, "I rest my case."

Q: Well for somebody reading this transcript in later times just to put into context that both Diego and I know what we were talking about. There was an awful lot of calling out. Consular work was considered within the lingo of the State Department non-substantive work. That would drive those of us in consular affairs up the wall. The idea that somehow or other the protection of citizens or helping choose new Americans was not of substance.

ASENCIO: Well my reading on this, and I used this occasionally in speeches, was that this is a throwback to the British Empire when a gentleman did not engage in trade.

Q: Absolutely.

ASENCIO: And we were engaged in trade.

Q: Oh well, and things have changed considerably.

ASENCIO: Yes, I think that is true. If I can get away with flying my flag a little bit, I think I contributed to it.

Q: It was appreciated because it took, in almost all my 30 years in the Foreign Service to see honest to God changes come about in the appreciation of consular work. But how did at the Secretary and at the Assistant Secretary level did you have problems getting recognition?

ASENCIO: Yes and no, depending on the issue. For instance on immigration policy, it was very clear. It was made very clear to me by all three secretaries that I served that my career would prosper if I kept immigration matters away from their doorstep. I did that. I took on full responsibility within the Department for immigration policy and acted as the Department's principal spokesman on the subject. However I recall for instance when an issue with regard to Cuba arose. Suddenly every office in the building seemed to be involved in the debate. We wound up with a huge number of people sitting in the Secretary's office arguing the merits of the case. It had to do with the fact that Secretary Haig basically wanted to nuke Havana, and didn't like the idea of our having a special interest office there. There was a point when we had been ordered to suspend the issuance of visas. After things had settled down, he refused to allow us to resume the issuance of visas. We began to take heat from the Congress. For instance I recall Senator Kennedy was very hot on this issue, and it became a cause célèbre. It was resolved especially when Secretary Shultz took over. He was very quick to remedy the situation.

Q: Secretary Haig really was really sort of ready to take the military option of dealing with Cuba, or is that the impression?

ASENCIO: Yes, if left to his own devices, he might have. But fortunately he did not. He was smart enough not to push it beyond taking a political position. One of my favorite anecdotes had to do with Secretary Haig that I will tell you for the record. We were

having a meeting at the White House with President Reagan. The issue of immigration was supposed to be on the agenda. So he asked me to go along with him. I went to the White House with him in the Secretary's limo. On the way over he was quite irate about the fact that a Washington Post story had appeared to the effect that people who had bypass operations suffer personality changes and citing him as an example. He had done some checking and found that the source had been the Vice President's office, Mr. George Bush himself. So we got to the meeting room and the Secretary was seated to the President's right. The Vice President was in front of the President across the table. I was seated in a chair directly behind the secretary. The attorney general, William French Smith, began discussing the fact that Mariel Cubans with criminal records had been put in American penitentiaries and were causing problems. They were rioting and burning things and doing all sorts of crazy things. Finally Haig looked up and said, "Hey George, you know why all those Cubans are rioting?" He said, "No, Al, why?" He said, "They have all had bypass operations."

Q: The story went around about bypass operations. I remember at the time Haig had his bypass operation and personality changes and all. You know some taking it all later, I had a triple bypass and I can't I mean I didn't undergo any discernible change that anybody mentioned to me. It sort of entered the myth situation. Did we have trouble getting significant officers? I mean most junior officers had a consular tour. I think almost everybody agreed that it was a good idea, but was this under challenge?

ASENCIO: One of the things I was concerned about was that the political and economic cone were mining the available officer pool and taking the very best officers. Theoretically according to some, we were getting those who did not measure up to the standards of the political and economic cones. I certainly argued that case with the personnel people and with the eighth floor to try to make sure that we were not suffering as a result.

Q: How stood with prisoners? Had we reached agreements to be able to exchange prisoners?

ASENCIO: That happened before I came on board. It was working without any major potholes.

Q: It always struck me as a good way to handle it because many of our problems were of people claiming they were not being treated well and that sort of thing.

ASENCIO: My experience with the Mexican prison system was that in certain respects they were probably more humane than ours in the sense that they permitted the conjugal visits and those that did not have a wife were permitted to have professionals taking care of their needs. If in fact you had any sort of income at all you could live very well in a Mexican jail. I recall that the Paymaster of the California State Government got away with a bucket of money and crossed into Mexico. We requested his extradition. I went

and visited him in jail. He was living in a very nicely furnished suite with other prisoners acting as servants and bodyguards. Not everybody had that amount of resources.

Q: Did you have much to do with Alan Simpson from Wyoming? Was he in the senate at the time?

ASENCIO: Absolutely one of my favorite senators.

Q: Do you want to talk about him and his attitude?

ASENCIO: Sure. I first met him on the Hesburgh commission that we were looking into the potential changes in the immigration law. He became my best friend in the Senate. For instance, he appeared in my support before the Foreign Relations Committee when I was nominated as Ambassador to Brazil. I testified before him several times. In fact I have a great anecdote about him that you might not want to use because I have to use the F-bomb.

Q: That is all right.

ASENCIO: This was the last day of testimony on what became The Immigration Reform and Control Act. I remember I was sitting at a witness table which you know is down in a pit and there is a dais with the senators sitting above. The room was full because it was the last day and the CSPAN television cameras were rolling. I could feel all the eyes on the back of my neck. I had a couple of staffers with me. Al Simpson came in waved me up. So I went up to the dais. He whispered to me, "Do you know why the Easter Bunny hides his eggs?" I said, "No, Al, why?" He said "He doesn't want anybody to know he fucks chickens." I sort of chortled and went back to the table. My staff said, "What did he say? Did he offer any deals?" I said, "No, it was a private conversation. But anyway we were pretty close. He was extremely helpful to me and we are still friends.

Q: Were we at that point having sort of all the people who had fled the United States to stay out of the draft because of Vietnam, had that been resolved during the Carter amnesty and all?

ASENCIO: I do not remember any such case coming to my attention. I would not say there was.

Q: Well after three years there, what was up for you?

ASENCIO: Well I wound up being nominated to be Ambassador to Brazil. That was quite an interesting situation. What I had done was I had written a book about my hostage experiences in Colombia, and with the consent and approval and censorship of the Department. But then one of the White House special aides had written something called the White House Diet Book, and the Democrats took over the fact that he was getting

royalties from the book and there was some issue about whether he was authorized to do this, which held up my nomination. What complicated matters was the Brazilians who remembered me from my previous employment didn't understand what was going on about the book, so they figured there had to be something nefarious or notorious going on. There was quite a commentary in the Brazilian press about my nomination. It was a little bit like coming home again. The same people I had dealt with when I was political officer were my main contacts as ambassador. It was an interesting time in the sense that I was there in the transition from the military regime to the civilian government. I visited Brazil for the first time in 1964 just after the revolution. I had gone back in '72 just about the time the Brazilian military began to loosen the ties on the political system. Then had the benefit of going back as ambassador at the time when civilian control was reestablished. From that standpoint historically it was quite a thrill being able to do that.

Q: Well you know having already been in Captured by terrorists in Colombia, and Brazil where back in the 70's had taken Burke Elbrick our ambassador, did you feel a little bit nervous about going to receptions?

ASENCIO: No not at all. I felt very comfortable in Brazil. It was an entirely different situation. Brasilia as you recall, is in the middle of nowhere. Basically you had to go thousands of kilometers on the road or fly in. If you drove in there were checkpoints at the outskirts of the city, so the place was I would say extremely well- guarded. There wasn't any possibility of doing an Elbrick type of operation in Brasilia. When I traveled to other parts of Brazil I went with a full security detail, so I never encountered any threat or any possibility of anything happening.

Q: Well what was the situation politically in Brazil at the time?

ASENCIO: The interesting thing was that they were in the process of electing the first civilian president since 1964. When I got there the election process was in full swing. I had pretty well determined who the next president was going to be, Tancredo Neves. I went to call on him as one of my first official calls. He was the Governor of Minas Gerais and I used my usual approach on him that "Listen, I want to be your friend now because after you are elected everyone will want to be your friend." He said, "If you want to be my friend, what I want is a consular office in Belo Horizonte." I said, "Well let me look into this." I called the Executive Director of the Latin American Bureau. He said, "Well you put in your request and we will look it over and pass it around here. We figure maybe three or four years down the pike." I said, No, I want an office by next Wednesday." Fortunately I had a very sharp administrative officer. He deflected somebody who was on his way to Rio de Janeiro. He rented an office in Belo Horizonte, put the plaque up on the wall and raised the American flag and we had a consulate. This was Jim Weiner. He is a real sharpie. There were celebrations at Belo Horizonte. Would you believe that I even received their Legislature's highest award? It all went beautifully. The end of the story is rather interesting. Shortly before my departure from Brazil and after President Neves died, I got called by the Department saying, for budgetary reasons you have to eliminate

one consulate, and you get to choose which one to eliminate. I said, "Let's eliminate Belo Horizonte." Of course, they called back within an hour saying: "You so and so that place doesn't even exist. So anyway we had a good laugh. So the interesting thing about the inauguration of President Neves was that he became ill before the inauguration and had to be operated on and died. All of this was happening when I had as my house guest, Vice President George H.W. Bush who had come down for the inauguration. The fellow who took over fortunately was someone I had been close to when I was Political Counselor. He was Senator Jose Sarney. It was again like old home week. One of the peculiar incidents that was commented on in the media during the New Year's end of the year ceremony when the diplomatic corps came by and shook the President's hand and that of his wife, was that I shook the President's hand and kissed the cheek of the President's wife. Editorials were written saying how dare I intrude on the dignity of the First Lady. The Presidential Palace had to issue a press release saying that I was a friend of the family and therefore it was okay for me to kiss her.

Q: OK, sure, well let's talk foreign relations. Where stood Brazil on foreign relations when you arrived there?

ASENCIO: There were several problems. One of them happened before my arrival. I think we discussed this at a previous session with you. The Brazilians had come to the conclusion that the special relationship between the United States and Brazil was one-sided. It was all on their side. We really took them for granted and they were not receiving any benefit from the relationship and we were not paying any attention. Truly we were not. They renounced the Joint US-Brazilian Military Agreement that was one of the oldest military agreements in the hemisphere. This caused quite a bit of surprise on the part of particularly the Reagan administration which I do not think really understood why they were doing this. So we began a series of sort of high level visits to try to get them back into the proper frame of mind. The ultimate one was when President Reagan himself came to visit. This all happened before I got there. This was his first trip to Latin America. When he disembarked from the plane, he said, it is very nice to be here in Bolivia. Fortunately, Brazilians have a sense of humor. They thought that was hilarious. Anyway when I got there, there had been a series of special groups negotiating various agreements. There was a trade agreement a military agreement, a political agreement, all sorts of things we were trying to do to replace the old Joint US-Brazilian Military Agreement. Secretary Shultz came to Brazil on a visit as part of the process. Since Secretary Shultz was coming and had been my boss while I was in Consular Affairs, I wanted to make sure that everything went right since all the preparations had been made before I got there. I had them review everything and they put on a whole show for my approval. On one of them they had a performance by a samba school and, particularly, its large drum section. They were explaining, "Now at this point these scantily clad maidens assault the guest of honor". I had visions of the front page of the New York Times with pictures of these ladies wrapped around George Shultz. I said, "Anybody touches the Secretary of State, you guys don't get paid." He said, "OK, if that is the way you want it, we will do it." So the big day arrived, George Shultz came. He went to Rio and

somebody told him about the incident. He came up to me and said, "What is the matter with you? Can't I have any fun?" These agreements were duly signed and celebrated. Then the Brazilians, who can be very crafty, decided to test them to see if in we were serious about this totally new step. So I got called in by the Minister of Defense, and he said, "We would like an ICBM" under the term of the new military agreement. Of course my interpretation of this is that what he was really saying was "Do you really love us? Are you serious? Is this for real?" Of course the decision on an ICBM would go into the bowels of the Pentagon where Richard Perle who was the so-called Prince of Darkness and had never met a Brazilian and knew very little about Brazil was wondering why the hell do they want an ICBM? So they said no. I am convinced what the Brazilians were saying was "Do you really love us?" The response they got was "What did you say your name was honey?" You know it went downhill from there and I think it was probably a pretty good precursor for what is going on now with the relations between the United States and Brazil.

Q: How stood Brazil with its neighbors?

ASENCIO: Well they had taken a lot of flak for being associated with us. For instance Brazil's participation in the invasion of the Dominican Republic during the Lyndon Johnson administration was not unusual. They were the only Latin American country to have an expeditionary force in Italy during World War II. They were also patrolling the Atlantic as part and parcel of their cooperation with the U.S. Navy. We were permitted to establish a U.S. base on the Brazilian coast. They had also done convoy duty during World War I. This cooperation had gone all the way back to the US-Spanish War. They had done everything in their power to enhance their relationship with the United States. One of their ambassadors, Araujo Castro, came up with the doctrine that he saw no particular benefit for Brazil to continue along these lines in whatever political machinations were going on in the rest of Latin America because they were not getting anything from the U.S. relationship. That has probably been the most influential change in Brazilian policy since my time there.

Q: Well you know looking at our relations with our closest ally friend, or whatever you want to call it, Canada, they have sort of staked out relations with Cuba as a way of showing we are different and we are independent and we are not your lap dog. It hasn't turned out very well. The Canadians had not gotten a thing out of it. But did the Brazilians have any areas where they were trying to show how different they were from us?

ASENCIO: At the time NAFTA was being negotiated with Mexico (I got this from the Brazilian side. I have never seen anything to confirm it on the U.S. side), they expressed an interest in having something similar to NAFTA for U.S. Brazilian trade. According to them they were told "we are busy right now, come back when things calm down and also when your economy has improved a bit and we can talk serious business" In other words,

get lost. So what they did was to set up their own free trade area and have been at loggerheads with us over trade policy ever since.

Q: Did it go anywhere?

ASENCIO: Go anywhere?

Q: Yeah, the Brazilian free trade area?

ASENCIO: Oh yes, not only that but they also got close to some of the more radical elements in the hemisphere, not only the Cubans but the Venezuelans and the Ecuadorians. They have in fact progressed economically quite a bit although this year I gather they are having economic difficulty. You read all of the difficulties about the preparations for the Olympics. The last few years their rate of growth had been exceptional. They have in built a substantial middle class that has done rather well.

Q: Well was Brazil at the time you were there the sort of power in the making gasoline out of ethanol and also the sort of orange juice capital of the world.

ASENCIO: Well Ethanol is a real story there. I got along rather well with their Minister of Industry and Commerce. He told me "I am thinking of going to the United States and using this as an opportunity to push the ethanol issue and doing something interesting in terms of the U.S. market." I said, "Well you will have exceptional difficulty with our Commerce Department in the sense that we subsidize the production of corn and the corn people are very strong politically and have a great lobby, contribute to both political parties, and what you will hear from the Secretary of Commerce and the Secretary of Agriculture as you proceed is that they have to protect the corn farmers." Being Brazilian he said, "I will buy the corn crop." I said, "What the hell are you going to do with all that corn?" He said, "What do you care. I will feed it to the hogs. I want to do this ethanol thing." I said, "I will tell you what, as a favor, I am going to not really emphasize why you are going there and I will not say anything about you buying the corn crop. Let's see what happens." So he met with the Secretary of Commerce and of course the secretary immediately came out with corn story. He whipped out his checkbook and said, "How much?" The Secretary did a double take and said, "Let's speak tomorrow and I will give you some idea of what we can do." So he checked with Archer Daniels, Midland, and the next day turned him down. So what could have been in fact a real U.S. Brazilian enterprise and something beneficial to both societies was nipped in the bud for purely protectionist interests.

Q: Well now did Brazil ever seek to ally itself with Mexico as far as two big powers in a way to replace the clout of the United States and all?

ASENCIO: They were more likely to cotton to Argentina. Argentina has always been a sort of stumbling block to the Brazilians. The Brazilian army was created in southern

Brazil to kill Argentines. They have always hated each other until this business about the treaty came up and they began cottoning toward each other. They have improved relations substantially. As far as I am aware, the Brazilians have never showed any deep interest in cottoning up to the Mexicans.

Q: Well how stood Brazil and Argentina when you were there?

ASENCIO: I think I told you the story about the minister of the navy whom I ran into at a cocktail party we were chatting. He said, "Oh incidentally could you get a message to Admiral Zumwalt for me?" I said, "Sure." He said, "Tell him that cruiser he wants us to have, we would be happy to take it, but we don't; have the budget to run it properly. We would need some budgetary assistance." Of course, no one had bothered to tell the State Department that Admiral Zumwalt was giving away a cruiser to the Brazilians. Of course, I sent a message to the Department up all hell broke loose about what the Argentines would think, so the cruiser never arrived.

Q: I always think of way back in the 50's and all when the Soviets gave Indonesia a cruiser. I think it was a Suvorov, and a nice looking cruiser. They made beautiful ships but there it sat getting rustier and rustier and sinking lower in the water over the years. I don't know whether they have ever sold it for scrap or what.

ASENCIO: Those things are expensive to run.

Q: Oh yeah just to keep, not even to run. Just to keep afloat. Well how stood things between Brazil and Chile? Any problems there?

ASENCIO: According to Brazil they got rather heavily involved during the Pinochet-Allende thing. There was certainly a good relationship with Pinochet, not so good with Allende. I recall there was a big meeting in La Paz, Bolivia. I met with some of the Brazilian delegates afterward. They said, "You know this imperialism business gets expensive." There is also a great story. This one really did not happen when I was Ambassador; it happened when I was still the Political Counselor, but I think it should be included in whatever material you put together. During preparations for the Stockholm Environmental Conference, I got called in by the Assistant Secretary for International Organization of the Brazilian Foreign Ministry. I had given him a description our position on the various aspects of the conference. He said: "We are building a dam on the Argentine, Brazilian Paraguayan border. We would like to screw the Argentines at the conference. We have got it all set up and all we want for your delegation to do is leave the room at the appropriate moment and we will take care of everything. Try it out and see what happens." So I did. I received a rather snotty telegram from the Department of State advising that my instructions were to go in and advise them about our positions, not to negotiate changes. So I told him and he said, "OK, I understand." So I was monitoring the news regarding the conference and I noticed that, indeed, the Argentines got screwed. We did not intervene. When the Brazilian delegation came back I asked, "What

happened?” He said, “Well your delegation looked over the situation and saw what was going on and they decided they would go along with us. That is all.” I sent a cable to the Department saying my Brazilian contacts tell me that you played along with them to screw the Argentines. In view of your previous message, can you tell me what happened? I got back a sort of butter melts in your mouth sort of message about, oh no there was no collusion with the Brazilians. There was just a meeting of the minds on policy.

Q: At the time you were there how stood Brazil and the narcotics trade?

ASENCIO: They were helpful. We broke up a Corsican heroin ring that had been operating in the Sao Paulo, Buenos Aires area and were able to extradite some of the people involved. They were quite effective in that regard. Unfortunately some of the guys they had working in that area were some of the same guys that they used for security matters, and they tended to be rather indifferent to human rights or any other rights and were in fact really thuggish and killer types. But I think we had absolute cooperation with them on narcotics.

Q: Did you have problems with the Brazilians on the sort of missionary work in the rain forest and all?

ASENCIO: No, that was a very nicely set up situation there. They were very highly regarded and the Brazilians appreciated their assistance in dealing with the Indian tribes. There were no problems in that area.

Q: OK, today is 7 May 2014 with Diego Asencio. Diego this is sort of a cleanup period. Do you have any particular themes you would like to discuss?

ASENCIO: After I retired I went to work for the Una Chapman Cox Foundation as the Executive Director. The Foundation was designed to help and promote the Foreign Service. I left after a year because I became Chairman of the Commission for the Study of International Migration and Cooperative Economic Development, a body that had been created by the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986. We spent three years looking at the question of how best to resolve the issue of undocumented immigration.

Q: Yeah well let's talk about those shall we?

ASENCIO: Yes, I think so.

Q: Well first on the Cox Foundation, could you describe what the Cox Foundation was and what particular things you felt that you got involved with.

ASENCIO: The formation of the Cox Foundation had a very interesting history. Mrs. Cox was a Texan who had found petroleum on her land and had become wealthy. She had taken a trip around the world, and had gone to India at a time of rioting and other

problems. The people on the boat were asked not to disembark. Being a Texan she decided to do so anyway and she was picked up by the Indian police and put in jail. She was visited by a young Foreign Service officer who was the Protection Officer. He spent the evening with her to keep her company. She was so appreciative of this that she left a substantial sum of money to help the Foreign Service in her will. This was being administered by her attorney, a fellow named Harvie Branscomb. I was engaged in trying to establish a point of liaison with the Department. Also we were promoting the filming of a documentary on the subject of the Foreign Service. We set up a program for Foreign Service officers to have a sabbatical and we set up a prize for Foreign Service officers learning difficult languages. We generally engaged in activities to promote the Foreign Service.

Q: Very good. Well then the committee you served on in immigration was known as the Hesburgh committee.

ASENCIO: No the Hesburgh Commission was established 1980 to look at issues with regard to what eventually became the immigration Control and Reform Act of 1987. The Commission for the Study for International Migration and Cooperative Economic Development was established by the Immigration Reform and Control Act and was designed specifically to look at the issue of how to ameliorate undocumented immigration. It was composed of 12 commissioners, all having some interest in the issue of immigration. For instance Michael Titlebaum, the noted immigration scholar, was a member as was Tony Anaya, former Governor of New Mexico. I hired Skip Enders who used to work for Peter Rodino as an executive assistant, and former FSO Sidney Weintraub as an economic adviser. We published a multi-volume report on the best way to approach our objective. One of the commissioners who happened to be a Congressman mentioned to me that he had been in congress for a number of years and had never read one of these reports himself. They usually hired graduate students to whisper in their ears during hearings. Therefore we should not belabor or worry too much about what the executive summary should say because he didn't expect anybody in the Congress to read the report. That turned out to be prophetic. The report came out; there was an initial splash and nobody ever looked at it again. I was awarded the Director General's cup. I was the guest of honor at a lunch offered by the Undersecretary for Management. At that time he was quite perturbed by the fact that the Commission had recommended that there should be a unified agency dealing with immigration that would include the Immigration and Naturalization Service, the Bureau of Consular Affairs and the Customs Office all combine into a single agency. He took some umbrage at this. We got into an argument during the toast at the luncheon. So I eventually said, "Do you want me to give the Director General's Cup back?" He said, "No, but we may want your ID Badge."

Q: Oh God. Well what was can you talk about this subject of combining everybody dealing with immigration into one organization. I know, I was a consular officer; this was a threat sort of hanging over that it might sort of go back to the Canadian system where the immigrations service handled the whole thing which I didn't like. Obviously on

professional grounds I felt the immigration service were not the right ones to be making judgments

ASENCIO: The feeling among the Commissioners was that there were elements of immigration policy that were distributed among different parts of the government and that there should be some sort of unified governmental approach. The State Department itself had never taken the Consular Service seriously and were derelict in promoting a particular approach to immigration policy. By combining all of the elements within the government that had something to do with immigration at the cabinet or sub-cabinet level, you might get a better focus on immigration policy.

Q: Well how did things develop on that?

ASENCIO: I do not think anyone paid attention to the very good scholarship that we contracted for and included in the report. For instance, there was one particular item that I think is still quite controversial. We had scholars weighing in very heavily on the subject. As societies modernize is the first thing you do is mechanize agriculture and automate industry. It is a stimulant for the elimination of jobs. This promotes outward immigration. So you had a situation we were studying, particularly in Mexico, where as the society modernized, it tended to increase the amount of immigration. On the other hand, as European countries demonstrated historically, as societies reach relatively affluent levels of standards of living, there was a tendency to cut back on immigration. On undocumented immigration in particular, one could foresee that as Mexican society modernizes, eventually there would be a cutback on the amount of immigration to the United States naturally, and not as a result of anything we could do to prevent it or forestall it.

Q: Well you gave the report and then what happened?.

ASENCIO: I went to work as a businessman. I wound up for instance as a consultant to would you believe, McDonald's, and I am talking about the hamburger people.

Q: Well it makes sense. I go to a McDonald's every morning to get my coffee, and I am served mainly by Hispanics.

ASENCIO: One of the substantial difficulties they encountered was in Mexico where they had gone in a relatively big way. The stores had been quite successful. However when they applied for an expansion of their franchise they were informed that the Mexican government was considering asking them to leave. A couple of things happened: there was an error in corporate policy. In the U.S. becoming a McDonald's franchiser, requires about a million dollars. You can find people in the United States who are millionaires who are quite prepared to do whatever the corporate policy requires, like go to Hamburger University, spend some time flipping hamburgers, before they give you your franchise. However, in Mexico it is very difficult to find a millionaire who is

prepared to flip hamburgers. So they found people they thought they were Mexican but they were not. They were Spaniards or Irishmen or Arabs or Jews or whatever who were not seriously considered as Mexicans by the Mexican government. Also one of these guys got the bright idea of putting the Aztec eagle on the tray liners. They took it right off the flag, so a budding Mexican nationalist came by with a camcorder and took pictures of people dribbling ketchup over the Mexican flag. This caused all sorts of havoc. They were of course a non-union shop the day they opened they were picketed. They had all kinds of problems. The embassy was angry with them, and this is when they hired me.

Fortunately I was able to convince the people who controlled foreign investment in Mexico to consider that that McDonald's was prepared to come through with an exceptionally large investment particularly at a time when their economists were considering changing Mexican policy to promote foreign investment in Mexico. So it was put to me at the time are they prepared to advertise that this substantial McDonald's investment is being made because of the New Mexican policy. I said, "Full page in the New York Times?" They said, "That would be nice." I said, "How about some ads in Time Magazine?" They said, "Yes." Anyway it resolved the issue and they now have several hundred stores in Mexico. I also got involved in some other negotiations. I think you would appreciate this. The North American Free Trade Agreement provided for a quota on the importation of potatoes, and McDonald's has a particular potato that they use called the Russet Burbank, which is large and fits their slicing machines and has the right consistency for the kinds of fries they do. But anyway once they met the quota which happened as a result of this expansion they were forced to use Mexican potatoes that were causing problems. So I had to go down and negotiate with the State of Sinaloa potato syndicate a deal whereby for instance we would help them in finding micro-climates that would permit the growing of Russet Burbanks in Mexico. We would also set up a processing plant that would permit them to export Russet Burbanks to other McDonald companies or franchises in other parts of Latin America. This resolved the situation. So I was applying Foreign Service principles to business.

Q: Well who were our men and women in pith helmets digging sticks going out to find the right climate?

ASENCIO: The McDonald's people have specialists in Russet Burbank's and they were also in touch with the producers in Idaho and Canada that sent specialists down to help with the subject.

Q: Did you have much of a problem?

ASENCIO: No, they have been doing very well ever since.

Q: By the way did you sort of as you entered negotiations on this have in your back pocket a place where you were pretty sure you could grow these potatoes?

ASENCIO: Well this was something that I was brought into the home office in Chicago and met with the officers at McDonald's to determine. What would the best approach be? Of course they sent people down with me to represent the corporation. So it was I think a well-planned enterprise. This was not the only place where I wound up having to fight for potatoes. For instance, we discovered that Brazil for instance would not permit the importation of Russet Burbank seed, so I was sent down to Brazil and met with the Minister of Agriculture who fortunately had been a contact of mine when I had been ambassador to Brazil. One of the things I discovered was that all of the foreign potato seed that was coming into Brazil was coming from the Netherlands. They had bribed appropriate levels of people in the Ministry of Agriculture to permit this and to keep out all other seed. Fortunately, they had not bribed the minister. So I told him that I could make him a hero by providing him with information about what was really going on in the seed business. That permitted us to bring down the Dutch monopoly.

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Q: OH boy, diplomacy in the food world is not for sissies.

ASENCIO: Yes, exactly. I also was sent to Chile where the concern about cholera had caused them to ban the sale and the production of lettuce. Of course the McDonald's people are very protective of their recipes for sandwiches and stuff. So again I had to meet with the Minister of Agriculture. I recall a conversation that still sticks in my mind. I said, "Mr. Minister, you don't have cholera in Chile." He looked at me and said, "You see. It works." I had a very difficult time convincing him that this really was not necessary. I also was sent to Venezuela where there was a general strike, and the strikers had attacked one of the McDonald's stores. Again, taking advantage of the fact that I was familiar with things in Venezuela and knew some people directly involved with the unions, I approached them and asked why they had attacked this particular store. They explained this was a general strike and all other businesses had closed except for McDonald's. Then I went to see the McDonald's franchiser. I said, "Why did you have the store open at a time of a general strike?" He said, "Everybody else was closed, so I thought it would be a good time to sell hamburgers." I passed that back on to the corporate headquarters, and they bought the guy out.

Q: Did you get involved in McDonald's in France where you had José Bové tearing down McDonald's stores?

ASENCIO: No they used me strictly for Latin America.

Q: Well McDonald's is firmly in place in Latin America isn't it?

ASENCIO: Very definitely, doing very well.

Q: Were there any sort of gimmicks or something that you had to bring McDonald's in like serving Chile sauce on the side or something that made it a little tastier to the Hispanic taste buds.

ASENCIO: No, the Hispanics ate the stuff up. The only place where as I understand it McDonald's had any trouble establishing a system was Spain. Eventually they broke through there. As I recall even in France, they were doing a land office business. Of course you know the situation in the Soviet Union where they really had to adapt to local conditions. For example McDonald's traditionally outsources practically all of their supplies. This is their corporate policy. This builds up a network of supporters for the business. In the Soviet Union they had the problem where they actually had to set up farms to produce their raw materials. They had to even go so far as to manufacture napkins and menus and stuff. They had to set up a global industrial enterprise to provide all of their industrial material because they could not get them from the local market. Also from time to time they would accumulate such a quantity of rubles they were beginning to warehouse them because the government would only permit them to change them into dollars periodically. One of the things I wound up doing was trying to figure out some way to use those rubles in the Soviet Union. I wound up going to Hollywood and seeing if someone was interested in making a film that could be done locally in the Soviet Union.

Q: Any luck?

ASENCIO: No, no luck.

Q: Well how long did you kept up. Did you get involved with other businesses?

ASENCIO: Well I got involved in a number of other businesses. One of them which would be of interest to you because it has an immigration or consular aspect. I went to work for a company that specialized in helping people get the EB-5 visa. That is the visa that permitted you to get your green card by investing a million dollars in American businesses. I did that for a number of years.

Q: Well did you develop a feel, well obviously you had to doing this, but how did you during this period we are talking about how the immigration system worked or didn't work. What were the real problems?

ASENCIO: We presented the outlines of our proposal for the Immigration Reform and control Act to President Reagan. The only thing he objected to was our concept that we should have some sort of identification system that would identify people that were eligible to work in the United States. This would be a universal ID Card. What became very clear was that this was one of the few things in U.S. political history that unifies both the left and the right against. When Al Simpson and I were presenting this to President Reagan he looked at us and said, "Not on my watch." I tried to argue that one had drivers' licenses and credit cards. He said, "Forget it. I am not going to do it." So I am convinced that a substantial reason why the immigration act failed is that after legalizing the people that were here, we provided no means by which one could have

employers check to determine if someone who was applying for a job was a legal immigrant.

Q: Well did you find in your dealings with Congress that there were areas in Congress obviously California and Arizona and all that were probably more welcoming of immigrant labor. But there were other, the Unions were causing lots of problems.

ASENCIO: One of the things that I am quite bemused by currently is the fact that some of the backers and detractors have changed. At the time I was presumably the point man on selling the immigration reform and control act, I discovered that the editorial room of the Wall Street Journal was promoting the concept that undocumented immigration was good for the economy. I discovered, for instance as we went around the United States and had hearings that places like Texas and California, would have witnesses come up and advocate for the undocumented and they would turn out to be ranchers or farmer, sort of right wing ideologues and enthusiasts. Now it seems to me that things have reversed a bit and the Republicans have come out against immigration reform and the Democrats and the unions who were very strictly against the idea of immigration reform at least now seem to be holding their fire a bit. And it has become an issue between Democrats and Republicans where I think before particularly during the Reagan Administration there was a distinctly Republican approach to immigration that I think has gone by the boards. I think the last evidence we saw of that was the attempt by Senator McCain and Senator Kennedy to come up with some sort of a joint approach.

Q: Yes unfortunately the Republican Party which used to be one of a certain amount of moderation has gotten in to the hands of basically racists, at least it seems to me that a significant part of the party seems to be anti-immigration, anti-black. I don't know, it is unfortunate,

ASENCIO: Well that seems to be changing. Hopefully there are cooler heads that are prevailing and will come up with some sort of a decent reform approach.

Q: Well looking on do you keep your finger on the consular bureau at all?

ASENCIO: Not really because at the time I was doing EB-5, I encountered some opposition within the bureau and I felt it would not be politic for me to maintain my contacts there or to continue to meet with the Assistant Secretary, because I was being accused of making money off the immigration business.

Q: By the way, I don't think I raised the subject before but when you were in charge of the consular bureau, did you run across the problem of visas and passports being sold. It is probably the only commodity that the State Department deals with that may have a monetary value.

ASENCIO: Oh definitely. I do not remember the consul's name but there was a cause célèbre while I was there of somebody-- I think in the Caribbean-- who had been selling visas. I recall when I was in Portugal I discovered that the Vice Consul in Porto had been selling visas. I got involved in the case since the Justice Department was not particularly anxious to prosecute because it seemed to them a low grade case that didn't merit much effort or concern. We had to weigh in heavily with the Department in order to get the Justice Department to take action and take an interest in the case.

Q: Is there any other area you would like to talk about right now?

ASENCIO: I think I have given you a pretty good capsule of what I had in mind and of course I would urge you to take a look at my memoir and see what you think, particularly the parts referring to the Consular Bureau. I also wanted to mention that for many years I was the Founding Executive Director of the U.S.-Spain Council, an association of business, government and cultural leaders. We promoted a closer relationship between the United States and Spain and held annual meetings alternating in each country. At the same time, I was a consultant at the law firm of Becker and Poliakoff, a prominent Florida law firm. In one case I found myself representing the Peruvian Air Force before the Department of State when the Air Force was accused of violating an embargo during a Peruvian-Ecuadorian fracas.

Q: What are you doing now?

ASENCIO: For a couple of years I headed an AID financed anti-corruption unit at the USAID Mission in Mexico City. I have also been lecturing on cruise ships and at other venues in the United States. I am more or less enjoying my retirement; writing books. I wrote a book about my hostage period which was received reasonably well. Now I have published my memoir. So far it was sort of ballyhooed in the Foreign Service Journal about publications by ex-Foreign Service officers, but has not really sold very well. But anyway, my wife has also been writing books. So we have sort of a writer's workshop over here.

Q: How have you gotten involved in politics?

ASENCIO: I did for a while. Shortly after my retirement, the Governor of Florida at the time Lawton Childers who had been very helpful to me when I had been Ambassador to Colombia and was instrumental in making sure that our narcotics activities were well funded, asked me to join the State Government to run something called the Florida international affairs Commission. I was the Executive Director of this particular commission. The idea was to try to standardize Florida's approach to international trade. One of the problems that Florida had always had is that it is a very long peninsula. They tend to be very competitive internally. You get sort of unified state delegations abroad. I received delegations from any number of states in the United States in my posts abroad. With Florida we would have city delegations. We would receive a delegation from

Tampa and another from Jacksonville, and another one from Miami. The ports were particularly bad. The airports were fighting with each other all the time. So presumably what I was trying to do was to bring some sort of a unified approach. It did not work too well. They say the roughest politics are not federal politics but state politics. Academic politics are the worst of all, because they say the stakes are so much smaller. So it was quite a slugging match doing this. I did it for a number of years, and eventually came out with a report that I do not think anybody ever read. I got acutely involved in some of the politics. For instance the Secretary of Commerce of Florida saw me as a potential rival and did everything he could to make my life more difficult including at one point getting my budget eliminated in the Florida Legislature. So I was suddenly in a situation where my commission had no funding. I organized a meeting of all the Cuban legislators and said, "Look at what they are doing to us." The interesting part is that they were all Republicans, and I was working for a Democrat Governor. We got our funding back. I was quite happy about that. It established the fact that I was not to be messed with internally. I took them all out to celebrate and they said, you are not done yet. I said, "What do you mean?" They said, "Well now you have to stop the Commerce Department budget otherwise you are not going to get any respect around here. I said, "Can I do that?" They said, "Sure." We put a hold on the Department of Commerce budget until a few weeks later I got a call from the Governor saying would you mind telling your friends to cut that out. I said, "Would you mind telling your friends not to mess with me."

Q: OK, well Diego I thank you very much and this has been fun.

ASENCIO: OK Stu I hope I did not cause you too much trouble.

Q: No, you haven't at all. I have really enjoyed this. You will be getting this and do talk up our website.

ASENCIO: OK, I will, take care.

End of interview