

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

EDWARD LOO

*Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy
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Born in Hong Kong, 1962; childhood in San Francisco
Dartmouth, BA; Columbia, MA
Entered the Foreign Service in 1987

The American Institute in Taiwan, Taipei, Taiwan Acting Cultural Affairs Officer	1988-1989
U.S. Embassy, Beijing, China Deputy Press Officer	1989-1991
U.S. Embassy, Manila, Philippines Deputy Press Officer	1992-1994
U.S. Embassy, Beijing, China Director, American Center for Educational Exchange	1994-1997
Bureau of Human Resources, U.S. Information Agency Assignments Officer for East Asia and South Asia	1997-1999
U.S. Embassy, Managua, Nicaragua Public Affairs Officer	1999-2001
Foreign Service Institute Chinese Language Field School, Taipei, Taiwan Principal	2001-2002
U.S. Embassy, Madrid, Spain Cultural Affairs Officer	2002-2006
U.S. Embassy, Bogota, Colombia Cultural Affairs Officer	2006-2008
U.S. Embassy, Budapest, Hungary	2009-2012

Public Affairs Officer

Diplomat in Residence for South Florida and Puerto Rico, Miami, FL	2012-2015
U.S. Embassy, Budapest, Hungary Deputy Chief of Mission	2015-2016
Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, Washington, DC Director, Office of English Language Programs	2016-2017
Retirement	2017

INTERVIEW

Q: Today is September 22, 2017, with Edward Loo. L-O-O?

LOO: That's correct, yes.

Q: And this is being done on behalf of the Association for Diplomatic Studies and I'm Charles Stuart Kennedy.

And, let's start with, you're called Ed, you go by Ed?

LOO: I go by Ed, yes.

Q: Alright. Well, first I want to know where you come from. Can you tell me on your father's side of the family, what do you know about it?

LOO: Well, my parents are both from Southern China, from Guangdong Province. They met in Hong Kong. I actually was born in Hong Kong and we emigrated to the U.S. in 1963 via steamship. If you couldn't afford to fly in those days you went by sea. So, I grew up in San Francisco and for all intents and purposes I am culturally American. But, like Arnold Schwarzenegger or Henry Kissinger, I'm a naturalized citizen so I won't ever be able to run for president. I have no memories, childhood memories of Hong Kong since I basically grew up as a San Franciscan.

Q: Can you tell me something about on your mother and father's side, what you know about their families and all.

LOO: They were basically from farming families, Southern China was largely an agricultural economy, and they met in Hong Kong. My father studied to be a mechanical engineer but he was not able to transfer his credentials when he came to the U.S., so he basically wound up working restaurant, busboy jobs, that type of thing, until he found a position as a repair technician for commercial cooking equipment. So, definitely blue

collar. He wrote an account about that experience that was excerpted in a book chronicling the history of the Chinese in California called Longtime Californ' by Victor Nee. My mother's side of the family, again was agricultural or farming, living in small villages in Southern China. She basically had her hands full taking care of six kids, so she was a full-time housewife.

Q: Well, Southern China is where most of the American Chinese came from.

LOO: Originally, yes, that was where most of the Chinese came from to the U.S. , because of the economic conditions and its distance from the capital.

Q: Yes, and treated more-

LOO: Sure, yes. So, that's where, Southern China, Southeast China is where most of the immigration out of China took place from. It was pretty common for a lot of people from Southern China, from Guangzhou, to move onward to Hong Kong, and then many of them would go from Hong Kong elsewhere.

Q: Now, where were you born?

LOO: I was born in Hong Kong.

Q: When?

LOO: In 1962.

Q: And you came to the United States when?

LOO: In 1963. So, I was about nine, 10 months old when we made the move.

Q: You settled in, your family settled in?

LOO: In San Francisco.

Q: Do you have brothers and sisters?

LOO: Yes. I come from a big family so there are six of us total, three boys, three girls. I'm the fourth of six.

Q: Well then, what sort of place did you live in in San Francisco?

LOO: A working class neighborhood called the Richmond District where my parents still live. We lived in North Beach initially and then we moved to a larger house that my parents bought in the Richmond District. That's where they still live.

Q: Alright. Well, let's talk a little bit about your early years. What was it like as a very young kid when you're sort of able to get out.

LOO: Yes. Well, it was a childhood in the 1960s, 1970s so it was a more old-fashioned type of parenting. My mother was at home but we went out and played until dark.

Q: Everything's changes so much but we belonged to- I know I was kicked out, be home by 6:30.

LOO: Sure, yes. Things that my brothers and sisters and their spouses now would not want their kids to do. We took public buses when I was in first grade, things like that, on our own and so on. Our parents sent us to a Chinese language school after regular public school. Some people kind of considered that as cheap daycare; it was a couple of hours Monday through Friday every day until I finished junior high.

Q: Did you speak Chinese at home?

LOO: Yes, that was the language of home. My father spoke English but my mother never really did, so communication in the household was essentially in Cantonese.

Q: Cantonese. How about reading?

LOO: We learned some in the Chinese language school and with my mother. So I learned to read some Chinese, and that was to my advantage when I started in the Foreign Service in terms of being able to develop skills in Mandarin Chinese.

Q: Well then, what was being a kid -- out on the streets is the wrong term but that's where you played.

LOO: Yes.

Q: What were some things that you- just to get a feel for the period.

LOO: I played a lot of basketball because it was an inexpensive sport; all you needed was access to a backboard and a ball. We lived close to Golden Gate Park so that was a great opportunity to have. We would go out there and have picnics and play pick-up softball games and things like that. And most of the time the focus was on school whether it be American public school or Chinese school.

Q: Well, how much of a Chinese environment was it? I mean, were all your friends Chinese?

LOO: Yes. San Francisco then -- and even now -- is a place where you can essentially grow up culturally Chinese and get through all your daily needs in Chinese if you wanted to, similar to what Miami is for Spanish speakers.

Q: Yes.

LOO: The neighborhood was mixed but probably “minority majority” in that when I went to public schools I never thought twice about how many Asians there were. It wasn’t until I was older and I had other friends from other areas who saw my old school yearbook and were stunned by the number of Asian faces that I realized how different San Francisco was. If Chinese-Americans, Japanese-Americans were not the majority in my neighborhood they were pretty close to the majority.

Q: Did you find that, as a kid did you notice there was discrimination or not?

LOO: No, not that I could tell as a kid, no.

Q: In school, let’s take elementary school, what was it like?

LOO: It was more traditional lecture style than it is now. I did have the benefit of being in a gifted program in elementary school so the teachers at least were more experimental and tried to give us more interactive opportunities. But I remember, Stu, the stereotypical teacher from junior high who would kind of drill the grammar rules into you and so on.

Q: Could you use your English out of school?

LOO: My English or my Chinese?

Q: Your English.

LOO: Yes. again, having arrived when I was about a year old English was essentially my first language.

Q: What was- could you enjoy- You know, I’ve visited San Francisco and it’s a delightful city. Did you- was it a fun city to be a kid in?

LOO: It was, it was a great city. It had, for a kid, it had a decent public transportation system where you could get around the city. And as I said, in those days you didn’t bat an eye if you saw a six- or seven-year-old kid on the bus by him- or herself. It was just the way it was done. Parks were nearby, schools were good. I had good friends.

Q: Well then, were you much of a reader?

LOO: Yes, I think so, yes. I read a lot of fiction, young adult and moving onward.

Q: Can you think of any books that particularly grabbed you as a young kid?

LOO: Off the top of my head, no. Certainly we read things like Animal Farm and Johnny Tremain and books of that type.

Q: Well then, what sort of a student were you?

LOO: I was a good student. I was, again, selected for a gifted students program beginning, I guess, in the second or third grade and that was a great benefit, especially in later years in elementary school where we were put together with other gifted students.

Q: Was there a lot of pressure sort of from the family to do well in school and all?

LOO: Yes. That was the primary reason, even if you were to ask my father today, why they moved from Hong Kong to the U.S. The motivation was to make sure that the kids had better educational/career opportunities. So, academic success was the main concern for my parents.

Q: Well, this of course- two immigrant groups who are particularly renowned are the Chinese and the Jewish families place a much higher standard on education than probably other groups.

LOO: Yes, yes, I find that to be true.

Q: I served in Korea for some time and there the pressure on the students was something at a very early age.

Well then, did you find any, particularly courses at elementary school to your liking and any not to your liking?

LOO: I gravitated towards, say, history and English in elementary school and in junior high school, world history or American history were some of my favorite classes. Also, English classes, especially when given the chance to do creative writing.

Q: And your family, was religion important?

LOO: No. I guess my mother, more than my father, kind of followed Chinese traditions including some of the Buddhist traditions but we're not a particularly religious family.

Q: Politically where did they fall?

LOO: They're typical first-generation immigrants in that they were not particularly politically involved. They were kind of struggling to make ends meet so they didn't really have time to engage in political discussions or think about that other than acquiring citizenship and voting every couple of years.

Q: Where'd you go to high school?

LOO: This is actually where it gets interesting; the reason I'm in the Foreign Service is because of where I went to high school, I think. I was, as I said, in a minority majority community in San Francisco, comfortable there with friends. And if that had been the

track I had continued on I would have gone on to the academic magnet high school in San Francisco. I probably would have stayed in San Francisco and become a lawyer or accountant or what not. But what really pushed me towards the Foreign Service was that I wound up getting a scholarship to a boarding school in Colorado Springs. It's a long story, but my sister had seen a notice in the newspaper saying that this school was offering a scholarship test -- and she said I ought to take it because it would prepare me for the PSAT or other standardized tests. So, I took the test. I wound up not being the winner. Ironically, I knew the winner and it turns out he had second thoughts or cold feet and he decided to turn down the scholarship and they offered it to me. And so, after some thinking I decided to take it. So, I went to a boarding school called Fountain Valley School outside Colorado Springs as a boarding student for three years. And, again, that's really what sparked my interest in an international career for a couple of reasons. That was probably the biggest culture shock that I ever had. Everything else in the Foreign Service has been easy since then, going from, again, a working class public school, and a very diverse community to a small, essentially white boarding school with students from families of privilege. So, as I said, everything else since then has been a piece of cake in terms of cultural adaptation.

Q: I went to a boarding school run by monks, Episcopalian monks, and I found that after four years there, when I went into the service basic training was a lark.

LOO: Yes.

Q: As a young boy you really feel it.

LOO: Sure. So, that was one aspect of why I'm comfortable as a cultural observer and trying to learn about new cultures. But another one was more personal. One of my roommates actually happened to be Jessie Low, who is a son of Ambassador Stephen Low.

Q: Oh, yes.

LOO: He was one of my roommates for a while and just hearing him talk about what his dad did and about growing up as a Foreign Service brat in places like Zambia, I believe, and so on, opened my eyes. Another thing was, this was the late 1970s so it was, as you know, the era of revolution and civil war in Central America and in Iran and so on. We had kids from those countries in my school, so when you saw the cover of Time magazine saying "El Salvador in flames" or something, it wasn't just a newspaper story, it was about your friend Viktor who was living down the hall. Or when Khomeini took power in Iran in the revolution, it was not just a hostage story, it was affecting those two girls, Delilah and Minoo, who were in your class. So, that really brought home the effect and impact that global affairs had on people. I think that was what drove me to thinking about a foreign affairs career.

Q: Well, Steve Low, of course, helped found this organization that I belong to here.

Well, what courses did you particularly like; did it continue to be history?

LOO: Yes, the traditional liberal arts curriculum is what really interested me, history, literature, languages. I started taking French in high school and I guess I gritted my way through the sciences and mathematics, doing well enough to get good grades but probably forgetting much of the material right after the final exam. Calculus and physics, things like that, just didn't stick with me.

Q: Were you able to continue to read Chinese?

LOO: To a certain degree. This is before internet days so I used to get letter mail and my parents would write to me in Chinese, and that was one way of maintaining some of those language skills.

Q: Yes. I would think that, I may be wrong but the ideographs in Chinese are so complex that you really would have to keep up with it, wouldn't you?

LOO: Sure, yes.

Q: I mean, it's not like something with the Latin alphabet or something.

LOO: No, it's very easy to forget so you do need to maintain and the letters did help at least maintain some familiarity with characters.

Q: Did you find yourself- were you able- I mean, was there particular news, TV or newspaper or magazines that you were reading?

LOO: As part of the curriculum or syllabus we had to get a subscription to "Time" magazine, so that was probably the main source of news for me during high school. We got the local Colorado Springs paper but it was not particularly strong except for local news. And we didn't have much access to TV. So, it was essentially that and then whatever else the teachers decided to provide in class.

Q: How did you view the Cold War?

LOO: It was ever-present. You always talked about the Soviets and Brezhnev who was, I guess, the leader at that time. And in that period it was less about the classic Cold War than it was about proxy wars. Central America and Africa was the context that we talked about in our classes.

Q: At school, what sort of faculty was there?

LOO: It was typical independent school faculty. Some teachers had been there for decades and others were younger faculty members who were there for a year or two. And like, I guess, most independent schools, salaries were not high and one didn't need a certificate to teach necessarily, so the quality was very uneven. Some were great teachers

who loved teaching and had rapport with young people and others were not as strong. But it was a great environment for me because I would have gone to a public high school where my class would have been 1,000 people, maybe more, and instead I went to this school where the entire student body in four grades was about 200. I would have classes sometimes with as few as, say, one or two other students. So, it was a great growth experience.

Q: And I guess you learned to write, too, didn't you?

LOO: Yes.

Q: I mean, really write as opposed to, I mean, if you had a large class.

LOO: Sure. They were pretty rigorous in that regard. Part of the junior year requirements was to do a significant term paper. And then I also had the opportunity to work on the literary magazine, which was great fun too.

Q: Did you go out for sports?

LOO: Yes. That was another area where I probably would not have had the chance in a larger school. I played soccer, and basketball, and lacrosse when I was there.

Q: Did they keep you in or did you get out in the community too?

LOO: It was a boarding school which, in those days, was maybe a dozen miles to the small town nearby and then maybe 25 miles to Colorado Springs and two hours to Denver so it was pretty isolated, by design because part of the idea was to build the sense of family among the school. So, apart from, say, a Saturday bus to town it was mainly a self-enclosed environment.

Q: Yes. How about, did you enjoy the mountains?

LOO: I did; it was great. That was another attractive part of it, being able to see Pike's Peak on your walk to breakfast every morning. And you got to enjoy the Rocky Mountains and the high altitude and the sunny days for the most part and the peaceful, secluded feeling of it.

Q: Was the school pointing you towards any particular colleges, universities or not?

LOO: It did in the sense that, having been in such a small school, I think I was less interested in larger universities. I thought that a better choice would be a smaller, say, liberal arts school. I did apply to the big names like Harvard but I kind of focused more on small liberal arts schools.

Q: And where did you go?

LOO: I went to Dartmouth.

Q: To where?

LOO: Dartmouth College.

Q: Oh yes. "Dartmouth's in town, again, run girls run." I went to Williams.

LOO: Yes, I applied to Williams too and had gotten in and wound up choosing Dartmouth.

Q: Alright, well let's talk about Dartmouth. What was Dartmouth like? You were there from when to when?

LOO: I was there from 1980 to 1983. I finished a year early. So, just in political context this was during Reagan's first term.

Q: What was it like and how did you find the campus and the environment?

LOO: It was a beautiful campus but I was bored/alienated, I guess, by the smallness, by the school. I got a great education, I had great professors but I think in retrospect it was too much of the same thing, going from a small high school to a small rural campus. And it was not very diverse in those days; in my class of roughly 1,000 freshmen or so there were maybe 30 Asian-Americans. And it was also not a particularly friendly school if you were not interested in the Greek fraternity/sorority culture, which I was not interested in at all. Or if you did not drink alcohol, which I did not at the time.

Q: By the way, how was the impact in your family when you would go back? I mean, you were in two different worlds, wasn't it?

LOO: Yes, it was, it was two different worlds and it was always interesting. My parents supported my choice and again, in college. Luckily I was able to get enough financial aid that I was not a big financial drain on them. But it was a bit of a culture shift going back home for visits and so on.

Q: How about your brothers and sisters?

LOO: They for the most part stayed in the area and they still are in the Bay Area for the most part. They've ventured out. My older sisters have gone out to the East Coast for law school and my younger brother went to Cornell but most of their undergraduate education was at Berkeley, which was pretty typical. It was almost like a feeder system from the elite academic San Francisco high school to UC-Berkeley and so on.

Q: Well of course, if you've got to be in a feeder system it's the best you can have.

LOO: Yes.

Q: In college, did you have problems dating?

LOO: Yes. it was pretty isolated. that's probably one of the reasons why I finished up in three years is I was just kind of itching to get out of that small town and do something else. And I didn't think I could do something else without the credential of a degree.

Q: Well, Williamstown is very isolated, too.

You graduated when, '85?

LOO: '83.

Q: '83. Did you have any idea what you were going to do?

LOO: Not particularly. The default for people who don't know what to do is to go to law school. I didn't want to do that. What I wound up doing was going on to graduate school in American history. I was lucky enough to get a fellowship to Columbia University in New York. That only served to show me that I was an amateur in the true sense of the word, in that I loved history but not enough to work in it as a professional.

Q: Yes, Columbia- Well, this is the thing. So, many of these grad schools are turning out people that are going to spend seven years getting a PhD in something like that and that's a bit much.

LOO: Yes. So, I realized that that was not me. I didn't love, say, historiography class or I didn't have the rigor that some of my counterparts did. So, it was fine enough just to get the terminal Master's and move on from there.

Q: Well then, how long were you at Columbia?

LOO: I was there for just a year to get the Master's and then I returned to San Francisco and worked for a couple of years.

Q: What did you do?

LOO: I guess to backtrack a little bit, I'd taken the Foreign Service exam for the first time when I was a senior at Dartmouth because one of my predecessors who had a diplomat in residence function or recruiting function came out and spoke to us at a career night and piqued my interest. It was a free test; you had the chance to work internationally and what he spoke about, USIA (United States Information Agency), was what I was interested in, working with media figures and cultural figures. So, I took the test as a senior in college. I passed the written test, I didn't pass the orals and that's when I went on to Columbia and then went back to California to work for a couple of years.

So, the first job I had was working as an admissions representative for a private chain of technical schools. I left that after about a year and then moved on to work for a small publisher and importer of books from China called China Books and Periodicals. And that's what I was doing when I got the call from the Foreign Service the second time around.

Q: When you took the oral exam for the first time, do you recall any of the questions?

LOO: Not particularly. They asked about how would you describe American culture and things like that. I'm probably conflating the two oral exams I had; the first one where I was unsuccessful and the second one. But questions about that, about historical events; I remember even in those days there was a variation on the group exercise where you had to do a presentation and defend your presentation with other participants in that oral assessment session.

Q: Well then, you took your second oral exam the second time; was this about a two-year difference?

LOO: About three- It was probably '85 or so.

Q: And the second oral exam, how did that go?

LOO: It went much better. One of my Foreign Service assignments has been as a diplomat in residence and, what I've told people whom I've worked with as diplomat in residence is that the real difference between my first experience and my second is: one, I'd been through it before so it wasn't completely foreign to me; and two, I had a couple more years of life experience, which was important. I don't think the Master's degree was a factor in it. It was just the fact that I'd been working for a couple years and I think my interpersonal skills had improved the second time around. And the realization that just because I was right, say, in my oral presentation for the group exercise, I would still have to convince others and have to negotiate with others to come to a mutually satisfactory result.

Q: Yes, learning a bit about the world.

LOO: Yes.

Q: Coming out of an academic environment you really need a little seasoning.

LOO: That's a good word for it. There's no substitute for life experience. You may be the smartest person, book smart, but-

Q: Yes. At one point I was one of the examiners giving the oral exam and you realize that- I mean, people coming out of the Peace Corps were quite good because they'd been around the block. I mean, they'd faced challenges and difficulties and had to learn to think on their feet and all.

LOO: Sure. I think I learned- I was able to think better on my feet the second time around as well. One specific question that I kind of remember was, there was a question about how would you explain to a foreigner about American culture, and I mentioned New York and Los Angeles and Washington, DC, have great museums. And the examiner said well, what about smaller towns and cities in the United States? And then I realized I had kind of dug myself into a hole and I was at least able to talk myself out of it and say, well, yes.... That may not have happened in the earlier occasion.

Q: Yes. So, you went to the Foreign Service, you passed it and this is for USIA?

LOO: Yes.

Q: When did you come in?

LOO: I came in in 1987, June. As is the case now, it had been a long wait. I think I'd taken maybe the written in 1985 perhaps and I guess done the orals sometime in 1986 and then there was a question of the security clearance as well. I guess it's always short notice but I think I got the letter sometime in the spring of '87 asking if I was able to come out for class that was forming in June.

Q: What was your basic officer class like?

LOO: It was a USIA class so it was small, smaller compared to State ones. There were 16 of us as generalists and also at that time they were hiring Arabists so there were three or four mid-level Arabists and a couple of regional English language officers. So, I think there were 21 of us total which that led to a very nice esprit de corps building because we spent all summer together. In those days the junior officer training class was around 12 weeks. I think we started in June and didn't start to go our separate ways until sometime in September.

Q: When they took you in did they say ah ha, we've got someone who speaks Chinese? I mean, were you sort of basically pointed towards dealing with China?

LOO: No. We had a global bid list. None of the career counselors (the equivalent of State's career development officers) pushed or prodded me towards any of the East Asian posts. That was actually my own decision because I had wanted to consolidate my Chinese language skills early on. Taiwan was on our bid list so it worked out. In fact, that was a nice coincidence too because Taiwan was one of the few places that I'd actually been to outside of the United States at that time.

Q: Had your parents, were they at all politically committed to Mainland or Taiwan or anything?

LOO: No. This is the late 1970s or by this time the late 1980s, the influence of the Taiwan government with the diaspora was still pretty strong. For example, the Chinese

language schools were supported or subsidized by the Taiwan government so, I think if there was any affinity it probably would have been with the Taiwan authorities. And also, realizing their history -- they essentially had been refugees from Communist China -- there was not a whole lot of sympathy for the Chinese government, though even by then my parents had gone back when tourism had opened up on Mainland. They'd been back as visitors in the mid-1980s. So, they were never particularly partisan one way or the other.

Q: Well then, your first post was where now?

LOO: In Taiwan, at AIT, the American Institute in Taipei.

Q: How did you find- What was your job there?

LOO: It was supposed to be a regular junior officer rotation but because of a staffing shortage I would up essentially being the acting CAO, cultural affairs officer, for my year there, which was a great advantage.

Q: Ah. Did you have trouble switching from Cantonese to Mandarin?

LOO: The Chinese teachers at FSI (Foreign Service Institute) always would say that I had a southern Chinese accent. I don't know if that's true or not but that's what they would always say. But on the whole it was an advantage, so much so that I was able to get to the 3/3 in Mandarin Chinese out of FSI after six months rather than having to think about a second year in Taiwan. So, on the whole it was an advantage.

Q: Who was in charge of- it was the Taiwan- at this point was it the Taiwan Institute?

LOO: Yes. By then we no longer had official relations, so it was the American Institute in Taiwan. When I was there David Dean was the director, the quasi Ambassador.

Q: Doing cultural affairs, what were you doing?

LOO: It was a pretty wide range. We still had enough funding in those days to do large scale exhibitions so there were exhibitions at the museums. In those days they were called AMPARTS, American Participants, now they're called U.S. Speakers. I remember having speakers talk about the American political system and elections. We had, I think as one of my first cultural groups, the Trisha Brown Dance Company. So, cultural work with a capital C. And then exchanges like Fulbrights. Taiwan had their Fulbright Commission. Their International Visitor Leadership Program exchanges going on. We actually did direct English language teaching so AIT actually had a language school that they operated as well. So, those were some of the activities that I was involved in.

Q: Were you running across many Foreign Service officers who were of Chinese background?

LOO: No, very few. There was one fellow who was Chinese-American who was in the junior officer class before me and, at that time, the class before you kind of took you on as an unofficial mentor type of thing. There were a couple of other Chinese-American officers that I knew early on but nothing-

Q: Because this seems- I mean just looking at it in practical terms and recruiting, diversify and all, you get an educational problem in trying to bring in African-Americans but with Asian-Americans that's not the problem at all. But it doesn't seem to be attractive to Asian-Americans as much.

LOO: Yes. again, I think I'm fairly unique in my background. If my path had not diverged I would have been perfectly happy probably to have stayed in San Francisco, gone to law school or business school and become some type of professional in the Bay Area. So, that's typically the career path of many Asians.

Q: Well, you obviously deviated, that's not the right term but I mean obviously went down a different path.

LOO: Yes.

Q: How'd you find the political situation on Taiwan when you were there this time?

LOO: It was very interesting. they were kind of coming out of what you would call an authoritarian rule. Chiang Kai-shek's son, Chiang Ching-kuo, died a couple years previously. They had a democratically elected president and it was still fairly authoritarian in that it was- the Kuomintang, the KMT Party was still dominant. But it was, again, just from my short time there - it was an interesting time. And it was colored too by outside events, because in the spring of 1989 people started hearing about what was happening on the Mainland, which was the June 4 Tiananmen demonstrations. So, that was-

Q: Tiananmen happened while you were in Taiwan?

LOO: Yes. my onward assignment was in Beijing but I was still in Taiwan when the killings took place on June 4.

Q: How did that play in Taiwan?

LOO: It was stunning for- I think the people. I guess things have changed in the past 30 years where many of the people on Taiwan feel culturally and politically and socially separate from the Mainland but, back then, I think most people were still invested in this common Chinese identity. And on top of that they were in political opposition to the Chinese Communists. So, they were excited by the student demonstrations and it was kind of the beginning of CNN there. It was non-stop news and you could be watching it 24/7 on Taiwan television. As a result, it was a shock when the People's Liberation Army moved in and afterwards there were demonstrations in support of the students on Taiwan.

There were all types of rumors- the rumors globally about who was in charge - what was happening in Beijing at that time.

Q: Did we have money to send cultural events to Taiwan?

LOO: We did. We had some art exhibitions that were part of a traveling exhibition globally. We were able to help sponsor some dance groups to perform in Taiwan. So, there was some funding for cultural programming.

Q: Up to your assignment, were you much into sort of the arts?

LOO: Yes. I think that's what attracted me to USIA, being able to work on cultural and arts programming. I'd always been interested in literature and museums and things of that type; not an artist myself but it was a pleasure to be able to work on those types of programs.

Q: What were you getting from the Taiwanese; was there a lot of resentment about our recognizing Mainland China and all?

LOO: No, it was a status quo which they still essentially pursue now. This was in 1988, 1989, so it had been almost 10 years since we broke ties, so they had learned to live with this kind of quasi-official arrangement and make it work for them. They were very hospitable. There's a reason why the Department still has to put out a new cable annually saying what you can and can't do with Taiwan government officials because the Taiwan government officials were, again, always looking for opportunities to engage with us. Again, there was no, at that time, no lingering hard feelings because the breaking of relations had happened in 1979. I understand that, at that time, people were very bitter with our senior official there being pelted, I mean his car pelted with garbage and things of that type but by 1987, 1988, 1989 they had come to accept the new arrangement.

Q: Were movies an important tool, you might say?

LOO: No, not in Taiwan at that time. They had a free cultural environment so it would have been unnecessary for us to try to bring in American films or anything like that for programming.

Q: How did you find the work environment within the mission?

LOO: It was great. It was a nice, medium-sized post so you got to know everyone. The conditions were good. Taiwan was a wonderful place to live in in terms of creature comforts. My apartment was about a five-block walk to the office building. There was, again, strong esprit de corps because many of the people in the Institute had been fellow language students in Chinese class so you had known them before starting the job. So, it was a good environment.

Q: I know that people who have served there really, really enjoyed it also because going to Beijing was not much fun, at least maybe now-

LOO: Yes, it's a different, it's a challenging place, Beijing is. But no, I wound up going back to Taiwan once for an assignment as a language school director and I would go back again if I had the chance. It's a very pleasant place. Traffic, like in all East Asian metropolises, traffic and pollution are challenging but food is great, people are friendly so it's a great posting.

Q: Was there a feeling of menace from Mainland China or did everybody sort of accept it and there really wasn't-

LOO: Menace is probably too strong a word, you know, though there still was an adversarial relationship. At that time there was the beginning of the kind of rapprochement in terms of talking about direct flights and possibilities of family reunification visits and that type of thing so there was some progress in that direction. But politically they were still at an impasse as to whether Taiwan would have its own role internationally and so on. But I don't think anyone was fearful of imminent attack or anything like that; it was just antagonism on an international stage.

Q: To Taiwan. And then when?

LOO: Then in August or so of 1989 I transferred to Beijing for a two-year follow-on tour as a press officer.

Q: What was that like?

LOO: That was still one of the more profound experiences I've had in the Foreign Service. This was right after Tiananmen Square and the crackdown. Beijing was still under martial law. I got there after the embassy operation had more or less normalized, the evacuation order had been lifted and people and their families were back. But it was still a very tense time. The first year I was there we were still sheltering the dissident Fang Lizhi and his wife in the embassy so that meant even an extra layer of Chinese security around the chancery compound and our offices. The Chinese government essentially had plainclothes security men surrounding the compound where they believed Fang and his wife were hiding. That compound also housed our offices. I remember one incident that turned out to be a little humorous. One Saturday, after having shopped at the duty free store, I drove onto the compound with our offices to pick up the newspapers. When I left, I attracted a caravan of Chinese security who followed me up to the parking lot of my housing compound. When I opened the trunk, I think they were disappointed to see that I hadn't smuggled Fang and his wife out, but rather, had only done a beer run for some cases of Heineken and Carlsberg. On the whole, it was tense, the first year, but it was a great learning experience. I worked with people that I admired, and got to know a lot of the international correspondents who were there covering the China story. So, it was, again, a very profound experience for me.

Q: Did we have a translation division there?

LOO: Not to speak of, apart from media reaction reports and translations of official texts. We had a publications office in Hong Kong. Back in those days USIA still did magazines so we had a Chinese language magazine that was done in Hong Kong but essentially at the embassy we had a press and cultural section, I guess that's what you'd call USIS (United States Information Service) sections in China, the Soviet Union or similar places. And then there was a VOA (Voice of America) correspondent.

Q: What was the press corps? I mean, were they all sort of heated up by the Tiananmen thing, looking for-?

LOO: Yes, I mean it was and it still is an adversarial relationship between the Chinese government and the foreign correspondents in Beijing. It was definitely then because many of the correspondents lived through the demonstrations and the crackdown and so they'd seen the peaks and valleys, the optimism initially and then the violence that brought it to its end. And many of them, apart from the typical surveillance which everyone assumed was going on, many of them had been harassed by Chinese authorities so they were brave people and they did great jobs reporting.

Q: Did we have an open library and all that there?

LOO: No. During my first Beijing tour we had what's called a reading room, I guess, which was a room probably about this size in-

Q: About 20 by 12.

LOO: Yes, in our press and culture section. And like all of our chancery offices, it was virtually impossible for a typical Chinese to come in on her or his own. So, my first tour, no, we really didn't have much of a-

Q: What about dealing with Chinese officials?

LOO: Being a Chinese-American it was, I would say, a double-edged sword. There were occasions where, say, talking to an official or a TV station director or even a human rights activist they would say something like "I can speak more frankly to you because we have the same blood," whether that was blowing smoke or not, that's what they would say. And so, sometimes it would make for freer communication but then, at other times, it was what would happen to, say, African-Americans in Africa or Latinos in Latin America, in that the government officials would be disappointed when they saw me show up as the American official instead of some white American. So, on the whole it probably was an advantage. And even when it was a disadvantage it was useful because one of the disadvantages was that, because I, at first glance, look like a Chinese citizen, I got to see how Chinese citizens were treated by their government and their authorities in some ways.

Q: You'd find yourself sort of dressing to slip into the-

LOO: Not intentionally. Those whose business it was to know who foreigners were obviously could tell me apart but some 19-year-old People's Armed Police private would assume I was a Chinese citizen and curse at me when I tried to get into my apartment or tried to block me as I try to get into the diplomatic compound where I lived, for example.

Q: Yes. Well, that's always the problem of dealing with young military. I've been places where we've had curfews and I've told the junior officers don't mess with the military, particularly at night. I mean, just think of the soldier who's stuck on midnight duty; it's not going to be the brightest bulb on the Christmas tree and don't play games with them.

LOO: Sure. Yes, clearly. it was as much a lack of education and training than it was anything else, so I could see that. And you could see how "service people" would treat their customers who were Chinese and so on.

Q: On the reverse side I'm told at one time, maybe this is kind of past, but there was sort of- foreigners were besieged by Chinese wanting to speak English or speak language with them.

LOO: Yes, I think that still probably is true. But again, I was not pestered, because of the color of my skin I was not a novelty so that never really happened to me as it would with a Caucasian American. No one ever sought me out and said, "I'd like to practice my English" or whatnot.

Q: Well then, what were you doing with the press?

LOO: We were arranging -- most of the work was with the international press -- arranging briefings or background sessions with either embassy officials or visitors from Washington. And then we also did try to work with Chinese press, if nothing else to give them moral support, inviting them to presentations, trying to get them exchange opportunities to come to the U.S. for either International Visitor programs or journalism fellowships or other programs of that type, engaging with them in representational events where they could, again, maybe speak more freely and get some moral support for what they were trying to do. And when there seemed to be any inkling of independent media work, try to applaud that, support that.

Q: Did the Chinese press have a standard lookout or a standard procedure for reporting on events in the United States or was it pretty open?

LOO: It was -- and is -- a controlled press so it's very predictable. There's a news agency, Xinhua, and then there were a couple of daily newspapers which were essentially newspapers of record, like "People's Daily" and "Liberation Army Daily" and a few others. They are unabashed about being mouthpieces of the Communist Party. What international press they had or stories about the U.S., coverage of the U.S. was very predictable; you could have written it by machine. Critical of our human rights record,

critical of the civil rights record in the U.S., critical of our China policy for interfering in internal affairs, so very predictable in that regard.

Q: Did you get to travel around much?

LOO: Yes. There were few restrictions if any then. I never got to Tibet but that was as much circumstance as anything else. My first tour, because one of my portfolios was television, I went to a lot of different provinces to participate in, say, television festivals that were sponsored by the local television station so I got to travel through most of China.

Q: Did you get back to where your family came from?

LOO: No. I went go Guangzhou but I've never gone back to my parents' village or anything like that.

Q: How did you find Shanghai and Guangzhou? I mean, was this a different world than Beijing?

LOO: Not particularly so. This is back in the late 1980s, early 1990s. The economic opening of China had already started so you could see a lot of neon and car traffic in Shanghai and Guangzhou but even so in Beijing too. So, in that regard I didn't see that much of a difference in those big cities. You could see a stark difference in the interior where the cities were much poorer and less developed so that was where the difference was that I could see.

Q: Well, the great building boom hadn't started yet, had it?

LOO: No. My experience with China mostly pre-dates, for example, Pudong in Shanghai, which is the huge kind of industrial development they put in right around the time I left. But it was still striking to see how fast things changed. I joke that you can see the advantage of having a place that's not governed by the rule of law where you can walk by a building one day, and the next day it's knocked over and you could see them starting to put a high rise up. You could see transformation on a daily basis and that was not an exaggeration.

Q: Did you find variations in China, I mean, knew about Cantonese and Mandarin but in other parts, in the west for example, was the language really different or-?

LOO: Yes, very much so. Take Sichuan in western China, for example. A Sichuanese trying to speak standard Chinese finds it very challenging and most likely will have a strong Sichuan accent. That was one of the biggest challenges for our colleagues working at the consulate in Chengdu, for example. In Shanghai some of our more ambitious colleagues would try to learn some of the local dialect like Shanghainese or Taiwanese. The idea was to try to communicate in standard Mandarin Chinese and sometimes it

would work and sometimes even our Chinese colleagues wouldn't understand what someone from the provinces was saying.

Q: Do you think that the Chinese government was particularly worried about you? I mean, you know what I mean, infiltrating or whatever.

LOO: No, I don't think so. They were worried about all of us. I think because I was not working in the political section or any of the other kind of policy sections as it were, I think they didn't pay too much attention to me or an inordinate amount that I could tell. I think we all were under surveillance and I think their intelligence services I'm sure looked at possible points of pressure on all of us. I don't think I was singled out for anything particularly. In that regard, some of their practices were pretty ham-handed. I remember that, when we traveled to Tianjin, we always seemed to be assigned the same few rooms in a hotel with several hundred rooms, so we assumed those rooms were wired for sound.

I remember another example when I was visiting Shanghai towards the end of my posting. I was staying at a twin tower complex that housed both a hotel and apartments. My colleague, who lived in the apartment tower, was curious about the quality of the hotel rooms, so I showed her mine. I said to her that the room was very nice, and that the only quibble I had with it was that I couldn't open the windows. The next morning, I went off to my appointments. When I got back later in the day, there was a form on my desk, reading along the lines of "Dear Mr. Loo: If you wish to open the windows, please fill out this waiver of responsibility...." I hadn't spoken to any of the hotel staff about this, so one can draw one's own conclusions about how they became aware of my interest.

Q: What about universities? Did you get into them and did you get any- what were you picking up?

LOO: It was difficult for all of us to get onto university campuses and again, that was not my portfolio as it were. I would go into universities as part of my work but I wasn't one of those political officers who had to sneak into a campus and try to talk to students for reporting cables. Since we wanted to avoid jeopardizing the status of Chinese academics who would engage with us, we didn't want to press too aggressively for access. So, my interactions were more organic in that sense but again, it was one of the advantages of being a young Chinese American, that I could go on a campus and not be spotted right away as being a foreigner or being a diplomat.

One of the major programs that we had was a series of weekly movie screenings where we would invite Chinese guests to watch commercial American films. We would order VHS tapes from our colleagues in Hong Kong and project them in our program room. Showing movies sounds innocuous but this program was powerful in that it gave Chinese contacts a reason to come to the Embassy, and a relatively apolitical pretext to provide to their supervisors or others monitoring them. They would come and watch "Tootsie" for

example but, at the regular intermissions we scheduled, we and other colleagues from the Embassy would have a chance to have substantive discussions on our turf.

Q: Well after you- you were there for two years?

LOO: Yes.

Q: Then where did you go?

LOO: Then I came back to Washington because my next posting was in Manila, so I came back for a year of Filipino language training.

Q: What were you doing?

LOO: I was, again, a press officer in Embassy Manila from 1992 to 1994.

Q: How did you find that work?

LOO: It was, again, a very stimulating environment. It was a great way to learn; I had good bosses early in my career. Mort Smith, who I don't know if you know, was a USIA legend, was public affairs officer. It was a challenging time to be in the Philippines in that we were being kicked out of our bases at Subic Bay and Clark Air Field in 1992. This was the first time I heard the unique military term "disestablishment." But we were trying to rebuild the relationship with the Philippines so that it would diversify beyond the military-to-military cooperation, especially after the eruption of Mount Pinatubo, so there was a huge humanitarian/USAID (United States Agency for International Development) program going on. And in contrast to China the Filipino media was freewheeling. It was a no holds barred type of media so that was great fun to work in too.

I was reminded in Manila of the awesome power we sometimes have as American diplomats and the corresponding awesome responsibility to not abuse it. We had Deputy Secretary Wharton visit, which included a meeting at Malacañang Palace, the Philippine presidential mansion. The deputy secretary's team had asked that we arrange a press briefing after his meeting with President Fidel Ramos. We made the arrangements with President Ramos' press secretary who, at the last minute, said I would be the moderator of the press conference. There I was, a third-tour officer, leading a press conference with the traveling State Department press corps in the Philippine equivalent of the White House Press Room!

My portfolio was the audio-visual/TV one, so I basically ran a TV studio with my team. We had a complete TV production crew, radio production crew, and still photographer. I got to accompany my team as we did everything from fly on a helicopter from our Chancery on Roxas Boulevard to the U.S. Seventh Fleet flagship in the middle of Manila Bay as it was making the first U.S. Navy port call since the closure of Subic Bay Base, to exploring the underwater caverns of St. Paul's National Park in Palawan with USAID and armed Filipino military escorts. We produced TV news stories that we distributed to

Filipino TV stations. We produced our own radio programs in addition to distributing Voice of America broadcasting material. Back in these pre-digital days, we would send out via messenger news releases accompanying our still photos. Unfortunately, during my posting we had an Inspector General's inspection that recommended we downsize or, in government parlance, conduct a "RIF" (reduction in force). The inspectors argued that this type of large media footprint was useful during the years we had military bases, but no longer. This was the first time in my life that I had to actually fire someone, and know that I was impacting his or her livelihood and ability to support their families. I still remember that vividly to this day.

Q: Where'd you go then?

LOO: Then I went back to Beijing, China. That was the opportunity to be the first director of the American Center there that we established. So, I was there in Beijing as a cultural officer from 1994 to 1997.

Q: What was the situation like then when you were there, when you got out there in '94?

LOO: It was significantly improved, I could say, from my first assignment there right after- which was in 1989 right after Tiananmen Square. Beijing was a very dynamic city. Our relationship had its ups and downs but it was great to be able to at least experiment with opening the first public access center where Chinese citizens could come and visit us. Creature comforts hadn't changed too much. We were still living in diplomatic compound housing that was operated by the Chinese government.

Q: Was everybody still more or less wanting to stay in the same outfit or had that really broken down?

LOO: No, by then the economic reforms had taken place so people were wealthier so they had clothing options. And traffic got much worse because more people were either, say, taking taxis, or actually buying private vehicles so while there were still bicycles it was- not the sea of bicycles many people think of when you think of China back in those days.

Q: Did you find that you were at the- what was it called?

LOO: It was called the American Center for Educational Exchange. They couldn't use the word "cultural" center because that term was a sensitive one for the Chinese government so it was an educational exchange center.

Q: Yes, culture can be a very loaded word. I think it was Herman Göring once said every time I hear the word culture I reach for my pistol. But anyway.

Was there sort of a major interest in young people going to American schools?

LOO: There was. There always had been and now it's probably one of the star attractions of the Center still today. Probably at most cultural centers or State Department libraries, USIS libraries, young people are looking to explore our scholarships and other opportunities to get to U.S. schools. So, yes, that was a big part of our operation.

Q: I've always found it very difficult when I've been over and people say what school should I go to. I mean, there are so many and it's easy to say Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Stanford, something; I mean, how did you deal with this?

LOO: We encouraged them to look for programs. The Chinese, like probably 99 percent of the rest of the world, look at the brand name, the Harvards, Yales and so on. Many of the Chinese would get in there but we would also encourage them to dig down a little bit further and look at the specific program they were interested in because you could find a school without a name brand that would still have the outstanding program and that might be able to give you financial support. So, that was one of the things that we preached, don't just look at the name but what you actually want to get out of the experience.

Q: Well, were there schools sending out representatives to sort of recruit and all?

LOO: Yes. It was not the kind of industry it is now where you have coaches and middlemen and all that. But there have always been these college tours where U.S. universities and colleges would go on a road trip and have recruiting fairs and things like that. So, there was some of that but again, not as developed an industry as it is now where you have people coaching students through everything from essay writing to extracurriculars to try to differentiate them.

Q: Yes, which is working both abroad and in the United States. I mean, the parents are up against a horrible selection. Not a horrible but an overwhelming way to select for their children.

Well, was the center doing anything- what else was it doing?

LOO: Well, we were doing a lot of seminars and panel discussions and some small exhibits. Basically, the idea was to try to generate foot traffic any way we could. It was our main program venue that was not inside either Chinese security or Marine Guard security so we used it for panel discussions with authors and political scientists and we used it for receptions every now and then. Our small library/reference center was there and occasionally we would have, again, small art exhibits and that type of thing.

Q: I assume that you had a full display of magazines.

LOO: Yes. At that time we were already transitioning to the idea of putting everything online and digital but we still had hard copies of magazines and newspapers and those were very popular. I remember I subscribed to the San Francisco Chronicle Sunday edition to stave off homesickness. I would donate the paper to the reference center after I had finished with it, and it was very much welcomed.

Q: Well now, how did the digital side of things work?

LOO: It depends on who you talk to. I guess the move started essentially after the end of the Cold War and the idea was that it was expensive and a security risk to have these freestanding libraries, you know, the Thomas Jefferson Library, the Lincoln Library, etc., which are USIS libraries. And the idea was that we were going to be targeting professionals with reference needs so they could phone the embassy or, as we got into the internet age, they could email us and the reference specialist would get them the information they needed and either fax it, mail it to out, or email it. This worked to a degree but it certainly weakened the brand name of libraries of USIS, of U.S. embassies because previously you had generations who would say, well, the first time I heard about the U.S. was when I went to the Thomas Jefferson Library and leafed through “Life” magazine or whatever it was. Now you had to work harder at identifying an audience and then getting them to use your resources than in previous times when you had a physical location that was welcoming and open to all comers.

Q: At that time would you say the young people were pretty well wired as far as the internet and all that?

LOO: No, that was the mid-1990s so I think, in the Department we were starting to use email, which was still kind of a novelty. People didn’t have the ubiquitous mobile phones they have now so, for the average Chinese citizen at that time, it still was kind of state-run media, radio and TV and newspapers in terms of their news and information.

Q: How was the Chinese press displaying American news?

LOO: It was pretty predictable and rote and matched whatever the party line, party policy was, which usually was pretty opposed to the U.S. Often it was whatever official statements there were and then kind of selective reporting about news events to further the narrative that they wanted to promote about the U.S. as a society with its own human rights abuses and inequities and so on.

Q: Did we have any trouble with your work about dealing with Tiananmen and the aftermath of that?

LOO: Tiananmen still was and still is taboo so you were not able to discuss it openly either publicly or privately with many people. There were still impacts on say, our programming occasionally. Programs would be canceled for no reason or the catchall phrase that was used is “it’s not convenient” to do something and oftentimes it could be traced back to the tensions of that time. So, it still was a major issue and had an impact on our work.

Q: How about your clientele; did they- did you see any indication that they were interested in that?

LOO: Certainly. Speaking privately people oftentimes would discuss it and they would talk about “the incident” and you would know what they were referring to. And they would reflect on how their thinking had changed or how the climate had changed since 1989. And colleagues in the political section were still working with human rights activists who were either imprisoned or detained at that time.

Q: Were there any, during the time you were there, were there any incidents at work and all that come to mind of any kind?

LOO: No. It was most dramatic during my first assignment there, and I ended my second tour in Beijing before we accidentally bombed the Chinese embassy, I think in Belgrade it was, which sparked protests and riots in China directed at our diplomatic missions. But in terms of incidents that dramatically affected the embassy or put us into a crisis situation, luckily I was spared that.

Q: Were you able to have any social life? I mean, was this a problem?

LOO: No. The thing about Beijing is it was very dynamic and cosmopolitan so within the embassy and outside with the international community there was a lot to do and you could meet many friends. I did make a number of Chinese friends as well who kind of made the special effort to establish a connection with a foreign diplomat.

Q: One of the things that has struck me as being an outside observer is that it seems to be very easy to whip up an anti-American crowd or something. I mean, you push that nationalist button. Was that a problem at all?

LOO: No. Again, luckily, I dodged that bullet in my three years there. There was kind of, I guess you could say, a standard level of tension but nothing that was orchestrated like, again, when we accidentally bombed the Chinese embassy in Belgrade where they stormed the embassy in retaliation and things like that.

Q: Did you get out and around?

LOO: Yes. your travel was still monitored and needed to be approved occasionally for places like Tibet but there was some travel. In my cultural officer position not as much as in my previous position as a press officer but there were still seminars that we would do outside of the capital and then on personal travel, I was able to take a number of trips around China.

Q: How'd you find the press? Had it changed?

LOO: It was only a three-year interval between assignments but no, it hadn't changed much. There were a couple of media outlets, primarily economic ones, that seemed to have more independence but the rest of the press was essentially very predictable and controlled by the government.

Q: How did you find integration with the center and the embassy?

LOO: At that time I thought it was great arrangement that we were off-campus; not far, but we were about a mile away. And for many purposes you could kind of feel that you were in your own environment. I would go to the main USIS office probably a couple of times a week at least for meetings and so on but, at that time, again, as a cultural officer you almost felt independent from the chancery and the other operations. Which again, in hindsight, depending on one's point of view could be a good thing or a bad thing. But again, what I was trying to do to build an identity or brand as an independent center, it was a good thing.

Q: Was the integration or the de-integration, well integration of USIA working at the time?

LOO: No, that occurred a couple of years later, essentially after I left in 1997. Then I came back to Washington and that was at the height of the integration process with State.

Q: Had tension begun to build up about the South China Sea and all?

LOO: It cropped up every now and then but as I recall it wasn't as much an issue as, again, the perennial one of the status of Taiwan.

Q: Yes. How about Taiwan? I mean, how did we treat it as far, you know, as our public face?

LOO: It's essentially a game of doublespeak that's kind of worked for the time being, where we recognize that there's a one China policy but that we enjoy unofficial relations with Taiwan. And so far, it's been ambiguous enough that we've been able to maintain good relations with both sides.

Q: Did you get any visits, Taiwanese?

LOO: At that time no, not government visits, but at that time the relations between the two sides had improved so that there was some direct contact, shipping, air flights and so on, and some Chinese who had fled to Taiwan decades ago now were either coming back as tourists or dipping their toes in the waters as far as becoming an overseas investor on the Mainland. So, some of our contacts were, again, Taiwanese or Taiwanese-Americans who now were trying to start up enterprises or businesses in China.

Q: How about, what was sort of the atmosphere and then did you in your work see American investment there? I mean, was this something that had investors stepping around and all?

LOO: The American Chamber was big there and it's always been. There's always been the dream, I think, since the 19th century with Standard Oil, you know, "oil for all the lamps in China", basically. So, there was always a lot of commercial interest. There are

always some success stories and then some setbacks especially in terms of a lack of rule of law and contracts not being honored and challenges like that. But that's one of the driving forces of the bilateral relationship, trying to improve American businesses' possibilities in China.

Q: Did the problem of sort of at the local level of corruption, payoffs enter into- was it a problem for you?

LOO: I didn't see it in my position but it's traditionally been an issue there where personal contacts matters more than anything else. Again, absent a strong system of rule of law many things can happen.

Q: Well then, who was the ambassador?

LOO: When I first got back it was Stapleton Roy. He was succeeded by James Sasser, who was a former senator from Tennessee.

Q: Did they take an interest in your work?

LOO: Some interest, I would say. Again, I didn't overlap much with Ambassador Roy but he came to the center a couple of times and Ambassador Sasser came a number of times, for example to moderate a panel on the U.S. elections or something like that.

Q: How about did we have good contacts with the academic community at the colleges?

LOO: Oh, definitely, that was one of our primary assets of the press and culture section, relationships with the Chinese academics.

Q: Did you sense a feeling of they were able to explore things they wanted to?

LOO: To a certain degree. Again, it was a time of transition so we saw some amazing progress, for example, in some human rights areas, like women's issues. That was partly sparked by the 1995 conference on women that Beijing hosted where-

Q: You were there at that time?

LOO: Yes, I was. I also wound up working as a press officer for then-First Lady Hillary Clinton's visit to Mongolia. (It was striking to see a full-blown White House motorcade rumble across the Mongolian steppes when she visited a "typical" nomad family in their ger (tent) in fields littered with yak manure.) The foreign affairs, international relations people had a pretty free reign. And the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences was doing some interesting things. So, they were kind of testing the boundaries at that time.

Q: Did you see- in your clientele were young women students well represented or was it mainly male?

LOO: I'm trying to remember now. There were many women represented among the university students we met with. And that tends to be the case, I think, because a lot of times when you're dealing with, say, foreign language majors, for some reason or another women seem to gravitate towards-

Q: Well, this is true in the States, too.

There were no great incidents or anything?

LOO: No. Again, it was a challenging time generally speaking but no single event like a Tiananmen Square or an embassy bombing or anything like that.

Q: Challenging in what way?

LOO: Just again, trying to work through the Chinese system and trying to meet some of our goals within that system.

Q: I mean, were you and other officers there looking at things and saying how will this play or concerned about what official Chinese reaction might be and sort of how to sidestep it?

LOO: Yes, yes certainly. And also, what American reaction would be. Some of the speakers I worked with included people like Betty Friedan and Daniel Ellsberg.

Q: These are sort of, well, you might say rebels within our system.

LOO: Exactly. And the program with Daniel Ellsberg drew a lot of flak among some quarters in Washington; Ambassador Roy and our PAO (Public Affairs Officer), Frank Scotton, defended it. The idea was to show how dissent works in a democratic system. Ellsberg initially paid a price but he was ultimately vindicated by our institutional safeguards.

Q: He was very much in- he was the Pentagon Papers.

LOO: Exactly.

Q: And disclosure of that was considered by many to be a traitor.

LOO: Exactly. So, that was why the program was probably more sensitive in the U.S. but again, it was an amazing story for our Chinese contacts to say, here's the U.S. Government officially sponsoring someone who had been considered a turncoat, I suppose.

Q: I would think the Chinese authorities would be a little bit unhappy with this.

LOO: Unhappy or happy?

Q: Unhappy.

LOO: No. Again, it was just a bit sensitive. We had to kind of couch it as a program on American history but with the subtext that any thinking person could understand that what we were trying to do was show the democratic process in action.

Q: Were we in any sort of competition with say Russia at the time?

LOO: No, Russia at this time was still weakened and chaotic after the end of the Cold War. The people we were concerned with at least culturally were more the British Council and the Japanese. This was, again, the time when Japan seemed to be the next big thing.

Q: Well then where did you go? You left when?

LOO: I finished my second Beijing assignment in 1997 and I came back to Washington where I worked as a human resources assignment officer at USIA in its last days.

Q: Now, that must have been, I mean, you must have felt all the stresses of this with the integration of-

LOO: It was. It was interesting to watch because I arrived Washington in 1997 and integration finally took place in 1999 which kind of coincided with most of my assignment in human resources. It was a constant kind of process of meetings and negotiations, mostly at higher grade levels than mine, to talk about where the money and people would go. And the end result was there was what was called a “crosswalk” where everyone at USIA was moved over to some position at the State Department; whether it was appropriate to their experience or not, they were moved over so they at least had a job. And one of the principal achievements from USIA’s side was walling off the public diplomacy money to a separate allotment that was solely controlled by the undersecretary for public diplomacy and public affairs officers in the field.

Q: It must have been sort of at the more junior level, maybe not _____ but the lower, middle, there must have been a lot of soul searching and turmoil about what does this mean for me.

LOO: Sure.

Q: And you must have been getting a lot of that.

LOO: Yes. At one extreme some officers would say, “I can never work for the State Department” and either retired early or left soon thereafter. But, the more typical reaction was to ask, “What does this mean for me in terms of assignments and so on?” There was a lot of that but I think the overall information campaign was successful and people were reassured that you’re not going to be fired, that they would land on their feet somewhere.

Q: Were you able to use the line, not just line but the fact that this really did open up a much broader field for officers?

LOO: We didn't say that but, if you asked me what my assessment of the integration has been, I would say, it's been some 18 years and the jury's still out on whether public diplomacy has been adequately integrated into the State Department policymaking as a whole. But on the individual level I think one would say it's been positive because, while USIA was in existence, we public diplomacy officers would get bread crumbs in terms of ambassadorships. We would maybe once a year get someone nominated as ambassador to a small African country. But since integration any number of us, including myself, have been able to take on, say, DCM (Deputy Chief of Mission) positions and the number of public diplomacy ambassadors has risen dramatically since integration. So, on an individual basis it's been good for many of our careers.

Q: Going back, I go back 30 years when I was an active duty officer, and I always felt that the USIA function was such a splendid one. The outreach was much better then. I think many of the political officers and all were pretty well deskbound and trapped reading the newspapers and all. I felt that we were cutting off a major source of information by doing this but there it was.

Did you have any problem, did you see any problems with the integration coming from the State side?

LOO: Yes, I think so. I guess resentment may be too strong a word but impatience, I think, on the part of a lot of the State side during negotiations about why we were so insistent on certain issues and why we just didn't agree to becoming a new bureau or something like that. We were a small fish being swallowed by a big fish. It was never a case of a merger of equals. So, I think there was some of that impatience. And I think there was perhaps a lack of sympathy among some of our State colleagues as to the impact on our identity and what this meant. I guess a good illustration of that is, when I left HR, I went on to Spanish language training and then went on to become PAO in Managua, and I was in Managua when the actual integration occurred in October 1999. My office door at that time had a signboard that said "USIS Director" on it. Right after integration I happened to be in the hallway with the management counselor and I said, "Wouldn't it be nice if there was some way that we could commemorate the history and I could keep the signboard." And the management counselor said, sure, I can do that, and he just snapped the sign off the wall, breaking it, and handed it to me. So, that was one indication of some colleagues on the Department side who thought this is no big deal.

Q: Yes. How did you find life in Washington at the time?

LOO: It was fine. I guess I'd been back to Washington for Filipino training about three or four years ago so things hadn't changed that much. It's the late 1990s by now, so we were starting to be more online. Having the internet and being able to browse and get

information was a revelation, especially coming out of China. It was a good assignment which helped me learn about how Washington worked

Q: Well then where did you go?

LOO: Since I'd always wanted to learn Spanish I bid on Spanish-speaking posts and I wound up going to Nicaragua as PAO from 1999 to 2001.

Q: What was the situation when you got there?

LOO: It was stable. It probably hasn't changed much. It's a small country, very poor, typically listed as second poorest in the Western Hemisphere, second only to Haiti. But it was not crime ridden; that's one of the things that separates Nicaragua from other parts of Central America. There wasn't a whole lot of gang activity, either indigenous or exported from the U.S., so we were fortunate in that regard. Managua never really recovered from the earthquake in 1973, I think it was, so there was really no city there. You'd have a pre-earthquake high rise, and then a vacant lot overgrown with weeds, another overgrown vacant lot, and then a tiny strip mall, and some other buildings. So, it was definitely not a typical urban setting. There was no safe public transit to speak of, so we drove our own cars, and you would be sharing the road with everything from decrepit yellow school buses salvaged from the U.S. for local use to donkey-drawn carts.

We had great housing. We had a good, tight embassy team which tends to happen when the outside environment is more challenging.

Q: Who was the ambassador:

LOO: O.P. Garza was ambassador while I was there. And the political situation seemed to be on an upward tick. There was typical corruption but the Sandinistas had been out of power for a while and there was some semblance of a free press and some democratic opposition.

Q: What was the political situation?

LOO: The party in power was kind of a center right party which ultimately collapsed due to corruption and which opened the door, unfortunately, for the Sandinistas to come back. There were some forces of good who were trying to push through the political opposition. So, there was a functioning government in place. And there was a huge assistance program primarily because of Hurricane Mitch, which had occurred in, I guess, 1998. So, billions of dollars were coming in in aid.

Q: What were we doing? I mean, you had, it sounded like a weak central government and an opposition which had been our enemy for a long time and now was a legitimate opposition party?

LOO: Yes, the Sandinistas were out of power but they were represented in parliament and they were able to keep much of the spoils of their time in office through what they called “el pacto” (the pact). And so, Daniel Ortega was essentially the head of the opposition and they had their own media outlets and so on.

Q: Did we have solid contacts with them?

LOO: Less so. I think we had some, but it was not so much a question of choice as means and that we didn't really want to work with the Sandinistas or deal with them given their history.

Q: What was the party in power called?

LOO: I think it was the Liberal Party. I couldn't be certain about that. It was the center right party.

Q: Yes. Did we see, was the corruption obvious as undermining the structure and all?

LOO: It was. Again, because of the Hurricane Mitch recovery certainly we had invested hundreds of millions of dollars there as had other donors and we were not seeing the impact. So, that was one of our main priorities, addressing corruption as well as interdiction of drugs because Central America was a transit point for a lot of the cocaine and heroin coming out of Latin America; and just kind of general strengthening of democratic processes were some of the issues that we worked on.

Q: Well, how were the leaders of the Sandinista movement doing at this time?

LOO: Many of them were idle. Some of them were in parliament, like Daniel Ortega; some of them were running enterprises or the media. But I have to say, I guess it shows how good – or bad -- a prognosticator I am that many of us thought that they were kind of has-beens and were headed towards the dust bin of history. So much so that I'm embarrassed to say that when I was leaving in 2001 I bought a Sandinista cap and a Sandinista hammock, as a novelty for history's sake, assuming that they wouldn't be in existence much longer. So, that shows you how wrong I was.

Q: Well, a lot of people were, too. Did we see any glimmers of the liberal side of mending its ways and all?

LOO: Yes. the vice president was seen as someone with a lot of moral rectitude and who was personally incorruptible. And I think that was where a lot of faith was put. You can try to side-step the president or try to work with the vice president and his team and whatnot and so that was, I guess, the aspiration. But he was an older man who didn't connect as well with, say, the average Nicaraguan voter, who, like in many developing societies was younger. When he ran for the presidency, he didn't win. So, I think we bet on the wrong horse in that regard.

Q: Yes. At one point, of course, Nicaragua and El Salvador and all were actually deluged with congressional and news delegations and all. But I imagine at this point you're pretty much left on your own.

LOO: Actually, for a country that size there were a number of delegations as a result of members of Congress who had developed a sort of proprietary interest in Nicaragua from the revolution and civil war era and so, over time, had invested either, say, their reputations or their programs in Nicaragua. Various donations programs had a member of Congress's name on it or things of that sort. So, we actually had, for a small post of that size, a good number of delegations.

Q: What about was there much of a strong Nicaraguan community in the United States?

LOO: There was some diaspora, not much and not politically active or strong. Most of them were economic refugees that had gone off to Miami or elsewhere and we would hear complaints on occasion about why were we talking to Daniel Ortega, that type of thing. And some of the political leaders actually had been in Miami and then had come back.

Q: How was Daniel Ortega seen at the time and what were we doing?

LOO: Well, he had his core supporters but, just as today, there were any number of scandals that you would think would sink a politician. His daughter accused him of molesting her. There are always corruption allegations and things of that sort. So, he was not invulnerable but he had a base that was supporting him.

Q: Well then, you were sort of new to the area, how did you find the Latin American political system?

LOO: It was in some ways familiar and similar to East Asia in that it was personal relationships that were the most important. Rule of law was lacking and the corruption was an issue. So, in many regards it wasn't much of a transition from, again, what I'd seen in, for example, China or the Philippines.

Q: You're mentioning that violence was not as endemic in Nicaragua as elsewhere in Central America. Right now I'm interviewing Ed Corr, who was our ambassador in El Salvador during the revolution and earthquake and he was saying that, I mean just personally people had guns and they were a violent society. And why would Nicaragua-is it the Somozas that smothered it or-?

LOO: My amateur theory on that is that Nicaragua is a poor country but it's not like El Salvador or Guatemala or Honduras where it's densely packed. Managua, as I said, is a big population center but the rest of the population is spread out through the country. It's a place where you can be poor but you can subsist, you're not living in a slum necessarily in the capital. You can go back to where your parents were and survive on subsistence farming. And there's space. That's my sense of it. And then also just by historical

happenstances. I don't know if it's 100 percent proven but it's a pretty well supported theory that a lot of the violence in Central America today is due to the indoctrination of immigrants into gangs when they were here in the U.S., so we exported the gangs back to Central America.

Q: Was there any significant indigenous population?

LOO: Handfuls. there were Afro-Caribbean Nicaraguans on the Caribbean side but there wasn't really an indigenous population.

Q: I mean, there wasn't really a problem with some other country.

LOO: No, no. there was no native groups per se.

Q: Well then after that where did you go?

LOO: After that I took a detour. this was right at the beginning of the State-USIA integration so, when I was leaving in 1999, I wound up initially assigned to a political officer job in Hong Kong. So, since I already had Chinese language and a year in between to fill, I wasn't quite sure what I was going to do. Fortunately, I was offered by FSI the position of the Chinese language field school director position in Taiwan as a bridge between assignments because I was leaving Managua in 2001 and the political officer job in Hong Kong wouldn't start until 2002. So, I wound up back in Taiwan for a year as principal at the language school.

Q: How good was your Chinese at this point?

LOO: It was good. It was probably a solid 3/3 and then at the end of the year of on and off training I tested out at 3 plus/3 plus.

Q: I would think that somebody who was not being exposed on a daily basis that the written language would be very- I mean, you have to continue to reinforce that all the time, didn't you?

LOO: Yes, yes, so I was a little bit rusty coming back. I never would have wanted to test right after I got back to Taiwan but over the course of the year and through watching TV and listening to radio and reading newspapers I was able to kind of get back into the groove of it.

It was a great assignment. And then by happenstance the cultural attaché job in Madrid opened up and I kind of weighed the pros and cons of applying for that and breaking the Hong Kong assignment. So, in 2002 rather than going to Hong Kong I went to Madrid.

Q: That's quite a change. Well, let's talk about your time in Taiwan. Did you notice any particular difference in atmosphere on Taiwan than in Beijing?

LOO: Well, clearly. it was a free society more or less, still a little bit authoritarian but free press, rule of law were present. People obeyed traffic signs, people paid their taxes, things like that. And it's always been a friendly place to Americans and so it was a pleasant place to work.

Q: How did you find it, looking at a practical sense as a place to train our language officers?

LOO: It was good but it had its limitations like all our field schools do. It's theoretically an immersion environment. You're in a place that speaks Chinese, but it's too artificial in that you're going to class and you're surrounded by your fellow language students who, during breaks or after hours will be speaking English. And then at that time, it may still be the case, we were located not in Taipei proper but up on a mountain in a suburb, the former U.S. military base. So, you lived on a compound and you walked over to class on the compound. Unless you went down to the local 7-Eleven or made an effort to go downtown you weren't going to be actively engaging in Chinese. So, sometimes better than here at NFATC, yes, but it was only theoretically an immersion environment.

Q: From your perspective how were relations between the Taipei government and the Beijing government?

LOO: It was good. The basic nut had not been cracked as to recognition and so on but they had, again, come to a modus vivendi where there were direct air links, there were commercial ties, mail was going through directly rather than via Hong Kong and there was starting to be, just as there had been Taiwan citizens going over to the Mainland for tourism and whatnot, there were Mainland Chinese starting to come to Taiwan for tourism. So, on the people-to-people side things were, I would say, thriving.

Q: I assume you had good solid contacts with the people on Taiwan; had they learned to live with the situation?

LOO: Some of them did. One of the prominent parties there, the Democratic Progressive Party, is essentially a pro-independence party and they've actually taken the presidency a couple of times. I think a pragmatic person on Taiwan probably wants to maintain the system as it is, maybe with some name changes or whatnot because they have economic power, they have economic relations, they have a functioning society on the island. the insult is when they can't be in the Olympics under their preferred name, they can't really carry a passport that says China on it, that type of thing. Well actually, they may have Republic of China on their passport but it may not be recognized internationally. So, for those who are fixated or focused on those issues it's a sticking point, it's a major concern. But I think most of the people of Taiwan realize that if the push too hard they could be creating a crisis that will be hard to escape from. The Mainland Chinese have been pretty clear about any kinds of signs of independence or declaration of independence.

Q: Well then, after this sort of ____ you all of a sudden- I mean, this going from Spanish to Chinese and you've off to be what, cultural-?

LOO: Yes, it's cultural affairs officer in Madrid.

Q: What did that involve? Did we still have, with the integration, still have ____ of the word culture?

LOO: Yes. After integration, USIS sections were renamed public affairs section. No one knew what that meant in Spanish -- and maybe even in English. People knew us more from our discrete functions, the press attaché or the cultural attaché, that type of thing. It was a great assignment. It was that small window when the State Department, I think taking on a best practice from USIA, had decided to make some assignments four years, so I was assigned to Madrid for four years as cultural affairs officer.

Q: This is from 2000?

LOO: 2002 to 2006.

Q: So, what was the political situation in Spain at the time?

LOO: It was very anti-American in a way. 9/11 had happened and then shortly after that we had invaded Iraq. And as you remember that was immensely unpopular among foreign publics, including our allies. So, at one point, I think, our disapproval rating in Spain was probably in the high 90s. But that was at the political level; at the personal, individual level there was no anti-Americanism. The political party in power was the Popular Party, the one that's in power now, and José María Aznar was the prime minister. That government was very, for the most part, very pro-U.S. Government and that probably contributed to why they lost midway through my tour.

But it was a great time to be a cultural attaché because the principle was that, if we were talking past each other politically with that big albatross of the Iraq war around our necks, what could we do to engage Spain, on a political level or people-to-people level? So, we devoted a lot of resources on cultural programming, showing them that we have commonalities in intellectual life and cultural life and so on. We had a chance to bring a lot of speakers, whether they were there as targets of opportunity or whether we sponsored them to Spain, writers and artists and so on to do presentations, have dialogues with Spanish university students, Spanish think tanks and so on.

Q: What was their rationale for opposing our ousting Saddam Hussein? He was pretty much a monster.

LOO: He was, but I think, like many people, they thought the premise of regime change was unsubstantiated and that Iraq was not responsible for 9/11. The narrative was that Bush was looking for a way to attack his father's enemy and, as they might say, to protect

the oil and that it was an unjust war in that regard. So, that was the narrative for opposition to the Iraq war.

Q: Now, how did you respond as the cultural officer?

LOO: Again, the front office and political and press office side were working on the other aspects of it, trying to explain our policies and looking for commonalities but, as I said, the one opportunity where they never shut us out in engagement was on the cultural and educational side. And we were able to show that, while you might criticize us for our policy, you can't criticize us for our cultural and educational achievements and leadership and our diversity.

Q: Knowing how sort of the leftist liberal side of politics are particularly among students and all, I would think that you would have had demonstrations in the middle of some lecture or cultural event.

LOO: Luckily, no. During my time in Madrid we didn't have any disruptions of that type. Some tense moments, including with some of our own speakers that we brought over who were opposed to the war, and some tense moments at seminars where, for example, the Iraqi dissidents or even Iraqi members of government were present. But we did start to have demonstrations in front of the embassy because a Spanish journalist, a broadcast cameraman, was killed in one of the bombings in Iraq. That became a cause celebré and we began to have frequent demonstrations in front of the embassy as a result of that.

Q: Did you get involved in students going to the United States?

LOO: Yes. I've always been active in Fulbright with my responsibilities, so I was on the Fulbright board as a cultural affairs officer as treasurer and we worked closely with Fulbright to promote study abroad for Spaniards, through Fulbright or through other means, through an EducationUSA advisor at the commission.

Q: Well, from what little I've gathered there seems to be a sizeable contingent of Americans going to Spain for the year abroad or something like-

LOO: Definitely. It's probably second only to the United Kingdom typically in terms of number of American students either there for a semester or full year abroad. So, we would work with some of those students occasionally as well.

Q: Did you have any problems with them?

LOO: No. certainly on the American Citizen Services side you would see lost passports, sometimes crimes against them, that type of thing, and as duty officers, just with the students and the tourists, you knew you would always be busy as duty officer, but nothing specific. Typically, those programs are fairly well run through the universities or through consortiums so there are faculty members and local hosts who are able to manage most of the issues.

Q: I think on the cultural side looking just slightly to the north, you've got France, which puts a tremendous emphasis on culture; how about Spain?

LOO: Spain does. They have the Cervantes Institutes, which teach Spanish and promote Spanish culture overseas. And they had kind of a copycat of a Fulbright Program with a scholarship program for Latin Americans to come to Spain.

Q: Did you get a feel the Spanish looked upon Latin America as country cousins or-?

LOO: Yes, I guess a couple ways to think about it is that they're looking for ways for Spain to be relevant, and one of the ways for Spain to be relevant is to be the broker between Europe and Latin America. And then they also were trying to triangulate that relationship by promoting themselves as an intermediary with the U.S. and Latin America. So, politically there was a lot of importance on Latin America and making sure that Latin Americans think of Spain as the mother country and as a protector and so on. And also, Spaniards feel that they have the authority to speak out, for example on Cuban human rights issues and so on, more so than other countries. But on the day-to-day level, yes, then there was some hostility or discrimination towards Latin American immigrants, many who come to Spain to work in menial jobs, and there were some pejorative terms directed at them.

Q: What about, speaking of immigration, what about Islamic immigration?

LOO: That turned into one of the main focuses of our work in Spain. I forget the exact number but there was a significant Muslim immigrant population in Spain, mostly from Morocco and the Maghreb, and some of them had not integrated as well. The landmark event that occurred during my tour was the train station bombing in Madrid in 2004 where almost 200 people died, which was ultimately linked to Muslim immigrants mainly from Morocco. So, partly as a result of that, as a response to that, and partly due to our overall government response to 9/11, we started working more with the Muslim community in Spain. I guess the term that's used now is countering violent extremism, but at that point we were just calling it Muslim outreach because our idea was that there's less of a chance that someone's going to be radicalized against us if they know us. So, we conducted outreach to the main mosque in Madrid, we sponsored the first U.S. embassy iftar after Ramadan. We brought a Muslim-American imam from Baltimore out to Madrid to give presentations. And we even worked with Fulbright to try to get more Spaniards of Muslim origin into the scholarship program.

Q: Was there, I think it came somewhat later, but a major anti-Islamic movement in Spain?

LOO: Well, certainly after the bombings there was an uptick but Spain's relationship with the Islamic world, as you probably know, is complicated and long. The Muslims occupied Spain for centuries before they were expelled around the 15th century and so on. So, just as Spain feels that they have a special interest in connection with Latin America I

think they also feel they have a special interest and relationship with North Africa and, by extension, the Islamic world. So, politically speaking, there wasn't a level of anti-Muslim sentiment as strong as it is in other places. And I think on the popular level, a lot of people understood too, "maybe I've got some Muslim heritage in my own family somewhere centuries ago."

Q: Does Spain still own Ceuta?

LOO: Yes, they still claim Ceuta and Melilla, which are the outposts on the Moroccan coast.

Q: Were there any significant incidents with the Spanish and Madrid at the time, other than the train bombing, of course?

LOO: The train bombing and then again, the other kind of significant event was a Spanish journalist was killed in Iraq so that became a point of friction resulting in frequent demonstrations in front of the embassy. Those were the main issues.

Q: How did you deal with demonstrations?

LOO: I think even before the demonstrations, partly because of post-9/11 security hardening, we'd already had a significant Spanish police presence in front of the embassy including, for most of the time that I can remember there, an armored personnel carrier that was parked on the sidewalk, which was off-putting to many people, obviously, but it was there. And the demonstrations, again, were raucous but fairly orderly, no attempts to storm the building or things of that nature.

Q: Where were you, this is going back, but when 9/11 occurred?

LOO: I actually was in Taiwan. So, it happened around 9:00 or 10:00 p.m. I happened to just turn on the radio and I guess they replayed a CNN broadcast. My first reaction, which probably was like many others, was to think that this must be a "War of the Worlds" style radio hoax show. And then I turned on the TV and saw pictures and it was horrifying and that's when it sunk in that this is real and it's happening. And just as a comment, and it's probably true for many Foreign Service officers, that was probably the first time where the world kind of turned on its head. Prior to 9/11 you're thinking any potential risk or danger is going to happen when I'm overseas and that you don't need to worry about friends and family back home, and then it's flipped completely upside down and you realize that the homeland is as much a target and at risk as anything else.

Q: Yes. Well, in Spain, how about our ties to University of Madrid and other places, university level?

LOO: They were great. In part that's because one of the things that USIS and public affairs sections and, say political sections, do, which are some of the strongest assets, is trying to maintain institutional memory through local staff. So, we had great local

colleagues who'd been with us for decades and were well-liked and well-respected by the academic world.

Q: I know. This is why I hope that the integration has maintained this contact. It's so important. I mean, it's institutional memory.

LOO: Yes.

Q: Did you pick up any feelings about the Franco times?

LOO: Yes, it was still kind of a sensitive subject then and still is now. Many people were trying to avoid discussing it too much because it would clearly open old wounds. But there were still streets named after him, there was still a big memorial right outside Madrid essentially dedicated to him. And there were starting to be more serious discussions about how to reconcile their history.

Q: Was there much in the way of scholarship, looking at the Spanish-American times? I mean, going back to the- not conquistadors but the archives and all of that and looking at-?

LOO: The only thing I can say is that's certainly the point of reference for them. When a Spaniard would mention "98" he or she wasn't talking about 1998, but rather 1898.

Q: Oh, yes.

LOO: They were talking about 1898, the Spanish-American War. So, there was some of that. But there was also, again, a lot of interest in shared history and about, for example, Spanish influence in the U.S. in Florida and the West Coast and so on.

Q: Yes. Yes, it's interesting, just in general reading one doesn't hear much about the Spanish side of things. But we go way back.

LOO: Sure. that was another good reminder -- obviously for the Chinese, you take it for granted that their memory is millennia long -- but it's a good reminder that for other countries, I found this in Hungary too and certainly in Spain, their collective memory is centuries long, unlike ours as Americans, which is at best decades long.

Q: Yes. 1492 was the expulsion, wasn't it?

LOO: Yes.

Q: Well then, where'd you go after Madrid?

LOO: Then my next posting was in Bogotá, Colombia, where I was the cultural affairs officer for two years, from 2006 to 2008.

Q: That was a scary period, wasn't it?

LOO: Actually, no. The violence or the threats or risks in Bogotá had subsided so it was relatively secure. Our biggest concerns on a daily basis were the traffic and the rain and pollution. It was still a danger pay posting and we still needed to travel by armored van but that was, more than anything else, I think, a precautionary holdover. But I thought it was a great time to be in Bogotá. The economy had started to recover, both Colombians and foreign investors started to have more confidence in Colombia, so you could see economic recovery. We were able to travel, at least by air, to most parts of the country so I got a chance to see the diversity of the place. And it was capped by the success of the release of the three American hostages who had been held for more than five years. So, it really was on a high trajectory. The FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia—People's Army) were still in a military campaign against the government and vice versa but that also seemed to be, as we see now, on the verge of being resolved in some way.

Q: Your job was what?

LOO: Cultural affairs officer but I was acting public affairs officer for almost a year.

Q: What were we doing in that regard?

LOO: The big thing was, again, counter-narcotics. We were looking at promoting rule of law and the democratic process, including anti-corruption, strengthening the judiciary, encouraging entrepreneurship, things like that. And then promoting American businesses, promoting American education, so a wide range of activities.

Q: I would think that in a place like Colombia where you did have the drug traffic and it was the center of drug traffic, that a hell of a lot of money is in that, which means that the corruption was not sort of petty corruption. Did you run across-?

LOO: Again, that was probably overall a positive news story. When I got there we were probably towards the tail end of Plan Colombia, an investment that we had made which was largely a success story in terms of the levels of drugs getting to the U.S. had been reduced, the cooperation with the Colombian military and Colombian government, we were pretty confident of their capabilities, their professionalism and ability to withstand influence. There were still some corruption scandals when I was there but I think overall we had confidence in the government and in institutions to function. And some of the priorities or focuses then was called nationalization, to move away from it being a U.S. Government initiative more towards a Colombian government initiative.

Q: Well, our ties to Colombia are really very strong, aren't they? I always think they had Colombian troops in the Korean War, for example.

LOO: That's true. And Colombia also volunteered for the Coalition of the Willing in Iraq and then in Afghanistan and so on. So, they've raised their hands when we've called.

Q: It must have been quite a contrast between Colombia and Nicaragua, wasn't it?

LOO: It was. In Spanish they'd say it's "un país en serio" (a serious country), and it's a country that works. And what I found, maybe just because I worked there, is that in a lot of ways Colombians are the professional class of Latin America. Oftentimes when you go outside of Colombia and you run into, say, a Latin American who's an expatriate manager for General Electric or whatever, he or she may be Colombian and that's because they're very entrepreneurial, hardworking, and dedicated. My comparison is to Filipinos in East Asia in that, if there is an expatriate manager who isn't American, they're oftentimes Filipino.

Q: Yes. Well, what about the universities? At one point practically every university in Latin America was almost a no-go area because the students more or less ran things on the political side. What was the situation when you were there?

LOO: It was mixed. There were some universities, say private ones for example, where we were quite welcome. And then, yes, then there were the big public universities where it was an accomplishment, for example, for us to get the ambassador there to even have a discussion with faculty members. And it was not just university students but oftentimes entrenched faculty who were thoroughly anti-American who were disruptive forces. Yes, so we worked with them where we could in terms of specific programs but we didn't do many high-profile events or high-level events. There were some universities, especially outside of the capital, where they would welcome, say, the economic counselor to speak but, as I said, it was a real accomplishment for us to get Ambassador Wood to one of the public universities because he'd never been there in his three years' time.

Q: Was it the students or was it sort of the junior faculty that was the most vehement of the anti-American?

LOO: I think in some of those universities it was more the faculty. Students of this generation, they were more pragmatic, the Cold War and such things were history to them. And they probably couldn't care less whether it was the Russian ambassador or the American ambassador. I think it was oftentimes more the faculty that were obstacles.

Q: How was life in Bogotá?

LOO: It was, for the most part, fine. Bogotá is not tropical, which was surprising to some people. It's at high altitude and the primary weather pattern is overcast and rainy. So, that got some people down, both the altitude and the weather and the traffic. But it had all modern conveniences. Most of us lived in an apartment in town where you could walk to upscale restaurants and nightclubs and shopping malls and things of that sort or be a short car ride away. The biggest adjustment was we couldn't use public transit for security reasons and even the Colombians still held onto some measures which may be justified. For example, I never had a key to my front door of my apartment building. Whenever I needed to get in and out I would have to wait for the security guard to let me in and out. And the rationale behind that was that if you were ever kidnapped you wouldn't be forced to open your front door and let them up to your place and be robbed without the intervention of the security guard. So, things like that were striking to me. But on the whole I felt comfortable there.

Q: Did you find that the Colombians socially were a different breed of cat from the Nicaraguans?

LOO: Yes, certainly because I was in Bogotá it was very much more urban and cosmopolitan, more worldly. Many Colombians in the capital had traveled either as tourists or studied overseas. Their interests were different. But I enjoyed both places.

Q: Did you get down to the coastal cities at all?

LOO: Yes. That was one of the pleasures of the posting. One of my responsibilities, for example, was working with binational centers and we had a network of binational centers throughout the country, so I got to go to Cartagena and Barranquilla, which are on the Caribbean coast and also out to Cali and Medellín, which are more towards the Pacific side and in the interior. Again, to get a chance to see the different parts of the country.

Q: There were a couple of cities, I can't think of the names right now, that at one point were completely off limits for us.

LOO: Well, a number of them were. Medellín to name one.

Q: Yes.

LOO: And that was a great success story because of the dynamic mayor at the time and the improvements in security and infrastructure partly funded by us. So, whenever we had delegations they would often be sent to Medellín to see firsthand. The story of Colombia was kind of different from the stereotype of the story from 10 years ago.

Q: What had the mayor done or what had we done?

LOO: They'd done things like increase literacy and opportunities for the poor. Part of that was they showcased things like a state-of-the-art library up in one of the lower-class slums, building a metro system including a cable car that actually would take people up to the slums. Improving public security, that type of thing.

Q: Was there an indigenous population that was significant?

LOO: There was but they were mostly in the isolated parts of the country. They were smaller in number so they weren't particularly politically significant. The main occasions when they were an issue was, for example, in exploitation of mineral rights or that type of thing in their habitats. For example, a mining company would want to go into an area where an indigenous tribe was and sometimes we would get tangentially involved because there might be an American investment in that. But they were not politically significant in many other ways.

Q: Did the drug trade, was it going at a reduced level when you were there?

LOO: Yes. The figures were down significantly over time. There were still big headlines every now and then when, say, a Colombia drug submarine would be found off Baja

California, or big busts in Europe, something like that. But the interdiction system was working and we were cutting off a lot of the main routes and making some headway in eradication on the ground and so on.

Q: Did you have any presidential visits?

LOO: We had a number of secretary of state visits and we did have a presidential visit with President Bush.

Q: How did they go?

LOO: They went well. The Colombians were willing partners and professional so for the most part they were successful. President Bush was in Bogotá and then Secretary Rice was in Medellín.

LOO: I then went on to Hungary. From 2009 to 2012 as PAO, public affairs officer.

Q: What was the situation in Hungary at the time?

LOO: I arrived about a year before the elections there. Like the rest of Europe and the rest of the world it had been hit pretty hard by the 2008 global economic crisis and that was one of the reasons why in 2010 the ruling party lost to the FIDESZ Party. The FIDESZ win put Hungary back on the map again as being kind of a populist, maybe less than democratic society. So, that was the political situation. The economic situation was on the road to recovery and, personally, living conditions were fine. This was Central Europe, Hungary was part of the European Union, part of the Schengen Zone, so it was quite a comfortable place to live and a good jumping off point for travel regionally.

Q: Well, this is sort of a turn which is happening in our country, a turn towards a little bit, I don't know ___far leftist or rightist but populism, wasn't it, I mean, sort of a plague on all your houses in a way?

LOO: It was partly that. I guess the descriptions of right and left don't necessarily translate as well to that part of Europe but certainly the party that had been in power, the Hungarian socialists, did not do themselves any favors due to their own incompetence and corruption. There certainly was a groundswell of what you could call nativist sentiment. There was a far-right party that was growing, which the FIDESZ Party co-opted to a certain degree by taking over some of their policy points. And Hungarians by and large, while many of them are friendly and outgoing, many of them are also inward-looking and they're proud of their culture. They've been able to maintain their language and their culture over 1,000 years of attacks by foreigners. So, there's a Hungarian pride that plays a role. But yes, certainly when the Viktor Orbán government took power it was a significant change from what one would think of as a liberal European democracy.

Q: Were you faced with the prospect of sort of changing our message to sort of fit into this, I mean, to sort of go with the flow but at the same time to make our points?

LOO: Yes. The bilateral relationship became more confrontational. And while we still stressed our strong economic and commercial ties that made Hungary an important place for the U.S., and certainly we stressed the security relationship, either it be military-to-military or our law enforcement cooperation, which never wavered. We did have to, again, we did have to engage in debates about human rights and rule of law, independent judiciary, independent press, and that debate continues today as well.

Q: Yes. Well, Obama was very popular in much of Western Europe; how about in Hungary?

LOO: I don't think he as a figure was particularly identified as being popular or not popular. On the whole, the American government, American people were still well regarded by Hungarians; it was just some of our policies that they started to disagree with.

Q: Was there much reflection of the many Hungarians who ended up in the United States as _____ - I mean, their kids were turning, what, was this an issue that we dealt with?

LOO: Definitely. It certainly was part of the dynamic, the Hungarian diaspora where, I think conservatively, we were saying there are between a million and a million and a half Americans of Hungarian descent in the U.S. compared to a native Hungarian population in the current day of about 10 million. Hungarian-Americans are very politically active and they have their own interest groups which we engage with in the embassy and the Hungarian government engaged with Hungarian-Americans quite consciously as well. So, yes, they were a player in the relationship.

Q: Well, what particular types of programs did we figure that would sell in this situation?

LOO: We still did some of the traditional programs supporting American cultural exchanges. Fulbright has a large program in Hungary. But then, because of the change in government and their change in emphasis we also changed some of our emphasis in terms of highlighting more, for example, the role and importance of civil society, of tolerance and diversity. We did things like organize a civil society boot camp where we brought in experts from the U.S. to help build sustainability for Hungarian NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations). And we also tried to do what we could to support an independent judiciary and independent press. The ambassador at the time had a good relationship with Justice Kennedy, Anthony Kennedy, of the Supreme Court and he came to speak to Hungarian jurists, for example.

Q: The European Union, what was their role there?

LOO: It was not particularly effective in terms of bringing Hungary back into the fold. The Europeans will be the first to tell you that it's a lot easier to exert leverage on a

candidate state than it is on a member state. Once a country's a member state it's often hard to sanction them or penalize them without subsequently going to a nuclear option which they really can't do because it requires unanimity on their part. So, their levers were the anti-corruption lever where they would challenge the Hungarian government to account for some of the subsidies that they'd been receiving and then threatened to cut that off.

Q: How stood corruption?

LOO: It's not petty corruption. There are some instances of petty corruption. The medical system is traditionally greased by your private payments to the doctor or whatnot. But there are no, say, for example, traffic stops for bribes and that type of thing as indicative in other countries of petty corruption. Their corruption was more of a public corruption in terms of diverting funds from, say, public works projects, infrastructure projects and that type of thing to diverting those contracts and resources to favored cronies, that type of thing.

Q: Who was the ambassador?

LOO: Most of my time it was Eleni Kounalakis, Eleni Tsakopoulos Kounalakis, who was a political appointee from California.

Q: How did you find-?

LOO: I enjoyed working with her and I guess I still count her as a friend and supporter. Strangely enough, we also were neighbors throughout my assignment in Budapest because the traditional public affairs officer house was on the same compound as the chief of mission residence. It also turned out that we were both San Franciscans who had attended Dartmouth, albeit in different years.

Q: How did you find the embassy staff, the local staff?

LOO: Very talented with strong, devoted Hungarians in most of the professional level staff. So -- kind of skipping ahead a little bit to when I went back as DCM later -- I felt fortunate that the staff was still, for the most part, the same. They had great language skills in English so they could-

Q: You know, to be Hungarian you really had to be good in other languages almost.

LOO: Yes, yes. in the past it had been Russian and then German and now English. So, it was a strong staff.

Q: Were Russians much of an element?

LOO: Yes. Russia always part of the discussion in Hungary. There is some ambivalence because the Hungarians feel that they freed themselves of them after the collapse of the

Iron Curtain. But Russia still is controversial; it's a big economic factor in all of Hungarian life and anyone who you talk to believes Russia is also a factor in Hungarian political life.

Q: How about speakers? What sort of speakers were you able to get?

LOO: We brought writers, for example. We had some exhibits and then later on in my tour we focused again more on bringing speakers to talk about the dynamics of civil society and the values of non-governmental organizations in the United States as part of a strong functioning democracy.

Q: Did you find sort of the old traditional way of USIA work different now that you were in a country where we'd obviously put a lot of effort back in the Cold War days and now it's sort of the new regime; how did you find that?

LOO: We had to adjust historically whether it be USIA or Public Diplomacy in the State Department so that was not a big change. But even during the USIA days there were always debates about how to program, whether you use the shotgun approach and try to broadcast as widely as possible or use a rifle approach and try to target specific opinion leaders. That's one debate that's perennial. Another debate was, do you do some programs just for the sake of showing the flag, or does every program have to "carry freight" in some regard in terms of having some substance. I think an enlightened public affairs officer and ambassador will understand everything we do carries freight in one way or another.

Q: I was wondering, this is still, well things have developed by 2012 and all, but what about discs and movies and lectures and things like this?

LOO: Yes. that was essentially irrelevant by then. By this time we're talking about a wired world so there is no need for us to be distributing materials except for on our websites and things like that. We did have a network of five American Corners in Hungary which were great assets in that they were kind of an outward face or extension of the embassy to Hungarian people and also gave us a foothold into the different regions of Hungary where we could do programs and have a presence.

Q: Well, did you have- What would a typical American Corner do?

LOO: They were fairly small, typically a space donated by a university or the city government, maybe a space like this room with book shelves, essentially DVDs. So, you could come into an American Corner and say, "I'd like to watch "My Big Fat Greek Wedding"" or something like that. They would offer that. They would have, say, day camps for English speakers, English conversation corners. They would have volunteer speaker presentations, whether it be people from the embassy or American Fulbrighters or private sector expatriates who were in that region who would talk about everything from Thanksgiving and Halloween traditions to the elections. Again, to socialize the

Hungarians about American English and about some of our history and politics and culture.

Q: Was Mainland China involved, engaged in Hungary?

LOO: Yes. I believe they had a Confucius Institute there, probably if not one, at a couple of the universities. And the Hungarians recognized the Mainland Chinese government rather than Taiwan and there actually was a pretty large Chinese population there since it was one of the parts of Europe where travel to and from China was easier.

Q: Was there much of an exchange program there?

LOO: Between the United States and Hungary?

Q: Well, I was thinking with China, between China- I wouldn't think there would be because-

LOO: I don't think academic exchanges but Hungarians obviously, you know they're looking at one of the largest economies in the world so they were always trying to think about ways to make themselves more relevant and to expand their ties to China economically.

Q: How about exchange programs- I assume we had a pretty active Fulbright?

LOO: We had a large Fulbright program. There were some American private sector exchanges going on as well. So, for a country that size it was pretty robust.

Q: Soros was- or was that- he-

LOO: George Soros, he was a factor. One of the best universities in Hungary and certainly maybe in all of Europe is Central European University which he founded and which had an English language curriculum and American director most of the time. When I was there it was John Shattuck, who was a former assistant secretary in the State Department and former ambassador. And so Central European University, CEU, had a very large impact and that was a Soros legacy.

Q: Well, did they have problems- I mean, was the government looking with suspicion about a university not really under their control?

LOO: Then, not so much, but now, in fact, it is a point of contention and they have changed the law on universities. Now the government certainly does see the university as an antagonist in that they are very uncomfortable with this Western liberal university that just happens to be in Hungary, rather than having a historical and political Hungarian connection.

Q: During the time you were there were there any high-level visits from the United States?

LOO: The highest level we had was a secretary of state visit. Hillary Clinton came toward the end of my tour. Bush had been there, I think, the younger Bush had been there during his administration but during my time the most prominent visitor was Secretary Clinton towards the end of my tour.

Q: How did that go?

LOO: I happened to be away from post but it was memorable because of her public remarks that were seen, rightly, as a criticism of the Orbán government and their straying from the lines of democracy. So, in terms of the logistics the visit went well, but the legacy was her remarks are often quoted by both opponents of the government and then the government itself (as an example of ways that we as the American Government “interfered” in their political system).

Q: What was the media situation in Hungary?

LOO: It was pretty vibrant but it was shrinking. There was some independent media that was not particularly objective. You could always tell the perspective of the publisher or the editor even in news stories. But then one of the main actions of the new government was to write new media laws that increased government control of the media which ultimately led to some self-censorship and then, either legally or extra-legally, a concentration of media power.

Q: You were there what, four years?

LOO: I was there for three years, until 2012, and then I went away to be diplomat in residence and then I went back for a year as deputy chief of mission. So, yes, in total I was there for four years.

Q: How did you see Hungary progressing at that time? Where was it headed?

LOO: Well, it was, again, making a decent recovery from the economic crash. It was still a strong security partner and law enforcement partner. It was still a reasonably good place for American business but there were concerns and still are concerns about the health of the democratic system there.

Q: Were you there when the first big wave of migration came from North Africa and Syria?

LOO: Actually, yes, that was when I went back as deputy chief of mission; it was that summer of 2015. There had been a trickle and then it started to grow, but the crest of the wave was in the summer of 2015 when maybe hundreds of thousands, maybe even half a million, transited through Central Europe, including Hungary, on their way to Germany

and Sweden and so on. And it was striking. It was right as I arrived as deputy chief of mission and the Hungarians were just overwhelmed, so you saw one of the major train stations, the eastern train station, Keleti train station, essentially turned into an impromptu or makeshift refugee camp with thousands of Middle Eastern and South Asian migrants, men, women and children, just kind of camping out there, trying to get on trains north and west.

Q: What were we doing for them?

LOO: We were reporting on the situation and we were trying to quietly work with the Hungarians to impress upon them that, while every country has its rights to protect its own borders and maintain security, there are also international obligations to protect the human rights of everyone. And so, we were quietly engaging the Hungarians in that regard. And then, of course, reporting on it as our political section would do.

Q: Well, did you see any of the, particularly the Syrians begin, some of them spinning off and beginning to engage in Hungary or were they on their way?

LOO: No, none of them, given the choice, none of them would have wanted to stay in Hungary which is, again, a paradox in why Hungary would be so hardline about it. Given the choice virtually any migrant would want to go to a Western European or Northern European country like Germany or Sweden. The economic opportunities are better, the host culture is more welcoming and the languages are easier. So, I would say, virtually none of the migrants who were coming through would think about Hungary as being their final stopping point.

Q: Well, what were the demographics of Hungary? I mean, so many of the countries of Western Europe and I suppose Eastern Europe are not having as many children and-

LOO: Sure.

Q: I mean, it's going to be a problem; all around the world we're having this.

LOO: You're right. It's the same problem that many Western European and developed societies like Japan have. It was aging and the population base was shrinking. You know, Hungarians, their psychological threshold number is to claim a population of 10 million. When I was there last they dropped below 10 million which was a big psychological blow. Their life expectancy isn't great because of the tradition of bad habits like smoking and heavy drinking. They were an aging population, Hungarians were having fewer children, and there was a lot of out migration. Again, as a citizen of a member of the European Union, if you're a young Hungarian who's multi-lingual with economic skills in demand you could work in London or Frankfurt with no need to stay in Budapest.

Q: Well, Budapest is a beautiful city, isn't it?

LOO: It is, yes.

Q: How was life there?

LOO: It was great, for the most part. It had an excellent public transit system. The places that you wanted to go were usually pretty easily reached because it's a fairly compact city, or at least, the parts where tourists or expatriates would tend to go to. It can be stunningly beautiful right along the Danube. Cost of living for Europe was not high. And Budapest itself is a pretty cosmopolitan city. It's a lot like a lot of other world cities in that it really is a place apart from the country that it's located in.

Q: Where was the embassy located? I mean, your office?

LOO: The embassy was downtown in the middle of Budapest, which was a real pleasure. And then our public affairs section, commercial section, some of the military and USAID offices were in a commercial tower that was across the square from the chancery. And the Marines lived up in the castle district on the other side of the river in a beautiful historic property that we as a government had managed to get from the Hungarians right after the Second World War. As part of a campaign to consolidate our operations and also to restore historical patrimony we did a property swap with the Hungarians where we received two buildings that they renovated adjacent to the chancery downtown and in return we gave up the Marine House up in the castle district. So, when I returned in 2015 we had three beautiful buildings on one of the main squares of downtown Budapest and everyone was co-located.

Q: Did you find the students particularly responsive to things about the United States or were they- how were they?

LOO: There was some interest in U.S. universities and a lot of interest in the Summer Work and Travel program, which permits foreign students to come to the U.S. for the summer to work in different capacities with some element of cultural exchange built in. But it was, I think, similar to our situation in many other European countries, the challenges that we face in that, unless one were to get a scholarship, it was just a lot easier to think about study in Europe either locally or due to the Erasmus Program somewhere else in Europe rather than to think about the expense and the distance of going to the United States.

Q: I may be wrong on this, but my impression is that the Hungarians are particularly adept, for one reason or another, in sort of the digital world. I mean, their thought process, I don't know what it-

LOO: Yes, I would say they're very skilled in math and sciences and I guess there's some theory that this may be linked to the difficulty of the Hungarian language and the way the language is set up. But yes, certainly they have won more than their share of Nobel Prizes.

Q: Yes. Well then, were there any particular incidents or things that happened while you were there.

LOO: Yes, let me just note again the whole migration process kind of colored my year as deputy chief of mission. And it was certainly an historic turning point in the way that Europe looks at migration. So, that was a major issue. We also tried to work towards, again, promoting the democratic process, supporting NGOs and civil society organizations. We also worked hard to promote diversity and tolerance. Both Ambassador Kounalakis and then, when I was there the second time, Ambassador Bell, marched in the Budapest Pride LGBT celebration. And we supported programs for minorities like the Roma in Hungary. All again in an effort to show the kind of strength that comes from diversity and from inclusion.

Q: Well, you left there the first time in?

LOO: In 2012.

Q: 2012.

LOO: Yes.

Q: And where'd you go?

LOO: I wound up getting a position as a diplomat in residence for the State Department based in South Florida, in Miami. So, I was a diplomat in residence in Miami for three years.

Q: How'd you find that?

LOO: It was great. I was hosted by two good institutions, Florida International University and then Miami-Dade College. Miami-Dade College is probably the largest Hispanic-serving higher education institution in the country. Florida International University had about 50,000 students and I would say easily 70, 80 percent were Hispanic-Americans.

Q: Well, was there much interest in the world beyond the Hispanic world among the students?

LOO: Actually, yes. Obviously there was a lot of interest in their heritage or their legacy countries, whether it be Cuba, which has a huge influence in Miami, or Colombia, Venezuela, the rest of Latin America. But the students I talked to and worked with, some of them would do internships in East Asia and the Middle East, Europe, and there was strong interest in what we were doing in the State Department and Foreign Service. So, it was a great assignment, and it gave me a chance to see the Department through fresh eyes and see the enthusiasm that some people have for our work, long before we spend decades and maybe get jaded or the novelty wears off.

Q: Well, part of the diplomat in residence program is designed to be recruiters for the Foreign Service and I think we're particularly interested in reaching out to the Hispanic world because it's been underrepresented for a long time.

LOO: Sure.

Q: What were you doing with that?

LOO: That was the core of the work, it's the main work of diplomats in residence now. It used to be an ambassador leaving post could try to carve out a diplomat in residence position somewhere and wear that hat and maybe write or teach, maybe do some recruiting as an afterthought. But now it's been standardized so that the diplomats in residence program belongs to human resources, the director general's office, and its reason for being is in fact to try to increase diversity through recruitment of underrepresented groups like Hispanics, like African-Americans and so on. And it helped that I had the Spanish language skills so I even went to Puerto Rico as part of my responsibilities to try to recruit there. But basically, the main challenge was to interest young people from diverse backgrounds that it was worth pursuing this career despite the long, drawn out application and selection process that we have and despite how competitive it was.

Q: Did you feel that you were pretty successful in this?

LOO: If you were looking at the data it would be a challenge to say I was particularly successful because our number, our representation of Hispanics is still quite low. In terms of raising our profile, in terms of generating enthusiasm for what we did in terms of getting at least increased applicants and participants in our internship program and some of the fellowship programs like the Rangel or the Pickering, I think I was successful.

Q: Well then, you were there two years?

LOO: I was there for three.

Q: So, you left when?

LOO: I left in summer of 2015. Originally, I was coming back to Washington and then the Budapest DCMship opened up suddenly.

Q: Well then, how did you find that you were supported for this refugee crisis for the State Department?

LOO: Well supported, I think. There was a lot of interest. We had regional coordination between our embassy, U.S. embassies in Central Europe and Western Europe to talk about how to respond. And in addition to the regional EUR Bureau there was also a lot of interest from functional bureaus like Population, Refugees and Migration and the Democracy and Human Rights Bureau.

Q: Then after doing that it was probably the end of your career, wasn't it?

LOO: Yes. Then I came back to Washington. And I just want to say a word about the DCM assignment. It was a little bit unusual in that it was a limited one-year assignment in a non-hardship post. The reason it came open suddenly was because the incumbent in 2015 curtailed. And by that time, as you know, they had already assigned the successor but he would have to go through language training first, so human resources decided that they had three options. The first option was to keep the acting DCM who was the political counselor, keep him acting, wearing two hats for an extended period of time.

Q: Yes.

LOO: The second option was to bring the successor out to post without language training. And the third option was to float a trial balloon and say, "We're looking for someone to do the DCM job for only a year, who is at grade, who has Hungarian language experience and language." And that's the option they chose. But they probably were surprised when I actually raised my hand and said I'm willing to do it for just a year. So, that's how that happened. I initially had been trying to come back to Washington for another position and then I would up going to Budapest for a year. I knew going in to that assignment that it was only for a year's time and once I got there essentially I was again turning around and lobbying and trying to set up an assignment for the following year in 2016.

Q: And then what?

LOO: Then I came back as the office director for the Office of English Language Programs in the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs.

Q: By this time- Where were you during the election of 2016?

LOO: I was here. I got back in August of 2016 so I was here for the election. But I have to say, it was a huge topic of discussion when I was still in Budapest, especially as Donald Trump was starting to gain traction in his campaign. Any number of Hungarians and foreign diplomats would ask me about his prospects and so on.

Q: This is, I mean, our organization is apolitical and everything now is political but Trump really is unique and I was wondering what was the reaction in Hungary?

LOO: Well, I got back here in August, which is before the general campaign and the November results but Hungarians, at least the Hungarian government, was very pleased that he was doing well. And Prime Minister Orbán was probably the first European leader, if not the first world leader, who spoke in favor of Donald Trump. And it turns out Viktor Orbán made the right bet. He supported Trump publicly though there's debate about whether he ought to have done so as a foreign leader. When President Trump won the Hungarian government was very pleased. I think they're a little disappointed now in that they still don't think they've seen the love that they are warranted from this

Administration in terms of high level visits and praise. But they were very pleased with the outcome.

Q: Yes. Well, I mean, we're really coming right up to now. What are you up to?

LOO: I have only been officially retired for couple of weeks and part of that time I was away traveling so I'm still kind of in transition mode. I'm keeping options open in terms of possibilities. I'm not quite sure if I'm ready to transition completely to full retirement mode yet but I am enjoying the free time, enjoying the opportunity to be a little bit more candid in some of my opinions.

Q: Are you looking at, I mean, having had this time at- down in Florida, are you looking at academic institutions there?

LOO: Not teaching. I realize it's probably a sign that I spent three years on college campuses and I never really wound up teaching a course. That's probably not my main interest. But working with, say, international studies departments or international students, working on recruiting and diversity promotion, those are still interests that I find very strong in me and that I would like to pursue.

Q: Good. That's great. Well, we'll be giving you a task to work on and that is editing.

LOO: Okay.

Q: And I urge you not only to make the normal editing but also, I forgot to mention this or you didn't ask me about that, expand. This is sort of your oyster and you can play with it any way you want. This has been fascinating.

LOO: Very good. Well thank you, Stu, for facilitating this. Okay, great.

End of interview