

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

**AMBASSADOR STROBE TALBOTT**

*Interviewed by: Mark Tauber*  
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**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

Background	
Born in Dayton, Ohio	April 25, 1946
BA in Russian Studies, Yale University	1964-1968
MA in Philosophy, Oxford University	1968-1971
Previous Career	
Journalist at <i>Time</i> Magazine	1971-1993
Translated, edited, and published Vols I and II of Nikita Khrushchev's memoirs	
Eastern Europe correspondent, 1971-74	
State Department correspondent, 1974-75	
White House correspondent, 1975-76	
Diplomatic Correspondent, 1977-84	
Washington Bureau Chief, 1984-89	
Editor-at-Large and foreign affairs columnist, 1989-93	
Entered the Foreign Service (political appointment)	1993
Washington, D.C.—Ambassador-at-Large	1993-1994
Special Adviser to the Secretary of State on the New Independent States (NIS)	
Washington, D.C.—Deputy Secretary of State	1994-2001
Helped mediate India/Pakistan nuclear conflict, 1998-99	
Retirement	2001
Post-retirement activities	
Founding Director of the Yale Center for the Study of Globalization	2001
President of the Brookings Institution	2002-2017
Chair of the U.S. State Department's Foreign Affairs Policy Board	2011-2017

**INTERVIEW**

*Q: To begin, how were your initial views formed about the U.S. and its place in the world, in international relations?*

TALBOTT: Well let's start with a kind of interesting accident of the time of my birth. I was born about nine months, pretty close to nine months, after the war in the Pacific ended with VJ Day. So I am a pluperfect baby boomer. I was kind of conceived, as you might say, under the mushroom cloud, that's the one up over Hiroshima and Nagasaki. So, when I was sentient, which is to say when I was a kid, but at least a kid who was listening to the radio and even looking at some very hazy black and white television and reading or looking at periodicals like *Life* magazine, I was very aware of the proximity in my lifetime to World War II. My father was in the Navy, saw combat, was at Normandy beach, also had some very dangerous assignments in the North Atlantic and a number of our relatives were killed in the war. So World War II was a big deal and I'll come back to that, and particularly the use of nuclear weapons, ending the war.

My parents were also charter members of something called the World Federalist Organization, United World Federalists, it was called. It was a highly idealistic movement, based not just in the United States but in other countries as well, to look at the possibility of, if not world government, which is, of course, was then as now a kind of a fighting phrase, more about international cooperation, particularly cooperation in keeping the peace. So my Mom and Dad were both very active in the branch of that organization in Dayton, Ohio which is where I lived in the first few years of my life.

And that loomed fairly large; I was very close to my parents, and as I got older they introduced me to Toynbee as a historian and the *Saturday Review*, and Norman Cousins, who was an advocate of world federalism and that kind of thing. During that period, I can remember being very affected by some gruesome and poignant pictures in *Life* magazine that must have been when I was five or six years old. There was a cover story on the survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, many of them children of course. And that sort of stayed in my mind, seared in my memory. So I had some sense that there were some pretty terrible things that had happened and there were some pretty terrible things that might happen including to me, my family, and my hometown. So that was there.

When I was 10, which was in 1956, the name Nikita Khrushchev became big in my vocabulary because he unleashed the Soviet Army on Budapest to crush the Hungarian Uprising. That was one of the big issues of the day. In fact, the sort of all-purpose Hungarian freedom fighter was made the "Man of the Year" of *Time* magazine which is, of course, a periodical I worked for for 21 years in my early career. And then came Sputnik, which was not just a little thing beeping; it was also the first step of the Soviet Union's getting intercontinental missiles and then there was the flight of Yuri Gagarin and we were behind the Soviets in space technology and all of that.

So, as a child, one thing after another, either in history just before I was born, family associations, my own coming to terms with the upside and downside of the era in which we were living, all kind of pointed me in a particular direction which is world peace and

the threats to world peace, the principal threat being Soviet communism. Then, let's flash forward, and there is something pretty much anybody of my age and background would remember, certainly in Cleveland, Ohio, which is where I was living and going to elementary school, but really anywhere in the U.S. and those were the drills for a nuclear attack. We had drills for a nuclear attack on Cleveland, and even as a kid I said I'm not sure that climbing under our desks was really going to help but okay, the teacher says that's what we're supposed to do. But once again it kept alive the fear and the ever-present danger.

After that, I went off to a prep school in northwest Connecticut called the Hotchkiss School in Lakeville, Connecticut. Every morning we had a chapel service, pretty much every day, certainly every weekday. And in October of 1962, they had a master, a wonderful man named Bill Olson, who told us that it was going to be a special chapel service and he was going to ask all of us to get down on our knees and pray to God, whether you believed in him or not, to save the world from the Cuban Missile Crisis which was right at the scariest part of the Cuban Missile Crisis. That made an impression on me as it did a lot of people. Also, before I left Hotchkiss, one of the very important officials in the Kennedy administration named Paul Nitze who was a graduate of Hotchkiss was honored. There was a holiday declared in his honor and he had been very much involved in what's called NSC 68, which was kind of a blueprint for the Cold War and who was very much involved in dealing with the Soviets over the years.

So more or less at that time, when I was at Hotchkiss, I developed a very deep interest in Russian literature, novels and poetry in particular, and became infatuated enough with that to study Russian. So now you had on the scary side, Khrushchev and his nuclear weapons and on the culturally-rich side, the beauty and richness of Russian culture.

*Q: A question here. You're talking both about the moment in time that you lived with the scary elements of Russian expansionism and so on and the culture of Russia. Did you also find interesting or were you gripped by the history of Russia?*

TALBOTT: Yeah, I read a lot of history of Russia. I started reading history through novels. I mean, many of the great novels, most famously of course, *War and Peace*, are fictionalized history, but very good history. I also started reading some of the dissident literature that was coming out of the Soviet Union at that time. And I was interested in the poets, sculptors, and film directors who were doing stuff that was either right on the edge of permissible, or over the edge of the permissible, in which case, they were usually in trouble. So, yes I was kind of straddling the pre-Soviet cultural scene or origins of Russian civilization and the Soviet period which was the dark side.

By the time I left Hotchkiss I had two years of Russian language under my belt and went to Yale where I signed up for a major in what was called Russian Studies. And I also went to an immersion course in Russian language at the University of Michigan in between, I'm going to say perhaps my sophomore year and my junior year, something like that, but I was basically doing Russian 24/7 when I wasn't doing extracurriculars. I was on the newspaper and that kind of thing, but Russia was my thing.

*Q: Many universities at that time had different views, or the professors had different views of Russia, was there a prevailing view at Yale that you sort of imbibed or was it much more eclectic?*

TALBOTT: Yale itself? Well Yale was incredibly eclectic. My education was not very eclectic; it was very focused on Russia.

*Q: But in terms of the view of Russia, the lens through which the professors viewed Russia/Soviet actions.*

TALBOTT: Good point. Most of the political ferment on the campus in those days was indirectly connected to Russia but only indirectly. By that I mean it was Vietnam. There were two big issues that energized the political consciences of my generation and it was the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War. Now on the Vietnam War, of course, was a kind of offshoot of the Cold War. The presumption in this government, out of this town and a lot of others, was that it was there was a monolithic communist threat consisting of for the largest territorial state on the planet which was the USSR, still is even shorn of all of its extra 14 republics plus the most populist state, that is to say Red China and the Vietnamese communist uprising, Well the communist attempt to take over all of Vietnam was seen as a domino falling and you know what the domino theory was all about and a lot of us were highly skeptical about that as a fact and certainly skeptical about that as a basis for policy. Our leaders, our seniors, believed that it was all one big threat. Many of us, largely because of teachers, they were quite a few of them at Yale, who understood with much more subtlety and accuracy the sociology and the political culture and the history of the Indochina nations, particularly Vietnam, to say this is a nationalist revolution. Yes, they're communists, but they're not going to take their orders from Moscow or Beijing.

*Q: Yes, that was the heart of the question. Because there were other places in the U.S. where professors took the view all movements that called themselves communist were part of a monolithic threat.*

TALBOTT: Not the Ivy League. Not the kind of elite schools on the East Coast and the West Coast. If you get sort of into the heartland of America, there wasn't quite such an iron grip of liberalism on the campus and there were actually, Brad Westerfield's point, now that's a name that popped into my head, I think was a political scientist whose courses I took and who I liked a lot but who was much more hardline and much more accepting of the rationale for the Vietnam War. But you know, I marched against U.S. involvement in Vietnam. Didn't have to burn a draft card because I had a somewhat dubious but anyway official medical exemption from the draft but a whole lot of my counterparts didn't. A number of my classmates went to Vietnam and several of them were killed. It was a big deal.

So then after Yale, and I was the editor of the newspaper in my last year, and I editorialized against the war, editorialized in favor of the "Dump Johnson" movement.

This was probably... I'm sure you guys are a lot younger than me but this was all history to you but biography to me. So then I went to Oxford and that was in the summer... Before I started Oxford, I had a three-year scholarship there, the summer before I actually started at Oxford I was a junior kind of all-purpose infielder in the *Time* magazine bureau in London which led to my getting a job eventually at *Time*. And that was the summer when the Soviets rolled into Prague and snuffed out the Dubcek reforms and all of that, and I spent most of that summer going out to talk to people like Isaiah Berlin, and otherwise heads, who were trying to understand the Soviet mind and so forth. And I also spent probably a week in Sofia, Bulgaria where there was a youth festival, world youth festival, no doubt under... paid for and supervised by various intelligence services, mostly in the East Bloc but I'm sure that the CIA had its eye on what was going on as well.

But that was my first look behind the Iron Curtain and that was the summer of '69, I had another job in the Moscow bureau of *Time* magazine and that was actually a much more serious job. There, the bureau chief put me in charge of the bureau and then took a long vacation which he was well entitled to. It was a great experience for me because it allowed me to cover stories including what was very, particularly in retrospect, a very important event which was a brief but serious war between the Soviet Union and China along China's northern border. There are two rivers that come together, the Amur and the Ussuri rivers and there was a fight over Damansky Island and people were killed and it was a real war and that was a sign of what many of us had long thought -- that the relationship between the USSR and the People's Republic of China was not a happy one and, in fact, they could be, over time, greater enemies to each other than they were to us. Which, by the way, led to the Kissinger-Nixon concepts of détente with the Soviet Union and rapprochement with China.

*Q: Another major debate going on throughout this time was the strength of the Soviet economy, and the value of the ruble and whether we had properly measured the strength of the Soviet economy. There were lots of arguments over this because it went to the question of how long the USSR could survive with an inefficient, centrally planned economy.*

TALBOTT: That was later. Let's back up. I want to get to some key personalities and come back to that issue later.

So I had this experience in '69 and the *Time* bureau chief, a guy named Gerald Schecter, who is still a dear friend, lives three miles from here. I see a lot of him, talk to him often. He gave me a small booklet by a dissident Soviet historian and asked me if I would please put it into English which I thought was a pretty big pain in the butt but I sat down and put it into English. And it turned out that that was a little test for me because he was already dealing with the Khrushchev family and the memoirs. Khrushchev was under house arrest and there were some friends of the family who wanted to get Khrushchev's dictated memoirs out to the West. So that connection with Gerald Schecter allowed me to have what was really an extraordinarily lucky and exciting experience of putting into English, translating the Khrushchev memoirs which ended up being two volumes, two

big volumes and then a smaller volume later on which goes to Khrushchev. I mean Khrushchev was a very complicated person. He had a lot of blood on his hands. I'm sure he's had to spend a whole long time in purgatory, but I don't think he's in the darkest regions or the hottest regions of Hell with Stalin and others because he did have some humanity and he did make some efforts to reform and that contributed to his ouster but I think the banana peel that really brought him down was the Cuban Missile Crisis which we've already talked about.

So, let's see, I was hired by *Time*, sent to Belgrade, then the capital of Yugoslavia. Ironically, I was moved there because they thought that Tito was about to die. He outlasted me by 10 years but I did get to know the Balkans very well and Eastern Europe very well. The only countries I couldn't get to were East Germany and Albania but all the others I saw a lot of and my wife was with me. We traveled a lot and it was a great two years and then it became... Khrushchev in the meantime had died and we got a whole additional tranche of tapes to be transcribed and translated so I went back and did a second version. The reason that *Time* had sent me to Eastern Europe was to prepare me to be the Moscow bureau chief and the Moscow correspondent.

*Q: Was that 1970 that you went to Belgrade?*

TALBOTT: '71. I was three years at Oxford and working on the second volume of... No, no. We didn't get the second volume until a little later while I was still in Eastern Europe. That's important. The Russians, the Soviets, weren't pleased with the publication of the first volume but they could claim well, it's a CIA forgery and people in the West said it's a KGB forgery because we couldn't really prove its authenticity until we shared with the public what are called voice prints that make clear that the voice on the tapes is Khrushchev's. The second volume comes out. He's dead. We don't have as many constraints so we kind of shoved it in the face of the critics and the skeptics and that really set off the Kremlin and they PNG'd me. PNG is persona non grata -- cannot enter the Soviet Union. So I couldn't go on to Moscow and instead of going to Moscow, I went to Washington which is where I've lived ever since basically. And I was put on the foreign policy beat. This now gets into the... slowly but surely, I'm getting towards the State Department.

I was the junior State Department correspondent in the Washington bureau of *Time*. The same guy, Gerald Schechter, who had allowed me to take on the Khrushchev project, was the diplomatic correspondent for *Time*, diplomatic editor he was actually called, and he let me take a trip with Kissinger in October, 1974. The reason he let me go is because Kissinger was going to take about a nine-stop trip, nine countries, and the first one was Moscow so it would be a chance for me to go as a correspondent to Moscow. Half-way across the Atlantic, Gromyko who was the foreign minister, sends a cable to the plane saying, Talbott is not allowed in. The plane stops for refueling in Copenhagen and I have to get off. So that was that, but I went on to India, had a great time. So that was '74, I think I was finally allowed back into the Soviet Union in '79 during their invasion of Afghanistan.

Seventy-eight was the beginning of the uprising against the Shah and '79 was when the Soviets went in. Believe it or not, even though they had invaded Afghanistan, they still let me come in and take a trip through Central Asia which was great and that put me back on the track for being able to go back to Russia. But in the meantime, I had developed other interests – India, Latin America, I had been to China several times including with Kissinger in '74 and later with Secretaries Vance (State Department) and Schlesinger (Defense Department). So I was expanding my portfolio of expertise, as it were, and I stayed a time right up until a guy that I had shared a house with in Oxford and who used to literally cook breakfast for me, and it was usually scrambled eggs, while I was working on the Khrushchev memoirs and he called after he was elected president and said I'm coming to Washington and I'd like to talk to you. And I said great and I went over to his hotel and he said, "How'd you like to be my ambassador to Moscow. I said I'd love it but I can't because my wife has got a job and my kids are in school and he said, "Well, okay, too bad. Thanks, all right. Have a nice day."

And about two weeks later through a number of kind of serendipitous things, Warren Christopher called and said, "Would you please come over to the State Department and be my person who will reorganize the European Bureau to deal with the newly independent states of the former Soviet Union and that's what I did for a year essentially, from 1993-94, and then Clifton Wharton stepped down as deputy secretary of state. There was a scramble to get somebody else in and when the coke bottle stopped spinning, it was pointing at me and that's why I was deputy secretary of state for seven years.

*Q: Okay, before we go on with your period as deputy secretary, go back for a moment to this question of the Soviet Union and how your views on it evolved as you saw it changing rapidly under Gorbachev and Yeltsin.*

TALBOTT: Well, there was a gargantuan world-changing change in the Soviet Union itself. I wouldn't say that I particularly had acute revelations on things that were changing; it was there for the whole world to see and it started with Andropov who had followed Brezhnev. And Andropov, and he, by the way, had been the Soviet ambassador to Hungary when Khrushchev sent in the tanks and he was the head of the KGB so he wasn't kind of an obvious good guy. But he was a reformer. At least, he was realistic about the shortcomings, if not the fatal flaws, in the Soviet system, these included the issues about the economy you mentioned earlier. And I'm reading now in manuscript, a superb biography of Gorbachev and Andropov had already decided that he was going to have Gorbachev succeed him but his health didn't allow him to stay on the planet for very long and there was another intervening head of the Politburo named Chernenko who died within a year and then came Gorbachev. And I was going back and forth a lot during that period and you'd have to be blind and deaf and lobotomized not to know that things were changing very fast and very profoundly. So, now you know some people were a little more skeptical than others particularly in the Reagan administration. President Reagan himself was an early believer in that authenticity of Gorbachev's vision that the Soviet Union was going to have to change profoundly including giving up the use of violence at home and definitely the use of violence to intimidate and dominate his neighbors. And, of course, those two things together meant that we're talking about a

whole new Soviet Union. And that's what we got. Didn't remain the Soviet Union very long; that's a whole other story and I assume at some point there are people interested in my own view and participation in policymaking can read a book that I've spent quite a bit of time on.

*Q: So we've now reached the point where you move from solely the former Soviet region to broader responsibilities as deputy secretary in 1994. As I understand, part of your new responsibilities extended to being a public advocate for many other goals of the Clinton administration's foreign policy because Christopher was very deeply engaged in a few specific areas...*

TALBOTT: Middle East in particular.

*Q: Yes, and he needed help with the other policies that President Clinton was developing throughout the world. So as you enter did you need to make some changes to the State Department bureaucracy to suit the specific things you needed to do?*

TALBOTT: Yeah, there were some important changes. For example, Tim Wirth was brought on board as the first Undersecretary for G, or global issues, as it was then called. It's called something else now. But I think that having somebody of that stature, coming from Congress as he did, and who was passionate about global issues, particularly climate change, women's empowerment, and to some extent proliferation although that was more in Lynn Davis' area (Under Secretary for Arms Control and International Security Affairs) but yes, there was a lot of stuff going on.

But related to policy management, what I would identify as vitally important was not so much reorganizing but working effectively with colleagues in the Department and in other parts of the government, That would not have possible without two things.

One, my known relationship, going way back, with the president. That's not a handicap, let's put it that way. And I don't mind saying that a lot of people who were careful to defer to me or not give me too hard a time, is because they thought I was talking to the president every day; I wasn't. That's not how it works but I mean I did stay in touch with him and I'm an early to bed guy; he's not an early to bed guy. You know I would always have to have a notebook next to the phone next to the bed and I've had to turn it over like that when the White House operator came on and said the president would like to speak to you. It was intermittent, but it was there and it helped and I didn't waste a lot of time disabusing people that I had a connection with the president. That said, I was scrupulous, if I can put it that way, to make sure that both Secretary Christopher and Secretary Albright always knew when the president called me and I can't remember a time when I put in a call directly to him, although it's possible I did at some point. So if he called me, I took the call and the first thing I would do the next morning, because it was usually late at night, would say, the president called. Here's what he said; here's what I said; here's what he said so they were always in the loop.

And two, my closest partner for the entire administration was Sandy Berger and it's a shame that he couldn't be part of this program. He died earlier this year. Sandy, first as deputy national security advisor for four years and then national security advisor for four years, he and I were just wired into each other's brains. We would talk sometimes six times during the course of a day wherever we were. He would be in China; I'd be in Washington. I would be in Russia and he would be in Washington. I mean we were always talking and what he allowed me to do, not very many people in that position would do this, he allowed me to basically be the chair of an interagency committee for two, three, four big issues. Oh, no I recall three. Russia and its neighborhood. The Balkan Wars which were at least this aspect of the Balkan Wars and the Balkan peace which was getting Russia to help us persuade Milošević to throw in the towel so we had an interagency group on that. And then when the Indian government set off a nuclear weapon in May of 1999, we set up yet another one of these things. It was an interagency group of the sort that is almost always run directly in the White House from the White House and the White House was very involved in it. In other words, there were, for example, Nick Burns when he was at the White House was working with me on Russia. Bruce Riedel was working with me from the White House on the South Asia nuclear issue and so forth and so on. And it really worked. It worked because there was trust, there was transparency, constant gut checking with each other, making sure that the president and the secretaries were okay with it. I'm sure there have been in other examples or other models of this kind in other administrations but I haven't studied them all that closely. But it was unusual and it worked.

*Q: You're right, it was remarkable because typically turf, if nothing else, causes NSC members to be at least hesitant about granting that...*

TALBOTT: Oh God yes, absolutely. It's both understandable and unfortunate.

*Q: So that is remarkable. Please go on.*

TALBOTT: I've given you details but not very many. I mean I've written a lot; I've done three books since I came out.

*Q: I understand. In other words, this relationship was a key ...*

TALBOTT: Trust

*Q: Trust and organizational development that was unique at least in all of those first years. Did it continue throughout your period as deputy secretary?*

TALBOTT: Yeah, because when Madeleine took over from Chris, she had her own MO and her own priorities but she was very comfortable with this as long as, which I always did, kept her in the loop in most of what I did, I mean I was a subcabinet officer at the critical time you always need to bring the cabinet officer in.

*Q: Looking at transitions, was the transition to government relatively easy, or did you have a steep learning curve?*

TALBOTT: Regarding the transition from outside to inside government, I should say that the fact that I had spent two decades essentially peeking through the keyhole of government operations, helped me learn a lot. Although I spent a lot of time at the Defense Department, the CIA, and the NSC, as well as at embassies around the world, my coverage of the State Department itself was my longest assignment, so I felt I had some acquaintance with its operations before I came on board. Nevertheless, when I first got the job, I said “Oh man, this is really terrifying” and I felt like I was in a Bill Murray out-of-body comedy. You know, you wake up some morning and you think you’re going to the office and a limousine drives up and says, “Put your briefcase here” and you sit in front of a bunch of people in a room who are looking at you, and you think, “Okay, now what am I going to tell them?” That lasted about two days because it’s not as though there is a secret, magic recipe book that says now you’re in the government; now we’re going to reveal to you how it’s done. The way it’s done is the way everything is done. I mean there’s a lot of stuff that’s secret but it’s common sense and I knew a lot of the people. In fact, early on, like when I was confirmed in April of 1993, and when I started going into these meetings, and particularly later when I was deputy secretary, I would see people in the room who used to leak to me when I was a reporter. And they would look a little worried. And I would usually go over afterwards or see them in the hallway and say, “Don’t worry. You played it straight with me. That’s part of the way the government works.”

*Q: How about the transition from Christopher to Albright. How did that affect your work.*

TALBOTT: The work did not change dramatically because the president was the same. And while Madeleine Albright had a very good relationship with the president, she knew that I had a longer one and that it was working. I mean she wasn’t going to come in and fix stuff that wasn’t broken. But regarding my work I did become more involved in other areas of the world such as India. Madeleine was very, very deep into Russia stuff, much more so than Christopher. She speaks Russian. We had a number of meetings, particularly with Primakov and even Yeltsin on a couple of occasions where she and I both were using Russian with Yeltsin so it worked very well. On India she never got really into it because she was so busy with Iraq, the Arab-Israeli peace process and so she said, “Go fix India. Go fix South Asia.” Let’s see, what else was she doing at that time? Well, she was also, having been the permanent representative at the UN, she was also doing a lot of stuff at the UN. Also, I would like to add Dick Holbrooke’s name to come up in this interview if that’s okay.

*Q: He had done many different things and continued to do many different things and all of them rather well. Of course, at that moment he was doing Dayton and the resolution of the post Yugoslavia but please go right ahead.*

TALBOTT: Well, I got quite deep into that not least because Dick was a very, very, very close friend going back to 1977. I think I had known him a little bit before that when he

was Jimmy Carter's assistant secretary of state for East Asia. He and I sort of bonded and kept going through the years. And because I had lived for two years in Belgrade, which we were ultimately going to be bombing, and knew the ethnic complexities of the region, we were very close as worked on the breakdown of Yugoslavia. There are a whole bunch of books on this, and there will be more, but one that we put together, called *The Unquiet American* makes this very clear. He had a tough time, often being his own worst enemy.

In fact, once we were coming out of a White House situation room and I had hurt my leg, I pulled a hamstring playing touch football and I was on a cane, and he was giving me trouble on something as we came out, and I picked up my cane and I held it over his head like I was going to whack him and a news photographer got a picture of this and put it on the front page of the Washington Star, was that it? And when I saw this, I cut it out and put it in a frame with a caption saying, "Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott protects Ambassador Holbrooke from being his own worst enemy." So we had a lot of kind of rough stuff but it was always based on respect and real love and working with him, along with a couple of other people in the State Department, Tom Donilon and Peter Tarnoff, we got Warren Christopher who was not hugely enamored of Holbrooke's style, let's put it that way, we convinced him to bring Holbrooke from Embassy Bonn where he did a great job there but it was not where he wanted to be. Brought him back to be the assistant secretary of state for Europe and the point man on the Balkans and the success that we had is overwhelmingly to his credit.

*Q: Wow, that is fantastic. Because of course then he also goes on for Afghanistan...*

TALBOTT: That didn't work out so well but it wasn't his fault.

*Q: Now you mentioned India, so let's take a moment with that because obviously when you're talking about India, you're talking about the whole subcontinent – India's relationship with Pakistan.*

TALBOTT: Not the whole subcontinent. It was basically India/Pakistan. Bangladesh didn't come into it. Sri Lanka didn't come into it. Nepal.

*Q: Because they both emerged essentially as nuclear powers.*

TALBOTT: Within a week of each other. But then we'd always known that they had the capability and in India's case, they set off an underground explosion in May of 1974. And the Pakistanis then went hell bent for leather to get one of their own and when the Indians set off theirs, again underground in Rajasthan, I took a team on a forlorn mission to try to persuade the Pakistanis not to do it and they were kind enough not to hit the button until our plane was just lifting off the runway, literally, We got a message about the explosion when we were like at 200 feet.

*Q: Wow and after that, did you continue to try to develop further U.S. relations with India or at that point, it was just getting cold.*

TALBOTT: Well actually I wrote a book on this too called “Engaging India.” I developed one of the most important and gratifying friendships of my life with my Indian counterpart whose name is Jaswant Singh. Unfortunately, he is now in a permanent coma. He had a fall. He either had a cranial event or he fell and had a cranial event; we’re not sure which but in any event he’s out of it but he was extraordinary and I stayed in touch with him for whatever it’s been, 16-17 years up until he lost consciousness.

And it was much more than... That was really the main point. The main point was supposed to be us, the U.S., persuading India to join the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and to take some other steps that would bring them a little closer to the international system that is intended to impede, if not prevent, the proliferation of nuclear weapons. We failed in that. It’s a long story; it’s in the book. But what we succeeded in doing was not even really part of our original charge. What we succeeded in doing was building trust between the two nations so that in, I said it was ’98, it was May of ’98 that they set off their test. In ’99, there was a crisis in the Himalayas between Pakistan and India. The snows began to melt and there were unmanned outposts up near a town called Kargil. The Pakistanis came in and crossed the so-called line of control, the ceasefire line and took up positions in what were Indian installations and that was really hairy.

And the prime minister of Pakistan, Nawaz Sharif, who was once again the prime minister of Pakistan, there’s plenty of second and third acts in Pakistani politics. He came to Washington to plead with Clinton to push the Indians back and let the Pakistanis keep this territory and Bill Clinton was absolutely adamant and made absolutely sure that the Indians knew. The Indians were sure that he was going to betray them and he didn’t. What he did was he muscled Nawaz Sharif to give an order to pull back the troops, the Pakistani troops that were on the wrong side of the border, or on the wrong side of the ceasefire line, and it didn’t help Nawaz Sharif’s career because he was then overthrown in a coup and almost hanged but he’s back. But I think that was a real turning point for the Indians and Clinton was talking to Vajpayee who was the Indian prime minister at the time and I was talking, for every time Clinton would talk to Vajpayee, I would talk three times to Jaswant to kind of keep things going.

*Q: Are there other issues that took your attention like Summit of the Americas, or the old frozen conflicts in the post-Soviet Union?*

TALBOTT: Well, I’ll comment on them briefly. I think I was for six years the American chairman of something called the Minsk Group which was dealing with Nagorno-Karabakh but it’s only worth a sentence or two even though it was six years, because we never got anywhere. Do you know what Nagorno-Karabakh is?

*Q: I served in Armenia 1999-2001.*

TALBOTT: Okay, so you know all about it. There was a very mysterious and tragic piece to that. We came very close with a prime minister named Sargsian or Sarkissian depending on how you translate it, who was prepared, I think, to make a land swap with the Azerbaijanis. Armenia would cede to Azerbaijan a sliver of Armenia down at the

bottom so that there could be a land bridge between Azerbaijan proper and Nakhichevan and in exchange the Lachin corridor would be made Armenian territory so that you would connect Armenia with the wild and crazy guys up on the mountain in Nagorno-Karabakh. But he was assassinated just before we were going to finalize that and I'm quite sure that's why he was assassinated. So there was that.

Now I did a little bit of stuff in Latin America mostly around Haiti and also our efforts to bring peace to some of the Central American countries.

*Q: One other aspect of being deputy is resourcing the Department, everything from personnel to making the case for congressional funding. Was there anything in those responsibilities that were particularly compelling for you?*

TALBOTT: Well, they were particularly difficult when the Republicans had control of the Congress. Most of my appearances before Senate and House committees were very rough, very politicized. The offset was, first of all, I had terrific help from what I guess is still called H, the legislative affairs office in the State Department, I did have good relations in private with a number of members of Congress even though publicly they would use the klieg lights and microphones during hearings to beat up on the administration. But you take that as part of the job and do the best you can.

*Q: Did you take a look at staffing and all of that and say we're going to have to move positions? We're going to have to take a different view about where our resources go?*

TALBOTT: I didn't do much of that. That was much more the work of the undersecretaries. Tom Pickering (Under Secretary for Political Affairs) would have done a lot of that kind of thing and of course Pat Kennedy (Under Secretary for Management) were always looking out for the resourcing side of things... My only real personnel responsibility for the seven years was the D committee, (selection of Ambassadors) which I actually really enjoyed and as a political appointee myself, I was delighted to be in the position of just trying to get as many foreign service officers as possible into the good spots. And win some, lose some.

*Q: Okay, final exam question: looking back what would you say was the major contribution of the Clinton Administration to U.S. foreign policy.*

TALBOTT: I would say that with regard to the sort of macro approach of the Clinton administration to the world, he did a lot and the rest of us helped him do a lot to strengthen the institutional and rule-based structures that help govern international relations. We worked to put in place, or reinforce an overlapping set of rules and multilateral arrangements and institutions to deal with the world as a whole. And I think that was really one of Clinton's legacies. I hope it survives.

*Q: On behalf of ADST, thanks for your time and a very interesting look back at U.S. diplomacy as the longest serving deputy secretary of state.*

*End of interview*