Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

ROCKWOOD H. FOSTER

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INTERVIEW

[Note: This interview has not been edited by Mr. Foster]

Q: This is an interview with Rockwood H. Foster. What do you go by?

FOSTER: Adam. It's a nickname.

Q: I was wondering. How did Adam come about?

FOSTER: My grandfather Foster had mostly daughters and when I was born to one of his two sons, he said, "This is my first Foster grandson," (laughter) and Adam became a nickname. It has been useful in the Foreign Service. Anyplace in the world that a missionary had been to, they knew the name, but the name Rockwood would have been very difficult, particularly in Japan.

Q: Yes, to try to get around that "R" and all that. I would like to start out at the beginning. Could you tell me when and where you were born and something about your family?

FOSTER: All right, I was born in Boston, Massachusetts on May 7, 1923. So, as we sit today, I have just completed three quarters of a century, a century which I think is one of the most productive and creative that ever our country has seen so far. I also feel we ain't seen nothin' [nothing] yet!

Q: What about your family?

FOSTER: There are two halves of the family. One is my mother's side and her maiden name [and hence my middle name] was H-o-a-r, a very difficult name for a girl to live with.

Q: Absolutely.

FOSTER: One of her ancestors was president of Harvard and he's the only president that doesn't have a house named after him. (Laughter)

The man I was named for, Rockwood Hoar, my grandfather, was a congressman from

Massachusetts. My great-grandfather, George Frisby Hoar, was a Senator from Massachusetts. So, my father won this beautiful girl called Francis Hoar. And they were married at St. John's Church, right across the street from the White House because of her father being a congressman and her grandfather being a senator. This is a family that spent most of its life in public service.

On the other side, my father, Reginald Foster, was a banker in London and in Germany for the… I can't remember the name of the bank at the moment. I think it was the Bankers Trust Company. I'm not quite sure. He looked at [the] Europe [scene] in 1936 when we were living in London and said, "The time has come to go home." And he was right. I was then 13.

Q: How were you educated? You were born in Boston. Could you talk a bit about your education?

FOSTER: I went to boarding school. It was called Brooks School and had been started by Groton. [Brooks'] headmaster, Frank D. Ashburn, had been senior prefect at Groton. I graduated from Brooks School.

Q: This was essentially an elementary school.

FOSTER: No, I went to secondary school there. Remember, in 1936, when we came back from England, I was 13 at that point. The time had come for me to go away to school and off I went to Brooks.

Q: Can you describe a bit about the educational system and the life at Brooks School?

FOSTER: Life at Brooks School was pre-World War II life. Boston children mostly went off to these private boarding schools. And I did, too, like everyone else. It was the normal thing to do.

Q: You talk about "everyone else," but you're talking about people "born to the manor."

FOSTER: Exactly, the Anglo-Saxon types particularly. Right. So, it was a pattern of pre-World War II, which was totally changed as a result of World War II. To some extent it is back, but it is still happening. Now, I will say this. Having been to boarding school, I had no trouble in boot camp in the U. S. Navy. I knew how to make my bed. I knew how to put clothes away and get [to] places on time. So, the children of the overprivileged who'd gone to boarding school were well trained for this. (Laughter) Children of the under privileged, whose mothers had picked up their clothes and taken care of them, had a terribly difficult time.

Q: I know when I went to camp for four years during the war, I went in as an enlisted man in the Air Force. It was no big deal. I knew how to avoid superiors and to keep my head down.

FOSTER: And you also learned to shave in the evening, not in the morning when everybody else was.

Q: What about education there? Were you particularly interested in any particular subjects?

FOSTER: Government. Now, they didn't use the phrase "Political Science" because it wasn't considered a science. But, government. Aside from that, it was the regular boarding school education: some science, some language, some Latin, English, and so on. [Afterwards] I was admitted to Harvard College.

Q: You went to Harvard from when to when?

FOSTER: I went to Harvard in two [timeframes], pre-World War II and post- World War II. I was a freshman in Harvard in 1941. I had asked Harvard to give me a roommate from just as far away from Boston as possible, so that I would meet somebody else. And the boy who was suggested to me and with whom I roomed freshman year came from a town called Honolulu.

And I remember coming back in 1941 to find him in tears, huddled around his radio, saying, "They're bombing my house!" That was December 7, 1941. And the world changed from then on. I should add that, fortunately, his parents were all right, which he didn't learn for two weeks.

Q: Were you planning to continue in government studies at Harvard?

FOSTER: Well, Harvard College, remember in those days, was set up to do a general education. In order to get a job, you went to a job preparing school like the Harvard Divinity School or the Harvard Business School, but as an undergraduate, you were meant to get a general education in college. So I took all the general courses that one takes. But, by 1942, with the war, I couldn't stay.

Q: No. Well, this was pretty much what was happening.

FOSTER: To everybody.

Q: So, what did you do?

FOSTER: I was in the Naval ROTC [Reserve Officer Training Course], so I volunteered for the Naval Flying Air Corps Program. It was called V-6 and off I went to learn how to fly. And I was sent to Amherst where I had my first flying lessons, right near a place called Smith College.

Q: Oh, yes.

FOSTER: (Laughs) And there I learned to fly a little tiny plane.

Q: Was it a "Yellow Peril" - you know, the Navy's N3N-1 that was built in the 1920s?

FOSTER: Yes, it was a "Yellow Peril!" (Laughter) You know something about this one I see!

Q: Oh, yes.

FOSTER: I was then sent down to the Midwest for [additional training]. They had a field laid out like a carrier deck top and we learned how to land on a carrier. And time went on and the war was drawing to a close and they called me up and said, "We're throwing you out of the Air Corps Program, because we have a new program." And I said, "What's that?" And they said, "Well, in the old days, the Navy radio chiefs, if the radio didn't work, they'd just take all the tubes out and drop them over the side and put new tubes on and that took care of it. With all of these new things like radar and so on, we can't repair things that way anymore, so we're sending you to electronic training school." And I said, "But I'm studying government!" They said, "That's all right. You went to Harvard. You can learn anything."

Q: Where were you studying electronics?

FOSTER: Well, I wound up, which is important in a couple of intermediate places, in the Naval Research Laboratory in Washington, DC. I was put on a highly top secret, at that time, project. So top secret, they couldn't even use the name. It was called Loran. And every [fisherman has] one now. But in those days, it was...

Q: It's a navigation system.

FOSTER: Exactly, and you see, you couldn't fix that by throwing the tubes over the side. And that's where I met the marvelous girl that I'm still married to over 50 years later, who came [to] Smith College [from] Kansas City. So, you see, I had a mixed marriage: Boston and Kansas City. But I can assure you my children are bilingual. (Laughter) They can say either "tomato" or "tomahto," depending on where they are.

I should mention my father [at this point, because he] was recruited by Bill Donovan.

Q: Of the OSS [Office of Strategic Services].

FOSTER: Well, before. But, yes. And he was in OSS and died in 1945. He was in charge of special operations in Europe and though he never [participated] himself, he knew a great deal about it. As a young man, he graduated from Harvard in 1911, he had been on one of the Hoover missions to Europe during that period and had been in the Army. So he, again, had been connected with public affairs. I should stop a moment and say I did not serve in CIA [Central Intelligence Agency]. I'm a straightforward Foreign Service Officer. I know many CIA people.

Q: Well, this was one of the prime recruiting grounds for the OSS and the CIA, the "Eastern Establishment" schools.

FOSTER: Yes.

Q: When the war ended in '45, did you get out?

FOSTER: I got out as an electronic technician and went back to Harvard. It was '46 when I actually got out. I went back and I got my degree from Harvard in 1948.

Q: You were married at the time.

FOSTER: No, I was not. I was engaged. By that time, I was engaged to a Smith College girl in 1947. She spent a year in Cambridge until I graduated. The world was very different in those days. I remember being in the Harvard Yard at Commencement in 1947, holding her hand and listening to the Secretary of State address Harvard. His name was George Marshall.

Q: That was the announcement of the Marshall Plan.

FOSTER: Of the Marshall Plan. So last year, fifty years later, we went back to hear the Secretary of State, Madeline Albright, speak exactly fifty years, to the day, later. She opened her remarks by saying, "My heels would not fit in Marshall's boots." Well, the place just collapsed [in applause]. This is off the subject but we're very glad we went back. So I graduated from Harvard in '48, married Margot in Kansas City, and went to work in a backwater at the State Department as an "intern," as it was called in those days.

Q: I'd like to go quickly to Harvard. Was it still the general education there in '46?

FOSTER: Quite totally different atmosphere. Everybody was in a hurry to graduate and get on with their lives, having spent this time in the Armed Forces and I was no different. I continued my studies and interest in Government and got my major in Government and applied for an internship in the Department of State.

Q: Why the State Department?

FOSTER: Because I had lived so much of my life in England overseas and [international issues] was an interesting subject. If you think back to the world in those days, foreign affairs was crucial.

Q: Oh, yes.

FOSTER: And I was interested in this; and government, that was the place to be.

Q: Had you done any reading or preparation for the State Department?

FOSTER: Basically, no. Just a general course. They were recruiting at that time and I'm sure there were people who had known my father. I'm talking about State Department people who were interested in his son coming. I can't prove this, but I suspect this.

Q: When you went as an intern, what sort of program was this?

FOSTER: It was an internship in the State Department. They were trying to encourage people [to join]. Remember, [at that time], they still had civilian employees as well as Foreign Service people. The Wriston program had not happened yet.

Q: Okay, so you entered under a Civil Service program?

FOSTER: [I was appointed as a clerk typist in September 1948 and assigned to the Division of Organization and Budget [OMB] in the Office of Budget and Planning [OBP] of the Administration Bureau. Remember, at that time, the Civil Service consisted of so-called Clerical, Administrative, and Fiscal [CAF] grades and the Professional grades. By August 1949, they transferred me to this backwater where nothing happened. It was called the Division of Southeast Asian Affairs [SEA] in the Far East Bureau [FE]. After being in SEA for a few months, in June 1950, I was accepted on the professional side of the Civil Service and given a GS-7 ranking.]

Q: I'd like to get a handle on your dates. How long were you in the Division of Southeast Asian Affairs?

FOSTER: From 1949, I'm guessing now, to 1956, when they came to me and said, "You've got to go overseas," because, you see, the world had exploded.

Q: Oh, yes. In '49, could you describe the Bureau or the Desk?

FOSTER: [All right. It is interesting that you ask, since the Far East Bureau was reorganized shortly after I arrived. Of course, the question of where the Middle East and the Far East bureaus met had been decided as the Burma-India border. Burma was in the Bureau of Far East Affairs. India was in the Bureau of Middle East Affairs. When I arrived, the Far East Bureau had a front office, and divisions that handled Chinese and Northeast Asian, meaning Japan and Korea, Affairs. Then there was the Division of Philippine Affairs and the Division of Southeast Asian Affairs, where I was assigned. By November 1949, these units, instead of being "divisions," were called "offices." There was still an Office of Chinese Affairs and an Office of Northeast Asia, but the other two offices were combined into the Office of Philippine and Southeast Asian Affairs [PSA].]

Q: What did [the Office of Philippine and] Southeast Asian Affairs consist of ?

FOSTER: [PSA] consisted essentially of the former Dutch, French, and British colonial areas.

Q: Well, in '49 where did they put you?

FOSTER: They put me as the assistant to the [PSA acting director], a man called William Sterling Byrd Lacey, who hired me, basically, to write a summary every two weeks of things that went on in Southeast Asia. There wasn't enough to issue this more than once every two weeks.

Q: Actually, though, this was a pretty active time, wasn't it?

FOSTER: Not when I first went in.

Q: Because Burma was independent.

FOSTER: Burma had just become independent.

Q: And we had interests in Thailand.

FOSTER: We did.

Q: And then you were moving into the problems of Indochina with the French.

FOSTER: Yes, but you see that the French surrender had not yet happened.

Q: But they were fighting the Viet Minh, weren't they, or had that not yet started?

FOSTER: Not yet. And Mao Zedong and Ho Chi Min had both been negotiating in the background, I'm told, but working with the US. And we, because of the pressures on the Hill, had nothing to do with it.

Q: What about Indonesia?

FOSTER: Indonesia was rather peaceful at that point, nothing much going on. It had one hell of a lot of oil and a lot of Muslims.

Q: When did Indonesia win its war for independence?

FOSTER: I think it was [shortly after the war], before I got there.

Q: So all these places were basically independent.

FOSTER: Many of them were colonies. For instance, Singapore and Malaya were colonies. Burma was independent. Thailand, obviously, was [never a colony]. Indonesia had just become independent. The Philippines were independent, theoretically anyway [and had its own division in the Bureau when I joined]. Places like Japan and Korea were in [other offices within] the Far East Bureau.

Q: What were you finding as far as reports of these places? Did we have embassies or

consulates?

FOSTER: We had an embassy in Burma, obviously. We had an embassy in Bangkok and we had an embassy in Jakarta. The rest were consulates and consulate generals. For instance, we had a consulate general in Chiang Mai, because it was on the old Opium Road that went into China. Remember we had no relations with China at that time.

Q: When you arrived in '49, the Chinese Communists had just basically won their war and I would imagine most of the time you would have been watching for the fallout.

FOSTER: The trouble was we had no reporting in China at all. So we were dependent on the generosity of our allies, particularly the British, for information about China. We were able to get some of our own through Chiang Mai, because it was on the Opium Super Highway into South China. We could get some from Burma and Thailand because of the Chinese presence up in the north. And I think we had an extensive CIA operation. I guess it was still the OSS then, up in northern Thailand and way up north of Burma.

Q: I take it there was a feeling that whatever was happening in you area was of minor significance.

FOSTER: Exactly. Until the surrender of the French. What year was that?

Q: That was 'May 54, I think, the fall of Dien Bien Phu and the opening of the Geneva Conference.

FOSTER: Dien Bien Phu, that's what I'm talking about, but the troubles had come before then, you see.

Q: The Korean War started shortly after you arrived, but did that have any repercussions in your area?

FOSTER: Not in my area, and not to me, that I'm aware of. It may have, but I'm not aware of it.

Q: Well, there was a concern about aggressive China.

FOSTER: Yes, definitely. Particularly coming down north into Burma.

Q: You mentioned that Chiang Mai was on the old Opium Trail. Were drugs at all of interest or was this a minor problem?

FOSTER: That was a minor problem to us. What was important to us was the fact that there were carriers going in and out of China from there with information. Our job, essentially, was information gathering.

Q: What about Vietnam. Was this a matter of any concern of ours?

FOSTER: Well, we had in PSSA an officer in charge of Vietnam. A man whose name was Sullivan, I think. He'd been vice consul in Hanoi and had been pulled back to do this job. I'm not sure that name is right. But there was increasing concern. Again, we were getting information from the French, sometimes not accurate.

Q: There apparently was a certain battle over Viet Nam where our natural inclination was to say, "Let them be independent." But then there was the problem of the Communists. You know, do you want independent Communists. And then the other one was, particularly in the first part in the early '50s, that we weren't necessarily supporters of the French colonial effort. At the same time, France was very important to us in Europe as part of the NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] thing. Were you feeling any of these tides?

FOSTER: Yes, because there was enormous tension between the Bureau of European Affairs and the Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs for precisely this reason. The French Desk, particularly, did not want us to have anything to do with the locals.

Q: The locals being the Vietnamese.

FOSTER: That's right, both north and south. Let's say "the Indochinese." But those of us who worked there said, "Look, we're going to be involved. We'd better get our own relationships here, fast. The French can't do this for us anymore." And I gather from Dayton that you had served there so you know exactly what I'm talking about.

Q: A long time after. It was '69-70. I was Consulate General in Saigon.

FOSTER: In Saigon.

Q: Well, did you feel that the arrival in '53 of John Foster Dulles and Walter Robinson and the bureau of East Asians a change in attitude, a strongly anti-Communist attitude or not?

FOSTER: Now, when you speak of "anti-Communist," are you referring to Ho Chi Min? Is that what you're talking about? The Viet Minh?

Q: Yes, because Walter Robinson came as a proponent of a much tougher attitude towards Communist China and I would think, by inference, towards Ho Chi Min. Did you notice?

FOSTER: Yes. But it was not because the French wanted it, but because we felt that the future of that area should not be in the hands of China, that [the Indochinese] should have their own. That's the way I remember it. And Dulles, remember, was related to his brother, who was deep into the intelligence business. And Dulles was no dummy. There's no question about that. I think he, by going with Robertson, became more sympathetic to the Far East point of view than the EUR [European Bureau] point of view. That would be

my suspicion but, remember, I was very junior.

Q: Oh, I understand that.

FOSTER: And the other thing, of course, that was going on was in the Congress as they were attacking people for their Communist views.

Q: Were you feeling any of the heat around you?

FOSTER: Around me, yes. I was too junior.

Q: We're talking about McCarthyism, but I was wondering how it impacted your office.

FOSTER: The more senior people were scared to death of it. We were too junior, really, to be afraid of it, but we saw what our seniors were worrying about. For instance, Bill Lacey, William Byrd Lacey, who I worked for eventually was going to go to Manila as the Minister. They refused to confirm him as Minister so he just went as the Number Two to Manila. There, he invented something which is used today. He invented something called DCM. And instead of saying, "Minister sat down with someone," he began to send messages saying, "DCM [deputy chief of mission] met with so and so." And is now today one of his legacies. That is an obscure historical point that may amuse you. (Laughter)

Q: You were there during the major development in Vietnam. That is, the increasing French War with the Viet Min at the time, who were led by Ho Chi Min. Were you getting more information? What was the feeling?

FOSTER: Feeling towards the increasing tension, you mean?

Q: I mean the perspective of your office. Was there any sympathy for the anti-French movement or not?

FOSTER: Not really, no, because they were extreme, but [then the French were extreme also]. I think this is where began what eventually wound up as something called SEATO, the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization. It began because of the feeling for [a] need for Southeast Asians to pull together, for the former colonials to pull together into some kind of regional group.

So, by '56, I was also in charge of SEATO. You see, in Burma, I started preparing this report and then I was made assistant officer in charge of Burma. Terribly elegant at my age. (Laughs)

Q: Well, now with Burma, were there any American interests there?

FOSTER: Basically not. Some Americans liked rubies but that's about all that you could say. And the Burmese were under a man called U Nu, who did very well, indeed. There were a number of small [ethnic] groups, like the [Shan, Karen,] and so on, but it was

peaceful enough. And then, the decision was made to [Wristonize the Foreign Service].

Q: That's the program of amalgamating the Civil Service and the Foreign Service.

FOSTER: And I was so busy, I just [accepted the conversion to the new system and became a Wriston FSO in November 1954]. And I was then Number Two in the section of the office that handled Thailand and Malaya. So I was made officer in charge of Malaya. My boss was an extraordinary man, now dead, whom, I think it's too bad you couldn't have interviewed.

Q: Who's that?

FOSTER: His name was Kenneth Perry Landon. He came to Thailand as a missionary and his wife was pregnant, so when he went off Christianizing the Thais, she had to sit in Bangkok waiting for the baby. She got bored and she wrote a book. Anna Inerkin was her name.

Q: Oh, yes.

FOSTER: He was an extraordinary man, knew a great deal about Thailand, but needed somebody to deal with Malaya and Singapore, which was essentially what I did as his assistant. I was still very young.

Q: Oh, yes. I understand that. Was everything we were seeing in that area (Malaya, Singapore, Burma etc.) sort of predicated on Communism and keeping the Chinese out.

FOSTER: Yes. China was a threat. I think we all thought that, but we knew so little about what was going on in China. I think we were sensitive to the fact that one of China's big problems was keeping it as one nation instead of Balkanizing like Europe. But we were [also concerned] about Chinese influence in Southeast Asia particularly because of the economics of it. These were very rich countries. Very rich. Thailand is very rich. Indonesia still. But a lot of Chinese immigration to these places.

Q: Were we watching the overseas Chinese in these places?

FOSTER: Yes, as best we could, but we didn't really have that much staff and we had very few people who spoke the languages. I never spoke any of the languages. You had people who spoke French, yes, and English, and Dutch, but not the indigenous languages.

Q: What about in Malaysia? Had the insurgency started yet?

FOSTER: Yes, it had been going on for a long, long, long time. In Malaya. I'm using "Malaya," not "Malaysia," because that's what they called it then.

Q: Yes.

FOSTER: And Thailand was going through a very difficult period. Three towering figures really held together by the Royal Family. But Ken Landon, having been a missionary there, knowing so much about it, was able, I think, to understand better than anybody else, how to guide our country in our relations with [Thailand], which stayed pretty good at his hands.

Q: Did you ever have any chance to travel in those areas?

FOSTER: No, never. Not until much later did I ever get there.

Q: Well, I would have thought it would have been quite a problem to be dealing with these countries and not getting you out to sort of look around.

FOSTER: They didn't have the funds or the time. They [had] other people there who had been, like Ken Landon, so why waste what little money they had sending me? And I was in the process of forming a family and so on and so forth so I would like to have gone but I was so busy. You see, you'd empty the "In Box" and you'd come back the next morning and it was all full again. It was an exciting time because, as I say, having come to a backwater to have it explode. This has happened three times in my life.

Q: While you were in that office you ended up with Burmese Affairs.

FOSTER: Began.

Q: Began with Burmese Affairs, but you then moved over to Malaya.

FOSTER: Yes, Malaya, Singapore, and Thailand but my field was Malaya at that point. Landon did the Thai business. Then came the Wriston Program.

Q: You were Wristonized, this amalgamate of the Foreign Service, in 1956?

FOSTER: I don't know the exact date, but before then. It would have been [around November] 1954. It was early in the program and I was just so busy, I just did it and kept on. Then, Ken Landon decided he would retire and so I took over as the [acting officer-in-charge of Thai and Malayan Affairs in mid-1955 with responsibility for Thai, Malaya, Chinese, and SEATO. Oh, and (Laughs) what've they got? Three divisions in there?

Q: What was the feeling towards SEATO at the time?

FOSTER: All for it. As far as I knew we were all for it. The question was how [to finance the organization].

Q: Yes, because it was sort of a peculiar thing. You know SEATO included, was it Pakistan? but not India, and Australia and New Zealand and then also… I can't think of it from the United States but not the Philippines.

FOSTER: Yes, I can't remember now. Originally, I think no but it was originally done more on mainland.

Q: The SEATO headquarters were set up originally I believe in Bangkok. SEATO was supposed to duplicate NATO.

FOSTER: Or the Middle East.

Q: Or the Middle East. CENTO [Central Treaty Organization].

FOSTER: CENTO, yes.

Q: Was that going anywhere?

FOSTER: Not really, no. They just began to do their own thing. But the chief threat really was China.

Q: When did you move out of that office?

FOSTER: In 1956, they said, "You've got to go overseas. You've been here eight or nine years." So I said, "Where are you going to send me?" They said, "Well, we're going to make you Consul General in Chiang Mai." That had been all set up and they changed the assignment at the last moment. They said they were sending me to London. I said, "Why?" They said, "Well, the officer who handles Far Eastern Affairs in the Embassy in London is an expert on China, and we need somebody who knows about Southeast Asia. And we're getting an enormous amount of information from British sources." So, I headed for London, followed by a wife and three and three quarters children, (Laughs) who followed me. I was given three things to do: to find my office, set up my desk, find a house, find an obstetrician. And I did all of it brilliantly, including getting the finest form of native interpreter you can get: an old-fashioned British nanny. (Laughs)

Q: You were there from '56 to when?

FOSTER: To '60. And my world exploded again.

Q: I was going to ask because '56 was a major year. When did you arrive?

FOSTER: I arrived, I would say, [in April] of '56.

Q: So, you were in place by October.

FOSTER: Yes, and the world exploded.

Q: Prior to October '56, how were things working with the British as far as your getting information?

FOSTER: Very well, indeed. I had a permanent pass to the Foreign Office, for instance.

You know, you'd just show it and walk in. [Anglo-American cooperation] was very close, indeed. And they were very glad of our interest. I think they shared most of the information about China with us, let alone Malaya and Burma.

Q: They had relations with China, but I take it they were not wandering around China.

FOSTER: Not much.

Q: The fact is that the British maintained relations, but the Chinese didn't really give them an inside track or anything else.

FOSTER: Except for the fact that they'd been there so long. They didn't tell us where and how they got their information, but they'd been there so long they tended to know what the [Chinese] were doing. At least, that was my opinion at the time. And they'd pull some interesting tricks on you in the Foreign Office. Like you'd be sitting at the guy's desk and he'd get up and go out in the hall and they were watching to see whether you'd go through his papers, which I didn't, obviously. And who knows what they'd left there for me to see if I had gone through. This was a period of very close relations.

Q: We're talking about the Suez crisis in October of 1956 where relations at the upper level, more than anywhere else…

FOSTER: …were very bad.

Q: Very bad.

FOSTER: The ambassador got sent home.

Q: [Prime Minister Eden] and Dulles detested each other and then he got this Suez thing which was a really rather stupid thing on the part of...

FOSTER: And they didn't like our ambassador at all, Winthrop Aldrich.

Q: No? What happened at your level and your relations?

FOSTER: At my level, the man in charge of the Middle East in the Embassy needed more help and so I began to help part time, particularly when we were forming the Suez Canal Users Association. One of our enormous problems was creating an organization whose initials didn't spell something dirty in somebody else's language. (Laughter) Like, do you remember during World War II, they tried to set up the Supreme Headquarters Italian Territory and they suddenly realized they couldn't do that.

Q: I'm told we had something called American for Government people who went into Civil Affairs. It was AMGOD, which meant in Turkish male/female sexual organs or

something like that. (Laughter)

FOSTER: Exactly. So eventually, SCUA turned out to be all right.

Q: Could you explain what the Suez Canal Users group was and what was the genesis of that?

FOSTER: Basically, they wanted to get [management of the Canal] out of pure British hands [and] into the hands of the people who were using the Canal. There's a word for it, we now use in the environmental business, stakeholders or something. This was long before that's ever been invented. I frankly don't remember exactly who belonged to it, but it was essentially the people used the canal.

Q: The idea was to try to diffuse the Egyptian nationalization of the Canal.

FOSTER: Exactly. And have it internationally controlled. So the Egyptians, again, were just not- (end of tape)

The contrary happened. I was taken out several times by my contacts in the Foreign Office into the hall and they'd say, "I just want you to know, Adam, that I didn't know anything about it." They were ashamed because the Eden government hadn't released this information very far down... We saw the British government fall. We also saw Princess Margaret getting married, the Queen having a baby, and the U-2 Summit.

Q: In Paris, yes.

FOSTER: And I saw with my own eyes, Sputnik sailing through the skies from a balcony in London. What a period in history!

Q: Oh, yes. Well, we want to go back to the Suez time because I'm told there was a period, that at least at the higher level of the British government, there were orders from Eden basically cut off all communication with Americans.

FOSTER: Yes, that was true and that's why the British junior people were saying they hadn't held out on me. They just didn't know either. He held it, not just from us, but from his own people.

Q: This was where Eisenhower said eventually, "We're not going to stand by… This is a French, British, Israeli invasion of Egypt at that point and the United States took a very firm stand against it.

FOSTER: By the way, I was a junior officer in the Far East part of the Embassy. There were junior officers in the Middle East part of the Embassy. One of them was Dayton Mak. (Laughs) [London: April 1954-December 1956]

Q: Oh, yes. Who is working with us now and whom we've interviewed.

FOSTER: Yes. And I was brought in to give him a hand.

Q: Yes, to help. What were you picking up regarding the Far East besides China? Were you getting pretty good reports from Burma, Malaya, and Singapore?

FOSTER: What I was getting, probably most importantly, was the British desire in that period, to strengthen and preserve and continue the idea of Commonwealth, as distinct from Empire. The movement from Empire to Commonwealth. This was, I found, all over the place, not just at the senior levels. They realized that colonialism was going to be a thing of the past.

Q: Also, this was the time when the British were really pulling back in many places.

FOSTER: Economics were forcing it.

Q: Well, economics, their garrisons, and their areas were being were being reduced and they were getting ready to pull out of Africa essentially.

FOSTER: Where were the colonies to go when they pulled out, you see. This is the point. That's why the concept of Commonwealth.

Q: What was your impression of the British government during this '56 to '60 period living in Britain?

FOSTER: It caused me to ask myself a question, not just about the government, but in general, which I will ask you if you have an idea on this. This is a relatively small group, population of people in Great Britain. I'm talking about England, Ireland, Scotland, Wales. For centuries now, they've had the most extraordinary percentage of genius. Whether you're talking about art, whether your talking about music, whether you're talking about literature, this really quite small percentage of people have constantly and are continuing even to this day to produce and be enormously creative. That doesn't mean that the Germans and the French and the Italians aren't, too, but their populations are so much bigger.

The question is, "Why?" What is it about Britain that continues even to this day? The most important scientific discovery of this day was invented in a garage in Britain. It's called DNA and the gene pool and all this. And my own answer to this is (which answers your question about the British government) their high toleration of eccentricity. As long as you don't scare the horses, you can do practically anything you want. And [the] line between eccentricity and genius is [terribly thin]. So, that's not the kind of answer you were looking for, but it's the toleration of eccentricity and basically letting people do what they think is right.

Q: What about the social divisions in England, Great Britain at that time? It all strikes me as when you read British literature, watch British movies that there's this very much

"Us and Them" thing. It doesn't seem to be a very bridgeable gap. Was that apparent when you were there?

FOSTER: Yes. This, of course, was changing, but if one remembers the meaning of the word "cadet." It means "third son." What did the children of the British aristocrats do?

They went into the Church, they went into the Foreign Service, and the Military, you see. And it had to do with education. I'm not talking entirely about learning either, because many of those aristocrats are pretty uneducated and stupid. However, there was a certain code of behavior, which I think, with all the immigrants that were pouring in, caused these divisions. We think we're coping with immigration. Imagine what the British, the Anglo-Saxons have coped with regarding immigration, which caused these class distinctions. I'm not sure I know anymore the definition or the meaning of the word "class," but that's what you're referring to.

Q: Yes. During this time, did you find in the Foreign Office that there was any sort of change during this '56-'60 period of relations the Embassy and the Foreign Office as far as sharing information?

FOSTER: Not that I'm aware of, but I would have only known it in a very narrow field. As you know, our ambassador was withdrawn and a new man was sent.

Q: Who was our ambassador when you arrived?

FOSTER: [Winthrop Aldrich. He'd been there since 1953.]

Q: And you were saying he didn't get along?

FOSTER: He wasn't very popular. I remember the British saying to me, "He came to England with a closed mind and an open fly."

Q: Chasing women and that sort of thing?

FOSTER: Yes, so he was pulled out after Suez and John Whitney was sent to be ambassador [in early 1957. The next year,] I went off on home leave. I'd been there two years. And when I came back, I discovered I had a new job. Whitney had lost his temper, which he very seldom did. He said, "This isn't fair. The British have the job divided between the Queen and the Prime Minister. And I've got to do both. So I want a young Foreign Service officer to handle my Prime Minister life and I want a young politician to handle my [royal responsibilities], you know, [protocol] at court and all of this kind of thing. And I was that young Foreign Service officer. I came back to discover I'd been moved to a new job called [staff aide] to the ambassador. And a young politician, still a friend of mine, had been brought in to handle his [royal responsibilities]. His name is James Symington. Jimmy Symington [arrived in London in 1958]. You may know he lives around here. Both of us very young, new babies and so on.

Q: What was your job?

FOSTER: Basically, everything that had to do with the Foreign Service side of his job being with the Foreign Office particularly with the Prime Minister. I was his private secretary for that.

Q: The Prime Minister, being during this '58 to '60 period?

FOSTER: Well, Eden was succeeded, you see.

Q: Was it Macmillan?

FOSTER: It was Macmillan, yes. I'm having a senior moment, at this point, I've sort of forgotten. But, essentially, dealing with his private secretary. [As staff aide, I also had the daily duty of screening the ambassador's cables after hours. So the embassy cable room would] call up in the middle of the night and say, "There's an eyes only message for the ambassador." They didn't wake him. They'd wake me.

Q: Oh, how nice! (Laughter)

FOSTER: And, I remember one night there was a message from the White House asking him to present America's condolences on the death of the Prime Minister of South Africa; and I could send a message back that night to the White House saying, "I regret I cannot follow instructions, because I am not accredited to the Queen of South Africa." (Laughter) Within three hours, there was one saying, "London's absolutely right and I'm going to do it." And, you see, the White House staff didn't understand [that when South Africa declared itself a republic and left the British Commonwealth in May 1961, the Queen of England was no longer Queen of South Africa.]. (Laughter)

Q: Yes.

FOSTER: This is an incident just for the fun of it.

Q: How did your ambassador, John Whitney, operate?

FOSTER: He took the trouble to read just as much as he could. He took the trouble to ask his staff. He took the trouble to ask the British to explain things to him. He was an excellent man and a very pleasant person, too. He had an enormous amount of money, which was very hard to deal with, because he never carried any money in his pocket at all. So you'd get in a taxi with him and you'd have to pay for it. He always paid you back though. It's just habit on his part. He was a brilliant collector. His collection of art work in the Embassy was just extraordinary.

We were invited to his parties, not because we were what we were, but because he needed help [with the guests]. For instance, my wife and I would arrive at the party and I'd [introduce myself around], "I'm Adam Foster. How do you do?" We'd [separately]

work our way [through the guests] and eventually we'd meet in the middle and I could ask how the baby was coming along and so forth. One day we were doing this in the middle of his house and this Brit propelled himself off the wall, came over and said, "My name is so and so," and turned absolutely purple with embarrassment. He said, "We've been watching and we thought it was such a good idea, but I thought I'd try it on you first." (Laughter) And what we discovered is if you say, "I'm Adam Foster," the British were afraid somebody would say, "So what!"

Q: Yes.

FOSTER: Nobody ever does but they are really very shy. And the change in the atmosphere when Whitney came was unbelievable and everything happened then. The first US president in office ever to visit Britain came to visit.

Q: This was Eisenhower.

FOSTER: Yes. And we, the staff, didn't know how long it was going to take to get from Heathrow in to the Ambassador's house. It took five hours! Everyone in Britain turned out on the streets. They loved Ike. And he wasn't going to drive right [past] them, so he was waving and all. It was very moving. We did, however, do something very shaky, diplomatically. Eisenhower wanted to play golf at St. Andrews. [Because] they didn't allow golf carts at St. Andrews, [none were available,] so we imported a golf cart through the diplomatic pouch.

Q: Well, Eisenhower, having suffered several heart attacks, needed it.

FOSTER: That's right, but we brought it in through the diplomatic pouch. The British knew it and they didn't pay attention to it. The first hole of St. Andrew's, it took him ten strokes to get the ball on the green. He was just surrounded by British watching him; and when he finally got it on the green they all clapped. (Laughter) It was just great! Again, I've gathered these moments which you like recorded, and they're just marvelous!

I would say this, that Jimmy Symington was handling the presentations at court and all that kind of thing. One of those presentations, that they'd always present the staff, and the ambassador presented this one guy whose name will be nameless. Prince Philip said, "And what so you do" and the guy said, "I'm the CIA." Philip said, "You weren't meant to say that," and moved on. (Laughter) Although, I'm sure they knew it.

Q: Oh, yes, we declare in a place such as Britain. Well, in 1960, where did you go?

FOSTER: They came to me and said, "It's time for you to go home. You've been here for almost five years." And I said, "What are you going to do with me?" And they said, "We're going to make you an obstetrician." And I said, "What!?" And they said, "Yes, every part of the world, except this hemisphere, has had new nations being born, and the British colonies in the Caribbean have announced that they wish to become independent, and we're sending you home to handle the obstetrics." And I said, "All right, but not the

pediatrics." And they said, "Fair enough." So I was sent home to Washington, and took over the West Indian Affairs [desk in August 1960].

Q: This was in ARA [Bureau of Interamerican Affairs].

FOSTER: This, at that time, was in EUR.

Q: EUR

FOSTER: British Colonies'.

Q: Yes.

FOSTER: And, I went to work. [Fortunately,] one of my friends who had been in the Prime Minister's Office was sent here as the British colonial attaché, the last one (I don't think they have [this title] anymore) to work with me on this. We decided (and eventually both governments agreed) that the best thing would be to have one nation so that Jamaica, Trinidad, British Honduras, and British Guyana would all be on nation, a "United States of the West Indies." And, we went to work. And then, Stuart, the world exploded on me again. Remember, this was now the third time this had happened. Once in Diem Bien Phu, once in Suez, and [now] we went into the Bay of Pigs. I'm not sure it's my fault, but it seems to happen to me.

Q: I would have thought that the Bay of Pigs would not have been your baby.

FOSTER: It wasn't my baby but, the Jamaicans had excellent intelligence into Cuba and I remember Norman Manly, who was then the Prime Minister of Jamaica visiting Washington and stepping off the plane here at the airport, shaking my hand and saying, "Adam, I'm glad to see you. What the hell are you guys doing in Cuba?!" And I looked at him and I said, "Mr. Prime Minister, I think you'd better ask the President that this afternoon," which he did. But, from this comes, I think, another interesting story. When the first ambassador in Jamaica arrived here to present his credentials, and I'm having a senior moment. I don't even remember his name at the moment.

Q: That's all right.

FOSTER: He called me up in despair and said, "Adam, I've got a real problem." And I said, "What is it?" And he said, "They've scheduled me on Friday to present my credentials and I'm an Orthodox Jew. I shouldn't do that. Can you help me?" And I said, "Let me make a phone call." So I called the White House and I said, "You idiots! What do you mean scheduling an Orthodox Jew on Friday?!" And they said, "What! From Jamaica?!" And, of course, Kennedy cared terribly about Jamaica. He was reading Doctor No and this was something he was really looking forward to. So they changed it to Monday. I called back.

And in we went to the Oval Office in the White House on Monday morning. And Sunday

night, Kennedy had announced over the radio and television that we'd stopped the Russian ships and he asked for every nation in the world and everybody to support the US in this action. And in we walked into the Oval Office at ten the next morning. Kennedy obviously hadn't been asleep all night, tired but thrilled, because of Doctor No and all his bedside reading, to [greet] the first Jamaican ambassador.

Q: Yes, this is a story by Ian Fleming. Sort of a history story.

FOSTER: Fleming, that's right.

Q: And this one was based in Jamaica.

FOSTER: This was Kennedy's bedside reading. So we came in and we went through the ritual with this worn out, tired president and when we got all done, the Ambassador said to him, "Mr. Kennedy, Mr. President, I heard you last night on the television and I want to tell you that Jamaica supports the United States!" And I thought Kennedy was going to burst into tears. It was the first he'd heard.

And as we left and we drove back in the limousine I knew something that Kennedy didn't know and I looked at him and I said, " That was a splendid thing you just did there," and he was so smart. He knew I knew. And what I knew was that in those days there was no cable to Jamaica and all communications shut down at sunset and I knew he had no instructions. (Laughter) And he knew I knew. He looked at me and he said, "They can fire me if they want. "The next day he got obviously a [cablegram] saying, "Absolutely right." So, end of story, but this was an extraordinary period.

Q: The fact is that all these disparate little pieces of land from Jamaica down to British Guyana all became independent but were we trying to do anything at early times to show the advantage of joining together.

FOSTER: We talked their ears off about this and we discovered the one reason they really didn't want it was immigration. The big islands didn't want emigration from the little islands, but they all wanted immigration into the US, oh yes, but not among each other. That, to me, I think was the main reason why, for instance, Jamaica voted it down. They had a [popular] vote on the subject and they voted it down.

Q: I would have also thought, political aspirations being what they are, all the people in a particular area wanted to be impressed…

FOSTER: And they all wanted to have their own Embassy in Washington and an Embassy at the United Nations and all the rest of that was there, too. It made very good sense economically because Trinidad has petroleum, Jamaica has bauxite and so on but they wouldn't do it. So now each of them is a separate country. I went to the Independence Ceremony and our representative was Jacques Whitney. And you see, really by that time the reason I had been put there was because I knew something about British colonialism and, again, the move towards the Commonwealth. So, there is no

queen in Jamaica. Her name is Elizabeth in London, but she is Queen in Jamaica and the Embassy here in town is Her Jamaican Majesty's Embassy. Totally confusing to anybody.

Q: Absolutely. How about Trinidad?

FOSTER: Same way. No. Trinidad decided to become a republic.

Q: Guyana?

FOSTER: And Guyana did, too. Most of them did, but Jamaica decided to stay a monarchy. [With independence in the Caribbean], our work in the State Department [multiplied] because of all the treaties we had with Britain that go back for centuries. These things all flowed to these islands from Britain automatically, but once they became independent, they had to sign their own. And the legal people just had a terrible problem finding every damn [treaty or agreement] that we had with the British, and getting each one of these countries to [recommit to] it, which they did. It was a very fascinating and busy period.

Q: Oh, yes. And were we concerned with the spread of Castro at that time?

FOSTER: We were very concerned about it. Each of these countries had had some experience with the unpleasant past and they knew a great deal about what was happening in Cuba. The intelligence in the British was right on top of everything. Many Jamaicans lived there, you see, and had been treated badly by the government there, Castro particularly.

Q: You did this from 1960 until when?

FOSTER: I did this from 1960 until 1963. [From 1962 I was the acting officer-in-charge of Caribbean Affairs.] And the time had come for me to go overseas and my children were now approaching [their] teenage [years] and they had made it clear to me that they really were not that interested in Anglo-Saxon [boarding schools]. [At that time], my grandmother and my mother both died one right after the other, both [had been] widows, and I was the oldest son.

Q: Oh, yes.

FOSTER: And I had two younger brothers who were just beginning life and I finally was ready to step down in the Foreign Service. [The Department] didn't really know what to do with me. [It wasn't] very interested, I don't think, [in] the British colonial thing. [That] was not that important to them anymore and so I [took leave of the Department and] worked privately for several years. Then I got appointed to be a colonial official in the only colony we had.

Q: Could you explain what it was and how it came about?

FOSTER: Well. You know what the colony was. The District of Columbia. [In November 1967], the White House [replaced the commissioner form of government and] decided to appoint 10 people to run this colony: one of them to act as the executive branch, and one of them to act as the legislative branch. The man appointed to act as the executive branch was Walter Washington, and nine of us, carefully selected by the White House [were to be the legislative branch. Among this group] there were five Republicans and four Democrats, five men and four women, and five blacks and four whites. I represented the ultimate minority. I was male in a city that was largely female; I was Republican in a city that was largely Democrat; and I was Anglo-Saxon in a city that had very few of them then. So I represented a certain ilk.

Q: How long were you doing that?

FOSTER: I did that for three years. This was not Foreign Service.

Q: I'd like to capture some of the atmospherics.

FOSTER: The reason they did this was because I knew about colonialism or British type colonialism. Then, the fourth and final explosion of my life occurred. It was called Home Rule. [Legislation offering self-government to the citizens of the District passed Congress in 1973, during the Ford administration. On May 7, 1974, DC voters approved a Home Rule Charter in a special election].

Q: During this time before Home Rule, what was your impression of Walter Washington? How did he operate?

FOSTER: Walter Washington belonged to the aristocracy. We were talking earlier about class. In those days, and I suspect today still, there was an enormous spread in the African-American community. He was clearly upper class and a very fine man.

The only instructions we were given by the [Johnson] White House was "to act as if you were elected," whatever the hell that means. So, [Washington] took over the administration of the city and we looked at each other and said, "What do legislators do?" And the answer is, "They form committees." So we formed committees and I was in charge of three of them. One was a committee on foreign affairs, because there are so many people from other countries who live [in the District of Columbia]. Second, was a committee on the environment, [an issue] which was just coming up. Lyndon Johnson had said that, making the Potomac swimmable and so on, [was a goal we should aim for]. And the other was a business one, because of [me] being an Anglo-Saxon. We formed these committees.

Then one evening somebody from the State Department came to me quietly and said, "We've got a real problem. Can you help us?" And I said, "Like what?" This was the period when young Chinese acrobats and Ping-Pong players were coming here and they said, "We're not allowed to meet their plane at the airport and we think this is a mistake.

These are unusual young people and shouldn't be snubbed. Could you arrange to have a "City Committee" formed that would go and meet them and welcome them? Most of them don't speak English and they won't know, but at least they'll know they were officially met."

And so I helped form a Mayor's Committee on International Visitors. For a couple of years we did this. One day we got a telegram from what was then called Peking, saying, "If you can get 23 people to Peking at your expense, we will take care of two weeks of travel anywhere in China. You've been so nice to our young people." So we went back to the Department and got briefed and they said, "By all means, do it. But don't ask to see anything that has anything to so with classified warfare or armies."

This was in [the early 1970s] and when this came a balloon exploded because all our spouses said, "Oh, you can't go without me!" So we finally sent a telegram back saying, "What about 40?" And the answer came back, "No." And we didn't discover until we got there why. We were all put in a Shanghai bus that holds 25. So there were 23 of us, [and] a male and a female [tour guide]. 40 was just really [too much for the Chinese vehicles and escort service. So we basically toured] in containers going all over.

Q: You say Walter Washington came from aristocracy. How did he operate as mayor?

FOSTER: Enormous charm. He was a good man. He was efficient. He wasn't elected so he could decide what was right and just do it. And the only people that had to worry about it was the White House, who was delighted to have him deal with [these issues].

Q: Did you see any of the problems that later became endemic to Washington? That was the proliferation of the government's City Service, and awful lot of both corruption and just plain inefficiency. Was this a problem then?

FOSTER: Not in my day. Again, because we could decide and just do it without worrying about politics, as long as the White House backed you. They were glad to have us, if you'd just do what you thought was right. You could fire people, start or stop organizations. It wasn't until Home Rule that this became... You see, Marion Barry was elected after Home Rule. He never was appointed.

Q: When Home Rule came, that ended your job.

FOSTER: Yes, and then, having been aware of colonialism around the world, I just quietly packed my bags and went home, and didn't try and give anybody any advice. Of course, they never asked me anyway. And then watch as this thing began to develop. By that time I'd left the Foreign Service, so I was able to go to Republican conventions [1988 as an alternate delegate] and be a Republican, which was [another] total minority. I am of the opinion today that this is was the city needs, a two party system. [The competition would] help [the] Democrats. If you've got a Democrat thinking, "You're doing something stupid," [or] another Democrat [saying], "Hey, don't do that," they'll win, you see.

Q: Yes. I want to go back to one other thing, back to your last job in the State Department. When the former British colonies became independent, how well did your office fit in to ARA? Basically ARA was a Latin American, Hispanic entity, and then all of a sudden you have these English speaking people who want to become part of the ARA club. How did this work?

FOSTER: Yes. I wasn't there. I'd stepped down at that point. Once this was done, I'd said I didn't want to do the pediatrics. So that I really can't answer this. I don't know. This could be a question to ask even today.

Q: Yes, because it does not seem like a very good fit. You have British Honduras as part of your [Hispanic bureau]?

FOSTER: Yes, and Belize.

Q: Belize.

FOSTER: Have you been there?

Q: No, I haven't .

FOSTER: Extraordinary. You see, I've been to all of them. I used to go in the winter. It was a good time to visit my posts. And I think the other thing which is important to record here is that there had been many year before an agreement with the British called "Destroyers for Bases."

Q: Yes.

FOSTER: Everybody knows about the destroyers but nobody knows of what [became of the islands we acquired for the destroyers. They were] all in the Caribbean and became the basis for the Atlantic Missile Range, so we had to deal with all of that, too. It was quite interesting and I believe that today's airport in Bermuda actually was on of those bases.

Q: Well, I think we might stop at this point, don't you? This is excellent.

FOSTER: I think so.

Q: Well, I want to thank you.

FOSTER: I'm sorry to have talked so much, for so long.

End of interview