

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

MARJORIE RANSOM

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy
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INTERVIEW

Q: Today is December 18, 2000. This is an interview with Marjorie Ransom. Could you tell me when and where you were born and something about your family?

RANSOM: I was born in a small village in northern New York: Croghan. 830 was the population. It's near Watertown, New York, about 80 miles northeast of Syracuse, New York. It's in Lewis County, the poorest county in New York State. We were considered part of Appalachia because of the poverty. It flourished at the turn of the century as a lumbering district, and then it went downhill.

I was born in 1938 in my village in an establishment they called the "laying in place."

Q: What about your parents?

RANSOM: My grandfather came from French Switzerland. He was born in a town called Chattel Saint Denis and left there as a boy. He and a bunch of other French Swiss were sold a bill of goods by one of their countrymen. They were told that the agricultural land of northern New York was great for growing and it isn't. It's rocky and hilly and terrible for agriculture. So, he opened up a country store in Croghan. It burned down in 1914, but he rebuilt it and managed to do business. When my grandfather died, my father's siblings got together and held a powwow. He had five brothers and three sisters. I'm sure it was just the men that met to make the important decisions. They decided that my father was the ablest of the sons in business and so they decided that he should take over the store. My father and all but one of his brothers were college graduates.

Q: Really? This is interesting. That is quite unusual for that generation, particularly coming from a small place like that.

RANSOM: I have no idea how my father's family managed to put the money together for college education. I know that the boys went off to school with very little money.

Q: Where did they go to school?

RANSOM: My father's brothers and he all went to Villanova College outside Philadelphia.

Q: So this was a Catholic family.

RANSOM: My family was Catholic. I was half Irish on both sides. My mother grew up in Yonkers, New York, where her father was a lawyer for the New York Railroad. Her mother ran a boarding house. Her mother was French. My mother met my father in Watertown, New York. He proposed after he knew he had to take over the store in my village; he somehow convinced her to marry him and settle in that small village. My mother graduated from Mount St. Vincent College in Yonkers, New York, and worked

until she married. In that village, my parents stood out as college graduates; there weren't many others. My mother never worked again professionally, but she was very active in the community. She started the first library in the town, and she was active in the Girl Scouts and the Red Cross and engaged in a lot of women's activities. She was respected and regarded as a leader among the women in the community.

Q: What was your family name?

RANSOM: My family name was Marilley. It's a French Swiss name.

Q: Did you have brothers and sisters?

RANSOM: I had four older brothers. I was the only girl and the youngest by six years.

Q: Oh, boy.

RANSOM: Yes. My father was 52 when I was born and my mother was 43.

Q: It's almost a village. I assume the general store served a pretty wide area.

RANSOM: The store served a pretty wide area. Our most important customers were farmers; they were Mennonites. There were a lot of Mennonite farmers in that area. It was a cash and carry place. My father extended credit. In addition to groceries, he carried hardware, ammunition, hunting clothes, cloth by the yard, and some pharmaceutical supplies. He had quite an extensive inventory. When he took the store over, it was in debt, but he did well during World War II. He got rid of a lot of the old inventory and managed to send us all to college. My parents lived very simply. Of course, they emphasized education.

Q: Did you find that while you were there the whole family got involved in the store?

RANSOM: We all worked in the store. I was unique among the children because I had to work in both the store and the house. I had to help my mother but I also worked in the store, so I got both experiences. There was a traditional split in male and female roles. My mother waited on her sons, and I was supposed to do so too. That was subject to debate.

Q: Did your brothers have a hard time with you?

RANSOM: I think so. I had a hard time with my brothers, I really did. They were hard to please.

Q: What did your brothers go on to do?

RANSOM: My oldest brother took over the store. My second brother became an engineer and opened his own company in Canada. He married a Canadian. My third brother

became a doctor. My two oldest brothers studied at Villanova. My youngest two brothers studied at Georgetown. The third brother became an internist and he practiced medicine in Watertown, New York. My youngest brother studied law at Georgetown and worked for the General Services Administration, and then the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). He and I are the only two offspring who worked for the government.

Q: It's really a very interesting situation, coming from a small town in a depressed area and yet your parents got all of you through college. Let's talk about early education. What about school?

RANSOM: I went to school for 12 years in the same building, moving from classroom to classroom as I progressed. We had Franciscan nuns; I studied with them for 12 years. The education was very mixed. We had one good teacher in high school who moved away after the third year and then there was not much to study the fourth year, not much left. My parents I know debated sending me away to boarding school, but decided they'd rather keep me at home. Then I went to college. Rather than follow my mother's path, I went to a Catholic college here in Washington, DC, where my aunt and two cousins had studied. Trinity is an all women's college. I studied with sisters of Notre Dame de Namor. I majored in history. I loved history. At the end of my junior year, my best friend was going on a trip to Europe. In those days, the National Student Association sponsored cheap trips for Americans to Europe to make Americans more aware in the world. In my case, it worked. I went to Europe that summer and had a wonderful time. Then in my senior year when, like many other seniors, I had to decide what I was going to do with my life, I went to my advisor, a history professor. She advised me to look into area studies, which was becoming popular at that time. Since my best friend was going to Columbia University to study journalism, I looked at Columbia University. They had five institutes that specialized in different parts of the world. For some reason – believe me, it was not an educated decision – I ended up choosing between Eastern Europe and the Middle East. I really chose the Middle East because I loved ancient Egyptian history. If you studied at one of those institutes, you had to specialize in at least one language. I decided that I would like to pick a language that was spoken in several countries. That turned out to be a very wise decision. I went to my first Arabic class never having talked to an Arab or seen one. But I liked the language and the area. After my first difficult three months with Arabic, I got along. I studied both for a Master's in History and a Certificate in Near and Middle East Studies, which required two years of intensive language study. Towards the end of my studies, I applied to The United States Information Agency (USIA), Peace Corps, and the National Security Agency (NSA). I was accepted by all three and picked USIA.

Q: I want to go back to high school and grammar school. Were you teaching yourself? Did you enjoy reading and that sort of thing? Were you sort of educating yourself?

RANSOM: I liked to read. I don't think I read as much as some people my age might have. We had some books in our house, but not a lot. I don't think anybody in my family read a lot. My mother read Reader's Digest's condensed books. There was always some kind of book around. My father was keenly interested in sports, as were my brothers. If I

wanted to spend any time with my father, I had to do it through sports. He didn't take a lot of interest in what I did. I was expected to get good grades; that was part of family ethos. But, it wasn't an intellectual family. I don't remember having any good role models in high school. My brothers were pretty busy doing their own thing. They were a lot older. I don't remember good role models at that point. I was Valedictorian of my class, and I was the only one of my graduating class who went to college.

Q: Did you feel any pressure at the time to become a nun or anything like that?

RANSOM: I did. I was very shy and in my first year in college it was very hard for me to adjust from the village to college. I decided that year that I wanted to become a nun. It was something that had appealed to me before. It wasn't the nuns in my village I was imitating. I never liked our nuns. There were Franciscan seminarians who trained in Croghan. I kind of admired the contemplative life. It seems preposterous now, but I did apply and was accepted by a Dominican missionary order in Newberg, New York. I had actually started assembling the things that I had to take with me. My parents called me on the phone, which is something they seldom did, at college. I was going to enter the Dominican after my first year of college. My parents wanted me to wait a year. That was very wise on their part. The idea of a vocation was pretty far from my mind by the end of my second year.

Q: One hears in grammar and high school about the strictness of nuns and so on. This would be during the '50s. Were the nuns as strict? Was it a rigid program?

RANSOM: The atmosphere in the town was pretty rigid. As single women in the town in high school, everybody in town kept their eye on you. You can imagine how much gossip there was. Our class was constantly getting into trouble my senior year, because there was nothing to study. There was nothing to really occupy us. I think that only one of the nuns who was teaching us had a college education. I'm not even sure she did. We were beyond them, so there was a lot of tension that last year. Before that, we had a nun who had a doctorate and who was very energetic and taught everything – the sciences, Latin, English – and she kept us very busy. The last year was a very difficult one.

Q: What was Trinity like? You were there from '55- '59?

RANSOM: Yes. I graduated in '59. I found that the nuns were a lot more interesting than the students. The sisters of Notre Dame De Namor have Trinity and one other girls' college. They really are quite broadminded and well educated. Most of the girls were there to find a good husband to marry.

Q: To get the "MRS." Degree.

RANSOM: That's right. And just to sport the big diamond. Junior year was the time that you got your diamond. I wasn't a very good student at Trinity. I became more interested in my studies my third and fourth years. The first two years, for me, were a social adjustment. So, Trinity was a good choice for me. The last two years, I got a very good

education.

Q: How about Washington? Did they turn you loose in Washington at all?

RANSOM: We had hours that we had to be in. We had curfews. During the week, you had to be in at 7:00 pm or something ridiculous. On the weekends, it was something like 11:00 or 11:30. When you were a senior, maybe you could stay out until 12:30. But I found a way around that. My best friends were day students, so I would spend the weekend with them. So, we got around Washington. I wasn't so socially aware. I have tried to remember since what it was like then. We had some African-American students at Trinity and I befriended some of them.

Q: Today what we call "African-Americans" were known then as "Colored" or "Blacks." In other words, these weren't people from Africa?

RANSOM: No, they were Americans. They were American blacks.

Q: What about international affairs? Were you at all following the Cold War events?

RANSOM: I wasn't much aware then. That started later when I went to Columbia.

Q: I take it you weren't overly engaged then intellectually.

RANSOM: No, I wasn't, unfortunately.

Q: You were really fortunate then to go to Columbia. Again, that must have been an adjustment.

RANSOM: Oh, yes. I went from playing hours of bridge to spending hours in the library. I worked my head off at Columbia and loved it.

Q: '59-'62, you were at Columbia. What was being a student like?

RANSOM: The Middle East Institute was tucked away to one side. There were only 35 students when I was there. I would say that I was a minority in that I was interested in getting my certificate and then going out to work. I had no desire for an academic career. Most of the people I studied with were people who intended to become full professors. So, my interest was more in contemporary politics, contemporary relations. I wanted a practical use of the language and that caused a bit of tension. I got a very good grounding in grammar and medieval poetry at Columbia. The grammar was useful later, but not the poetry.

Q: You were in Columbia in New York City, which is probably almost the Jewish capital of the world taking Arabic. Were the tensions between Israel and the Arab world played out at Columbia?

RANSOM: Oh, yes. I met a lot of Arab students and became aware through studies and contacts of the political problems of the Middle East and the lack of understanding among Americans of the Middle East. It was my first exposure.

Q: Between '59 and '62, how was Israel portrayed at the school? Were the teachers siding with the Arab cause?

RANSOM: The professors tried to claim that they were objective, but each professor had his own particular slant on the problems of the area. My academic advisor was J.C. Horowitz, who wrote the book *A Struggle for Palestine*. He was quite pro-Israeli. My economics professor was Charles Issawi. I just read his obituary this morning. He was born in Egypt and was sympathetic to the Arab cause. In both cases, they were presenting me with a documentary history of the issues in the classroom, but it was not always possible to be academic and objective.

Q: Were you tapping into "The New York Times" and finding out what was happening in the Arab world?

RANSOM: I did, but again, I think I was less aware than some of my colleagues. I was very focused on my classes and my daily needs. I also was waking up culturally. I was learning about jazz, visiting museums; I don't think I wasted a minute of those years in New York. I saw everything. But newspapers and the day-to-day tracking of foreign policy, I'm embarrassed to say, came later.

Q: One reaches an awakening time.

When you were taking Arabic studies, because we're Americans, we tend to focus on Palestine-Israel and so on. Was your class looking beyond that? You've got the whole Maghreb and Sudan and Saudi Arabia. Was it all of a whole or was it more focused on the Holy Land?

RANSOM: A lot of it was on Palestine. A lot of it was on Egypt, the Egyptian government and economy.

Q: This was Nasser time.

RANSOM: Nasser was at his height. Of course, I was a great fan of Nasser's before our later posting to Yemen where I had some direct exposure to his government. There was an awful lot to learn. I took two kinds of Arabic. I studied Arabic at night, which was the modern, useful stuff. Lots of other professionals came and studied that. That was very practical. In the daytime, I was studying medieval Arabic with scholars. I was studying Islamic law with Joseph Schacht, one of the great minds on the subject. We were much more in an ivory tower atmosphere than the students who were in the School of International Affairs.

Q: You were being trained to be an academic.

RANSOM: Basically.

Q: I would have thought that medieval Arabic law, Sharia law-

RANSOM: Absolutely basic grounding. I needed that.

Q: I was interviewing Hume Horan this morning and he was talking about Sharia law being put in the Sudan and the problems. I had to deal with it when I was in Saudi Arabia in the Eastern Province at just about the time you were at Columbia. This is not an esoteric thing if you've served in that part of the world.

RANSOM: No, not in any country. If you have Christian minorities, you have a lot of difficulties to deal with.

Q: On the gender side, I wouldn't think that this would be a subject that many women in America, particularly in that era, would have been interested in. You must have been, if not unique... I don't imagine there were many women...

RANSOM: No. When I took my second year of class in medieval Arabic, I was the only woman in the class out of eight. In the night course, there were more, two or three others, out of a class of 15.

Q: What were their interests?

RANSOM: One of them became a lifelong friend of mine, a woman who was Lebanese-American. She came because she wanted to learn the language of her ancestors. There were a couple of men in the class who were connected with oil companies and they were sent to learn Arabic. I met a fascinating Israeli in the class who was in the School of International Affairs but was doing Arabic at night to improve his spoken language. But in the Institute itself, I can only remember one other woman and she was not doing Arabic. She was doing Ottoman Turkish, which was written in Arabic. She must have had some Arabic. Her emphasis was more on Turkish and Central Asian languages.

Q: Were they trying to push you towards an academic career?

RANSOM: Absolutely. You know how people are – they don't pay much attention. I did my requirements and did a bit more Arabic than the requirement. Then I announced that I was leaving. I remember this wonderful scholar, Joseph Schacht, calling me in and saying that they would give me a full scholarship if I stayed to study Turkish: Persian and Ottoman Turkish. He was very hurt when I said, "No," that I wanted to go into the Foreign Service and live and work abroad.

Q: You had been in Washington and Columbia in New York. Was the Foreign Service just a place to use your language or was there anything beyond that that was attractive about the Foreign Service?

RANSOM: I liked the idea of representing the United States to people overseas. I had a very vague idea of what it all involved. But the idea of representing and serving my country was paramount.

Q: Did you have any chance to go in and take the temperature of the United Nations while you were in New York?

RANSOM: I went to the UN and heard some sessions, but nothing much has stayed with me.

Q: Were you getting any input from people who had been in the Foreign Service?

RANSOM: No, I did not. The only people I knew from the Foreign Service were the two people who interviewed me for my real examination.

Q: Why did you pick USIA?

RANSOM: That is a question I really don't know the answer to. I don't have the clearest picture of this, but I think you had to make a decision when you went in to take the written exam because in the afternoon session there was a difference between the Department of State and USIA questions. I was very interested in culture, even though it was not reflected in my studies at Columbia.

Q: So many of us, myself included, were hit with "What do you want to do for the rest of your life" in this odd field. For me, it was just, "Gee, going overseas sounds like fun."

RANSOM: Columbia University sent me abroad. The way they did it was really funny. They had some money from the government somehow and called me in one day and said, "We don't teach spoken Arabic. We realize that. Would you like to go to Lebanon for the summer and learn how to speak Arabic?" I said, "Yes!" They gave me a check, handed it to me. I looked at them and thought, "Well, now what am I going to do?" I went to Dr. Issawi and he said, "Well, you go to this professor at AUB and he will help you." Another woman student who was ahead of me in Arabic had gotten a similar deal. She had a place to go. She had gone to the Middle East before. So, I traveled out to the Middle East with her. That helped a lot. She helped me get something lined up. Through this professor, I was able to arrange a boarding situation with a Lebanese family. I spent three months in Lebanon that summer, some in Beirut, some in Tripoli up in the north, and then some in the mountains in the Maronite village of Bcherri.

Q: What was Beirut like at that time?

RANSOM: It was a lovely, easy place to be. That was 1960.

Q: It had gone through the first civil war. We landed there in 1958.

RANSOM: I lived very near the campus of AUB. The situation that summer was very calm. The city was flourishing. People were visiting. We had a lot of visitors from overseas.

Q: How about Arabic? Was it difficult to speak?

RANSOM: I was hopeless. I had arrived with no knowledge of the language that the Lebanese speak. Fortunately, I was around the corner from a very good bookstore, al Khayyats. I got a couple of excellent books on colloquial Arabic and started teaching myself. This was after I had one year of classical training at Columbia. So, the summer was extremely useful. I would have benefitted a lot more from the summer if I had had more actual preparation before I went. You just don't go out and learn the spoken forms. But that's alright; it helped. I was able to converse by the end of the summer.

Q: Were you able to plug into AUB, get some help there, or at least get people who could point you in the right direction?

RANSOM: The professor I met was not warm and friendly. He turned me over to this family and that was it. So, I had contact with students at AUB, but not the professors. I stayed in Beirut only about three weeks and then went to Tripoli and stayed with another family and then up to the mountains with that family.

Q: Was this the same basic Arabic that they were speaking or were you more into mountain Arabic?

RANSOM: Oh, yes, there were different accents. Some people I couldn't understand at all, especially in the mountains. It depended on the amount of education they had. But I learned an incredible amount culturally. I was the only American around. I was immersed. It was an experience that helped me a lot later working as a single female in the Arab world.

Q: You took the written exam for USIA?

RANSOM: Yes, and the oral.

Q: When was this?

RANSOM: 1962.

Q: Do you recall your oral exam?

RANSOM: I do. I had two male questioners. One was a State Department officer and the other was from USIA. I can't remember their names. The exam lasted about two hours. They were very interested in my background. I think they spent about half the time talking about my life in that village and why I went into the Foreign Service and why I chose Arabic. The State Department officer had served in Iraq and spoke some Arabic.

My Arabic was much better than his, so that boosted my confidence. They asked me some very general questions that were very easy to answer. They asked me about whether or not I could name a number of countries that had arguments over their borders. All I had to do was go from one end of the world to another. They asked me one question that I had difficulty with and it's a question I still have trouble answering. It was to explain the function of the Electoral College.

Q: We're talking now in the year 2000, where we've had a long disputed electoral count.

RANSOM: Today, the votes are being counted in this historic race. They admonished me to learn the Electoral College system and to be able to explain it to a foreign audience. But, they told me at the end of the interview that they thought I would represent the United States well and that I had passed.

Q: Were you getting any sexism about what a woman was doing in this sort of thing?

RANSOM: I got it from my father. My father thought when I went to Columbia University that I was studying French and that I was going to become a French teacher and marry a nice man and settle down and raise children. He only realized at the end of my first year at Columbia when I got this scholarship to go to Lebanon what I was doing. He was very angry, but he let me continue. We all discovered that the Syrian and Lebanese merchants he dealt with were of Arabic origin and spoke Arabic. We were so stupid that we hadn't realized that. When I went to Lebanon I wrote letters the entire summer and worked on the family to tell them what a great place it was and how hospitable people were and to humanize them. He came around.

Q: How about during the exam? Were you getting any questions such as: "Do you think as a woman you will stay in the Foreign Service?"

RANSOM: I don't remember that. I had a very positive experience in the exam and felt as though those two men treated me with respect and courtesy. They were very impressed by the fact that I didn't come from a big Ivy League school. The fact that I came from a village, that I had had to work in my father's store, that I knew the people in that northern community, I knew people from different backgrounds, that all seemed to impress them. I did have problems later.

Q: What happened? Did you have to wait quite a while to get your clearance?

RANSOM: That I just can't remember. I remember that I took the oral exam in the spring, because I had handed in my master's degree thesis on the way to the exam. I felt great. I remember that I went into the September class of that year. Now, I can't imagine how it happened that quickly. I don't know if I've mixed the year that I took the oral. That seems very fast. I hadn't lived overseas. The background check wouldn't take that long, but still, it was very fast.

Q: You came into the Foreign Service in September of '62?

RANSOM: Yes.

Q: How did they train USIA officers in those days? Were you separate?

RANSOM: We had the basic A100 course with our State Department colleagues. I think that was for two months. Then USIA gave us training. Our training was very long. I came in September and didn't go overseas until March. It was too long.

Q: What was your basic A100 course like? What were your fellow officers like?

RANSOM: Some of them are still good friends. They were a mixed bag. Women were the minority. Probably the oldest ones were – I think 30 was the cutoff point at that point. Again, I was still shy. Everybody seemed much more impressive than I was. Some of them were very articulate. There were people from all over the country. There was a State Department officer from Oklahoma City who became a good friend. I think a number of us were idealists. It was a time when people were still interested in serving their country. We had Chuck Vetter, who put us up on stage and tried to embarrass us by acting like an obnoxious foreigner throwing tough questions.

Q: When you got to USIA, you were perhaps the only one who had a solid background in Arabic.

RANSOM: Oh, yes. They thought I was fantastic. When they gave me the language exam, I was one of their weirder students. At Columbia, they taught you excellent grammar but no vocabulary. So, I could look at a paragraph and read it out loud and it would be grammatically correct and I would read it very well, but I didn't have a clue what it meant. We always worked with a dictionary. They never wanted us to bother learning vocabulary. They gave me a 2/2+, which wasn't bad.

Q: In the USIA training, what were they saying you would be doing? How did you see USIA?

RANSOM: In USIA at that time, you were a junior officer for 10 months and worked in the different parts of USIS (U.S. Information Service). You did not do any work in the embassy. My first post was Amman, Jordan. I helped work on an appearance of Duke Ellington and his orchestra. My Public Affairs Officer [PAO] insisted that I teach English, even though I had no training, so that I would learn about English teaching. I did work on scholarships. I was given responsibility for running the scholarship process. I worked on producing television documentary film, newsreel footage on AID (Agency for International Development) programs... I had a terrific PAO, David Nalle, one of the best. He saw to it that I was not plunked in one place and assigned to one officer and got stuck there. He always put me where the action was. There was an Information Officer. There was a Cultural Affairs Officer and an Assistant Cultural Affairs Officer and a Public Affairs Officer. I worked in each section. I also had to act as duty officer in the Embassy. It was one place where I was discriminated against. I took care of that. They

wouldn't let me read the traffic, but they would let me act as duty officer. The only time I got to see any cable traffic was when I was duty officer. So, one night I got a cable that I had a pretty good idea did not require any immediate action, but I woke the DCM up anyway. Since I couldn't see any of the traffic, I was incapable of judgment. After that, I got to read the Embassy traffic.

Q: What was the situation in Amman? You were there from when to when?

RANSOM: March '63 to January '64. There were problems then with the Palestinians.

Q: It was the '67 War that really pushed all the Palestinians into...

RANSOM: By that time, I was in Yemen.

Q: How did you find Amman and the Jordanians?

RANSOM: I loved the Jordanians. I thought they were very easy to communicate with. The fact that the PAO had me teach English was really a good move for me. It meant that I had a class of 18-20 men – these were 18-20 men totally outside the Embassy circle.

Q: What were you getting from your contacts about King Hussein?

RANSOM: I wasn't seeing so many Palestinians. The Palestinians that I saw were not so critical of King Hussein.

Q: How about the Jordanians?

RANSOM: I did know some journalists who were quite critical of the government. They complained about the lack of freedom of expression and opportunity for Palestinians. The Jordanians I saw were not so critical.

Q: Who was the ambassador when you were there?

RANSOM: William Macomber.

Q: He is one of the characters. Although he is not technically Foreign Service, he had a number of assignments. His temper is renowned. Did you ever run across that?

RANSOM: He had a reputation for having a strong temper, but I never saw it. He was very energetic, very active. He was a bachelor when he was there, so it was hard on families. He just worked all the time. He was very involved in sports. He liked all the male members of the embassy to play basketball. I was the most junior person in the entire embassy, but he was interested in what everyone did. I found him to be open and accepting.

Q: Were you picking up attitudes from the officers in the Embassy about Israel at that

time?

RANSOM: There was a lot of concern among people in the Embassy about the condition of the refugee camps. The ambassador took people from the Embassy to play basketball in each one of the camps. I went along and watched the game and saw how the Palestinians lived. That's a long time ago.

Q: I know it is. How about your Arabic? Were you studying it on the side or keeping it up?

RANSOM: I used it. I must have had a tutor. I had some Arab friends who didn't speak English. It was a struggle, but I communicated with them. I couldn't use my Arabic in an official capacity. I was a 2/2+ level at that point. I'm sure I tried to do some reading in Arabic, learning the music.

Q: Did you get involved with the newspapers?

RANSOM: I did less with newspapers and I'm not sure why. I did more cultural work. There was a press section. The FSNs (Foreign Service National, or a local employee of a Foreign Service post) in the press section were older men. I don't think they got out very much. The information officer certainly knew a lot of journalists, but I don't remember meeting them.

Q: Whither in '64?

RANSOM: Bombay, India.

Q: That's a good place to work on your Arabic. You were there from '64 to when?

RANSOM: From January of '64 to March of '65. I became engaged in the fall of '64 and was told that, if I married, I had to leave the Foreign Service. I looked in the regulations and never could find anything that was clearly written down, but I asked the authorities in the Consulate in Bombay and they asked the authorities in the Embassy in New Delhi, because they didn't know themselves. I was instructed that I had to resign to marry.

Q: This is one of the great... scandal is not too bad a term for it. It never was really written down, was it?

RANSOM: No. I knew that other women had done it, that I wasn't the only one. It was part of the mentality of the time. I'm appalled now that I just laid down and did it. I thought it was what had to be done. It's what women did. I wanted to get married. It was terrible. I thought later, "What if the marriage doesn't work and I've given up my career?"

Q: Where did you meet your husband, David? I've interviewed him.

RANSOM: We met studying Arabic in a summer course at Princeton University in 1961. Then we saw each other that summer and saw each other the following summer at Harvard, where we both did Arabic again. Then I went into the Foreign Service and he went into the Marine Corps. We met in August of 1964 in India to decide what we were going to do and we decided to get married.

Q: He was a Foreign Service officer then?

RANSOM: No, he was still a Marine Corps officer. When we married, he was in the Marine Corps and entered the Foreign Service just after we married.

Q: Had he been planning to?

RANSOM: Yes. He had taken the Foreign Service exam and then had persuaded the Department to let him finish his three-year Marine Corps stint. He had prearranged his entry for December '65.

Q: You were in Bombay from January '64 until early '65.

RANSOM: Yes. I was Assistant Information Officer in charge of the audiovisual unit, which meant that I had two film units that went around India and showed movies about the United States. I was also in charge of getting permission from the Indian government for U.S. films to be shown in India.

Q: This was before TV was around.

RANSOM: There was no television.

Q: This must have had a pretty good audience.

RANSOM: They were extremely popular. While I was in Jordan, President Kennedy was assassinated. I was in Beirut on vacation when it happened. I learned about it in Arabic first. I saw the newspapers with a black band all around them and looked at the newspaper and read the news. When I was in India, the film, "Year of Lightning, Year of Drums," came out and was shown to huge audiences in India.

Q: This was a production that talked about Kennedy.

RANSOM: Yes.

Q: Who was the Consul General in Bombay?

RANSOM: Myron Rewinckle.

Q: Was USIA in India in those days under any particular constraints from the Indian government?

RANSOM: Well, our films were subject to scrutiny when they first came to be sure that they didn't violate what the Indian government called the "third country rule." It couldn't be critical of any other country.

Q: Was this a problem?

RANSOM: No. I had a wonderful Indian friend who was in charge of censorship and we never discussed the word "permission." Somehow, things always moved through. I don't remember having any problem with any particular film. It was just a matter of getting the paperwork done.

Q: How did you find the Indians?

RANSOM: I liked them very much. Bombay is a very eclectic city. It is very sophisticated and has a very active art community, music, everything, wonderful museums. It was great.

Q: Did you get involved with the movie industry there?

RANSOM: I did. I became very good friends with the MPA – the American Motion Picture Association – representative there in India and some of the other major American film distributors. I also met a number of Indian film producers. They loved to have me come and look at their movies and would ask my advice. Of course, I knew zilch about movie production, but I saw a lot of Indian movies and gave advice.

Q: Bombay is, next to Hollywood, the second largest producer of films. But there is little carryover from the Indian movie to the United States. There is no market for them here.

RANSOM: It's very hard. A lot of their films are not so interesting. I had seen Satigit Ray's films when I was in college.

Q: Those were Bengali films.

RANSOM: Yes. That's very different from the film producers in Bombay.

Q: They were mainly musical, weren't they?

RANSOM: They were musicals depicting love triangles – the conflict between the two male suitors – while the beautiful heroin swung on a swing covered with flowers, singing.

Q: When you decided to get married to David, were you thinking of still staying in the Foreign Service?

RANSOM: Well, I was fortunate. The minute he got word of his assignment – he entered in December of '65 – we had been married a few months and he was assigned to Yemen.

Days after he got news of his assignment, I got a call from USIA asking me to work for them in Yemen. I couldn't work as an officer, but they hired me at the highest level they could, which was executive assistant. I could work 32 hours a week. That was great. I don't know what I would have done in Yemen if I hadn't worked. I would have gone crazy. So, I ran an English language program in Sanaa.

Q: You were there from when to when?

RANSOM: From sometime in April 1966 to May 1, 1967.

Q: What was Sanaa like?

RANSOM: We were first in Taiz for six months. We were there at a time when we had a chargé d'affaires. Our diplomatic relations were at that level. The Chargé had been instructed to move the Embassy from Taiz to Sanaa and his wife did not want to move, so he refused to move. Everyone in the Embassy wanted to move. Our orders read "Sanaa" when we arrived. So, there was no house for us in Taiz. But the Chargé wouldn't let us move to Sanaa. It was ridiculous. We were caught in the middle of this tension in the Embassy and it took us some time to figure it out. No one was very forthcoming. Sanaa was quite a primitive place. The Egyptians dominated the country at that time. The basic amenities were very few. It was a very difficult place to be. We had a large USAID (U.S. Agency for International Development) mission in Yemen at that time and they were based in Taiz. Taiz was closer to Aden and we were able to get some supplies through Aden, so that made Taiz a little easier to live in. So, Sanaa was tough.

Q: I was just wondering... It's all very nice for the wife to say she's not going to move, but...

RANSOM: We didn't move until the chargé left. He left in August and we moved the next day.

Q: Who was this?

RANSOM: Harlan Clark. Mrs. Clark did not want to move. I must say, I was in Sanaa with her one day. I was up there doing USIS business. The USIS office was in Sanaa. We heard a terrible noise. First of all, I was at USIS and a loudspeaker truck came around announcing that a public execution was going to take place. It was a political execution. The Chargé's wife was up there. She saw the corpse being taken away after the execution, so one can understand her reluctance to move to the city at that time. It was a very difficult place to live. David and I, however, were eager to move, as Sanaa was the seat of government and the center of action.

Q: What was the political situation in Yemen when you got there in '66?

RANSOM: You had a so-called republican government under Salal, but he was really an instrument of the Egyptians. The Egyptians had a large military presence and were

preoccupied with training fighters to fight the British in Sanaa. It was August of 1966 when the Yemen cabinet met and decided to express their distress over what the Egyptian military was doing in Yemen, especially the bad treatment they were giving people in the countryside. They flew off to Cairo to complain to President Nasser. They were sure that he couldn't be aware of what his military was doing in Yemen, but he locked them all up and kept them in prison until the 1967 war was over.

Q: This was at a time when Egypt was reaching out. They had the United Arab Republic and they made a treaty between Syria and Yemen.

RANSOM: The Yemen Arab Republic.

Q: Then that kind of died while you were there?

RANSOM: No. It died when the Egyptians lost the 1967 War. They kept the cabinet locked up in Cairo. There wasn't much the people could do. But there was a civil war going on in Yemen at the time. The royalists were fighting it still and the Saudis supported them. The Egyptians had their spy network and we were watched all the time. Our travel was restricted.

Q: The Egyptians weren't very pleasant, were they?

RANSOM: They were hard to deal with. They really wanted to be friendly. It's their nature. It was hard for them. But no, they made life quite difficult for us. In the end, two AID employees in Taiz were accused of blowing up an Egyptian ammunition dump. The Egyptians controlled the radio in Yemen and broadcast this story to the people. They were encouraging mob action against our people. So, the State Department decided that they could not protect us, because they had gotten no cooperation from the Egyptians or from the Yemenis and so they made the decision to withdraw us all. We all left by May 1, 1964.

Q: What sort of work were you doing while you were there?

RANSOM: I was running the USIS office. It was mainly English teaching, recruiting teachers, running the classes, keeping track of the students, administering exams, and passing out publications. Our activities were fairly restricted. There wasn't a lot we could do.

Q: Was there the divide in Yemen that later became so pronounced between the very hardliner communists and the royalists?

RANSOM: Between the communists in the south and the...

Q: Yes.

RANSOM: When we were there, the British were still in the south. So, the communists

hadn't come in.

Q: Was Aden...

RANSOM: The labor movement in Aden was very active.

Q: There were terrorist acts and things of this nature.

RANSOM: Against the British. The Egyptians were encouraging this.

Q: Was this something you had to be concerned about?

RANSOM: Yes. We flew down to Aden a couple of times to do shopping for the embassy. The British were very much on the defensive. We watched our movements. We didn't like to go into the Crater, which was an area where security was very difficult. We were there one day and someone was shot a half hour or an hour later. In north Yemen, there was fighting between the royalists and the republicans – we would hear explosions and we would see fighting in the mountainsides at night, but we weren't directly affected ourselves.

Q: Did you get involved in sending Yemenis to the United States and that sort of thing?

RANSOM: We must have been sending some. Yes, we would train them. I think the numbers were very small at that point in time.

Q: How about Arabic? How did you find the language?

RANSOM: Arabic was a godsend.

Q: I would imagine so that really couldn't..

RANSOM: There I spoke it all the time. I must have been rusty when I arrived because I got no training before I went.

Q: How did this work? Did USIA take advantage of somebody they could pay a little less or were you getting this, "Well, we'll try to keep you going this way?"

RANSOM: I ended up running the place for four months in between PAOs. But they had replaced the PAO, so I was usually the second person – I was an extra person. They didn't keep me as the only representative there. I think it partly was to keep my hand in, but they definitely needed the help there. Thirty-two hours a week was just about right. I wouldn't have been fully occupied when the PAO was there.

Q: Was Saudi Arabia a presence there at all?

RANSOM: There wasn't much of a Saudi presence in 1966, no. They were not getting

along with the Egyptians.

Q: What were our interests in Yemen at that point?

RANSOM: I'm sure our interests at that point were similar to what they are now, which is the strategic position of Yemen at the southern end of the Red Sea. It's the chokepoint for the traffic from the Suez Canal going down into the Indian Ocean. There is a sizeable number of Yemeni-Americans, so we needed a consular presence. Stability in that part of the world was very important to us because of Saudi Arabia and Oman, the oil rich countries.

Q: Particularly up in the mountains away from the port activities, was it pretty tribal in Sanaa and the surrounding country?

RANSOM: Oh, extremely. Very tribal. Everybody knows what village they're from, what tribe they belong to.

Q: Did you get involved? There is a fairly substantial Yemeni community in the U.S. in New York. When I was in Dhahran, I was issuing visas to Yemenis going to those places. Were you seeing Yemenis who had built up a bit of money coming back and settling down?

RANSOM: We did, especially in the... less in the north, more in the southern part of the country called Hogariyya and in Ibb. You'd be walking through the town looking at this quaint town with mud brick buildings and some Yemeni would come walking by you, wearing a Yemeni skirt and a big jambiya. Then, he'd turn to you and he'd say in a Brooklyn accent, "Hi, how are you?" This guy could have lived in the U.S. for 30 years. Sometimes they would come to the States and didn't have the money to go back and visit. They would just stay here and work and save their money to eventually go back there and settle down.

Q: How about when the AID people were in jail and you were packing people up and pulling out? Did you get involved in that?

RANSOM: Oh, yes. We went from house to house and did inventories. Some people were away when all this was taking place and we had to go and try to help pack up their valuables and pull together what we could. The PAO was away and we had to close up the USIS office and decide what we would take. We took any information that we felt could be used against any of our Yemeni contacts. It was a very tense time. We had five days notice, five days to prepare for departure. We couldn't be sure what was going to happen from minute to minute. The first people we evacuated were those in Taiz, so we had a little longer time in Sanaa, where we had less trouble with the government.

Q: Was it a matter of the government turning hostile?

RANSOM: I think the Egyptian government did not want us watching their activities in

Yemen. They didn't like us there reporting. They had done some things earlier that made it apparent that they wanted to embarrass us and find an excuse to expel us. At the very beginning of this period, we lived on the fourth and fifth floors of a Yemeni skyscraper. A loud knock came down below at the door on the first floor: someone delivering an urgent message in the night. It was a diplomatic note declaring 23 of our people persona non grata (PNG). This was the beginning of the end of our tour. We sat there on the fifth floor and tried to decipher all these names. There were four of us, all students of Arabic, and when we got down to the last name, we could not figure it out. It was the name of an AID employee. Her name was Gwendolyn Whigley.

Q: Not exactly designed for Arabic.

RANSOM: Well, in Arabic, the letter "wow" is a consonant, but also means "and." So, every time we read "wow" in the name, we read "and," instead of realizing that it actually stood for the W's in her name.

Q: So what happened?

RANSOM: As junior officers, we were very excited. We said, "We've got to take this to our Chargé d'Affaires," so we went marching around through the dark, winding, twisted streets of Sanaa to the Chargé's house and knocked on his door late at night. He came to the door, wondering what all the excitement was about. We shared with him the note and he said, "Well, we can take care of this in the morning." So, we were summarily dismissed and sent back. In the morning, he went to the Foreign Ministry to discuss the note and somehow communicated with our government in Washington. I think the decision was made right after that to withdraw us, but it was really in the works already before this happened.

Q: Did you all want to stay or were you glad to get out?

RANSOM: We liked Yemen. Living in Sanaa was like living in "Arabian Nights." It was an absolutely fascinating place to live. There was great esprit among the people in the Embassy. Some of the people we served with are still among our closest friends. Because it was a difficult place, we worked very closely together.

Q: So, you were all pulled out of there. Everybody left?

RANSOM: Yes.

Q: When?

RANSOM: The last planeload left on May 1st, 1967. We chartered an Ethiopian Airlines DC-3 to fly us out. They flew us over to Asmara in Ethiopia, where we had a military base.

Q: Kagnev Station.

RANSOM: Right.

Q: Did you figure this was going to be for a long time?

RANSOM: Well, you couldn't take much out with you. We had no idea what was going to happen, but we knew we weren't going back to Yemen. We had been scheduled for Arabic language training in Beirut in 1968. So, when we got to Asmara, we must have had to wait a few days before we learned what our fate was going to be. We were assigned temporarily to Iran to fill in the time between Yemen and Beirut.

Q: You did that from when to when?

RANSOM: We were in Teheran for eight months, July 1967-March, 1968. We spent some time in Germany beforehand, as David had to have some surgery. So, we were in Iran from July 1967 to roughly March 1968.

Q: What did the June '67 war do to the situation in Yemen that you could monitor?

RANSOM: We were in Germany at that point. Once the war was over, the Egyptians started their withdrawal from Yemen.

Q: Then you went to Teheran.

RANSOM: We were just in Germany for medical care. We were there at the time of the June war.

Q: In Teheran, what were you doing?

RANSOM: In Teheran, by that time, I was expecting our first child. I was unable to get work there. David was given a job in the consular section. He worked as a consular officer for that period of time. We arrived in August and our first child was born at the end of October in Teheran.

Q: How did you find Teheran in those days?

RANSOM: It was a fascinating city.

Q: That's really the "Arabian Nights," isn't it?

RANSOM: Oh, it is. We lived downtown below the Embassy. In those days, in Teheran, you were given a rental allowance and could find your own housing. We managed to save the government and ourselves a little money and found a charming little house, but south of the Embassy rather than way up on the hill in one of those luxurious suburbs.

Q: Today is January 26, 2001. 1968. Arabic language class. Was it a nine-month course?

RANSOM: The course was as long as the department would let us stay. I think I had eight months of study and then I had to drop out for my mother-in-law's visit. When we arrived in Beirut, I was a spouse. At that point in time, the Foreign Service Institute had no full-time language classes for spouses, but we persuaded Haile Smith, the director, and Jim Snow, the linguist, to let me study full-time. They agreed, as long as one of the other students would not object to my being in his class. So, we were tested. As I recall, there were three Foreign Service officers who tested at about the same level – my husband, David; Arthur Houghton; and David Mack. Arthur and I were near the same level. He had no objection to my studying with him. So, they very nicely let me study. I was extremely appreciative. So, I did all that study as a spouse. They couldn't register my score in the end, but they at least told me how I did.

Q: I assume they made a certain mark in the books somewhere.

RANSOM: Yes, I'm recorded. I got a 3/4 and I was very pleased. I went in with a 2/2+. In those days, Beirut was a lovely place to live. We were near the school, which was in the Embassy around the corner from our apartment. There were some other students there who had been there before. Joe Montville was there. There were several others. But we ended up being a very close-knit nucleus – the Houghtons, the Macks, David and myself. David managed to take a course at AUB with Walid Khalidi, but that was really one of the few activities we had outside our language studies. We knew it was a rare opportunity and we made the most of it.

We were supposed to go from Beirut to Jerusalem, but there was some type of downsizing and the position that David was to go into was abolished. Then, we were supposed to go to Jordan. For a whole bunch of reasons, we ended up going instead to Jeddah. But I remember those nine months in Beirut as a really unique opportunity.

Q: How did you find the Arabic program?

RANSOM: I had studied a very classical approach to Arabic at Colombia, where there was a lot of emphasis on grammar and almost none on vocabulary and rapid reading. It was just the reverse in Beirut and it was absolutely what we needed. We were just thrilled. They had the green books of well-prepared language materials. They were relatively new at that point, but I think they're still using them. The materials were good. The teachers were extremely dedicated, and very knowledgeable about the current political situation. It was really an ideal learning environment.

Q: Were you getting any reflection of what was going on in Beirut at the time?

RANSOM: There were some political problems at the time. We lived in a building with a Palestinian manager who often talked to us about the desperate plight of Palestinians in Lebanon at that time. But it was early in the developments that led to the Lebanese Civil

War. We left Beirut in the summer of '69. I think the problems really began to develop the following year.

Q: Yes. It was Black September, too, wasn't it? It had repercussions all throughout the Palestinian community.

You went to Jeddah and were there from when to when?

RANSOM: We stayed there about 14 months. It was roughly from August 1969 to very late 1970.

Q: What was David doing and what were you doing?

RANSOM: When we went to Jeddah, I was pregnant with our second child. David was assigned to the consular section. He was the juniormost officer in the Embassy in Jeddah. I was very busy with one small child and another one on the way. That is when I really experienced what it was like to be a Foreign Service wife. When I arrived, I was told the women I should call on. I think I had my own calling cards. They were wonderful women and I respected them a great deal. Actually, I looked on the diplomatic call, the formality of it, as useful. I got to know these women and they introduced me to other people. It wasn't easy for me to get to know Saudis. So, I went to a lot of tea parties. Andrea and Bill Rugh were in Jeddah at that time. Andrea was a very good friend. We went to endless tea parties. Andrea was interested in anthropology, so she was probably more interested than I was. I was trying to find women who were sufficiently liberated to come and socialize with us with their husbands. I don't think I was very successful in that, but I certainly met a lot of women and got to know the female Saudi society in Jeddah that mixed with western women.

Q: Let's talk about this. This is not a group that is easy to penetrate and you have to be a woman to do it. If you're a working officer, that's not your target. In a way, it was a unique opportunity. What was your impression of the wives of what amounts to the professional class within the Saudi society?

RANSOM: Well, I got to know some women at the university – professors and the woman who ran the university, who was someone I admired. Our best friends in Jeddah were a group of couples who socialized regularly. In this group, there were two Palestinian couples, two Saudi couples, and ourselves. Two of the Saudi wives had studied at the equivalent of a junior college in Alexandria, Egypt. So, they were fairly well educated. One of them had been a champion swimmer. At that time, we had access to an Embassy boat. A very nice way to go swimming in the Red Sea was to go out on the boat into the middle of the sea, several miles from shore. You were out there by yourself and it was totally private. When I talked to this woman, she talked about how she missed swimming and being able to engage in athletic activities. I said, "Well, we have this boat. You can go out and we could pick the group that would be with us and could assure your total privacy. Would you be able to go?" Yes, she said she would be very interested. So, David and I both became quite excited about this opportunity. We

organized a group and got ready to go and went to the boat. Her husband came, but she never appeared. That taught me something early on about interpreting signals. Arabs almost never say “No.” I should not have been surprised that she wouldn’t feel free to do so. There was a veil drawn over their activities. I saw her a lot after that. We just didn’t refer to that incident. She never explained the why or wherefores. There also was a Saudi woman I got to know quite well in Riyadh who was more educated and her husband was a minister in the government. She was much more active, but still, she could only go so far. She would go out wearing a long coat and a scarf over her head. She didn’t veil in those days. She was able to move around town with a car and driver quite freely. But to me, and I was relatively young then, it seemed that the women were surprisingly accepting of the limits that were placed on their lives, even though both of them had studied abroad (one in Egypt and the other in the U.S.). It was fairly frustrating.

I had another Saudi female friend who got a Ph.D. from Columbia University and who came back to Jeddah imagining that she would be able to become the head of the women’s university there, because the woman who was the head of it at that time was Palestinian and not Saudi. This woman came and visited me at home a couple of times. I was very frustrated, however, for when she came she refused to see my husband, even inside the house when no one was around. She absolutely refused. He had to stay totally out of sight in another part of the house.

Another time, a young woman from a very good Saudi family in Jeddah returned from studying in the U.S., full of energy and ideas. She was ready to challenge the system. She told us that she was going to be the first Saudi woman to work in the Foreign Ministry. She was going to do this and that. Then she simply disappeared from sight. We would try to call her and the calls weren’t returned. I met her father at an Embassy function and asked about her. He said, “Oh, she got married a couple of weeks ago to a cousin.” So they had married her off and set her aside.

Q: Did you find that you could talk to these women about events that were happening of the period? Were they following things, listening to the news?

RANSOM: It depended on the women. Those who had studied in the U.S. did follow events and were more interested. The women who studied in Alexandria, Egypt, were much less interested.

Q: Did you ever have problems with the fundamentalists, the religious police?

RANSOM: I think I had one minor encounter with the mutawwa in Riyadh, but not in Jeddah. They just had civilian police at that time. I did find that in Jeddah in the souk, some of the shopkeepers were not very friendly and were sometimes rude. A friend of mine had given me before I went to Jeddah a heavy, dark, drab, cotton dress which was several times too big for me. She said, “You’ll want to wear this when you’re in Jeddah.” I said, “Yuk,” and put it in the back of the closet. One time, I had a particularly unpleasant encounter with a shopkeeper. When I said to him, “Salaamu alaikum” [Peace be with you] he responded: “You can’t say that because you’re not a Muslim.” That was

outrageous and very bad behavior on his part. Then, I pulled out that dress and thought, “Well, maybe I’ll try this.” Another time, I had trouble with a foreign worker following me around the souk and could find no shopkeeper friendly enough to ask for help. So, I thought I’d try this dress. I actually found the dress quite liberating in the souk. I then was treated like a man. I hated wearing it. In fact, I hated the whole idea of such a garment. But it was the only way I could go here and there freely. I was determined to do that, so I used the dress to make it easier.

Q: Separation always has made it very difficult for our American diplomats or other diplomats to penetrate the society.

RANSOM: I never had any difficulty in any country doing my job. People recognized what my job was and they dealt with me on that basis. Socially, it was trickier, but being a woman gave me access to the families of my contacts. I think that it has become a lot easier to get to know Saudis since that time when I was there. There weren’t many U.S. graduates. They were the people that we would naturally have easier intercourse with.

Q: Did you get any feel for how the Saudis were treating people like the Yemenis and the Palestinians?

RANSOM: Oh, terribly. Well, the Yemenis – I have to be fair. The Yemenis were doing quite well. They were shopkeepers. They were allowed to come and go without visas. They had a privileged status. Yemenis did very well there. It was the Pakistanis and the non-Arabs who suffered more.

Q: Was there much of a Palestinian presence there?

RANSOM: We were socializing with Palestinians. I would imagine there were quite a few. These people that we socialized with were on very friendly terms with their Saudi counterparts. It wasn’t bad then.

Q: People had been talking about the Saudi ruling group, saying that it wasn’t going to last. I remember back in the mid- ‘50s being in Dhahran and speculating that maybe in a few years it’s not going to be around. The Soviets disappeared and a lot of other people disappeared and they’re still there. Was there much speculation about this within the American group?

RANSOM: I think there was. The Saudis had some trouble with their military, with the Air Force. But Faisal was King and commanded a certain amount of respect. But, the whole nature of society in Saudi Arabia is so different from any other in the Arab world that it’s hard to imagine that it would continue to survive, especially after they have sent thousands of their young men and some women abroad to study. It’s hard to imagine how it has continued to be such a conservative place.

Q: Did you get involved in conversations about our support of Israel?

RANSOM: Absolutely. Our support of Israel was always an issue with the women.

Q: Was there any solution to this? Did you just sort of sigh and explain the...

RANSOM: I have always tried to explain in the Arab world how foreign policy in the United States is formed and the role of different lobbying groups. It's very difficult to explain it, especially to those who either haven't spent any time in the U.S. or know very little about the nature of our government.

Q: In 1970, you and David left. Where did you go?

RANSOM: In 1970, we returned to the United States.

Q: Around this time, the rules of the Foreign Service changed.

RANSOM: The regulations preventing women from working in the Foreign Service changed in the beginning of 1972. William Macomber was Under Secretary for Management when a group of women from the Women's Action Organization went and called on him. He had not been aware that women officers had to resign when they married. He was outraged. I suppose he put together a study group to decide how to proceed. The decisive memorandum came out in the beginning of '72. Overnight, the status of women changed, both for women officers, for women who had left to marry, and also for women married to officers. When I was in Jeddah, that was the one time when I experienced what it was like to be the wife of a diplomat. Not only did I have to do official calls and entertain, but I had to support the ambassador's wife's effort in supporting local charities. The Embassy in Jeddah did an annual bazaar and all the women had to produce handicrafts. Now, I had never been good at doing handicrafts. I think the wife of the economic officer was the chairman of this particular endeavor. It became clear that you either went to her house and stuffed animals, or you developed your own craft. I got my hands on a magazine that told you how to do batik with crayons. So, I did batik with crayons. I did several sets of cushions. They really turned out amazingly well. It was a typical American article that explained every step of the way. As long as you followed the directions, you got good results. Also, you could put a bit of your own originality into the designs. So, I did all these wonderful cushions and turned them in ahead of time. That was really stupid on my part. The ambassador's wife had a visitor whom she showed all my batik. The visitor loved it and bought it all at a very low price, that made my labor worth less than a dollar an hour. So, then the ambassador's wife asked indirectly if some more batik could be produced. So, there I was again, doing batik while our two children were asleep upstairs, down in the kitchen melting wax for batik. My husband was getting rather short-tempered about all of this. So, the day of the bazaar, when all the women were lined up outside the ambassador's residence to go in, one man was in the line: David Ransom. When the door opened, he ran in and bought all my batik. He missed one, but he got five out of six of my pieces. As he left, he told the ambassador's wife and the DCM's (Deputy Chief of Mission) wife that when there was another bazaar, we would be ready. They weren't happy.

Q: Who was the ambassador?

RANSOM: Hermann Eilts. We had a tremendous respect for Hermann. Helen is just a wonderful woman. She had to do this charity work. We all had to do it. I didn't mind. It was a bit much, however, to have to produce the second time.

Q: Were you able to keep up the Arabic studies?

RANSOM: Yes, and those tea parties were very helpful. I used my Arabic a lot.

Q: I don't know Arabic. Is there a women's Arabic and a man's Arabic?

RANSOM: It wasn't so true in Saudi Arabia because they were well educated. In Yemen, the difference is remarkable. They use different endings and different sounds. Of course, it all depends on the level of education. If you deal with men or women who are educated, they are going to speak a formal Arabic that I can understand. I never could understand the women in Yemen.

Q: What did you go back to in Washington?

RANSOM: By the time we returned to Washington we were expecting our third child. When the memorandum changing the regulations came out I was at home with three children, aged five and under. I called the U.S. Information Agency and asked if I could come back to work, but I wanted to come back part-time. I was told that a diplomat's job is full-time and that there was no way I could come back part-time. So, I bided my time and came back in 1974. By that time, my youngest was three.

Q: How did you find coming back? Were you able to keep in touch with the professional world?

RANSOM: I was very busy and preoccupied with my children, but I did keep in touch. I was active in the Parent-Teachers Association and did a lot of activities that were focused around the children, but I kept in touch with people in my agency. The State Department sent letters to women who had had to leave and invited them to come back, but in USIA they felt no obligation. I had to go through an interview process and I had to work rather hard to get back. The man who interviewed me for a reappointment asked me if I knew how to take stenography. [laughter] He backed down off I told him that was a question he really shouldn't ask me. He realized that that wasn't a proper question.

Q: Were you still in Washington in '74?

RANSOM: Yes.

Q: Aside this interview in which you allowed that you did not take stenography, was it a fairly simple remodeling into the business?

RANSOM: Once I was back in USIA/NEA, I was fine. Bill Rugh was Deputy Director when I came back. I think I had the title of “assistant program officer” and they did permit me to work part-time for the first three or four months. Then there was the question of an assignment overseas. We were ready to go. Personnel always asked us whose assignment took the lead. At that point, it was David’s. Bill Crawford had been named as ambassador to Yemen and he asked David if he would like to be his DCM. David said, “We’re a two-fer now. You’d have to take Marjorie as PAO.” Bill was thrilled to do so. NEA was happy. I can’t remember how the assignments were done and I don’t think it was quite as formal as it is now. Then, Roger Davies was killed in Cyprus and Bill Crawford was assigned to replace him. Tom Scotese was named for Yemen. We didn’t know Tom very well. He was happy to have David, but he said he wasn’t so sure about a tandem couple. We got very nervous, as Tom is Greek-American and his wife did not work. Tom said that he could not agree to take both of us until he had a chance to test us, so he came and stayed with us the weekend before Christmas. It turned out that he was just being funny. As long as we kept the heat turned up in the house and had a large supply of navel oranges to feed him, we were fine.

Q: Is he still around?

RANSOM: No, he retired a long time ago. He lives in Athens. He retired after our second tour in Yemen actually and went into private business.

Q: You were in Yemen from ‘74 to when?

RANSOM: We went out in the summer of ‘75 and were there until ‘78.

Q: You were PAO.

RANSOM: Yes.

Q: What was the state of relations between Yemen and the U.S.? What did Yemen consist of? It kept switching around.

RANSOM: It was just North Yemen. South Yemen was the communist Popular Democratic Republic of Yemen [PDRY].

Q: We didn’t have relations with them.

RANSOM: Correct. When we went to Yemen, Ibrahim Hamdi was the president of the Yemen Communist Republic. We had a large aid program. We had over 100 employees in AID stationed in Sanaa, and a large Peace Corps contingent. My predecessor in USIS had just started a small English teaching program. So, I inherited the English teaching program and expanded it. We had a small Fulbright program. Thanks to a friendly CODEL that came to visit, we were able to expand the Fulbright program from three to 13. We ran the English Language Institute in cooperation with AID. We picked the best of the students for Fulbright scholarships. It was a very successful program. It was a time

of great strife and political turbulence in Yemen. President Ibrahim Hamdi was assassinated in the fall of 1977 and was replaced by General Ghashmi, who was himself killed the following June, 1978.

Q: What was the USIA effort?

RANSOM: Public diplomacy was extremely difficult in Yemen. We were much more successful with television than we were with the newspapers, which nobody read. The papers danced to the tune of the person or the embassy that paid them and we didn't engage in that. We supported the central government, development, women's programs, and, as best we could, stability in the area. We had good relations with Saudi Arabia, their big neighbor to the north. It was very much the peak of the Cold War and the Russians were a very big presence, very active and visible. They were very powerful and had a much stronger relationship with the Yemen government than we had. But it was apparent to the government at that time who the western-educated technocrats were. They were much more effective than those who studied in the East. The Prime Minister and the Minister of Development were both U.S.-trained. So, we worked on a number of public diplomacy issues that were current.

Q: With TV, were you able to put in films and things of that nature?

RANSOM: We were able to place films on TV. Television was new. Whenever we had a speaker or a cultural event, the television people would televise it. We would program our speakers with a small, select group and then have them interviewed on TV for a broad audience. We were able to have a very broad impact.

Q: Looking at Yemen in those days, it would seem that the natural center of all Yemeni activity would be around Aden. But it seemed like you had a truncated northern country. Was Aden that much of a center?

RANSOM: Aden was an economic mess. I'm not sure exactly what you mean.

Q: I was wondering whether you felt that the north of Yemen was sort of a rogue state, that it fit together in its own boundaries and wasn't a group...

RANSOM: Still waiting for the fall of the south... No, I think northern Yemen had been ruled by imams until the early '60s and the center of it was always in the north with the tribes. It was very different from the south. It seemed to us and it is still an isolated, poor country. It is very isolated and very different and is certainly struggling to establish its basic institutions. We had a professor, one of the neo-conservatives at that time, who came to look at the Fulbright program in Yemen in 1977. He couldn't understand why we were giving scholarships to Yemenis and came with the intent of cutting the program. I introduced him to the faculty of the university and he engaged them in conversation. Then I had him speak on the founding father era in the United States and talked to him about how the Yemenis were setting up their basic institutions, as did our founding fathers, (I emphasized that) and how we were playing a very important role in this by

sending leading Yemenis to the United States for study. The Yemenis convinced him that that was absolutely true. He left a big fan and supporter of the Fulbright program.

Q: How did you find being part of a dual team? Were there any problems with this at all?

RANSOM: We were very, very careful in our dealings with our colleagues in the Embassy, David being the DCM and I the PAO. One time, for example, I had some type of argument or difference with AID. They paid a big part of the English teaching program, but I funded the Director of Courses out of my budget. There was some difference over who was going to fund a house for him. David just stayed out of it. That was the best thing he could do. He just said to the Deputy Director of AID, "You settle this with Marjorie. I have nothing to do with this." We had within the country team a natural affinity with the ambassador and became very close friends. We were very careful not to exploit that in any way. I always thought that these tandem assignments worked well when the couple didn't take advantage of their positions over anyone else. We never had any real problems. I think that's because we were sensitive to the benefit we derived from our being married to each other and I heading a government agency and he being in a sense the vice president of the Embassy.

Q: Yemen was basically a tribal society still?

RANSOM: It still is.

Q: You couldn't actually go to a person and have things flow down. Did you have to consider tribal affiliation?

RANSOM: You always had to know who belonged to what tribe and what his obligations and loyalties were and who spoke to whom and who got along with whom. We had always loved entertaining. In Yemen in those days – and this wasn't always true – people would come to your house if you invited them. They really loved being invited. David would have all his contacts – the Foreign Ministry, the businessmen, the heavies – and I would have the writers, the intellectuals, in most places academics and one or two journalists, and we would introduce them to each other. Often, they would never meet otherwise. They were people who would never meet outside this particular setting. It could cause some strange reactions sometimes. One night, we were showing a Marx Brothers film, "A Night at the Opera." The Yemenis just adore that film. We had the Minister of Interior and a U.S. graduate, a young businessman who was my contact, but he was from the old royal family that he thought would be republican. When he met the Minister of Interior, he looked at him and said, "You don't remember me. You put me in jail in that awful underground prison. That's what you did to me." The two of them walked outside and sat in the dark for about 30 minutes talking. We were scared to death and stuck our heads out to see what was happening, but they just sat there, conferred, and talked it through and talked it through until they reached some reconciliation. We never knew when there would be some unexpected encounter in our house.

Q: What were we trying to do other than to make this a viable government?

RANSOM: We had an aid program that was aimed to help one of the poorest countries in the world. Yemen was one of the poorest 25 countries in the world. So, we had an aid program that was designed to help develop the country. We were dedicated to stability in that part of the world. We were devoted to strong relations between neighboring countries. We wanted to secure peaceful transit through the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean.

Q: What was the role of the Saudi government there at that time?

RANSOM: The Saudis had a very strong interest in seeing things go their own way. They had their contacts with the tribal sheikhs and with the central government. The relationship would often start out well with a given individual and it would become more difficult as time went on. I think that was the case with Ibrahim al-Hamdi.

Q: How about the Soviets and the Chinese? Were they doing things there?

RANSOM: The Chinese and the Russians had very large aid programs. The Chinese built some of the major roads. The Russians were heavily engaged in military with the Yemenis. They also sent hundreds of Yemenis to the Soviet Union to study. And the Kuwaitis were heavily involved in aid. The North Koreans were there, but I am not sure what they were really doing.

Q: Did you run across Africans who were studying in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union came out bitterly disappointed because they found that learning Soviet economics is a way that doesn't lead anywhere? They are designed for the socialist command economy.

RANSOM: I was really struck at that time. The number of U.S. and European graduates who were in Yemen was small, but they stood out head and shoulders above those who studied in Eastern Europe or the Soviet Union – less because of the specific knowledge that they gained in the United States than the confidence that they came back with and their willingness to tackle problems in a very flexible way. They were “do it yourself” types. None of the Soviet-trained individuals came back with that kind of demeanor or self-confidence. I would say the British trained were the most like our graduates, but there were French and Italian graduates, too. They made all the difference.

Q: What sort of products was Yemen making?

RANSOM: They must have exported some salt. They hadn't discovered oil. They had some agricultural products. But what they really exported were people. The largest part of their GNP came from Yemenis living abroad. They had huge numbers of Yemenis in Saudi Arabia and in the Gulf. When we were there, the standard of living in Yemen rose dramatically all across the country as a result of the remittances. The workers benefitted directly from the increase in oil prices in 1973. For the first time, they were bringing in water pumps and tractors and all kinds of small household conveniences that dramatically changed the lives in Yemeni villages. It was an exciting time in that sense.

Q: Were you able to travel much or was this kind of dangerous?

RANSOM: We could travel. We took one remarkable journey with Ambassador Tom Pickering, who was U.S. Ambassador to Jordan. He loved to travel and cover great distances. So, we went and joined him in Jeddah and traveled from Jeddah to Sanaa by car through the no man's land between the Saudi and North Yemeni border down through Saddeh into Sanaa, to the consternation of both governments, both of which feared for our safety and security.

Q: Later on, the predilection of kidnaping...

RANSOM: That developed later, the kidnaping of individuals. There were some instances of cars being commandeered in those days. It was a little dicey if you went north of Amran and up toward the Saudi border. It was even less safe to go out into the Jowf, into the east, where a lot of the kidnapings now are taking place. But it was nothing like today. We did it. We would travel in groups.

Q: Did the students who were exchangees, Fulbrights and so on, go back into the government?

RANSOM: Some of the most effective ministers in the government are U.S. graduates today. The Prime Minister is... Some of the best people in the Foreign Ministry... The best people at the university. They have done extremely well, the graduates. Unlike many Arabs from many other countries, the Yemeni students returned to Yemen.

Q: Was there any sort of Yemeni lobby coming out of New York; Youngstown, Ohio; or Detroit?

RANSOM: There are enough Yemenis in the United States to form a lobby, but they just haven't done it.

Q: When I was in Dhahran, we became very much aware of the Yemeni communities in the U.S., especially in Detroit and Youngstown.

RANSOM: And Brooklyn. There is a great restaurant in Brooklyn.

Q: How about with the women? Were you able to observe their role?

RANSOM: Most of the women wore a veil because it was something new and revolutionary for them to be able to be in class with men. They veiled, but they sat right next to men and studied right along with them. The numbers were few. But there was a lot of support from U.S.-trained Yemenis in the government for the development of women. When the Yemenis drew up their first constitution, they wrote it in a way that didn't indicate sex, so it meant that both men and women had the right to vote. I brought in women to talk about women in development. There was a conservative group that tried

to impede women's progress, but the progressives managed to keep the university coed. A small number of women primarily from good families have done quite well.

Q: I was wondering whether you found yourself up against the Islamic fundamentalist male conservatives that didn't like what you were doing and made things difficult for you.

RANSOM: No, I had no trouble at all like that. In fact, I had only been there about a week when the Ministry of Public Works called me. The minister, Ali Abu Il-Rijaal, sent word that he wanted to meet the new PAO who was a woman. I called on him and he wanted me to do everything I could to develop women, to educate them. He sent me to meet with all the women in his family. His attitude was typical of many of the Yemenis I worked with. They were very excited. They were very proud that the U.S. thought enough of Yemen to assign a woman officer to the embassy. They were very supportive. When I had been in Yemen in the '60s that one year that we were there, and we sent our forms off to apply for driver's licenses, I never got a response. This time, mine came back before David's. They treated me as they would treat any man in that job. I was an honorary man.

Q: I take it that when you left there in '78, you came away with a very positive feeling on this?

RANSOM: I loved it. Our daughters did, too.

Q: Were they being taught at home?

RANSOM: No, there was an American school there. There still is, run by the same man. It was an international school, but run by Americans and with an American curriculum. At the time we were there, it probably went up through eighth grade. It now goes through grade 12.

Q: You never got down to Aden or anything like that?

RANSOM: Not in that period. The United States was putting out feelers to South Yemen in 1978. An emissary came from the State Department who came first, fortunately for him, to Sanaa. He came just at the time that the President of North Yemen was assassinated by the South.

Q: You were there during two assassinations. How did that affect your work? What was the initial reaction to the first assassination? What were we doing?

RANSOM: The first time was the worst. It caught everyone totally by surprise. We had no idea who did it or what the motivation was. Yemenis were extremely nervous. We had a lot of responsibility for all the Americans over there, so we had to set up a warden system and keep them informed as best we could of what was happening. I think the Yemenis established a curfew at sundown. There was a lot of uncertainty for some time. But we never felt in danger and we never did draw down. We limited travel by

Americans into Yemen.

Q: Did we come away with any feel about what this is all about, why the assassination?

RANSOM: Yemenis carried out the first assassination; those in the Sanaa streets said it was with Saudi support. The second time, Ghashmi was working with elements in the south to bring about change there. Their plot was discovered and the southerners sent an emissary with a bomb in a briefcase. Ghashmi and the emissary both died from the explosion.

Q: He was trying to upset the southern regime?

RANSOM: Yes.

Q: So they just... Did you have the feeling that you had a hostile regime sitting down to your side there?

RANSOM: Oh, yes.

Q: Was there concern about it moving north? It was a situation where neither side would make much sense to attack the other.

RANSOM: No. The north was so much bigger. The south had much less population. It was a smaller country. There was always concern about their ability to get Soviet and Eastern European weaponry for their overall strength. There were skirmishes on the border. But I don't remember being concerned that they were going to go into all out war with each other.

Q: You left there in '78. Whither?

RANSOM: We came back to the United States. This was really a result of our inability at that time to come up with two joint assignments. So, we came back to Washington. I went to the Near East Office in USIA and David went to NEA at State.

Q: You were in the Near East Office in USIA from when to when this time?

RANSOM: 1978 to... I was desk officer for three years. So, that took up me to '81. I was desk officer first for North Africa and Sudan. The next two years, I was desk officer for Egypt, Jordan, and the West Bank.

Q: The desk in USIA was really quite different than in the State Department, wasn't it? It's not a policy...

RANSOM: It's not a policy-making agent. The office provided program, budget, and logistical support to the posts.

Q: How did you find these three years?

RANSOM: I loved them. You got to know everybody in USIA in all the different offices by coordinating all the efforts abroad. You got to know your State counterparts.

Q: This was during the Carter period. Who was the Director of USIA?

RANSOM: John Reinhardt.

Q: How did you find his regime?

RANSOM: John was always mysterious. People felt he could have been more active. He commanded respect for fairness, but not for innovative programs. I didn't get to know him very well.

Q: What were the major things that you dealt with? Let's start with the North African side.

RANSOM: We had a lot of administrative and personnel issues in our posts in North Africa. 1978-1981. We had an evacuation during that period of time.

Q: That would be '79.

RANSOM: After the hostage taking in Iran, we brought a lot of people back to the U.S. Then we couldn't get those who should have been able to go back to post back. I spent a lot of time on the issues of the evacuees.

Q: The Embassy in Islamabad was attacked.

RANSOM: It was awful.

Q: It was a very difficult time. What do you do with a bunch of people coming back? The Middle East is the one place where when it happens, it happens all over.

RANSOM: We had evacuees from the whole area. Once you withdraw people, it's very hard to get them back. We had spouses who had jobs at post and they lost the jobs. I remember one in particular who was a teacher. They replaced her and she was stuck in the U.S. The allowances for evacuation were running out and her husband was there, while she had many children to look after here. We spent a lot of time trying to facilitate their return, to figure out meaningful ways to do it that would treat all the evacuees equally. It was problematic, because you had different situations in different countries. It was extremely difficult also to put together public diplomacy programs that would have meaning in the area after all these tumultuous events...

Q: I've talked to people like David Mack and others who were vehement in not wanting to be pulled out of their posts when and where there really wasn't much of a threat. But it

was sort of a blanket pulling out.

RANSOM: Treating them all the same.

Q: Yes. Each country was quite different and the threat was different.

RANSOM: That's right.

Q: You mentioned you had Sudan at one point. We had our Ambassador and DCM murdered there in Khartoum. That must have meant that we were treating it very cautiously. That was during the Nixon period, the beginning of the '70s. What was the aftermath of that? Those were Palestinian assassins.

RANSOM: That's right. It was a terrorist group. When I was responsible for Sudan, we had a fairly good-sized public diplomacy program there. We worked closely with the university. We had a Fulbright program. Whether there was an aid presence there at that point in '78, I'm not sure. It was very frustrating being responsible for Sudan because you couldn't talk to Khartoum very easily by telephone.

Q: Was Algeria a problem? Later, the fundamentalists caused it to be a very dangerous place. But it was never a very happy post, was it?

RANSOM: Well, the people we had in Algeria in the later seventies liked it. We had a very large successful English teaching program right near the embassy. When I went there, to mail the post, I lunched with some Algerians from the government. I remember visiting the kasbah. It wasn't a happy place. It was desperately poor. The Algerians were considered dour, but they were very interested certainly in the cultural activities we engaged in. That certainly changed later.

Q: Egypt was... You were there when the Camp David Accords came out. We were putting tremendous effort into Egypt in order to keep them from fighting the Israelis.

RANSOM: Yes. And Sadat had a very logical framework to work with the Israelis.

Q: Sadat was riding high at this point. He was killed shortly after you left, in '81.

RANSOM: When I was responsible for Egypt, we organized a tremendous cultural program with Egypt called Egypt Today that was done in cooperation with the Smithsonian Institution. This was certainly an effort that was meant to bolster a close relationship. It included modern art exhibits, antiquities, movies, costumes, performers, and a whole host of activities. It was very exciting and successful. Jihan Sadat came for the opening event. Charles Wick was the head of USIA at the time.

Q: Wick took over... What was the initial reaction to Charlie Wick becoming director of USIA?

RANSOM: I think there was a lot of opposition in the ranks and a lot of criticism. He was visionary in the way he started our television service and got us moving in video. Wick had a tremendous relationship with President Reagan, which he used to get us all kinds of resources. In retrospect, he probably was one of the most dynamic directors USIA has ever had.

Q: He also could get money, too.

RANSOM: He got resources left and right. He could get access to the White House any time he wanted to. He was a funny little guy. In diplomatic situations, he never acted diplomatic. He made a lot of social gaffs. He had very little interest in foreign policy as such. He wasn't good at discussing the issues. That annoyed several ambassadors, certainly in our part of the world. It was shortsighted of us. Had we been able to look beyond that, we would have been much more appreciative.

Q: How did USIA deal with Israel? It was the same area?

RANSOM: Absolutely.

Q: In a way, it seems almost superfluous to have much of a program in Israel.

RANSOM: We devoted a lot of our effort to normalization. We would try to find ways to bring Arabs and Israelis together in our cultural programs. It was extremely difficult. We would organize multi-regional visitor programs, for example. You had people from all over the world. If a PAO were able to send Arabs on multi-regional programs that Israelis were participating in, they would get double the number of programs that they would otherwise get. It was a great incentive for finding ways to do this. It wasn't easy. A lot of times, it would disrupt other programs that we were doing, but the point was to get Israeli and Arab professionals who had similar interests together in various ways. Some of them did succeed.

Q: You were doing this until '81. Then what happened?

RANSOM: In '81, I became a Jefferson fellow. I had a year of academic study at George Washington University. I chose to do American studies since I had done Middle East studies in graduate school.

Q: What sort of things were you looking at?

RANSOM: American intellectual history, literature, architecture, regionalism (I took a wonderful seminar on regionalism in the United States with Clarence Mondale, Walter's brother), poetry... It was one of the best years of my life.

Q: Was there in USIA an intellectual course going through there more than you might find in the State Department? You were dealing with cultural things, but sometimes people who deal with cultural things can get very much to working on the nuts and bolts

of how to deliver a message and there is not much intellectual engagement.

RANSOM: No, there were a number of people who were very much engaged in different intellectual currents in the United States. I think you had different offices in USIA that dealt with different cultural issues. In those days, we had an office called Arts America, which selected the art and the dance troupes and the type of musical groups that would travel and represent the U.S. I never worked there, but it was an office that people loved to work in.

Q: I would imagine it would be fascinating. While you were dealing with the Arab world as a desk officer, was there much connection with the university community that dealt with the Arab world?

RANSOM: Oh, yes. We went out and attended conferences at different universities and were in touch with professors. We also sent a number of them abroad to address foreign audiences on our behalf. We would bring them into USIA to talk before they went and when they came back.

Q: Did you ever do any off the hand monitoring of how well our exchange programs were working with people from Arab countries here in the United States?

RANSOM: We did that primarily through our posts when they debriefed the grantees when they returned. But we also used NGOs to handle their programs while they were in the U.S. An organization like Amideast, which Bill Rugh heads, did a tremendous job for us in keeping in touch with the students while they were here to be sure that they were getting enrichment programs – home stays with American families – to be sure that they were not doing well just in their studies, but also in the climatization to the United States.

Q: This would bring you up to about '82?

RANSOM: I finished my year at GW in '82 and then I went to the Voice of America [VOA]. I was Deputy Director of the Near East Division at the Voice for a year.

Q: '82-'83.

RANSOM: Yes.

Q: The VOA has always been a very interesting offshoot of the American government. It really is a group of foreigners with a slim top body of Americans and they all have their own agenda. How did you find it?

RANSOM: In the Voice of America, you had a large English language division that was populated by Americans. Then you had the language services in the Language Division. There were English broadcasters who wrote the news and then the language services had to translate it into their languages and get it out. Of course, they did their own “back half” programming, but that was not primarily news. There was a built in tension between the

two, between the English language programs and the language divisions, but never... I suppose in some sense it was healthy to have that kind of tension. The language broadcasters felt a kind of a heavy hand on their programs, especially the news.

Q: Was there a problem with trying to run a program dealing with the Middle East and the Israeli situation?

RANSOM: Sure, and not just Israelis. We would have objections from Arab governments about the programming on Voice of America. They monitored it very carefully. They would react to not only the content of the news broadcasts, but the spokesmen from the U.S. who... And there was always some tension with the State Department over how the Voice handled different situations. The journalists at the VOA felt the need to always present two points of view to be credible journalists, but they also felt that their primary responsibility was to present the news and not the positions of the U.S. government. I'm sure that's a tension that continues in their present structure and source of authority.

Q: How did you find your job?

RANSOM: My job, parts of it were very difficult and parts of it were kind of fun. The division had been run for a number of years by two civil servants and they had been there too long. So, the Director of the Voice brought in two Foreign Service people to kind of shake it up and change it. I was given a mandate to reorganize the Arabic service. I spent all of my time on management issues that had been so badly managed before. So, I was able to reorganize the Arabic service and promote a lot of people and bring in fresh, younger blood. That seemed to revitalize it at the time. They were doing pretty well.

Q: Where were the Arabic speakers from?

RANSOM: We had only one or two Moroccans, a number of Egyptians, Palestinians, one or two Syrians, an Iraqi or two, maybe some Lebanese. I don't remember anyone from the Gulf or any Saudis. I think we just couldn't find them.

Q: By the time you were there, the Iran-Iraq War was on.

RANSOM: Yes. We had tremendous Iranian listenership. We still do.

Q: Did we have to treat that with a certain amount of care? With Iran, there certainly were not good relations. We had just gotten through the hostage crisis and it was not satisfactorily resolved at all. Were we displaying an anti-Iranian bias?

RANSOM: No, I think we had an anti-Iranian bias – depending on who your audience was in Iran. The policy of the U.S. government at that time was not designed to please Iranians. We certainly carried all the policy announcements. It was important that the Iranians understood what our thinking was. On the other programs, we would try – and it was always a challenge – to explain to the audience what the debate was that was going on in the U.S. about policy towards Iran. We would carry those discussions. So, we were

presenting a much broader picture than simply the U.S. government point of view.

Q: During this year, did you find that people at VOA were watching what the BBC Arabic service was doing?

RANSOM: They listened to it every day.

Q: Were we in competition with it? Were we filling in the gaps between?

RANSOM: The BBC was always – and I think still is – quite a challenge to VOA. They felt that they were in competition with the BBC and the BBC was always ahead of them. We used to have annual or semiannual meetings with the head of the BBC Arabic service and exchanged visits. But there was always more competition than cooperation. The BBC in its news programming in the Middle East was always faster with the news. They would go on the basis of one source. The Voice by its rules had to wait until they had two authoritative sources. That rankled them that they had that rule. They were always behind the BBC.

Q: You left there in 1983. This is probably a good place to stop.

In 1983, whither?

RANSOM: Abu Dhabi.

Q: Today is April 12, 2001. We're off to Abu Dhabi. I'm one of the few people who could say I was in Abu Dhabi. I was there back in the late '50s.

RANSOM: What were you doing in the 50s?

Q: I was a vice consul in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia. We had the whole Persian Gulf save Kuwait. I used to travel and do visas and go around and kind of report in Abu Dhabi, Bahrain, and the Trucial States (That was before they became the United Emirates).

How did you get the assignment and how long were you there?

RANSOM: David and I had had one tandem assignment to Yemen from '75-'78 and we were looking for another tandem assignment. So, we were paying close attention to people who were rumored to take ambassadorial positions in the Arab countries so we could go lobby. We learned that the ambassadorial candidate for the United Arab Emirates [UAE] was going to be Quincy Lumsden, Jr., someone David knew quite well. I remember going to call on Quincy. He was in that awkward position which people get into when they know that their name is on the State Department's list. It might well have gone through the White House; I'm not sure. But he certainly had not had his hearings. So, everything that he said was conditioned on his confirmation by the Senate Foreign

Relations Committee. But he welcomed the idea of a tandem couple in the DCM and Public Affairs Officer positions. Both were opening at the same time, which was a minor miracle. It worked. He was confirmed. We went on our second tandem assignment to Abu Dhabi. We had always worked in Arab countries where Arabic was spoken on the street and where Arab civilization had a very strong cultural presence that made its impact on you every day. But I remember, when we went to Abu Dhabi, we went through a big transition. It was the first time we had worked in a wealthy Arab country. It was the first time we had worked in a country where it was difficult on a daily basis to find somebody to speak Arab with. It was a very young country.

Q: When you say a “country,” are we talking about Abu Dhabi? When I was there, it was a sheikhdom. Now we’re talking about it as the capital of the UAE.

RANSOM: Yes, Abu Dhabi is an emirate, but it is the capital of the seven emirates. It was very much and is the capital of a loose federation of emirates. The central government spends a major part of its time focusing on the coalition of emirates and particularly the emirate of Dubai, which is a very economically strong emirate that competes with Abu Dhabi in many ways. There were always delicate negotiations going on on that front. Of course, the UAE became a member of the Gulf Cooperation Council [GCC], which was in its early days when we were there. That is another type of federation of powerful, rich states of which Saudi Arabia is the strongest member. But Abu Dhabi also had to engage in constant negotiations with the members of the GCC to make its will felt. That made it an extremely interesting place to work.

Q: You were there from ‘83 to when?

RANSOM: From ‘83-‘85. It was a differential post because of the strangeness of the working conditions. It was a two-year tour then. Toward the end of our two years, we were ready to extend for another year. It really took us as Arabists a year to get used to the Emirates, but we then became quite enthusiastic about it and wanted to stay a third year. We left because we got another interesting tandem assignment.

Q: How did you find this different?

RANSOM: The natives of the Emirates comprised roughly 15% of the total population. The workers that you came into daily contact with were not from the Emirates. They were foreign. In many cases, certainly the blue-collar workers were not Arabs. They were primarily from South Asia, from India, and they didn’t speak Arabic. They spoke Urdu or Hindi. We could not communicate with them except in English. For us, that was a source of some frustration. The radio broadcasts often were in other languages. It was a tremendous challenge for everybody in the embassy to get to know people who were naïveté’s of the UAE. Many of our important inter-locators were advisors to the government and not themselves natives – often Arabs, but not natives. That was a daily challenge. I finally figured out in my own work that my best vehicle for getting to know people from the Emirates was to find out who had studied in the U.S. and to find a way to connect with them through their studies. Also, in a country as small as the United Arab

Emirates, the number of people who really were powerful was quite small and there was a lot of competition with other diplomats for their attention. It was always a challenge to find areas of common interest with the people who were powerful. One of their favorite pastimes was going hunting with falcons. It's not an interest that any of us were born with. So, I think we had to develop some new skills. It didn't happen overnight. It took us about a year.

Q: As PAO, you are supposed to reach out. Did you aim strictly at the UAE people as far as your target or did you figure that the guest workers there were also people with whom you might want to keep in contact?

RANSOM: Our target audience was, we had a few, but we in the media field dealt with several expatriates, primarily Arabs – I remember a Bahraini editor in particular – but also a South Asian or two in the English language media. On the university side, in the academic area, our primary dealings were with expatriate professors. There were almost no UAE professors. My primary target was a member of the ruling family who was the chancellor of the university. He was my most interesting contact and was someone that the ambassador was kind enough to let me deal with directly. He was a young sheikh, much younger than I was, probably in his late 20s, and was seized with the responsibility of developing a university that would be a federal institution to bring together the youth of the seven emirates. He was a fascinating person to deal with.

In the media area, also two UAE brothers in Sharjah owned the newspaper that was my biggest challenge, but the editor and the real power in the newspaper was a Palestinian.

My list of UAE contacts was surprisingly small and certainly had the smallest native content of any country I ever worked in.

Q: What were we trying to do in the UAE?

RANSOM: In terms of the media, the challenge was to encourage accurate news coverage of issues involving U.S. policy towards the area and also to get the U.S. point of view across. It was a considerable challenge. My two biggest problem newspapers were the *El Ittihad* in Abu Dhabi, which was really run by the Bahraini editor, and the *Al Khaleej* newspaper in Sharjah, which was and is still extremely critical of the U.S.

On the academic side, we were pleased that many people from the UAE went to study in the U.S. One of our big challenges was to do all we could to make sure they studied in reputable institutions. There are a number of fly-by-night American universities that advertise easy degrees and try to attract students. Of course, you walk a very sensitive line between – you have to be careful how you couch your criticism of these institutions. That's something we struggled with always. And working with the university. We were interested in seeing them develop academic excellence. I was keen to have this young chancellor experience... He was educated himself in the UK. I was anxious to have him experience the excellence of American institutions and the variety of programs and techniques that we offer. I think I did so.

Q: Were you able to get a visitor pass for him?

RANSOM: The visitor grant I got for him gave me early gray hairs. I tried on several occasions to persuade him to go to the United States. We talked about the kinds of things he could do and where he could visit. He just kept kind of putting me off. Then he saw me at a diplomatic reception and said he wanted to go to the United States in one week – would I please take care of the trip for him? I persuaded him to wait 10 days and we put together the most extraordinary visit imaginable. But it was unbelievably complicated and challenging.

Q: Did you find that when you were able to tap the ruling group there, were they knowledgeable about the U.S. or did they look more to Europe?

RANSOM: They were more comfortable with Europe and especially more comfortable with the British. But the challenge with the ruling elite was to develop a relationship where they would be frank with you. We sent Sheikh Nahayan to the United States. He changed his itinerary several times. He took his own airplane and then he decided to take the Concorde. He changed his point of entry into the United States on two days' notice. I only learned after he embarked on this trip to the U.S. that his previous trip had been disastrous. He had gone into the U.S., entered through New York as an ordinary citizen, and for some reason aroused the suspicions of the customs officials, who treated him very badly. He had vowed then never to return to the United States. Then he asks me to arrange a trip on the spur of the moment for him, and never tells me of this previous experience. It was only through the diligence of some people in USIA who worked on the weekend that I was able to arrange a reception committee for him in New York, because he was supposed to come in through Washington, DC. The problem was lack of communication in general, an inability to plan ahead.

Q: Did you find our relations with Israel were a constant burr in your saddle on news accounts?

RANSOM: I think that the Arab-Israeli issue was always a factor, but it was not something that you talked about or thought about every day. It would depend on events at the time, what was going on. We have a very good relationship with the UAE and many areas of common concern, such as Iran across the Gulf. But there were a number of Palestinians living in the UAE at that time and they were very sympathetic and still are to the cause. So, it was an important issue, but not always the overriding issue.

Q: What about Iran? We didn't have relations with Iran. This wasn't that long after the Iran-Iraq War was on, was it?

RANSOM: Yes. Their relationship with Iran is a very complicated one. They have a large number of citizens of the Emirates of Iranian origin. The distance across the Gulf is very close. They had good reason to be concerned about them, but they were not as openly critical of Iran as they became later. They were very happy to have Iran engaged in a war

with Iraq. That's the only thing that one gets in the Gulf in general. They're very happy to have these two giants occupied with each other, rather than focusing on the little gulf states. But they had the problem of the islands with Iran, Tunb and Abu Moosa.

Q: At that time, were we doing anything as far as basing supplies or anything like that in the area?

RANSOM: In the area we were, but we were not prepositioning any weaponry in the UAE. One of our goals while I was there was to increase the frequency of ship visits. We had ship visits both in Dubai and in Abu Dhabi. We were able to increase the publicity of these ship visits and had some receptions on board. That was a new move in our relationship.

Q: How was living in Abu Dhabi?

RANSOM: Oh, living was very comfortable. Living was very easy for expatriates. There was a very active social life and a lot of parties, but nobody from the UAE – it was primarily expatriates.

Q: Did you find yourself in competition or scrambling with the other embassies to make UAE contacts?

RANSOM: Oh, we were in competition absolutely. But there were some tricks to it. It took me a while to learn them. We would invite people from the UAE for dinner. We would try to invite people who knew each other and we would tell them who was coming so they would feel comfortable and we would invite them in small groups. But the trick – and I learned this one day by walking into our ambassador's office – we were quite chagrined to find that Quincey and Helen Lumsden had considerable success in getting people from the UAE to come to their house. I walked in to see the ambassador one morning and found that he was very busily engaged on the telephone. He finally confessed to me that he was calling every UAE guest that was invited to his house that night. That is what he did for every single function he had. He would invite them seven or 10 days before, but then he would call them several times before the dinner and absolutely the day of to remind them. They had large extended families and lots of family obligations, no matter who they were, so they tended to react to the last invitation they got. It was very labor intensive.

Q: As you made these contacts, were they meaningful dialogues? Was there much interest in what we were concerned about?

RANSOM: I think there was considerable concern about U.S. policy towards the Gulf and towards the UAE in particular. One of my most successful public diplomacy programs involved new technology. It was probably my second WorldNet. It was a televised telephone interview with Geoffrey Kemp, who was the Middle East person on the National Security Council at the time. The dialogue was with three key advisors to the government. They were all from the UAE, but two of them were advisory and one was in

an important position on his own. They had a wonderful dialogue with him. He presented U.S. policy toward the UAE and then they left the dialogue with cassettes in their hands, which they took immediately to the ruling family. A day or so later, we were able to make a televised copy available to them. They absolutely loved it. The entire transcript was published in the newspaper. Excerpts were put on TV. The beauty of using that kind of technology was the way we were able to personalize U.S. policy towards the UAE specifically.

Q: Did we have a library there?

RANSOM: We had only a library of student counseling materials and a wealth of material on special training and educational courses in the U.S. That's what they were interested in. We could do online information searches for any of them who wanted that kind of thing, but it was primarily student counseling at that point. After all, that was 1983 and they discovered oil in 1971. Their wealth was 12 years old. So, they didn't have an educated base that would call on such materials.

Q: What was your impression of the relations with Saudi Arabia? There had been at one point a big dispute over the Buraimi Oasis back in my day, in the '50s. Obviously, Saudi Arabia is the big boy on the block. How did things go there?

RANSOM: The relationship was very delicate. The border issue had not been settled when we were there. We could drive into Buraimi from UAE. There was not a separate territory. They were certainly the big brothers in the GCC. They were a very conservative influence in the area. Sheikh Zayed was known for his moderate leadership. He was very supportive of a women's organization in the UAE and hosted a women's conference while I was there. Kuwaiti women came. All the women came, but the women from Saudi Arabia were denied permission to go. In general, in foreign policy, the UAE often followed Saudi lead.

Q: Were there any incidents or problems or crises that came up?

RANSOM: I'm sure there were. For me, one of my biggest crises was a fight I had with the *Al-Khaleej* newspaper. They had published one or two editorials that were very bad. They personalized their criticism of the U.S. They were very inflammatory. One of them praised the bombing of the Marines in Lebanon. I forget the second one. The third one carried a personal attack on Ronald Reagan, on his personality. It had nothing to do with policy. It was a diatribe against him. It was very upsetting. We had a lot of security concerns at that time in the Middle East and this kind of journalism was very dangerous. I had made verbal protests to the first two. In the final instance, I wrote a letter, sent it to the newspaper, and they published it with a long response. Their response was highly inflammatory and they referred to me all the way through as a man. That was one of the most frustrating things: "Mr. Marjorie Ransom objected to the article." The FBIS (Foreign Broadcast Information Service) at that point was headquartered in Bahrain. They published the whole article in English and sent it to every embassy in the area, but did not publish my letter, which had appeared at the beginning of the article. They simply

published the response of the newspaper. It was very frustrating for me. But the letter had an impact on the newspaper. The publicity forced the government to put an end to this kind of campaigning. That was the last time we had that kind of inflammatory press coverage. So, it accomplished the purpose, but it was highly embarrassing for me.

Q: Was the editor of the paper a Palestinian?

RANSOM: Yes.

Q: So this was more than a personal thing.

RANSOM: Well, the guy who was writing the article was an Egyptian Nasserite who worked for the newspaper. It was bad journalism. If they had a beef against the United States, they could have written a reasoned, thought out argument and that we would have accepted. That's what I told them. But this was a personal attack that promoted violence as a response. It was quite irresponsible.

Q: Did the government of the UAE express any concern about this type of thing?

RANSOM: They paid very close attention. They expressed in private sympathy with our arguments. They felt that the journalism was irresponsible, but they maintained that they allow freedom of the press and they didn't want to tell the newspaper what to publish or what not to publish. But as a result of this – and they told us this again in private – they did put out some guidelines for all the newspapers and held them to it after that. They characteristically did not like confrontation and they would have preferred to handle it in a different way. But I had approached the Minister of Information several times to complain about this type of journalism. We had complained to other people in the government. So, they couldn't say that we had not tried previously to change the thrust of the newspaper's writing. I had gone to see the editor I don't know how many times. The owners would not meet with me, but I met with the editor several times. The only way to get their attention was by writing our objection. This letter that I wrote, the newspaper editor and the owners obviously thought that it was to their advantage to write such an article, but in the end, I think it came down against the newspaper.

Q: Was there much interest in VOA broadcasts and that sort of thing or was it pretty much BBC country?

RANSOM: We always had competed with the BBC. It's a question of signal. It was hard to hear the VOA in UAE. You could get the morning news broadcast, but I'm afraid that the majority of our interlocutors listened more closely to the BBC.

Q: You left there in '85. Whither?

RANSOM: I went to Damascus.

Q: You were in Damascus from '85 to when?

RANSOM: To '88.

Q: Did David go with you?

RANSOM: David was DCM. It was another DCM-PAO tandem, our third such assignment.

Q: What was the status of American-Syrian relations when you went to Damascus in '85?

RANSOM: When we went in 1985, the relationship was formal. The Syrians were having a lot of internal security problems. In the course of our first year there, there were perhaps at least seven or eight major domestic bombings. It was a problem they were having with a conservative Muslim group, the Ikhwan, with Iraqi backing.

Q: Your first job for the first year from '85 to '86 was what?

RANSOM: I was a regional program officer and worked to support our programs in the smaller countries of the Gulf. I traveled to Yemen, Oman, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia. That was a short period from September to April.

Q: What sort of programs were these that you were helping to support?

RANSOM: I was working on our book translation program, trying to beef it up, organize group international visitor programs, generate articles for our regional magazine, and look at general management issues.

Q: With the trouble in Lebanon, where we were getting our books translated and magazine published?

RANSOM: The magazine was always published in Manila, where we had a special printing press. But the editors worked out of Tunis, which was a challenge because France is so strong in Tunis.

Also during that time I helped with the visit of Vice President Bush to Bahrain. It must have been the early spring of 1986. I ran the press center so the PAO would be free to work more closely with Marlin Fitzwater, Bush's spokesman.

Then I became the PAO in Syria in April of 1986. We had a number of successful cultural programs going with Syria. It was always easier to work on these long-term programs, than it was on specific short-term political issues with the Syrians. We were quite alarmed and upset with the news of the implication of Syria in the attempt to blow up the El-Al airplane in September 1986.

Q: What did we do?

RANSOM: We withdrew our ambassador, Bill Eagleton. We downsized our embassy. The biggest impact was felt in our USIS office. I was a PAO. I had three officers who worked for me and also a junior officer trainee; I lost them all. I forget now the total number. I think we reduced our embassy by 15 people.

Q: So, in public diplomacy, you were it.

RANSOM: I was it. I hired all the qualified spouses as quickly as I could to keep the program going.

Q: It always strikes me that in diplomacy we go through this peculiar thing – if we get mad about something, we downsize our embassy and often take away the top people who are supposedly the most skilled at dealing with it or they wouldn't be the top people. It just seems to be counterproductive.

RANSOM: The Syrians were not at all upset that we reduced the size of our embassy. They felt that the majority of us were just there to look and to spy on what they were doing. At least we were able to hold the line and not close. The British severed diplomatic relations. We did not. In retaliation for their severing diplomatic relations, the Syrians closed the British council, so they lost completely their cultural presence. We had a considerable argument within the embassy as to which part of the embassy was going to make the majority of the cuts. Washington set a total number that they were to be cut by and then left open to some dialogue and discussion where the cuts were going to come. Of course, Charlie Wick was then the head of USIA and he was furious at Syria. The story was scandalous. An operative (I can't remember if he was himself Palestinian or Syrian, but the whole operation was run with help from the Syrian embassy), a young man, sent his pregnant British girlfriend back to Palestine, to the West Bank. He was putting her on the airplane and he placed in her possession without her knowledge a tape recorder that had the bomb detonator in it. An astute El-Al airlines employee picked up something suspicious in questioning her. They inspected her luggage and found this device and an explosive. Someone who worked for the Syrian Embassy was directly implicated in the plot. They were caught red-handed. The British broadcast the trial on the radio in Arabic. You heard the testimony, the trial, the whole story. It was just amazing. So, the British took the diplomatic lead, of course, as it happened in London. They reacted by cutting relations. Our first act was to withdraw our ambassador. He left on very short notice. David became Chargé. But rather terminate our USIS presence, we took the bulk of the embassy cuts. I learned later that USIA's NEA office was able to argue to keep the USIS presence there because the PAO and the Chargé were a tandem. Otherwise, USIA would have closed the USIS office. Remarkably, we were engaged at that time in beefing up our English language program. We had laid all these plans beforehand and went ahead with them. We expanded the program, brought in a Fulbright professor to run the program, and somehow were able to pull that off. We had four American Fulbright professors in the country and we were able to keep them there as well. So, we were able to keep the basic part of our cultural program going. It was a considerable challenge with no American officer support. But in a country like Syria that's a closed, isolated country, what we were able to do in the cultural area had a

considerable impact. We got extraordinary cooperation from the Syrian government. Even when they weren't agreeing with us politically, they gave a lot of importance to our academic ties. They even welcomed whatever cultural performances we could bring to Syria.

Q: Were young Syrians going to the United States to be educated?

RANSOM: Some Syrians were going, but not that many had the economic means to do so.

Q: What about ties to the Soviet Union at that time?

RANSOM: The Soviets gave huge numbers of scholarships. They had very close ties with the government. They had a number of Soviet military advisors in the country, over 100.

Q: Did the Syrians in the street have much regard... Did you feel that they were sympathetic towards the Soviet cause?

RANSOM: The people in the street were at that time amazingly pro-American. We traveled around the country and that is something I must say about Syria. We were able to travel anywhere freely. There were no restrictions on our travel. We were supposed to inform the Foreign Ministry when we were going to go 50 miles beyond the city, but nobody did it and they didn't pursue it. People would always ask us when they surmised that we were foreign – they would expect us to be Russian and they would find that that, no, we were Americans living in Syria. Almost inevitably, they would invite you home. They would be so enthusiastic. There are thousands and thousands of Syrians living in the United States - Syrian-Americans. Many of these people had cousins in the U.S. But many others simply loved what they had heard about the U.S. They did not like their experience with the Russians. They viewed the Russians as atheists. They were full of admiration for the United States. Of course, the worse our relationship was with the Syrian government, the more the people – and of course it's hardly a democratic country – would feel aligned to us. If they viewed us as cooperating with the government, then we would become suspect.

Q: How did you find dealing with the Syrian government, the Minister of Information and that sort of thing?

RANSOM: The Ministry of Information was at that time almost impossible to deal with. Newspaper editors wouldn't receive me. The language of the newspapers in those days was full of all the anti-Zionist propaganda. It was not very productive to try to influence them. That changed right after I left – with the end of the Cold War – when they finally decided that they needed to turn the press relationship into something. The primary person that I dealt with in the information area was the Spokesperson for the President Assad. He was someone who had worked for Assad from the beginning. He was very influential and set the editorial tone for the press every day. He really ran the whole press

operation.

Q: As you say, the press tone was...

RANSOM: In those days, it was just a waste of time to try to influence the press. In fact, Secretary of State George Shultz visited Damascus during my stay after we had reestablished relations towards the end of my tour. What we did for George Shultz, who wanted to reach the Syrian people, wanted to get a message directly to the people without government interference, was to arrange a radio interview for him. We had Radio Monte Carlo, the BBC, and VOA. The Syrians rather sheepishly sent a reporter to the interview, but they didn't play the interview. We beat them at their own game by going to the radios they couldn't block out.

Q: How did we view things in the Syrian war with Lebanon?

RANSOM: We had hostages still in Lebanon in those days. I remember most particularly our attempts to get the cooperation and help of the Syrians with the release of our hostages. They always denied any direct knowledge of the whereabouts of the hostages or the details of their being taken, but they were anxious to get credit when a hostage was released. I think in the final analysis, we considered them helpful in getting the hostages out. The situation in Lebanon then was still very bad.

Q: What was the general feeling about Assad that you were getting from the embassy?

RANSOM: There was tremendous respect for Assad's political acumen, but he was obstructionist to any attempt to make progress on the Arab-Israeli situation. He would not hesitate to use radical groups based in Syria to support actions against Israel. Within the country he and his government were viewed as dictatorial, cruel, and tough. He was seen as a very tough minded leader who would not hesitate to be ruthless in achieving his goals. The country was very hard up economically. People couldn't get their basic foodstuffs. It was a very hard time for the citizenry.

Q: Was it the feeling that Syria was suffering because of the program of Assad? Supposedly, Syria used to be sort of the breadbasket of the Levant.

RANSOM: Socialism was failing. He was viewed as a very isolated person who relied on his close circle of advisors to tell him what was going on. He was obviously a man who felt under threat. Whenever he moved anywhere in the city, there was extraordinary security. He traveled to the coast, to Latakia and to Cardaha, his birthplace, but to few other places even in Syria, let alone the rest of the world. He never went to Aleppo, the other big city in Syria. He had a public mystique, not as bad as Saddam Hussein's, but he was a comparable figure. People blamed him for their economic hardships, especially people who were not Alawite. Don't forget that the Alawites were only 11-15% of the population. They, and perhaps some of the Christians and the Druze, supported the regime, but the Sunnis were and are roughly 70% of the population. His regime was one that was imposed on them. So, it was a tough dictatorship that advantaged Alawites and

people from other minorities. He imposed such severe economic restrictions on the farms and the merchants that Syrians were never able to develop their country. What industry existed was government-run and highly inefficient, your classic example of a socialist run public sector.

Q: Did the war between Iran and Iraq, particularly relations with Iraq, create a tense situation?

RANSOM: This was a very bad period in Syrian-Iraqi relations. It's the question of the enemy of your enemy being your friend. The Syrians had close relations with the Iranians and cooperated with them in Lebanon as well. In the first year, a series of explosions was attributed to Iraq meddling in Syrian affairs. It was really a very bad period for Syrian-Iraqi relations.

Q: How did the George Shultz visit go?

RANSOM: George Shultz never liked to come to Damascus. He must have come three or four times while we were there. He would never spend a night. He would stay in Israel and fly in and go to the palace and see Assad and then go straight to the airport and leave. The only time we had with George Shultz was waiting for the meeting.

Q: Was there any effort on either side during this time to try to improve relations or were things at such a state that it was just a care-taking type of situation?

RANSOM: We exerted considerable effort to make it possible for our ambassador to come back. What we held out as a marker for the Syrians was an end to the Abu Nidal presence in the country.

Q: He was a top international terrorist.

RANSOM: He was operating at that point with Syrian government support. We withdrew our ambassador in October of '86. In February of '87, we got word that Jimmy Carter wanted to visit Syria. He was a retired U.S. President and was coming as a private citizen. He of course was able to carry messages. He was able to lay out for Assad what it would take, what the U.S. government feeling was about the incident in the UK, but also what we expected from Assad before we would resume full diplomatic relations. This was one of the most interesting operations we'd been involved in. David was Chargé and I was the next highest-ranking person in the embassy. We had suffered some harassment from the Syrians. The only way they could get back at the United States was to be mean to us. So, we had extra unwelcome guards at our house, harassment of people who came to visit us, and harassment of our Foreign Service Nationals. Our FSNs were called in late at night and questioned. The Syrian security services made things as difficult as they could. When Jimmy Carter came, we in the Embassy had to negotiate all the details of this visit. Everything that President Carter wanted, they thought we in the Embassy were proposing. They were highly suspicious and prickly over the visit. Jimmy Carter wanted to visit President Assad's birthplace. He felt that he had a lot in common with Assad. He

thought he could take advantage of this by going to visit his village.

Q: The poor rural village.

RANSOM: A poor rural village. Jimmy Carter's father was a peanut farmer in Georgia. Jimmy Carter was the first son in his family to go to college. Of course, Hafez El-Assad was the first in his family to finish high school. Well, no foreign dignitary had ever asked to go to Cardaha and the Syrians were totally bent out of shape. They were furious at us in the Embassy. They were sure that it was the idea of that bothersome Chargé d'Affaires of the American Embassy. But we patiently worked out all these details with them and they put on quite a program for Jimmy Carter. They had to do an initial welcoming reception and they did it in an old palace in Damascus. The only embassy personnel who were invited were David and I. They wouldn't invite anybody else. They gave me the worst seat in the entire room. They put me next to the Foreign Ministry official who deals with Libyan affairs. I was way down at the corner of the room to show their displeasure. They gave us Assad's own plane to transport Jimmy Carter from Damascus and we flew up to Cargaha. We went in an entourage from the Latakia Airport up to this village. We were taken to a tiny, simple hut where his oldest brother Jamil received us. This was where Assad was born. We were shown this kind of closet he was born in. Jimmy Carter started working his magic on the oldest brother, Jamil Assad, who was initially quite suspicious, and told him about his own family history and how he felt he and Hafez El-Assad had so much in common, mentioning that he too had come from very simple origins and against all odds had made it to become the head of his country. Jimmy Carter told him he was interested in the story of Hafez El-Assad because, as he understood, he too had come from simple origins, from this simple house, and had gone on to be the president of his country. You could see Jamil just melt. It was just wonderful to watch Jimmy work his magic. President Carter had asked for a tour of the village and they had not been willing to put anything on, but as the conversation went the right way, suddenly, we were taken on a tour around the village and all these old women, these Alawi women, were up on the roofs of their houses throwing down rice on us. It was a great celebration. It was just amazing. When the exchange of gifts took place, they produced a wonderful pair of 19th century matching pistols, highly ornate, for Jimmy. The Syrians were just as pleased as they could be.

Then we went on from Cardaha back to the airport and flew up to Aleppo. We visited the Aleppo Museum. Somehow, in Aleppo, everybody knew what was happening. Of course, the Syrians had done their best to keep this visit quiet. They did not publicize it. They did not want him to go to Aleppo. They were very concerned about his security in Aleppo because President Hafez El-Assad never went to Aleppo because of concerns for his safety in that Sunni stronghold. When we left the museum, there was a crowd of 200-300 people applauding Jimmy Carter. Much to the chagrin of our security escort, he waded right into the crowd like a typical American politician, shaking hands. It was wonderful to see. Then we had a tour of the souk and the same thing happened in the marketplace. The security had tried to clear the place of all visitors, but the Aleppan people had heard that he was coming and hundreds came and cheered. He got a very warm reception everywhere he went in public.

Back in Damascus, it was a similar kind of thing. He felt that he had very good talks with Assad during his stay and certainly for us, it had an impact further down the road. When Carter was in Damascus, he asked David to go on a jog with him around the city at 7:00 am. He wanted a briefing while he ran. He is quite fit for a man for his age. This was almost 15 years ago, of course. David jogged and took him by the Abu Nidal offices, which were in plain view of on a major public street. The Syrians had denied any involvement with Abu Nidal and claimed they offered him no support, but David was able to march Jimmy Carter right by the offices and point them out. This was before Jimmy Carter met with President Assad. When he met with him, whatever transpired was between him and Jimmy Carter, but Jimmy Carter was equipped to point out that he himself saw those offices in downtown Damascus. It didn't happen right away and it took the President's present emissary, Ambassador Vernon Walters, also making a trip or two to Damascus, to talk to Assad. But by June 1987, he could report that the offices had been closed and one of the major obstacles to a resumption of full relations was accomplished.

Q: So, who came back as ambassador, a new person?

RANSOM: No, Eagleton came back and stayed until, well he left after we did in 1988.

Q: Did the editorials and the official signs change at all?

RANSOM: They publicized the return of the ambassador and the resumption of relations, but the basic tenor of the press continued to be quite critical.

Q: I'm surprised that you were allowed to travel without being harassed.

RANSOM: You felt the heavy presence of the Syrian government in Damascus. When you traveled outside the city, you just weren't aware of it. You felt it in hotels. You were careful not to take pictures of anything that might be military. Of course, you avoided military bases or buildings. But other than that, we were able to travel wherever we wanted to. In Syria, that's a special treat. It's a country of extraordinary beauty and has important historic monuments for every period of history. We had a wonderful time traveling. Our military attaché was always tailed and watched, but we weren't.

Q: Were you there at the time of the Jewish wives who wanted to go to the U.S.?

RANSOM: When we were there, for some reason, the Syrians would not allow Syrian Jews to travel. I think they were afraid that those who remained would move for good. That changed, but the change came after we left. Congressman Steve Solarz did work on that.

Q: What about the Jewish community? Considering that there was a state of war between Israel and Syria...

RANSOM: I forget what the size of the community was. Even then, there weren't a lot.

They were able to conduct business and were protected in any time of particular crisis with Israel. The security service was always careful to protect the Jewish community. But they were denied the basic right of travel. As the community dwindled, the Syrian Jews had problems arranging marriages and avoiding marrying first cousins. That changed, but that goes into my second tour there. Now some of them travel back and forth.

Q: You left there in '88. This is a good place to stop.

Today is May 24, 2001. Marjorie, you just said you'd like to go back and add something about the UAE.

RANSOM: I was in the UAE from '83-'85. I just want to add kind of a summary paragraph about my time there after some reflection. Certainly in the UAE, you had the phenomenon of a lot of money, few native people, and a very wise, benign ruler in Sheikh Zayed. When we were there, the UAE certainly spouted the Arab nationalist line. They obviously did this for protection. In their own country, they were less than 20% of the population. But in our dealings with the UAE, they expressed strong regret over our policy toward the Arab-Israeli conflict. Politically, they themselves felt caught between the two major threats to them in that area as a small, weak country – Iran and Iraq. At that time, the war was going on and they were happiest when the two were fighting each other, but they certainly sided with Iraq in public diplomatic forums despite their private misgivings about them, and they provided them with money. Our political posture and military presence was very small. The UAE shared with other Arab countries in the Gulf the belief that the U.S. would not intervene militarily in the Gulf and it was probably for this reason that they wouldn't allow the prepositioning of military equipment, although I do remember during my stay that the number of ship visits increased and also as Public Affairs Officer, I was allowed for the first time to publicize the visits. We of course were still concerned about the Soviets, especially after the invasion of Afghanistan. We were constantly looking for a bigger presence on the ground. Our relationship with the UAE was probably complicated by where they were in their development. They discovered oil in '71 and they had sent a few people abroad to be educated, but the number of people that we had to deal with who were educated and who were actually from the UAE was very small. I think I said in my dealings with the press that a lot of the people I dealt with were not natives. I think that made it harder. That's the UAE.

Q: On that subject, was there the feeling that things were moving ahead in a better fashion or at least a forward fashion in Oman as opposed to the UAE?

RANSOM: My memory is that we were able to do more in Oman than we were in the UAE in terms of a military presence, but even in Oman, there you still had British advisors on the ground. We had to deal with them as well as the Omanis. So, we certainly were not able to do what we wanted to do in the Gulf at that time. Of course, that changed so dramatically.

Q: Do you have anything you want to add about Syria?

RANSOM: Yes. I talked before about when we were in Syria, our tremendous involvement in the Middle East peace process. The Syrian government saw us as very preoccupied with that, but they had no illusions about our position and viewed us as very biased in favor of Israel. But still, they were not a strong country and they clung to their American ties despite their major alliances with both the Soviet Union at that time and Iran. I think I talked quite a bit before about the strength of their relationship with Iran. It's partly the business of the enemy of my enemy is my friend, Iran being the enemy of Iraq. But also Iran brought considerable benefits to Syria in terms of even great numbers of tourists, trade, and they gave them oil and gifts. They cooperated with Syria. Maybe sometimes they went beyond cooperation in working with Hezbollah in Lebanon. But this Iranian cooperation strengthened Syria's hand in its position in the Middle East and in its ability to use some radical groups for its own purposes. I talked before about the large number of Russian advisors in Syria. Certainly, Russia, the Soviet Union, provided large amounts of military aid and supply to Syria.

Q: Were you picking up from any of your Syrian colleagues questioning of Soviet military aid? Every time Soviet equipment, Soviet trained people, came up against Israelis, they got a bloody nose. Was that ever a question? Were they blaming their own military or Soviet equipment?

RANSOM: They certainly blamed the Soviet equipment. Not only was the equipment they had old and not kept up to date – what they had did not rate very well. There was no question about the superiority of American weapons. I don't know how they felt about Soviet training. I just wouldn't have gotten into discussions like that, but I myself would question it. The biggest problem for the Syrians even more than equipment was how they organized their military and the lack of security in the regime. The different elements in the military were usually positioned against each other so that one of them couldn't suddenly get the idea of moving against the regime. So, they spent an awful lot of time on regime protection.

I failed to note that it was an American company that discovered large amounts of oil. It was a company named Pecten. So, we also had that commercial relationship with Syria at that time. So, you had when we were there a rather peculiar relationship with the Syrian government. It was very difficult for the embassy to work with government ministries. They would not cooperate. They seemed to be in the hands of Syrians who were sympathetic to socialism and communism. They were not open to discussion with the West. The exception to that was in the cultural arena. But whenever we in the embassy had any need to contact the Foreign Ministry, the Foreign Minister, the President, or the Vice President, we had almost immediate access. It was extraordinary. We had better access than any other country there, maybe even better than the Russians at that level. This gives a glimmer of how important they viewed the United States in the area.

Q: Did you have any feel for how Syria was viewed from Washington? George Shultz went to Syria early on when Bob Paganelli was Ambassador. It's a renowned incident.

The basic thing was that Shultz thought he had a fine plan and Syria said, "No." Did that cause Shultz to say, "I'm not going to touch that country again?"

RANSOM: We had a terrible time getting Shultz to come. He would never stay in Syria overnight. Even on a broader basis in Washington, it was very difficult to get cooperation on things for Syria. It still has a very bad reputation.

Q: When you feel a country is not one you can really do much business with, you think "Why bother?"

RANSOM: That's right. But in the cultural arena, they had made the decision that working with USIS was working more with the American people and not specifically with the U.S. government. They were as cooperative as they possibly could be. It was an extraordinary contrast.

Q: Is there anything else on this?

RANSOM: I talked enough about Jimmy Carter's visit and the closing of the Abu Nidal offices. That's probably enough.

Q: What did you do in '88?

RANSOM: In 1988, I was assigned as Executive Assistant to the Counselor of USIA. I would like to talk a little bit about that position, which was quite unique. The position of Counselor was established in USIA under Charles Wick in 1981. He had a senior Foreign Service officer named Jock Shirley who was Acting Deputy Director and was very helpful to Wick. Then a political appointee was named Deputy Director: Gil Robinson. So, a position had to be created for Shirley. Shirley, working with others, structured the Office of the Counselor. We had several counselors down through Harriet Eblum. Jack Hedges came after Jock Shirley and he did not get along with Charles Wick and was fired by him. Then you had Sam Courtney, Stan Burnett, and John Kordek. At that point, Mike Pistor came in 1987, followed by Donna Oglesby, Anne Sigmund, and Harriet Eblum. Now in the State Department, there is an officer in the Office of the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy named Brian Carlson. He holds a similar position. But in USIA, the Counselor was the senior-most Foreign Service officer and also the senior civil servant. The person who occupied that job was the voice of the institution with the Director and the top political appointees. He worked on policy issues, as well as personnel and management. The position in the State Department I can best compare it to is Under Secretary for Political Affairs or Deputy Secretary.

Q: You were doing that from '88 to when?

RANSOM: '88-'90, for two years.

Q: Who was the director of USIA during this time?

RANSOM: Initially, Charles Wick, but for a very short period, Bruce Gelb.

Q: What were the issues that you worked on?

RANSOM: This was the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall and we worked on information talks with the Soviets. Three important sessions were held with the Russians under Bruce Gelb.

Q: When you held the sessions, what was supposed to come out and what did come out?

RANSOM: They were dealing primarily with press issues. There was a summary last session, which was held in February 1990. The Russians agreed to end intrusive Radio Moscow medium wave broadcasts via Cuba. They agreed that private sector groups in the U.S. would sponsor Soviet media officials to take part in American professional meetings. There are a number of issues they discussed fully but did not reach a conclusion on. One was a proposal by the U.S. government to reciprocally improve conditions for journalists working in both countries. That didn't go very far. But they did accept a proposal from USIA to assign a second VOA correspondent in Moscow in return for a second Soviet radio correspondent in the U.S., subject to further negotiation. The Soviets confirmed support for President Bush's initiative for an undergraduate exchange initiative. They agreed to consider removing any limit on distribution of the reciprocal magazines. Ours was *America Illustrated* and theirs was *Soviet Life*. It's interesting that these talks on the American side were really run by the private sector. We had 46 Americans involved in these discussions versus 30 on the Russian side.

Q: What was in it for the Russians? Soviet Life wasn't a best seller in the U.S. and America Illustrated always had been. It's almost one sided.

RANSOM: Well, don't forget that the Berlin Wall had fallen and that the situation in the world was changing and some changes were beginning to take place in the Soviet Union. I think they were reaching out to be more in touch with the world.

Q: How did you find morale in the USIA service at that time?

RANSOM: I think there was a lot of concern, especially at senior echelons, with Bruce Gelb, who was a weak director. He commanded little respect in the State Department. He engaged in negotiations with the VOA to reorganize the relationship. VOA was always seeking more independence from USIA and he gave them a separate personnel office, separate from USIA. He in effect negotiated away the television service. We in USIA felt strongly that the WorldNet programs that were done via television, these exciting interviews with American officials, should be placed in the Information Bureau in USIA. But Bruce Gelb could not make his mind up, although he was in a position to affect a final outcome. Our people would think one day that he had negotiated WorldNet into the bureau safely and the next day he would change his mind. WorldNet ended up in the VOA, very unfortunately. It's something that came back to haunt me later.

Q: Did Radio/TV Marti intrude at all in your work while you were doing that?

RANSOM: Oh, there were always issues with Radio Marti – budget issues, policy issues, etc. They had such strong support from the Hill and such a strong Cuban-American group in Miami that our arguments seldom prevailed.

Q: Was it just “Let them do it and let’s get it out of our hands because we can’t do anything about it?”

RANSOM: In effect, that’s what happened. Our best attempts went nowhere, even though they reached a tiny percentage of the Cuban population at some awful hour in the morning on some obscure part of the island. It was just insane, especially TV Marti. Radio Marti you could argue for, but TV Marti was a big waste of money.

Q: You left there in ‘90. You had had enough?

RANSOM: It was a two-year tour. Most of our domestic assignments were two years.

Q: Then what happened?

RANSOM: Then I became director of Foreign Service Personnel.

Q: This is always interesting because it’s so crucial to a career. How did you find the personnel system? This was ‘90-‘92?

RANSOM: No. I want to give a little background on the personnel system in USIA. I think it was very different from the State Department. We had a Director, John Reinhardt, who was our Director from 1977-1981. He came into the job determined to reduce the power of the area directors. He did that in two ways. He insisted that officers be moved from area to area but not spend their entire career in one geographic area. But maybe more importantly, he set up a very strong centralized personnel office with a civil servant in charge. Under her, there was a Director of Foreign Service Personnel. He introduced the concept of open assignments and bidding and established within the Foreign Service personnel office a very strong cadre of career counselors and area personnel officers. But the area personnel officers reported to Personnel and were evaluated by Personnel.

Q: This was to bypass the geographic bureaus?

RANSOM: This was to reduce the power of the geographic areas, especially in personnel assignments. Under this system, the area offices were consulted and had their say, but they didn’t have the final word. The authority for all assignments up through O1 rested with the Director of Personnel. A very small committee decided the senior officer assignments: the Director of Personnel, the political Associate Director of Management, and the Counselor of the Agency. I, as director of Foreign Service Personnel, presented the arguments and participated in the discussion, but I didn’t have a vote. Of course, all the senior assignments had to be signed off on by the Director. But, Personnel prepared

lengthy descriptions of the jobs, the positions and the qualities needed for them, and then rank ordered all the bidders with a full description of their qualities and Personnel's argument for the selected. Nine times out of 10, Personnel's decision held sway, but not always.

Q: Were you up against suits by women and minorities trying to redress past grievances?

RANSOM: We were not obliged to make a certain number of women and minority assignments. At that point, no. The State Department did, but we did not at that point. But I should say that the Office of Equal Employment Opportunity participated in the process. They knew who bid on the jobs and we shared with them some information about how the assignments were made. They definitely were involved in the process. We had to be concerned, naturally, about seeing that women and minorities were given a fair shake. I would say that one of the most difficult things, and something that one always had to watch out for, was the assignments in Europe. They continued to be the most attractive. It was hard to move people from other areas into Europe. We did well at it, but that was one of the big challenges. Fortunately, there are a lot of people who like to work in other parts of the world, but there were always a few disappointed ones who failed to get into the European club.

Q: Did you face the adversarial relationship between Personnel and those who were being assigned?

RANSOM: We almost never forced an assignment unless it was to force people to go overseas. We enforced the rule very rigidly that you could not stay in Washington more than five years; you had to go overseas. But other than that, people's desires were definitely taken into account. We tried to do our best in accommodating tandem couples. You run into a lot of difficulty when you have a single officer who thinks they're being discriminated against because a tandem couple is getting a certain assignment. You always had people who were disgruntled. You had people who complained that their corridor reputation did not match their real reputation. There was no way to get around it. Maybe I'm biased, but I didn't see how you could make the system fairer than we did. I spent a lot of my time counseling senior Foreign Service officers. You would become painfully aware in that process of which officers have corridor reputations – maybe correctly – that they can't get around in assignments. Of course, the best jobs are highly coveted and competed for.

Q: Did you have the feeling at that time whenever assignments were made that you had to look over your shoulder for some lawyer with his briefcase? Did you find yourself having to "cover your ass?"

RANSOM: Yes, there was that. The personnel system is always complicated. We had to be very careful to give every person the same information and to give it accurately. The one case, the one complaint, that was lodged against me, which never went anywhere, was that I had not sufficiently explained a certain item in the regulations. But I had given it to this person on paper and I probably had explained it fully well. It was something that

involved a decision about retirement and when you get compensation for certain things and when you don't. I worried a lot, but I had a very good person in charge of policy who was very helpful in explaining details and in helping us particularly with the material. It was very important that you give everybody exactly the same information.

Q: Were you in Personnel feeling a lack of power at USIA? You had a quite a powerful Secretary of State in James Baker. Did the weakness on the USIA side and the strength at the top at State play a role?

RANSOM: Oh, absolutely. We were dependent for our voice at the table on the political leadership that we had. The Counselor of the Agency would go to those senior meetings at the Department only when the Director and the Deputy were not available. Mike Pistor did go a few times and then we had a chance. But for the most part, we had to get our ideas expressed through the Director. Charles Wick was not a political animal. He had some clout at the Department because they knew he was a close friend of President Reagan's, but he didn't care about political matters. Policy was not important to him. Bruce Gelb, frankly, did not have respect at the Department. What he said there carried very little weight. I don't want to talk about it more than that. I would think that perhaps in terms of having an influence on policy, we always argued that if USIA were to be effective, we had to be in on the takeoff as well as the landing. We were not in on the takeoff and we were often left with great messes to pick up and take care of because we weren't consulted in the beginning. There are many different ways to deliver a message.

Q: You have a very tight group, particularly on the public affairs side, with James Baker and Margaret Tutwiler. Margaret Tutwiler was a very strong personality in her own right, but reflected that in James Baker. Did that cause problems, that things would be issued and nobody was ready for them?

RANSOM: The problem that our officers in the field had with Margaret Tutwiler and James Baker was that they gave all priority – it's an eternal problem, but they were worse than most – in giving total priority to the domestic press and not letting us have access for the top foreign reporters. I think Shultz was much better than James Baker in terms of thinking about how to communicate with the local populations.

Q: As Director of Personnel, one can usually have a certain say in where you go? What happened to you and David?

RANSOM: It's funny that you ask. As I got towards the end of my tour as Director of Foreign Service Personnel, I realized that I was going to have to go overseas. David wasn't ready. I had not bid on anything. I felt very reluctant to bid on anything. It was only after my supervisor, Harlan Rosecker, prodded me that I put my name in the hopper for Cairo for the PAO position, which for an officer like me, who's paid my dues in the Arab world, was a prize job. So, I bid late. I had hoped that it might be possible for both of us to go there, but the ambassador had in mind another DCM, so that wasn't going to work. So, David initially – and this happened after I went to Cairo – was under consideration for Ambassador to Cyprus, which would have been fine because it was

very near Cairo. But then he was named for Bahrain. Then, his clearance process took forever. I don't mind talking about this on the record. It was very frustrating. He was subject to a whistle blower action. Someone had brought a complaint against David. When he went to the Office of the Inspector General, he could get no information from them. It held up his nomination for about 10 months. They would not open the case, examine the case, or consider it until it came up on their docket, on their schedule. So, he sat there with no information at all. I was in Cairo, so he was here living alone under really very difficult circumstances. It was really the worst period of our lives in the Foreign Service. When they finally opened the file and looked at it, they threw it out in a week. Somebody made the claim that he had sold a vehicle twice in Syria for Ambassador Eagleton, who had been withdrawn, and had made lots of money in the process. Well, the truth of the story was that when Ambassador Eagleton was withdrawn in October of '86, he left behind his personal car, which his wife had driven. Months dragged on and he asked David if he would sell it for him because he didn't know if he was ever coming back. So, David sold it for him. Whatever the money process was, he sent the money to him and that was the end of it. But someone had come up with the story that he had sold it twice and had made personal profit. It was a ridiculous story, so they threw it out in a week. But the poor guy had to sit there for 10 months imagining all kinds of accusations, wondering in his mind whatever he could have done to deserve such a thing, and it proved to be nothing. But it delayed his assignment. The post was without an ambassador for almost a year for that foolish reason.

Q: You were in Cairo from when to when?

RANSOM: From '92-'95.

Q: When you arrived in Cairo, what was the state of American relations with Egypt?

Today is June 11, 2001. Marjorie, Cairo, '92-'95.

RANSOM: When I arrived in Cairo on August 5, 1992, it was the largest U.S. embassy in the world, with a huge military and aid sections. The USIS post was the largest in the Arab world and one of the largest in the world. We had 10 Americans and 80 Foreign Service nationals and contract personnel. We had a budget of over three million dollars. Relations with the Egyptians were good and there was close cooperation. My job in that very busy Embassy was to provide Public Affairs support to the ambassador and the Country Team. In that job, I had to deal with some major American press personalities, as well as Egyptian. Every major U.S. media outfit, be it television, radio, or newspaper, was based in Cairo. Of course, we had regional as well as domestically based Egyptian press. In addition to that, we saw probably 40-50 American journalists coming through Cairo each year. They wanted briefings on everything from the Egyptian economy to the Middle East peace process to a host of other subjects. They were really relentless.

Bob Pelletreau, my ambassador when I arrived and for the first year and a half, was

especially popular with the U.S. media on the peace process, because he had led U.S. negotiations with the PLO when they were based in Tunisia. That was his post before coming to Cairo. In addition to our specific press responsibilities, USIS was engaged in a whole host of other activities. We supported the military. We publicized AID. We supported English teaching programs, not only in Egypt but also throughout the area. We hosted major cultural presentations such as opera, jazz, and art. We even worked out a special relationship in Egypt with AID to use their money to run an important exchange program with the Egyptian judiciary. It's a unique arrangement called a Participatory Agency Support Agreement [PASA]. We sent upwards of 50 Egyptian official visitors to the U.S. each year, e.g. a group of dynamic young Egyptian filmmakers visited their counterparts in the U.S. and also got a short mini-course in American history. I had the pleasure of seeing one of them recently at a local film festival: Yusr Nasrallah, a student of Yusuf Shaheen, the former who has of late become an important filmmaker. I like to think that we contributed to his education as he was developing. We also were able to tap AID money and VOA's to train Egyptian journalists. We worked very closely with the media. As you found in other areas of Egyptian life, the people who were my age were well-educated, broad-minded, sophisticated, and quite remarkable journalists. The younger generation were educated primarily in Arabic. They were not well trained. They had no idea of investigative journalism. They didn't know how you went about doing a story. They often were more editorialists than journalists. So, we spent a considerable effort to bring in people to train them locally, to try to upgrade their skills.

Q: Training people to be investigative journalists can be kind of dangerous in a country which is rather authoritarian like Egypt. Do they really want to have a bunch of young guys and girls going around investigating? It's usually the government they're investigating.

RANSOM: We've seen the dangers of where that can lead recently. Nevertheless, we were able to give them skills so that whatever story they would be covering, be it something the government favored or didn't favor, at least they would be able to work as responsible journalists. Our focus was on their skills.

Q: How did they respond to this?

RANSOM: They liked it. They liked it a lot. They benefitted from it, although their resources were limited. They didn't get per diem or money for travel to cover stories. Their parent organizations didn't pay them to do their jobs well. That was a problem we couldn't get around. We wanted them to write cover stories that were important to us. Usually, it was something regarding our aid to Egypt, but it could also be a military story. We would hire the buses and provide the meals and send them off to report. Those efforts were usually successful.

Q: You're sending them out to say, "Gee, what a good job you're doing," aren't you Marjorie?

RANSOM: Yes, of course.

Q: But you're training them to be investigative reporters. My initial impression is that they would be looking around underneath the tents to find out what's "really" going on.

RANSOM: That's true, but if you're going to have a credible and well-written story that people are going to pay attention to, you're going to have negatives and positives. We didn't give them the negatives, but they could root around and find them. Our message wasn't 100% perfect but we usually had a good story to tell. We were improving the lives of Egyptians and they couldn't deny that.

Q: You were on the periphery of the AID operation, but you were acting in support of it. I've heard often that a significant part of the AID budget ends up going to people who are working for AID, Americans, or to study grants which help universities in the U.S. The University of Michigan may every summer turn out a number of kids that come out and work on their Ph.D.s, this type of thing. Did you find that?

RANSOM: Absolutely. In fact, our biggest challenge in dealing with the Egyptian press who were covering AID projects was to show the final benefit to the Egyptian people. They criticized us constantly for using U.S. contractors. Several of these contracting organizations exist only to carry out AID projects, but I can't fault AID. Congress writes legislation that forces them to turn to contracting organizations to implement these projects. They also force AID to turn to an American organization, so even if there was a qualified Egyptian NGO, you often couldn't do it because it had to be a U.S. provider. That was a challenge and we were quite honest with the intent of Congress, but we focused on end results to show them the expertise that was brought in this way and the final good it could produce. Congress, on the other hand, was always criticizing AID for not pulling projects off and wasting money and not getting things done in a timely fashion. So, poor AID was criticized on all sides. It was a big and very serious challenge to tell their story well. We worked very closely with them. I had an assistant information officer who worked on this full time, working with different AID officials, first of all to lay out a strategy. Then I would work with the Ambassador and the AID Director to be sure that those people in AID who were effective with the press would take the time to give interviews and to talk to journalists. That was often the biggest challenge of all. But we had a lot of small successes throughout the year.

Q: How about with the newspapers? For decades, El Ahram and other newspapers had been castigating the U.S. They had certain wonderful phrases that were embedded in almost everybody. All of us are used to hearing about these horrible things that the U.S. was doing. I would have thought this would have become an entrenched establishment within the newspapers.

RANSOM: Well, I was used to dealing with Nasserites from my early period in the Middle East and reading articles in different media that were inspired by that ideology, so it was no surprise to me to find people my age especially who still harbored some of those same points of view. Naturally, you figure out who in the press first of all has credibility, and secondly who is going to give you a fair shake. Then you throw in those

who carry strong anti-U.S. and probably socialist visions of the world – it’s very important; you have to go and “debate” with them. The best I could hope for was to get a fair shake out of them. At least you hoped that they wouldn’t exaggerate or distort. Egyptians being Egyptians, they would always listen. I found the dialogue very useful. I used to go out every week and talk to these guys. I’d try to see at least one a day, meeting editors and op-ed piece writers. They were very good also at filling me in on what the current Egyptian take was on a specific U.S. policy. That was material that the embassy found extremely useful; it was also very helpful to me in planning a public affairs strategy for the embassy. But there were some guys who would give me sleepless nights sometimes. One *El Ahrām* editor was very smart, very well educated, but a Nasserite through and through. He would never change. He was a socialist. But he would write honestly and fairly and he never engaged in diatribe or attacks on personalities. I don’t think I could ask more than that from him. He was an extremely thoughtful commentator, both on U.S. policy and also what was going on in Egypt, a very honest guy. But I had others who were friendly and supportive.

Q: What about reporting on Israel? Did you get into any effort to steer that or was that just their business and not our business? Israel is our close friend. The Arab press – even one with a peace treaty – is not very kind towards Israel. Did we ever try to make them a little more kindly towards Israel?

RANSOM: We tried to have them take a better look at Israel. That was extremely difficult, as you can imagine. We also were encouraging them to go down the path of normalization in certain areas. That was extremely difficult and something that we had very limited success in. I held some dinners... I would sound out Egyptian intellectuals and find those who would be willing to meet with Israelis and then host them at my house, especially the Israeli cultural attaché, but we would sometimes have groups come: some military figures, some Israeli intellectuals. They would participate in some seminars and we would try to get Egyptians to come, but it was very slow going. Since I left, a number of Egyptian intellectuals went off to Copenhagen to meet with Israelis and faced a lot of trouble when they went home, so it was an endless battle. But one of the exciting things that happened while I was there was, after the conclusion of the Oslo Accords, there was the famous handshake on the White House lawn. Rabin and Arafat shook hands with President Clinton. We got word of that early in the morning. We scrambled and got a bunch of leading media to come and watch the event. That included the editor of the leading Egyptian opposition newspaper, a guy who was in and out of jail, Magdi Hussein. I sat next to him as he watched this event and got him to admit that this indeed was a step forward. He was radically anti-U.S. and especially against our attempts in the peace process, but he wrote the next day in his paper that this indeed was a step forward. That was like getting blood out of a stone. So, you had small victories in that area.

Q: What was the internal situation that we were concerned with?

RANSOM: Sheikh Abdul Rahman was active. He was a Muslim cleric who was extremely anti-U.S. and who promoted the use of terrorism to oppose what he saw as major moves against Islam and against moral values. He was suspected of involvement in

the [first] World Trade Center bombing in the U.S. [in February 1993]. There were a number of terrorism incidents in Egypt during my tour, including a horrendous attempt against the Minister of Interior, whose office was near our American Embassy. In fact, two of our Embassy Officers witnessed the car bomb explosion and, fortunately, weren't hurt. The Minister escaped, but his guard and a driver were killed. There was in Cairo and across the country demonstrations of increased "piety," or Islamization: women veiling more severely, masses of people praying on Friday, and religious demonstrations. The government was very security conscious and concerned about these manifestations. There was a lot of rhetoric put out by Sheikh Abdul Rahman and his group. There were cassette tapes available in the souk with inflammatory Friday sermons. When I was first in Cairo, they were clamping down on the Friday preachers because of the rhetoric that they were using against the West and, in effect, against the government. So, internal security in Egypt was a real concern for the government and a matter of much focus for the American press. Of course, the way we handled that story was always sensitive. We had special problems with the American press. They were U.S. citizens and so whatever we told American citizens living in Egypt about the security situation we had to tell the journalists. But we had to, in effect, make our statement off the record. I remember one time in particular when we were concerned about security. We did want to advise Americans to avoid crowded places. We wanted to caution them. We felt it was our obligation. But we didn't want the thing blown up and exaggerated in the press. So, we invited the journalists to come with the understanding that it was an off-the-record briefing. But one of the journalists, a *Washington Post* reporter, declined to come, sent another journalist from another organization, debriefed her afterwards, and wrote the story in *The Washington Post*. She said she wasn't at the briefing, so she was free to do so. It was always a challenge.

Q: What did that do to your relations with The Washington Post?

RANSOM: It meant that that particular reporter missed a few reporting or interview opportunities. We didn't hold a permanent grudge, but short-term. We talked to the *Post* and complained to the editor, getting a non-committal answer from them. The Egyptians were furious at us. They were highly critical whenever we brought attention to the local security situation because that would immediately have an impact on tourism, one of their main livelihoods.

Q: Did you find yourself constrained about going around because of this?

RANSOM: I didn't, no. There were certain parts of Cairo that you would never go to, just as there are certain parts of New York City or Washington, DC you wouldn't go to. I never felt in any particular danger myself. I didn't feel targeted. But you were aware of it. There was a certain kind of explosive they liked to use. They'd set them off in a certain kind of trash barrel that was in the middle of Cairo streets and they made a huge noise. So, you were always hearing these things. It wasn't as though you could forget it.

Q: You had Pelletreau and then who was after him?

RANSOM: Ned Walker.

Q: How did you find their styles in dealing with the press?

RANSOM: I was with Pelletreau longer and he had been there two years before I arrived. He was quite comfortable with the press. I think he probably spent more time on it while I was there, but I think that was only because Ned was new, because he was very cooperative, too, about meeting with the press. It was a daily job in Cairo. I've never seen anything quite as intense.

Q: Was the press camped at the ambassador's office?

RANSOM: No. They couldn't get near the Embassy without an appointment, but the requests were constant. We always had long list of requests from both American and Egyptian journalists – it was hard to keep up with them – for people in different specialties, not only the Ambassador. We tried to spare the Ambassador. We used him for the top Egyptian journalists and for select Americans. But we were dealing with a whole host of subjects with different parts of the embassy from commercial topics to AID to economic stuff to security stuff. We would brief people on the security situation.

Q: Who were your target audiences in Egypt on the cultural side?

RANSOM: "Culture" is a broad term. Egypt has 13-14 universities. Certainly the university presidents, specific professors in specific fields were targets, and in the media, writers on every aspect of Egyptian life – politics, economics, business. Writers – we dealt with the leading Egyptian novelists. We did some very exciting dialogues using both televised interviews and telephonic interviews. We arranged a very exciting exchange between Maxime Hong Kingston, author of *The Woman Warrior* with a wonderful Egyptian novelist named Gamal Al-Ghaitani, and other Egyptian writers. We had a close relationship with Yusef Shaheen, a world-renowned filmmaker. We knew Adel Iman quite well, a leading Egyptian film star who starred in a film called "The Terrorist," which was quite successful in making fun of the Islamic terrorists. We were deeply engaged in the annual Cairo film festival. We would help the American participants. We hosted a big reception for them. We worked with all kinds of television hosts of different programs, magazine writers, editors, and some businessmen, especially those who took an interest in cultural projects. We participated in a huge art biennial in Egypt. We brought in dancing troupes, opera singers, jazz musicians, and worked with people in the arts in every area. We worked closely with the Minister of Culture.

Q: I would think that one of the prime concerns of anyone in the Egyptian or American governments would be the increasingly large number of young men and women who were getting good educations but no jobs. Did you see that as a group to do something about or was there much you could do?

RANSOM: We couldn't do much in terms of finding them jobs. What we did do was work very closely with our commercial section in encouraging privatization and

improving the Egyptian economy. We also worked closely with AID to publicize their efforts in promoting small business projects which were quite successful. I like to think that our English teaching – we were really supporting teachers of English and organizers of programs to teach English – was important in helping young people succeed. Those Egyptians who were able to speak English fluently were in a much better position to find good jobs in the tourism industry and in the business sector, so I think we contributed that way. But on a broader scale than that, no.

Q: By this time, in the early '90s, were the Egyptians on the educational side pretty well focused on the U.S. rather than Europe? Where were the students going?

RANSOM: Oh, yes, they were focused on the U.S. There were some attempts at that time – and I think they've gone further – to establish American type universities in Egypt in addition to the American University of Cairo, which had been in Egypt for 75 years.

Q: How successful were these American-style universities?

RANSOM: They were just struggling to get off the ground. I think they've done better since. There were also a couple of private high schools. In addition to the Cairo American School [CAS], there were two or three other private academies that were trying to do a quality job in presenting an American education to high school students. We got terribly involved in that somehow. I forget exactly how. Another part of the responsibility of the USIS office that is difficult is to show foreigners – in this case, Egyptians – how to evaluate American universities and how to pick a good one to study at. All these fly-by-night outfits that advertise in the newspaper... I can't tell you how much time and effort we spent figuring out exactly how much we could say and what we couldn't say so we would not be sued. That was a big problem in Egypt and in the Gulf – in the Gulf probably even more so.

Q: Wherever we are, it's very difficult to try to... You can take it and almost smell it when you can see a school that really has no experience and is a very minor little school and there are people spending a lot of money to send their kids there.

RANSOM: Oh, it's terrible. It's even a bigger problem now because there are universities that will give degrees without requiring the students to attend classes. The possibility for abuse is even greater. It's a huge problem for the prestige and value of American education. Quality institutions that present quality degrees don't want their reputation damaged by these fly-by-night organizations.

Q: Were there any major presidential visits while you were there?

RANSOM: The last year I was there, we had President Clinton once. We had Vice President Gore twice. We had visits from three Secretaries of State. We had Ambassador Albright. We had Secretary of Defense Perry once or twice. We had Secretary of Commerce Ron Brown. All in one year.

Q: Was your staff pretty well honed to take care of this?

RANSOM: My Egyptian staff was the best staff I have ever worked with. Within the USIS establishment, they were specialized to focus on certain areas of USIS activity and they were extremely talented, highly qualified, very loyal, and incredible ambassadors for the U.S. It just made my job extraordinarily rich and rewarding. I just can't say enough about them. We had a guy named Ali Darwesh who knew all the political reporters. They knew and trusted him. They had known him for years. We had Ahmed Lutfi, who knew all the economic reporters and could explain the values of privatization forwards and backwards. We had Nihal Rizik, who knew television inside and out. On the cultural side of the house, we had Magda Barsoom, who handled the judicial training program. She knew the judges and understood them. She could pick up nuances in the relationship and the conversations that I would miss. She played a leading role in some of the early normalization attempts. There were 20 others that were equally talented in specific areas. They were just extraordinary. One of the challenging jobs for me in that big mission in Cairo was first of all to let USIS play its full role. Under an ambassador like Pelletreau, that was easy because he not only understood the mission, but he wanted to expand into new areas of activity.

I had to fight to keep my personnel resources. I even once had to argue about the utility of USIS officers' reporting. Our people, our Americans and our Foreign Service Nationals, were always outside of the office in touch with various parts of the Egyptian community – certainly more so than anybody else in the embassy. It was just easier for us to do so. So, we had extremely good contacts in all areas. That sometimes caused some jealousy in the mission. In the final analysis, we worked it out. We involved people in the political section in our representational functions. We introduced them to our contacts. But when there was downsizing and consolidating the embassy, one person high up in the embassy suggested that the USIS press section simply be folded into the embassy's political reporting office. They were going to take our whole press section and use it for reporting. So, I don't envy the people now trying to hold onto their resources in a totally integrated mission.

Q: Did you have problems on the cultural side running across fundamentalist Islam, depicting things that shouldn't be depicted?

RANSOM: We always had to worry about things. I remember an event that happened before I got there, but it's an example of what can happen. There is a wonderful Egyptian woman who probably became a U.S. citizen. She is a very talented ballerina, Magda. Out comes our wonderful USIS magazine with her picture on the cover in a ballet costume. Of course, we couldn't use it, which was ridiculous in my way of thinking, but it just wouldn't fly.

I ran into other interesting problems. I wanted to be in touch with the Islamist media and I was. One time, I had a dinner party and I invited all of my press friends and then I invited a guy from a conservative Muslim monthly, a tiny publication. I invited him because I felt it was necessary to hear a different point of view. My journalist friends were

scandalized that I would let this guy in the door because he dressed funny. He wore sort of a modified Pakistani dress and had a beard. I think they were afraid because I was dealing with this guy. I just did it. The same was true for the editor of the *Shaab* newspaper. We invited him. We invited other Islamist op-ed writers. But the mainstream Egyptian journalists felt they had a monopoly on our attention and they weren't happy when they knew that we were hearing all kinds of points of view.

Q: How about as a woman? Did you have any problems?

RANSOM: No. I've never had problems in the Arab world working as a woman. I have always dressed very modestly. I have a whole bunch of long skirts that I don't wear in the U.S. When I was young and single in Jordan it would be tricky socially but workwise it was never a problem and was often an advantage because, as a woman, you had access to a man's family.

Q: What was the feeling you were getting from your Egyptian contacts or from the political section about Mubarak and his regime?

RANSOM: There were complaints about the regime, about corruption, about the amount of time it took to get things done. There were special complaints when Mubarak completed his second term, which should have been the end of his rule, according to the Egyptian constitution. But he simply ignored it and continued. On the other hand, the government was engaged in a lot of very forward-looking activities at that point. They were moving towards privatization. The Egyptians being Egyptocentric, felt that the government in Egypt, compared to other governments in the Arab world, was progressive. We would hear a lot of criticism about certain issues and we did hear a lot of criticism about attempts towards normalization. Our contacts felt that Mubarak's support for the peace process was fine and that it was important for the Palestinians to move forward, but they did not read that to mean that they had to mix with these guys.

Q: Did you pick up any feeling about the Kuwaitis there? Were they just a completely different breed of cat?

RANSOM: There was strong criticism of the Kuwaitis, particularly for the role that they played during the Gulf War. The Saudis opened up more jobs to Egyptians after the Gulf War. There were still a number of Egyptians working in Saudi Arabia when I was there. I felt that they felt much more kindly towards Saudi Arabia than towards Kuwait.

Q: How about relations with your home office? Was there much direction?

RANSOM: My home office then was USIA. They were extremely supportive of what we were doing in Egypt. They wanted very much – for example, when they would arrange WorldNets with the Secretary or with other government secretaries or with the Assistant Secretary for the Near East, Djeridjian, they always wanted us heavily involved. They looked to us for information on the current issues in the area. I felt they were extremely supportive. During my time there, the NEA office at State was very positive about our

reporting and participating in embassy activities. A conference was held in Cairo of mid-level political officers in the area to look at Islam. One of our officers, a USIS officer, presented the best paper in that conference and brought a lot of special expertise. So, I thought we were in very good with both State and USIA.

Q: Then you left there in '95. Whither?

RANSOM: I went from there back to Syria.

Q: We'll pick this up next time in 1995.

Today is July 5, 2001. Marjorie, we're in Syria in '95. You were in Syria until when?

RANSOM: 1995-1997.

Q: What was your job in Syria?

RANSOM: I was Public Affairs Officer. My husband and I had another joint tandem assignment. I was PAO and he was the Deputy Chief of Mission.

Q: How did that work out?

RANSOM: Oh, extremely well. We had three such assignments. We found it extremely helpful. There was a lot of cross-fertilization within the Embassy between my contacts and his. I think it really reinforced our family ties and our marriage to share such interest.

Q: 1995. What was the state of relations between Syria and the U.S. at that time?

RANSOM: Relations were terrible. They weren't that different in 1995 except perhaps for the increased activity in the peace process.

Q: How did we see the government of Syria at that point?

Who was the ambassador?

RANSOM: Chris Ross.

Q: 1995. What was the state of relations there?

RANSOM: Even looking back to my previous tour in Syria, the relationship was not good, but we were engaged intensely in the peace process. Our exchanges with the Syrian government were extensive, but confined almost 100% to the peace process and to terrorism and to other difficult subjects. The relationship was a very difficult one.

Q: Hafez Assad was still the President?

RANSOM: Hafez was absolutely the President. We engaged in what we called a “death watch.” But he was pretty tough. He was quite active in those days. Over the course of two years, we might have seen him slow down somewhat. But he was very much running things and certainly running peace negotiations.

Q: What was the wisdom of the period on who was going to replace him?

RANSOM: At that time, it wasn’t clear. They were just starting to groom Bushar after Basel died the year before I got there. They withdrew Bushar from England. He was studying to be an ophthalmologist. They brought him back and started grooming him in different jobs. It became apparent that they were testing him to prepare him for leadership. They were doing it in a rather gradual way. They thought they had a few years to do so.

Q: Had Assad’s oldest son died?

RANSOM: Assad’s oldest son Basil died in an automobile crash racing in his sports car to the airport. Not a very noble end. Nevertheless, he was elevated to some sort of martyrdom after his death and became one off... We watched in Syria the change in the pictures that would appear around town of Assad. There were many pictures of Basil and then there was some gradual transition to a trilogy. You would have a picture of Assad, the dead son Basil, and the upstart Bushar.

Q: While you were there, what was the ruling of Bushar?

RANSOM: The word was that he was a very nice guy and perhaps lacked the steel will, and so-called “killer eyes,” of his late brother, Basil, and his younger brother Maher. He was considered smart, having been educated in England. He spoke English fluently, was quite westernized, and expressed interest in opening up Syrian society to the outside world. He was instrumental in starting a computer society and tried before he became president to put Syria on the Internet, but the security services got in his way at that time. He was viewed as a very nice person, but people doubted his ability to lead Syria, considering the strength of the security services and the military.

Q: Were the security services and the military pretty well dominated by the Alawis?

RANSOM: The Alawis are 11-12% of the population and they definitely dominated the security and the military, along with a small number of Christians and a very few select Sunnis. The Alawis dominated throughout the security and the military.

Q: What about terrorism? Syria has been fingered for decades as being the center of terrorist training and asylum for terrorists.

RANSOM: Syria had been very careful since the incidents of the late ‘80s to not have

their fingerprints directly on terrorism acts, but certain dissident groups continued to meet in Damascus openly and freely. There were Palestinian groups, the DLFP and three or four others, and they also were supportive at that time of the Kurdish leader Ocalan's PKK. They continued to appear on our terrorism list. We delivered messages from time to time, expressing our dissatisfaction with specific Syrian support for these groups. But our protests fell on deaf ears.

Q: What was in it for the Syrians in supporting these groups?

RANSOM: Syria is a very weak country, surrounded by enemies. Not only did they feel that Israel and we were their enemies, but they couldn't get along with Turkey, with Iraq... They had problems with Jordan. They weren't getting along with the Palestinians. Even their relationship with Lebanon, where a large number of their troops were stationed, was a difficult one. Iran was one of their few allies, so what could they use for leverage? Also, you have to remember that with the breakup of the Soviet Union, they lost the Soviet support that they had relied on earlier. So, they were using all the cards they could get. Certainly they felt that with Turkey, their support for Ocalan was one of their strongest cards. They felt that they could use other groups to make Israel's life difficult. They could even rely on these groups to create problems in other areas in the Middle East. So, it was one of Assad's few cards that he had to play.

Q: Did you have the feeling that Assad was ever considering playing the U.S. card? The U.S. has been pretty friendly with Jordan. If Iraq was an enemy, the U.S. ... There would seem to be some room for Syria to maybe be opposed to Israel, but to get more friendly with the U.S.

RANSOM: I'm sure that we had discussions with them about Iraq at certain times, but their willingness to cooperate was always quite limited.

Q: How free were we to operate within Syria?

RANSOM: In what sense?

Q: Could you travel around? Could we go to Aleppo?

RANSOM: Compared to life in Iraq when we still had relations with them, we had considerable freedom in Syria. We could travel anywhere. It was amazing. You could travel anywhere except to a military base and even then you could get quite close to their military installations. You had to be very careful if you were going to take a picture. There was a requirement on the books that the Ambassador and the DCM give travel plans in advance to the Foreign Ministry, but it was never enforced. The only person who suffered any serious restrictions and was followed was the Military Attaché. Other than that, we had considerable freedom. Our houses were watched. The Syrians certainly knew who came and went from our houses, but they at least in the '90s – especially as we were engaged in the peace process – did not make it difficult for people to see us or to enter our houses.

Q: During this time, your husband was Ambassador to Bahrain.

Let's talk about the peace process. What was going on from '95-'97 and what was our Embassy role?

RANSOM: When I went to Syria in 1995, the Embassy was heavily engaged in the peace process. Over the course of that first year, I was involved in six visits from Secretary Christopher trying to push forward a separate Syrian-Israeli peace treaty. Even though Chris Ross attended the meetings, I always had the impression that his participation in discussions on how to move forward, his ability to contribute ideas, was severely limited. He was in on the meetings because he was Ambassador. He played a valuable role in briefing the peace team on what the intent of the Syrians was, what their present mood was, what their options were. He also played a similar role with the Syrians after the departure of the peace team. He was a very good interpreter of U.S. intentions and desires in the peace process for the Syrians. But the peace process itself, the negotiations, were held very closely by Dennis Ross; his deputy, Aaron Miller; and Mark Parris. It was interesting to me, incredulous to me, that Bob Pelletreau, who came on one of the early trips with the Secretary, did not attend the meetings.

Q: One of the complaints I heard about the Clinton team was (1) that it consisted mainly or completely of people of Jewish ancestry, which rightly or wrongly sent a message to the Arabs that this was a team that was loaded and (2) that in the State Department, the word was put out that no Arabist was wanted. "We will take care of the peace process and the rest of you go off and do whatever you have to do."

RANSOM: My impression in Syria was that Chris Ross, who was one of our best Arabists in the Department, who had long years of experience in the area, played a very limited role in the actual negotiation process. He certainly showed his stuff in his ability to act as an interlocutor for both sides. He also served his country brilliantly in the way he would smooth over the U.S.-Syrian relationship. He spent a good part of his time trying to explain to the Syrians how decisions are made in the U.S. and tried to assuage their fears that the whole process was in the hands of a group of Americans of Jewish extraction who were overly sympathetic to Israel. But as far as a long-term contribution to the intricacies to the actual facts of the peace process, I didn't see it. I think that was unfortunate.

Q: Was there any feeling that maybe this peace process was going to work?

RANSOM: I felt that we were very close before Rabin was assassinated. We had an ongoing debate in Damascus over Assad's true intent, whether he was using the peace process for his own designs to augment his position in the area, to strengthen his hand diplomatically, or whether he really intended to make peace. We became convinced that he was sincere. He was preparing the Syrian people for peace. You would see billboards on the road coming in from the airport talking about Assad the Peacemaker. We felt that there was a real hope. We felt that it would be very difficult for Assad to take less than

his stated public position on where the border would be drawn and the specifics of a treaty with Israel and perhaps he painted himself into a corner that way. But we felt his intent was real and that was something dramatically new in Syria.

Q: Was there the feeling that Syria's interest was really pretty much on the border along the Golan Heights as opposed to support for the Palestinian cause?

RANSOM: Oh, my goodness, yes. One only had to visit Quneitra to get a feeling of Assad's feeling about the peace process. The place was left blown up the way the Israelis left it when they withdrew as a result of the Kissinger shuttle. He made it a point of pride that he was going to recover the Golan Heights for Syria. It was absolutely his first and ultimate goal. He might have from time to time paid lip service to the Palestinians, but his outlook was totally to get Syria back what they lost and to regain the prestige that it lost in its wars with Israel.

Q: Did you see Syria willing to accept some surveillance on the Golan Heights? Everybody who goes there sees lookout towers and antennae looking over the area.

RANSOM: There were a lot of discussions about what would count as surveillance, if the Israelis withdrew their listening posts, what would be acceptable to both sides? There was progress in the discussions. They hadn't ironed out every last problem and crossed every "t," but they were very close.

Q: It seemed to boil down to a small area of some farm?

RANSOM: It's a matter of the shore of Lake Tiberius and where you draw the border. The Syrians wanted their border to go right up to Lake Tiberius. The Israelis were so dependent on Lake Tiberius for water that they were unwilling to countenance that. Then, there was a discussion about the width of the border in-between. I say all this because I had this information secondhand. If Chris Ross was not a full participant in the peace process, I myself often felt like I was more of a bystander, totally occupied with the details of supporting the trips and making sure that all the mechanics went well, but not in any way a participant to these sensitive and complex discussions. It was frustrating.

Q: Making your preparations, how did the State Department crew act? Were they fairly easy to deal with?

RANSOM: I thought the Secretary was easy to deal with. The peace team often came without the Secretary. It was sometimes complicated, getting them in and out easily, but they were very decent people to deal with. The problem with the Secretary when he travels – and I have said this until I'm purple in the face – is the size of the delegation. It was so unnecessary to have all those people along. Of course, everyone was very caught up in the peace process and it was very sexy and glamorous to be part of the entourage. Our best attempts to reduce the numbers met with total failure. If you had six visits in one year, you kind of got to know the drill. The officers in the embassy were much better equipped than the 13th officer from the watch to handle all those details. But it made no

difference. Actually, when the team themselves came, they traveled fairly lightly. Usually they would fly in commercially or, if they had a plane, it wasn't too difficult, as long as there weren't last minute changes in meetings that would complicate things. The Syrians were cooperative and I didn't find the Americans difficult.

Q: Were you there when Rabin was shot?

RANSOM: Yes.

Q: What was the reaction?

RANSOM: Just horror. We had a CNN correspondent who was with us at an embassy dinner when we first got the news. The Syrians were very upset and were very concerned about what it would do to the peace process. We tried valiantly to have the Syrian government give some indication, some sense of this loss, to express condolences – anything, the tiniest gesture after this tragic loss. We just couldn't get them to do it. I see that as Assad's failure as a leader. Something that small, he just couldn't do it. We wanted him to express some sympathy to the widow. He just wouldn't do it. That would have sent an extraordinary message to the Israeli people. And, the fact that he didn't do it sent a very negative impression.

Q: King Hussein came and spoke at the funeral. What about relations with Jordan?

RANSOM: Relations with Jordan at that time were very bad. I know from my reading that they've improved dramatically.

Q: Why were they so bad? Was it a chemistry?

RANSOM: I think part of it is chemistry. Part of it is a history of bad blood between the two countries. They just couldn't cooperate together. I think the fact that Assad traveled so little was a great hindrance in his relations with other Arab rulers. He did get along fairly well with Mubarak. That was a wonder in itself.

Q: Relations with Iraq at this time?

RANSOM: Very bad. The history of the relationship with Saddam Hussein was very bad and the problems in the Baath Party early on were very bad. When we lived there in the '80s, the Iraqis were supposedly behind a series of seven or eight bombings that took place in different parts of Syria. The Syrian government eventually strung up some guys that they said were from Iraq. Don't forget the role that Syria played in the Gulf War, going in with Egypt.

Q: With Turkey... You were saying relations were bad. Why were they bad?

RANSOM: A major problem was water. The Turks had built a number of dams, two of them quite large, north of Syria that were there when we were there – and of course it's

gotten much worse – reducing the amount of water flowing into Syria. There is a water committee made up of Syria, Iraq, and Turkey that would meet periodically to discuss the water issue, but they never were able to come up with any satisfactory agreement on water distribution. The Iraqis suffered every bit as much as the Syrians from the Turkish dams. The Turks made some proposals at that time that seemed fairly reasonable. They were at least interesting. But the Syrian reaction was quite negative.

Q: Did we have any programs going in water development?

RANSOM: We had no aid program in Syria and very interest in promoting economic development in Syria.

Q: How about exchanges?

RANSOM: The Syrian government had made the decision long before I was there my first time that exchanges with the American people were something desirable. They were supportive of almost any program that USIS would recommend. They partially funded scholarships for Syrian graduate study in the U.S. We would pay for Master's degrees and they would pay for Ph.D.'s. While the rest of the embassy had very limited contact with Syrian government ministries, USIS could deal freely with the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Culture, and the universities – almost anything that fell into their bailiwick.

Q: What happened to the graduates that came back to Syria? Did they have to keep a pretty discreet presence?

RANSOM: A Syrian who studied in the U.S. was a hot ticket item when he came back to Syria. He was given a prominent place in the university. The difficulty these graduates faced when they came back was the lack of resources, the huge size of the classes they were expected to teach, and the outrageously low salaries they were paid. They simply couldn't live on the wages. In the '70s, after the Kissinger shuttle when we reestablished relations and wanted to show our goodwill towards the Syrians, we gave through AID 50 Ph.D. scholarships to Syria. When I was there in the '80s, maybe 49 out of the 50 came back, which I found amazing. But when I was there this time, I looked for those graduates and I could only find five or six. The rest had all left. It really was because they couldn't do their job. They felt they couldn't teach with the lack of resources and the lack of ability to keep up with their field in the U.S.-and also the terribly low salaries. It was really a tragedy, a waste of resources.

Q: By this time, the communications explosion had begun. If you didn't have good solid computer skills in your population, you were going to be slipping farther and farther behind. Was that at all evident at that time?

RANSOM: They had a few computers then. They were beginning to take an interest in it. But what was quite apparent was that the security services were not going to allow Syrian access to the Internet. So, they were going to fall way behind. They simply wouldn't

allow the use of computers. Even today, their use of the Internet is quite limited.

Q: What about the Syrian troops in Lebanon? Did we want them out?

RANSOM: Our focus was on the peace process. Until we resolved that, we paid lip service, but we didn't spend a lot of time on that.

Q: Were we seeing a pernicious effect from the commander of the Syrian army about the corruption coming from that rather free society in Lebanon?

RANSOM: As a matter of fact, the Syrian army, like everyone else in the government, was seriously underpaid. Through the corruption in Lebanon, a lot of them were able to make some livelihood. Fear of corruption from the Lebanese? There was some talk of it, but 800,000 Syrians outside the military were engaged in menial jobs in Lebanon. It was obvious that without the safety valve of Lebanon, Syria would have faced a lot of difficulty in terms of even higher unemployment and more unrest from the military itself.

Q: You are talking about a weak state, aren't you?

RANSOM: It's a society that's rotting from within. It's totally corrupt. The Syrians made a major oil discovery in the early '80s. Until the time when I was there as DCM, there was no line item in the budget for income from oil. It simply disappeared. Obviously, the President used that money to buy the loyalty of people. None of that money went to improve the infrastructure of the country. So, I assume that at some point the whole thing is going to collapse. But I don't know when. Probably not in the short run. The security and the military are quite strong. They were scared to death when they saw Ceausescu collapse in Romania. They could see the ramifications for a place like Syria.

Q: Did the Russians by this time play any role?

RANSOM: The Russians' role was much more limited. They refused to continue to supply the Syrian military with equipment without remuneration. In fact, they even insisted on getting money for their spare parts. Syria had never paid.

Q: What reports were we getting from the Military Attachés? If the Soviet Union couldn't supply arms and equipment, the Syrian military must have been going straight downhill.

RANSOM: Yes, it was. Their equipment was deteriorating. They still had the same system they had in the mid-'80s as well. You would think that each branch of the Syrian military would be outwardly faced to defend the country, but in fact, each branch was poised to watch the other branch for internal security breaches. This you could see if you drove around Damascus as I did with the Military Attaché. You could see how the different branches of the government were poised to watch the activities of another branch. It was the most extraordinary thing. I don't know how they ever managed to fight because the number of checks on the command structure was extraordinary. There was no room for any quickness of action.

Q: Did you have any problem with the Jewish wives that Stephen Solarz got involved with? There was a sizeable Syrian community.

RANSOM: They left Syria for the United States and Israel. Some went to Israel and a large number went to the U.S., to Brooklyn.

Q: How was your contact with the Syrian departments?

RANSOM: I found a very interesting change when I went back to Syria as DCM. When I was PAO, I managed to develop a really good relationship with the Presidential Spokesman, Jibran Kurlyah, who was very close to President Assad and had been with him for years and years. I could walk down to the Presidency and meet with him on a whole bunch of issues. It was an extremely useful relationship. So, when I went back to Syria, one of the first things I did was go down and call on my good friend, Jibran. I had two or three very productive meetings with him. Then word came back to me through one of the FSNs in the embassy that he could no longer see me because I was now a DCM. He made it clear that President Assad would not let him continue this relationship because I had moved from being PAO to DCM. I thought that was pretty funny. I tried my entire two years there to get around that barrier and he would not see me. I could go to his office when Secretary Christopher was in town. I would go to the palace. When everybody went in for the meetings, I could go sit and chat with Jibran, but there would be a couple others in the room. I never had any more of those one-on-one meetings. I went to the Minister of Information. I could call on different people in the government. I called on the Commerce Minister. I had a good relationship with the Deputy Prime Minister for Commercial Affairs and the Minister of Economy. I spent more hours than I like to recall in the Foreign Ministry. But, we never had any real good programs going with any government ministries, except for USIS in the cultural area.

Q: Did you have any major consular problems?

RANSOM: We had two or three embarrassing incidents. Talk about shooting yourself in the foot. There was a group of Yale alums who had made arrangements to travel to Syria for a two-week intensive tourism program. These programs are always so well done. But the travel agent, instead of getting them individual visas, arranged for a group visa, which meant that they all had to enter Syria together. Maybe five or six of them came early. I can remember being at the airport greeting another visitor and running into one of these elderly, distinguished Americans, who was being held in the horrific rooms at the airport because of the group visa business. I spent hours and the Ambassador spent hours on it. The Chef de Cabinet was mortified. He knew exactly what this was doing to Syria's position. But the power was in the hands of security and they wouldn't let these guys out. It took us two days to get them out. It was mortifying. That was one incident.

We would have problems if people showed up with any evidence of travel to Israel in their passports or any evidence of intent to travel there. Even if they had an airplane ticket that showed that they were going or had been, they were not allowed in the

country. We had those issues to deal with all the time. We spent a lot of time trying to explain to people what would happen if their passports said such things. But you don't get a hold of most people before they decide to come.

Also, I spent a lot of time trying to persuade the Syrians to give visas to different Americans, either Americans traveling privately or with journalists. It was an ongoing discussion. They knew pretty much which journalists they wanted to let in and which ones they didn't.

Q: Was CNN pretty well watched?

RANSOM: Oh, yes, very popular. They were able to get in more easily than the other networks or newspapers.

Q: You had been doing this for a while. By this time, were things like CNN and increased public awareness bringing any change?

RANSOM: We were seeing some changes in the newspapers, small changes. They had a Minister of Information who was trying to do a better job of coverage. He was trying to be helpful in getting journalists in. It was small. In the 10 years that I had been away from Syria, they had dropped a lot of the old Zionist terminology that they used in the papers and that was an improvement as well. But they still took the editorial tone from this guy Jibril Kuriyah. He did a radio broadcast every day at 2:00. You could listen to that and know what the news would be for the next 24 hours. That was the Syrian government pitch.

There was more freedom in some of the television programs. Certainly Egypt was taking the lead, but there was some greater leeway, but it was small still.

Q: How about how the Embassy was run? Had communications improved between Washington and Syria?

RANSOM: Oh, absolutely. Syrians were very good in allowing diplomatic pouches to move in and out of the country, better than many other countries I've lived in. That certainly helped us in terms of getting equipment in and that type of thing. So, I would say communications were pretty good. Because of the nature of the place, we discouraged Embassy people from using open Internet and that kind of thing. Of course, in terms of communications, you always knew your phone was tapped. But we were able to communicate.

Q: Did you find that the hand of Washington rested heavier on what you were doing because of communications, second-guessing or looking over your shoulder?

RANSOM: I felt that Washington was very tuned in to anything that dealt with the peace process and any events within Syria related to the peace process or to the Assad regime. Certainly the increase in ease of communications meant that you had to report more

quickly and move more quickly. I didn't feel that the Department told us what to do every day, but certainly over my career, it's changed dramatically.

Q: There used to be the saying that there can be no war without Egypt and no peace without Syria. Was Syria considered the major player or was it moving more towards dealing with the Palestinians?

RANSOM: There was a report done that was called "State Department Strategy for the Year 2000." I can't remember what institution did it, but it listed countries in order of their importance and in resources. I can remember Chris Ross being very proud of the fact that Syria was 11th in the world in importance at that time, but 95th in resources.

Q: Why would it be that high?

RANSOM: Why would it be that important? It's got to be the peace process. What else could it be?

Q: So, this was the American media?

RANSOM: I wish I could remember what institution did the report, but it was some report that commanded respect. Syria was right up there in terms of importance.

Q: Is there anything we haven't touched on while you were there?

RANSOM: No, I think the major focus was on the peace process. I had wanted to talk a bit about how I felt going from PAO Cairo to DCM Damascus, the difference in the two jobs. I had acted as DCM a few times in Cairo, but it was the first time I had ever been assigned to a key State Department job. I thought especially because of the importance of the peace process in the Embassy mission, that for me it was a very attractive challenge. In Cairo, I had a huge budget and a big, talented staff and many, many programs, but Egypt already had a treaty with Israel. Our focus on the peace process in Egypt was primarily to keep the government and the people informed of what we were doing in the peace process. In management terms, my own office in Cairo challenged the size of the embassy in Damascus. It was a very big management job. Going to Syria was attractive to me because it meant that my daily life hopefully would be a little slower than it was in Cairo, where, frankly, I was being worn down. I was flattered that two ambassadors would recommend me for such a job. I had Ambassador Bob Pelletreau and Ned Walker. I thought since I probably would have more time, it would be easier to see my husband more often. That was our hope. We always had hope that we would manage to meet frequently. That first year, I was Chargé 12 weeks out of the year. There were disturbances in Bahrain when David was Ambassador. A lot of things were happening. Our goal was that each of us would travel once a month so that we would see each other every two weeks. We were lucky if we made it in six weeks. It was more often two months. It was pretty miserable. But at least when he came to Damascus, I could usually arrange to get away. We could get in our big station wagon and travel to some of the gorgeous sites in Syria. We could get out and see the country and see some of our old

friends and get away from the telephone. In Cairo, it was impossible. I want to say that Syrian people are some of the nicest people in the whole area. They were very open and receptive to American diplomats, maybe partly because we didn't get along with the Syrian government and also partly because so many Syrians emigrated to the U.S. It was just extraordinary how many Syrians had ties to the U.S. But their admiration for everything about America from democracy and creativity to openness and pluralism was simply extraordinary. You'd feel it at strange moments much to the distress of our government contacts. But the government continued as it was, as I described it, so extraordinarily corrupt. The government in Syria manages to stifle any creativity or energy in the business community. They made everything illegal so that any time they wanted to get even with anybody, they had a law on the books that would enable them to do so. So, any businessman who wanted to accomplish anything in Syria had to have a patron in the military or the security services. The businessman would evoke this or that person in security as their guardian angel. It was very distressing. Before I left, there was talk about economic reform, about doing away with the law that made it illegal to deal in foreign currency. But there was always lots of talk.

Q: You left there in '97. Whither?

RANSOM: David and I made the decision just before the end of two years in Syria that, after five years apart, it was very important for us to get together again. This became evident to me when, at the last minute in the summer of '96, he was unable to take home leave. So, we even had to take home leave separately. Thus, we decided that it was best for our marriage and family to both leave our posts at the same time. As he finished his ambassadorial post in Bahrain, I finished a curtailed DCM tour in Damascus. We met in Europe and traveled home together. It's a decision in retrospect that was absolutely the right thing to do. But my farewell to Damascus – and I didn't realize it at the time – was my farewell to life in an embassy and life in the Middle East, life in an Arab country. We both feel very proud and contented with our diplomatic tours. We feel that we accomplished a lot and did very unusual things and are proud of the life we gave our three daughters.

Q: How did the daughters... Have they shown any interest in diplomacy?

RANSOM: Our daughters are very interested in diplomacy, in international affairs, but none of them wants to do it as a State Department career. Our oldest daughter works in public health, an interest she got when she lived with me in Cairo. Our second daughter married a corporate lawyer who is an ex-Peace Corps volunteer. The two of them plan to live and work abroad at some point. They're very interested in foreign affairs and international travel. Our youngest daughter tried to make it in international business and may at some point go back to that. She works for a computer firm in quality assurance, making money, but she is very interested in Islamic art. All three are very positive about the benefits of growing up overseas.

Q: Tell me about coming back. What did you do? Did David retire at that point?

RANSOM: David retired in '97 and I went back to USIA. I was assigned as Director of the Department's three Foreign Press Centers.

Q: We'll talk about that next time.

Today is July 17, 2001. Marjorie, you're back in 1997. You are working for USIA. Tell me about what you did.

RANSOM: I was assigned to be the Director of the Three Foreign Press Centers, which in USIA at that time was really one of the best jobs available. We had foreign press centers in Washington, New York, and Los Angeles, and a staff of about 35, including 11 Foreign Service officers with foreign language speaking capability and area expertise. So, we had excellent staff to deal with roughly 2,000 foreign press based in the U.S. Surprisingly, the greatest number are based in New York, about 1,100.

Q: What are they doing there?

RANSOM: As you can imagine, in Washington, the 800 journalists are practically 98% focused on foreign policy, but in New York, they focus on a whole variety of issues. Wall Street is a big draw as the economic center of the U.S. There is a lot of interest in culture. There are writers there, especially European writers, who focus on the arts. The journalists in New York tend to cover the broad-brush social issues in the United States. Our officers there had a tremendous challenge to meet their journalists' needs. Very interesting. Very bright. Most of these journalists were remarkable. They were the leading writers and journalists of their country, having bylines, having well-known personalities on television. Their governments paid a lot to place them in the U.S. We got into the business of helping them at the time of the founding of the United Nations in New York after World War II when all these journalists showed up in New York City to cover the story. The State Department was in a quandary over what to do with them, so they set up an office to assist them, with the thought that it was a temporary thing and that they would go away once the UN got underway. But they didn't go away. They stayed and continued to cover the U.S. and continued to need help.

Covering the United States is a very complex challenge. Journalists turn to us for help in getting interviews with busy Americans who are focused on a domestic audience. They also need help in how to research complicated topics. The press office in New York was started in the '40s, but in the early '70s, we established a press center in Washington. Then in the '80s, we set up an office to handle the West Coast in Los Angeles.

USIA was given the challenge of dealing with the foreign media. In our Foreign Press Center, our way of dealing with the foreign media is quite unique in the world. It was my surprise and delight while I was in the job to receive visits from delegations from Japan, from Holland, from Spain, from Eastern Europe, government officials coming to see how we work with the foreign press. In fact, I think I had been in the job a few months when

the newly assigned French Foreign Ministry spokeswoman came on a visit to Washington. She called on Jamie Rubin to see how he and the State Department deal with the domestic press, but she was also keenly interested in how we deal with the foreign press. So, we are really a model institution. I spent many hours briefing different delegations who came to visit the Foreign Press Center to see what we did, what our facilities were. They were surprised to find that we didn't charge money, that we were an open institution to anyone with a foreign press credential. Our Chinese counterparts were surprised at how we went out of our way to help the press. We spent a lot of time with the Chinese. They had a very active government run television office. We helped them with television tours across the United States. We facilitated all kinds of special series on America for placement on Chinese television, in cooperation with the Chinese – a very successful program.

Q: How would you handle, for example, the Swedish TV stations who wanted to do another series on the underside of the United States, the drug culture in Miami or something like that? Was that a problem?

RANSOM: Any program that we undertook with a foreign television outfit – and that included the Chinese, who worked out with our posts overseas – we had limited resources and they always had to negotiate to get funding for these things, but any program series that we were going to spend a lot of time on would have to be something that was a high priority for the U.S. government. If Swedish TV wanted to look at the underground drug culture, they would be doing it on their own, with their own money. If they wanted to do something informative and not degradable, they would come to us for help in finding out what the government was doing about our drug issues, how we were handling them. We would put them in touch not only with the drug czar in the White House but other institutions – private NGOs that were working in the area – to rehabilitate or to educate. We simply broadened their approach. We never turned them off. In fact, we always tried to help journalists get the broad picture. We would encourage them to get different voices so they would have a credible product in the end. We did a very interesting tour for Dutch journalists on biogenetics. They are very concerned in Europe about our food products, the bioengineering in agriculture. One of our officers working with Europe spent a lot of time in developing a good program for these seven or eight journalists and took them out to Monsanto and other spots in the U.S. to try to explain to them the benefits of these modern techniques in agriculture. That was one program where the office felt that it was very hard to get the journalists to broaden their outlook. The post was pleased with what we did, but the journalists came with a mindset and message that we failed to alter.

Q: Modifying grain and feed was considered to be bad. Europe was going through that phase.

RANSOM: Yes. Well, it's certainly better to have improved seeds than it is to douse them with chemicals to make them bug resistant.

Q: These things are complicated. We just don't know much about them until somebody comes up and asks. You must have had a very skillful staff.

RANSOM: One of the most valuable people on our staff is a research librarian who is in touch with institutions in Washington and across the U.S. She knows where to look to get the experts who have the information. Her office in the Foreign Press Center is near the front door because she is the one that savvy journalists go to right away. But our other officers - and we had some civil servants as well and some political appointees - all spent a lot of time trying to persuade busy officials or businessmen and women to meet with our journalists. They also developed a lot of expertise quickly on the subjects that the journalists were interested in.

Q: Where would political appointees fit into this?

RANSOM: Over the years, we were assigned in Washington two political appointees to work right along with our program officers. At election time, it was extremely helpful to have them. Of course, some are more talented than others. I think in New York City we would have morale problems from time to time with our talented, in this case, civil servants, who constantly had to educate new political appointees who then would be assigned over them. We kept the key positions in Washington as career Foreign Service jobs, but in New York, the Director of the Center was a political appointee. It's a management headache.

Q: Political appointees? (You were there during the Clinton administration), I would think they would feel obliged to try to give the best picture possible of the administration.

RANSOM: That is true, but I think it's helpful to have them there. I had an interesting issue arise during my tenure in the Foreign Press Center that I had never run into before. This was after we became part of The Office of Public Affairs (PA) in State my last year there. We had always made the decision of who was going to brief when. We would call on the Department to help us get people like Under Secretary Tom Pickering, who was our best briefer. But, we made the decisions. Overall, the State Department gave us the greatest number of briefers. They gave us more briefers than any other individual government agency, but overall more briefings were non-State than were State. There were a lot of non-State issues that we handled. We represented the entire U.S. government to the foreign press, but we worked with independence from the government. During an election year, we were extremely busy. We took it upon ourselves to educate the journalists about the U.S. electoral system, and we worked very hard to put the journalists in touch with the different candidates. One of the very first calls we got during the last election campaign, 2000, came from Bob Zoellick's office. He was advising candidate George W. Bush on defense matters and wanted to brief the foreign press. So, we said, "Sure," and set a date. I went to my weekly State Department meeting and announced that Bob Zoellick was briefing on such and such a date and that I hoped that... I mentioned that we had been trying to get someone from Gore's staff to come and brief and we hoped the fact that Zoellick was doing this would give us the push we needed to get someone from the Vice President's office. The political appointee in PA said, "Absolutely not. You can't do this. You can't put on Bob Zoellick. You have to cancel." We had a lengthy, heated discussion. It was one of the few times the woman gave me her

ear, but she forced us to postpone the briefing until she was able to check it out with her supervisors. I had to bring forward all kinds of proof that we had always done this, that this was our mission, and that all candidates had an opportunity to brief. It was obviously a very sensitive issue for the Democratic political appointees. We in the end won out, but we got a couple blips in the press from Zoellick's office because we postponed the briefing.

Q: You say a "briefing." What was this? There is the State Department normal briefing, where the spokesperson gets up. But what were these other briefings?

RANSOM: We would announce that a briefing was taking place on X subject with X official. Normally, the briefer would speak for 10 minutes. The whole thing was on the record. Then he or she would take questions and answers. The whole session would run from 30 minutes, a short one, to 50 minutes maximum.

Q: These were done where?

RANSOM: The Washington Foreign Press Center has offices in the National Press Building at 14th and F St. In New York City, we have a similar setup, but in an office building at East 52nd St., not far from the United Nations. We have a briefing room smaller than the one at the State Department, but it can accommodate up to 100 people. We have facilities to accommodate up to about 10 television cameras. We always videotaped it ourselves. We have the latest technology to handle these briefings. We have a wonderful website which carries the briefings live on video. Many of our journalists live in the suburbs and don't like to come into town. They can simply cover the briefing on their computers. We then, once the briefing is over, can make video copies available to any TV network that wants it that could not cover it live. We do a lot of that. We archive the audio immediately so it's available once the briefing is over. We don't keep the video up because it takes too much space, but the audio is there. Any journalist can check any point immediately. The transcript goes up on the website in two to three hours. It depends on how vital the subject is.

Q: This is pretty expensive.

RANSOM: It's an expensive operation, but we were able to get Spokesman Jamie Rubin more column inches and time on television from one of those briefings than the State Department main briefing would get in weeks of time. We had 800 journalists in Washington. There were lots from the Middle East. More than 100 in Europe. Many Japanese. Many Taiwanese. The Chinese. Poor Africa was the one continent that wasn't really well represented. Lots of people from Latin America. This is a fantastic vehicle for the U.S. government to make its viewpoint known for whatever subjects it's talking about quickly and accurately. It's not like CNN. It's not like news coverage by other organizations. We put out full transcripts and very accurate representation of U.S. policy.

Q: I would think there would be pressure to have one of these in Miami for Latin America.

RANSOM: Well, we've even tried one time when another government agency wanted us to put them on live from a point in Latin America to the foreign journalists in the Foreign Press Center. It simply doesn't work. It's got to happen at the center of action. We do work closely with six international press centers. There is one in Miami that was one of the first. There is one in Houston, in Seattle, in Chicago, in Atlanta, and in Cleveland.

Q: What are these?

RANSOM: These are press centers to deal with the foreign media that have been set up by the local government. Usually, they start after a big conference involving the American President. We've gone in and set up a press center to help cover it. The local institutions have seen how helpful it is to have an institution like that to work with foreign journalists, to guide them in their coverage, that they have set them up and run them after we've left. The best ones are in Seattle and in Houston. In Miami, there is a funding problem. Cleveland is the newest. They came on board a couple of years ago.

Q: I would think that when you look at the normal press briefings of the President, these things are so dominated by the American press and usually they zero in on one or two points. This is usually a scandal involving sex or money or something of this nature. This is the way it goes. It seems like the foreigners are ignored on this thing. Does this allow them to get off on their own?

RANSOM: Well, there are a couple of important things. First of all, with Jamie Rubin, we had a particular problem. He was not interested in the foreign press. We almost never could get Jamie himself to come. He came only three times in two years.

Q: One has a feeling he belonged to the coterie around Madeline Albright.

RANSOM: When he came to the Foreign Press Center, I experienced his concern about it. He would come in with his huge briefing book, which was about two feet high. He would have to stand at a podium and he always feared the weird, narrow question about a fine point he would be unfamiliar with. In such a case, he had to stand there and ripple through his book to find the answer. He simply didn't want to face that kind of thing. But the most important advantage with the Foreign Press Center was that, since it was the foreign press who came and since the focus of the White House and the State Department is on domestic press, it would allow the American officials who really do the work, who really know the issues, to come and talk. So, we could get all the Assistant Secretaries of State. We had Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott. While these officials were seldom allowed to address the domestic press, they could address the foreign press successfully.

Q: This would be to the Pentagon, Treasury, etc.?

RANSOM: The Pentagon loved us. Pentagon spokesman Ken Bacon used to come and brief at the Foreign Press Center every four or five months. He would see only a small

number of foreign journalists over at the Pentagon, but to reach all of them on a global basis, he would come to the Foreign Press Center.

Q: These would be well attended?

RANSOM: Oh, Ken is wonderful. They loved his briefings. Our advantage in all this was because the Smith-Mundt Act prohibited USIA from publicizing the U.S. government within the U.S. So, our audience was naturally a foreign audience. At the Foreign Press Center, we advertised only to foreign media. We had a listserv that included only foreign media. Of course, it's getting harder to distinguish between foreign and domestic press. We can't say that CNN is domestic media anymore, for example. But the interesting issue that would come up constantly was CSPAN. CSPAN is the television network that is owned and funded by Congress. They cover congressional briefings at great length and put them on TV, and especially when Congress is out of town and they have time to fill, they always want to come and tape our briefings. We almost always said, "No." I think there were a couple of occasions when we allowed them to come when we had the permission of the other agency involved, but the Department would never let them come. I don't think they ever relented. That then enabled the Assistant Secretaries to come and brief without fear of appearing on American TV. Once in a while, it would happen, but normally not.

Q: I talked to at least one Assistant Secretary during this time who had been told by Madeline Albright's staff not to get himself on TV. This was a difficult time. You had very close control under the secretaryship of Madeline Albright.

RANSOM: Yes.

Q: It was an atypical time when we were trying to make focus on the Secretary, as opposed to the institution.

RANSOM: Well, the Secretary did something I really admire. She tried very hard to educate the American public about the importance of foreign affairs. But that was a different issue that went way beyond the desire for control.

Q: What about the Foreign Press Center in Los Angeles?

RANSOM: It's a very small office. It was a one-officer office and I added another person to make it a more realistic operation. They focused more on economic issues. Their audience was largely... Initially, I thought it would be the Pacific, the Japanese, the Chinese, the Asian audience, and also Latin America. They have a number of Mexican journalists in Los Angeles who cover for all of Latin America. But then it became apparent that there were a number of very talented European journalists on the West Coast, not just in LA, but in San Francisco as well, who were there to cover economic issues. There is tremendous European interest in our west coast.

Q: Not being frivolous because it's a major exporter: Hollywood.

RANSOM: We tried to stay away from Hollywood, but we certainly got a lot of questions on it and had good contacts. But we tried to keep our focus on immigration issues, drugs, and economic issues in high tech, the computer industry, Silicon Valley.

Q: You had the Foreign Press Center. What if I were a reporter for the St. Louis Dispatch or something? Could I wander in and pick up stuff?

RANSOM: You could wander in. We're not going to lock our doors to American journalists. But we make it clear that our primary focus is foreign press and if we have any time left over, we can help them. But they usually don't come. They would come to our briefings. I had a journalist from a small U.S. publication get quite annoyed that I wouldn't take his question. Frankly, I was giving priority to the foreign press and there wasn't enough time for everyone, not to mention the fact that I didn't like his attitude. But normally, they were fine. Barry Schweid comes from time to time, but he's reporting for AP. The AP is international.

Q: You had this good look at the foreign press. Could you characterize some of the major press corps that you've seen in the U.S. – the Chinese, the Japanese, the French, the Swedes, the Germans, and also the Middle Easterners? What were your impressions?

RANSOM: The Europeans are very sophisticated. They don't need much help from us. But they came regularly for our briefings because we got them access on a regular basis to top officials that even they couldn't do on their own. The Japanese were and are kind of a puzzle. They were very reluctant to ask questions in briefings, even briefings that dealt directly with Japan, where they should have been asking the lead questions. My colleague and I hosted most of the briefings and we tried very hard to get them to be more courageous. The stories would have been more interesting. We talked to them individually to try... It's a cultural thing. They have a very large press corps. Some of them have Americans on their staff working for them and they would come and ask questions. After a while, after they've been here for a while, some of them would finally start speaking up. With the Taiwanese, you had the opposite problem. You couldn't shut them up. Very aggressive. Most of them have lived in the United States for a long time. Of course, you knew what questions they were going to ask and you could barely ever get through a briefing that was dealing with Asia without the Taiwan question being asked, whatever three or four issues were on their mind.

The Middle Easterners were many. They used the press center a lot. They were very focused on the Arab-Israeli issue. It was very hard to find many of them who went beyond that. We were always trying to get them to understand better why our policy is what it is and how our policy is formulated. The more sophisticated would work on that, but most were pretty narrow in their scope.

Africa simply didn't get the coverage it should have. They just don't have the journalists.

The Latin journalists are quite good and there is a representation from across Latin

America. I wish there were more.

Q: What about the Brazilians?

RANSOM: The Brazilians were okay. There were some very good reporters. There was an excellent Argentinian journalist. A number of good Mexicans; that's no surprise. But they were few in number compared to the Europeans.

Q: How about the Chinese?

RANSOM: The Chinese have a government press. We had interesting journalists from Singapore. Indonesia – we only had one or two. They were not well represented.

Q: How about India?

RANSOM: Oh, there were some excellent journalists from India – quite a number and quite articulate. We had one or two from Pakistan. So, India definitely was very well represented.

The Turks have a very active press, very good journalists. There were some Greeks, but they were outnumbered by the Turks.

Q: How about the Russians?

RANSOM: The Russians have a fair number of journalists and they're quite good. They're very active.

Q: Did you get any feedback from posts saying, "What are you doing at that place?" Journalists from their countries were writing how despicable the United States was, and the posts gave credit to you for helping them put out the articles?

RANSOM: No, we never got anything like that. Our problem was that we were always fighting for funds. When you fight for funds, you want evidence of effectiveness. Posts have been cut back so much that they no longer have the staff they used to have who could just sit there and read the papers in the morning. With journalism and communications having become so universal and so fast, it's very hard to get the credit you deserve. After every briefing we sent out a cable to all the posts in the world who had journalists at the briefing and told them they were there. Of course, the posts knew about the briefing. They got the transcript. But still the feedback was very bad. We could only do so much. During my time we bought new digital video camera equipment and connected ourselves with both New York and Los Angeles so we could share briefings. In one particular briefing, a French journalist asked a very appropriate question from New York. It was one of the first times we were connected this way. A story appeared on the front page of one of Paris' major newspapers. An alert woman at our post there sent us the clipping. It was a Department of Defense briefing on a topic that was very timely. We had some difficulty persuading them to do this particular briefing, so we sent the

clips over to Ken Bacon. He was absolutely thrilled. He took it back to the Pentagon briefer. Everybody at the Pentagon was as pleased as they could be with this placement. But we know that there are 1,000 other stories out there like that, but we never got them. So, that was frustrating.

Q: What did you do about coverage when you were there of an event called the “Monica Lewinsky affair?” This was when President Clinton was caught fiddling around with a young female intern. It ended up in impeachment and everything else.

RANSOM: That was very tough for us. One of the best things we were able to come up with was a report that was done by the Congressional Research Service on the role of the special prosecutor. We put that up on our website. There just was very little we could do. We thought about having academics come in and talk about the problem. Then we weren't even willing to do that. It was too politically sensitive. We just stayed out of it, frankly. It was a domestic issue. It very quickly became a foreign affairs issue because of the amount of U.S. coverage. All we could do was make sure that whatever information was public was available, but we didn't do briefings on that topic. These journalists are still fascinated by it. I was at the Foreign Press Center yesterday for a reception. An Iraqi journalist was saying, “Oh, you're at it again now.” We have another intern...

Q: A missing intern [Chandra Levy].

Did you feel this institution which sounds first rate was going to have a problem as the USIA was being absorbed into the State Department?

RANSOM: The whole consolidation issue was the frustration of my three years in that job; that coupled with my frustration with then Director of USIA Joe Duffy. I just have to say a few words about him.

When I returned to Washington in 1997 and before I took up the job as Director of the Foreign Press Centers, the foreign press centers really had been given away to State's Office of Public Affairs. The decision had already been made that they would not move into the State Department as part of the Information Bureau, which went in as a whole unit. We were snipped off and given to Public Affairs and there was nothing I could do about it. I tried, but the decision had been made. Joe Duffy was always very friendly to me, very supportive, and certainly played a role in my becoming a Career Minister. So, there was no personal animosity. But first I discovered when I got back that he had written off the foreign press centers. Then a few months into the job, I learned indirectly that someone had made him aware of the cost of rent for the New York Foreign Press Center and he had decided that closing it would be a good way to save money. Without even consulting me, he had made the decision to close the New York Foreign Press Center just like that. I moved quickly to get an appointment to see him. I went in with the Director of the New York Foreign Press Center. Working with the State Department, we were able to save it. He just was going to cut it off with no discussion at any high level committee about the impact, no question about foreign policy implications, nothing. That's the way he was. Then within the Information Bureau, there was a hiatus... The

Associate Director for the Information Bureau left and the Deputy, who was acting head, retired and so I was acting for three months. During that period, I continued the negotiations with the Voice of America for the transfer of the television unit that produced WorldNets for our overseas posts. I continued the negotiations with the head of VOA, Kevin Close. After weeks of wrangling and discussion, Kevin Close agreed. We had worked out a satisfactory arrangement. He signed. Joe Duffy wouldn't accept it. He said it wasn't enough. I went and argued with him and said, "Dr. Duffy, you'll never get more than this. With consolidation facing us, we simply ought to take it." He wouldn't do it. So, in the end, we lost everything.

Q: What was Duffy's background?

RANSOM: Before coming to USIA, Duffy was the President of American University for four or five years. Before that, he was President of the University of Massachusetts. His wife is Ann Wexler, a very powerful lobbyist. He never defended our agency. He testified once on the Hill. I was told that the congressional staffers told him before he testified that if he argued for money in this and that way, he would get it; he refused to. He lost the opportunity for our agency. He never traveled. I was Public Affairs Officer in Egypt, our most important post in the Middle East. He never visited.

Q: What turned him on?

RANSOM: I don't know why he took the job. Nobody could ever explain to me why he took it. He was like a relic from the '60s or the '70s. He was genuinely embarrassed by the size of the U.S. presence overseas. He was uncomfortable with USIA's role in public diplomacy in being a spokesperson for the U.S. government. He favored reducing the U.S. presence abroad. This man was in charge of our agency. Very frustrating.

Q: Were there any major incidents or stories working with the press centers?

RANSOM: The biggest challenge we had in my three years there was preparing for the 50th anniversary of the NATO summit, which was also the 50th anniversary. It took place in Washington, DC, and it was the first time we could find that the U.S. government had hosted such a major public event with all the NATO countries and all the other countries... It was a group of 40-some countries which gathered in Washington, DC. It was our job to negotiate with the GSA [General Services Administration] the space that we would get in the Ronald Reagan Center and who would pay what. The GSA was trying to charge rent to USIA for the space. We were deeply engaged in negotiating all that. Then, in addition to blocking out the space and equipping it to handle all these media, we had the job of credentialing some 3,000 press. We credentialed both the American and the foreign press who were coming to cover this event. It was a managerial nightmare, but it was extremely successful. It didn't hurt that our office was right down the street from the Ronald Reagan Center, positioned perfectly.

We in the Foreign Press Center have the responsibility for staffing any major presidential event outside the United States and some within the United States, if they occur outside

Washington, handling foreign press, staffing, etc. It's a lot of work, but a lot of fun. Again, it's crucial for getting the accurate word out to the foreign media.

Q: How did you find CNN? What was your impression over the years? It's become a major source of news all over.

RANSOM: When I was overseas, I watched international CNN and relied on it totally. I found it much better than the two domestic services. Here, I can't get the international CNN. We don't have a satellite dish. I still prefer it for rapid news to any other television station. I don't see much in-depth reporting on either Headline News or the regular CNN. That's a disappointment. I think they could do a lot more. I still prefer McNeil Leher on PBS. But I think they've revolutionized the whole business of television news around the world.

Q: At a certain point, how did things end up?

RANSOM: Well, I just wanted to talk in general about the merger with State. It was a mystery to me why it really happened. We were all told that Secretary Albright agreed to it in exchange for getting Senator Helms' agreement to the passage of the chemical ban. It didn't make any sense to me and it really doesn't today. I don't think it's a big money saver. I think the main problem is that in the State Department there is not only disinterest in public diplomacy but often fear of it. Many Department officers are afraid of working with journalists.

Q: Somebody has either been burned or heard about someone who had been burned, being misquoted, etc.

RANSOM: I think that our agency really developed an expertise that I fear will be lost. Just yesterday, I attended a reception for the new leadership in NEA [the office of Near Eastern Affairs]. I learned that in the Department there is a tremendous shortage of officers at the 3 and 2 level in every geographic area, but also within NEA public diplomacy. The State Department suddenly has a problem staffing the PAO position in Jerusalem; they have a gap in Riyadh; they are going to face difficulty filling the PAO jobs in Cairo and Amman because of illness. But the talent that you draw on is so limited. What's happening in the Department is that the talented Public Diplomacy officers are going to State jobs. They will do them very well, but who is going to sit there and worry about public diplomacy? It's a problem of assets. I lost a great deal for the Foreign Press Centers going into the Department. I think it goes back to that decision to shave us off from the I Bureau. I lost personnel and money to Public Affairs. I think that there will be further erosion as they need more assets to support the Secretary of State. It's natural that they would turn to the Foreign Press Centers. They took away our television service.

The positive side is that no one in the Department is more aware of the value and importance of public diplomacy than ambassadors abroad. Our PAOs, CAOs, and IOs continue to do their work well and are very much integrated into the overall foreign policy work in embassies abroad. I can only hope that ambassadors will weigh in when

there are fights over resources. I hope that public diplomacy officers will be able to continue to do their work well and have support on the Hill. It could happen if Congress sees that public diplomacy is not being done in the Department, that yet again it might look for the creation of a separate agency. I would hope so. It happened with Commerce and Trade. You got USTR. Economic issues are decided by Treasury. Many of these functions have been moved out of the Department. So, I would hope that if it doesn't work, there would again be another move to create a separate agency.

Q: Can you talk about the end game?

RANSOM: My end game? Well, when I was DCM in Damascus, my name was on a list to be Ambassador to Yemen. At that point in time, I finally asked that my name be removed from consideration. It was when David and I had just had it with being apart and felt the tremendous need to go back to Washington and establish our family life again. Then the opportunity came up again and I was one of the last of those from USIA to be nominated for an ambassadorship. My name was again in the hopper for Yemen. In fact, the President nominated me for Yemen. It was a tremendous honor and I got myself ready to go. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee held a hearing in late June of 2000, which I was ready for. I even had my "murder board." The "murder board" is the mock session that the Department holds for its candidates. They put a group of candidates together in a room and then they call in all the desk officers and they ask you the toughest questions they think that the Senate committee could ask to see how you handle them and you get some coaching from the congressional liaison people on how to answer certain questions with proper deference and politeness, etc. So, I was all ready to go, but there was one piece of paper that they insisted on having. It was a financial question. That paper didn't reach them until after that hearing. So, I sat and waited for another hearing. I waited all of July. In July, Jesse Helms was angry with the President over the possibility of debt relief for Russia and he would grant no hearings. In August, the Congress went on recess. The President named three political ambassadors as recess appointments, without putting them through the Foreign Relations Committee. So, when Jesse and the Committee came back in September, he finally let it be known late in September that he was not going to give the President any more hearings for career ambassadors in the year 2000. Having waited about a year and a half from the time I first heard about this, I decided that I didn't want to start the process all over again. It is simply foolish on the part of a Foreign Service officer to get nominated during an election year. It's just the wrong time. But with the new administration coming in, I simply did not want to go through that process all over again. I wanted to get on with my life and do something different.

So, I retired as of November 30, 2000. David and I are living in our house on Cathedral Avenue. We're near our daughters. We have spent just an enormous amount of time with them and our grandchildren. David does consulting work. I'm working on a book. We are just having the time of our lives. Yemen would have been a tough assignment. A friend of mine has been nominated. I wish him all the best. I leave with no regrets.

Q: I want to thank you, Marjorie, for this. This is excellent.

End of interview