

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

HERBERT THOMPSON

Interviewed by: Thomas J. Dunnigan
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INTERVIEW

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

Q: I'm going to interview Herbert Thompson, a retired Foreign Service officer who spent

many years in countries that have Spanish culture and dealing with Latin American and Spanish relations. I will be interviewing him on behalf of the Association for Diplomatic Studies Oral History Program.

Herb, tell me how you became interested in the Foreign Service.

THOMPSON: At the end of the war in Europe, my division, the 11th armored division was broken up, and I was reassigned to a new unit. While there, I discovered the Foreign Service exam was going to be given in Europe, not too far from where we were in Austria at the time. I requested permission to go and take the examination. Permission was not forthcoming and so I did not take it, but kept the notion in mind for when I returned to the states.

I returned to the United States in January of 1946 to finish my semester at the university, meanwhile keeping an eye out for the next Foreign Service exam which I then took in southern California. I passed the written and was scheduled to take the orals from the traveling board that I think went to San Francisco. I did not pass the orals which I had foolishly conceived as an opportunity to show whether one could behave in civilized society. I took the next written exam [a year later] and passed it, and on that occasion had to go to Washington for the orals, which I did, and was approved for appointment about mid-1947. Fortunately, I was working at the time, [because there was] about a two year delay [before] I was called and offered an appointment. That required some rethinking inasmuch as the Foreign Service at that point was not willing to match the salary I was already earning. But, after some delay I accepted the appointment and came to Washington to enter the junior Foreign Service class in July 1949.

Q: Herb, had there been in your background any particular studies or concentration that directed you toward an interest in Spanish or Latin American affairs?

THOMPSON: Well, [I was born in California in April 1923 and] I had always had an interest in foreign languages and had studied Spanish in high school and French at the university and found I had significant aptitude for both and later in the army was assigned to an ASTP [Army Specialized Training Program] program at the University of Oregon for several months in a Spanish language and culture program, which came promptly to an end when it was decided that all these ASTP students ought to be out fighting instead of studying. And at that point I was assigned to the 11th armored division which was in its final stages of training in California and proceeded [overseas with it].

Q: Now your first assignment was to Madrid.

THOMPSON: That's right. [I arrived in September 1949.]

Q: You spent five years there.

THOMPSON: Almost.

Q: What did you do during that assignment?

THOMPSON: I was first assigned to the consulate as a visa officer. I suppose I did that for two years or more. Then I had the good fortune of having a DCM [deputy chief of mission], Johnny Jones, who was insistent on rotation of young officers to try to give them work experience. I was moved from the consulate to the economic section, where I worked for a year or year and a half. Then I was rotated to the political section where I remained until our departure in 1954.

Q: I think Mr. Jones should be commended because that sort of rotation did not become routine in the Foreign Service for a number of years.

THOMPSON: Yes, I think that's right.

Q: Now you arrived there at a time when our relations with Spain were to say the least cool. As I recall we had only a chargé there we didn't have an Ambassador, and we were still unhappy with Franco's flirtation with the Axis powers in World War II.

THOMPSON: Yes, that's right. Franco got very little credit for playing a very cagey game with the Axis during the war which had kept the Germans out of Spain and had left Spain relatively free to conduct its own affairs. Nevertheless at the end of the war there came the United Nations resolution condemning Spain as having been, I suppose, an Axis collaborator, and all member nations were required to withdraw their ambassadorial appointments and leave their missions only under chargés or withdraw the missions altogether. In our case, we had a chargé in Madrid at the time I arrived. I suppose Paul Culbertson, who was the chargé, was not replaced for at least a year after I arrived.

Q: He was replaced by Stanton Griffiths, I believe, who had made his name in the movie industry but had been Ambassador in Poland at one time. How was he as an Ambassador in that situation?

THOMPSON: Well from my lowly position at the foot of the stair, I suppose I was not in a position to judge very well, although I must say Ambassador What 's his name's performance was apparent even to me. He was a remarkably blustery type who called all the officers in the mission "son," and all the wives and other ladies "girlie," and never had any idea who anyone was except possibly for the DCM.

Q: Were you able to travel about Spain or were you limited pretty much to Madrid at the time?

THOMPSON: We did a lot of traveling, both for personal and official reasons, always within Spain. I recall at one point, I think I was in the economic section at the time, we had a dreadful protection case in Salamanca. For reasons best known to themselves, it was decided I would go up and try to free this American citizen who was in prison there after having killed a bicyclist with his auto. So I went up to Salamanca and stayed two or three days and finally got the man released on the understanding that he would post a

modest bond and then would abscond from the country without interference from the authorities. He was most grateful, I must say.

On another occasion still on my assignment, I was sent again, for reasons best known to others, to assume responsibility for our consulate in Vigo after the incumbent had left the post. I was there about six weeks or so at a very inconvenient time. Our son, our first child had been born just days before I was asked to assume charge at Vigo. On the other hand, it was a very interesting assignment. I took it upon myself to take advantage of being the new counsel to make courtesy calls on a wide variety of local officials, the Archbishop as well as the military, and did a series of memcons on their views which I think were found interesting. In addition, of course, we traveled a great deal on our own time to religious festivals and the ferias [Spanish: festivals] of Sevilla and the ferias at Valencia. So we had an opportunity to see a good deal of Spain.

Q: Did you find hostility toward the U.S. because of our stand towards Franco?

THOMPSON: Outside official circles, no. We never encountered any at any time.

Q: How would you assess Franco's hold and popularity on the people?

THOMPSON: Well, as much as he endured for another 19 years or so after I left Spain, one has to assume his control was pretty good, and his popularity wasn't all that bad. After all, it was only his death that ended his rule.

Q: Why did Stanton Griffiths resign as Ambassador? He resigned after a rather short time in Spain.

THOMPSON: I don't recall.

Q: It may have been business interests that brought him back.

THOMPSON: Possibly, but I just don't know.

Q: Did the shift to Lincoln McVeigh indicate any policy changes as far as the embassy was concerned?

THOMPSON: Not as I recall. McVeigh, of course, had an academic background and had served in a post before, but I don't think his arrival was a signal for any significant change in our relations.

Q: Now it was while you were there that we started to think about placing military bases in Spain. Had the embassy recommended for or against such an endeavor.

THOMPSON: I have no recollection and had no direct role in recommendations of any kind, so I don't really know. But I think the initiative came from Washington and was more at the behest of our security interests than anything else.

Q: It was cold war driven, in other words.

THOMPSON: Yes, I'm sure it was because the whole objective, which was later accomplished, was to make a fixed aircraft carrier out of Spain with the bases that were then developed and utilized.

Q: Did the U.S. presence, the official presence, grow while you were there that of AID people or military people or not, or was that observable?

THOMPSON: Yes, our AID mission grew and we had a happy organizational arrangement in that Washington either arranged or permitted a structure wherein the economic consular became the head of the AID mission, a very useful arrangement. The influx of the military really took place largely after our departure. There were not significant numbers of personnel there while we were still there except in the immediate negotiating headquarters.

Q: Did the flap over atomic weapons at the bases take place while you were there or did that come later?

THOMPSON: No, that was much later.

Q: That's when our ambassador had to go bathing in the sea to show the water wasn't contaminated after the bomb had dropped there?

THOMPSON: That's right. That was just before he went rollerblading on his last trip.

Q: How would you sum up your first tour in Madrid? It was an interesting one and a long one. Most officers don't have five years at their first post.

THOMPSON: Yes, that's right. It was fascinating and I thoroughly enjoyed it and learned a great deal. It was also a very good launching pad for a subsequent assignment as the number two on the Iberian desk in Western European affairs.

Q: You came back to that desk assignment in 1954 as I recall.

THOMPSON: Yes, late in 1954, [November, I think].

Q: What were the problems you faced in that assignment?

THOMPSON: Well dealing with Spain was always a difficult business given the widespread attitudes in the United States and among our allies abroad about the Franco regime. On the whole the base agreements had been concluded and went forward without significant difficulty, and there really were no major problems that I can recall. After I became the senior desk officer [around June 1957], we had the negotiations for the Azores base complex with the Portuguese government which required enormous effort and endless consultation, but that went well and was finally completed successfully.

Q: What was our attitude toward the Salazar regime?

THOMPSON: It was one of substantial coolness and correctness. There really wasn't any great warmth between our countries at that time.

Q: Did you accompany Secretary Dulles when he went to Madrid in 1955?

THOMPSON: No I did not.

Q: But you were undoubtedly present when Juan Carlos came to the U.S. in the summer of '58.

THOMPSON: I think so. Yes we were still in Washington when the king came. I remember there were great doings at the Spanish embassy at the time of course. This was at the time of the rapprochement between Franco and the monarchy. Franco of course having had his way in terms of how the young king of Spain was to be educated and prepared for his possible future rule.

Q: And were the Spanish basically happy over the aid they were getting or were there complaints about that?

THOMPSON: I don't remember any. Well, I don't think the Spanish government was ever fully satisfied by any means, but as far as popular responses go my recollection is that there were no complaints about our aid program. In fact Spaniards in general were quite gratified to at last have that kind of a relationship with the United States.

Q: In those years did we make any comments about human rights behavior in either Spain or Portugal as we are wont to do now in many cases?

THOMPSON: No, we were not inclined to do that then. I think because the Foreign Service establishment as a whole had not fully grasped the relevance of human rights protection for the United States abroad and because it was not politic at the time to do anything to rock these regimes upon whom we were making significant security demands at the time.

Q: Well at the end of your tour at the department in 1958, you were transferred to Bolivia.

THOMPSON: That's right. I went to Bolivia as head of the political section in La Paz [in August].

Q: What were your impressions of Bolivia as you arrived?

THOMPSON: Ha, Ha, Ha, Let's stop this!

Q: Today is May 14, 1996. I am resuming my discussion with Herb Thompson. Herb, when we last talked I asked you your impressions on arrival in Bolivia, and you responded in shall I say a humorous manner. Why was that? Did you find Bolivia that exciting?

THOMPSON: Yes, it was exciting. It was a fun place in many ways. I suppose I chuckled because Bolivia has to be one of the most exotic places in Latin America as well as the most politically unstable country in the hemisphere. Bolivia is also a dramatic place, physically and remarkably beautiful. At that altitude, which is above 12,000 feet in places where most people live, one gets an absolutely gorgeous light which is unique in my experience and a wonderful climate where it is warm in the sunshine and cool where you step into the shade. Of course one is always a little breathless at that altitude, but more or less one gets accustomed.

Q: What was the state of our relations when you arrived? Were we getting along well with Bolivia?

THOMPSON: Yes. I recall we were doing all right with the so called revolutionary regime in Bolivia. The MNR, the National Revolutionary Movement, had been in power since 1952 and I was there in '58. The problem in Bolivia always was not so much whether we had a good relationship, it was a question of how dependent Bolivia was going to be upon U.S. assistance for the present and in time to come.

Q: Were our people threatened there? Were there riots against the embassy? How did their feelings illustrate?

THOMPSON: That's part of my chuckled response I guess is that at one point in our stay in Bolivia, some correspondent, presumably not the regular Time correspondent, but another doing an article on Bolivia, included in it the canard which was then old, old in the hemisphere, that Bolivia and her problems should be divided up among her neighbors, and attributed that to an officer of the United States embassy. The result of course was a tremendous riot on the streets of La Paz directed at the embassy and which was finally brought to a crisis by the President's telling our Chargé by telephone that he simply could not guarantee the safety of the embassy premises or its personnel any longer. One can question that, of course, in as much as there certainly had been government participation in putting the riot in motion, and by the time things really got hot and heavy and the cars had been torched in our parking lot and so on and the mobs were in the street breaking the windows of our embassy building that we shared with a bank which got the most ground floor damage, there was a cordon of civil guard police around the embassy doing a pretty effective job of deterring entrance into our premises. But it was yeoman labor and I suppose the President simply didn't want to maintain that struggle any longer. In other words, I think it got completely out of hand. The upshot was that we burned our files and evacuated the embassy and removed all our personnel down to a nearby suburb called Qualicoto where we stayed for a week or ten days before returning to our homes in the city and reactivating the embassy.

Q: Certainly there must have been some reaction from Washington because of this. Did they lean on the Bolivians to cease and desist or did we ask for compensation for our embassy?

THOMPSON: I am no longer entirely clear on what happened, but my impression is, given our assessment of the limited capacity of the government, no real effort was made to put any pressure on them for what they had done. In other words they had gone through the motions of trying to protect us from this incident when it got underway and they had given us fair warning that they could no longer protect us and to some extent helped us evacuate. So I think we just let it pass.

Much in the same way we let it pass when my wife was attacked on the streets of La Paz on another occasion having nothing to do with this affair. The irony is that she was out collecting for Bolivian charities and had gone into town to see a number of Bolivian business people to ask for contributions for their Red Cross and hospitals and so on only to have made the fatal mistake of having parked near the Ministry of Campesino, otherwise rural or farmer affairs, where in her absence a mob gathered demonstrating against the government over a variety of farm complaints. When she returned to her car, she was sighted by this mob which simply turned and bore down on her. She barely made it into the car with scratches and bruises and considerable disarray and damage to her clothing, and with remarkable aplomb at the time, managed to put the car in motion and move slowly enough not to run over anyone and still get away from the site. Afterward the President, this was President Pass, apologized to our Ambassador and asked that his apologies be extended to my wife, but that was the extent of it.

Q: So it was a place where your lives were at stress, if not under danger often.

THOMPSON: Well, yes, to some degree. It was a very unsettled place. You know that since the achievement of Bolivian independence some time in the second quarter of the 19th century, Bolivia has had an average of more than one government a year to date. So political life expectancy in Bolivia is not very great, and that is associated with a good deal of turmoil and violence.

Q: There was an incident where the Foreign minister had to seek refuge in our embassy. Do you recall that? Or perhaps it happened after you left.

THOMPSON: I can't [recall the] occasion.

Q: I was reading an account where he had been pursued by a mob and had to take refuge in the U.S. embassy there.

THOMPSON: It sounds perfectly natural. I would be rather inclined to think that the Bolivian Foreign Minister would be loathe to take refuge in the American embassy. [But] he was entitled to jump in any door he could.

Q: How strong was the Communist influence there from Moscow or from Castro in those

years?

THOMPSON: The Castro influence was alive and growing at that time. The Soviets were active and doing their best to cause trouble. But it was not a kind of overriding consideration on our relationship. Certainly the East-West arm wrestling was a constant factor there.

Q: But there was never a threat to overthrowing the government, say by Castroite people.

THOMPSON: There was never really an overt threat. There was a period when the MNR had splintered to the degree that its own members had taken on the coloration of a much wider political spectrum than they presumably represented when they came to office. On the left wing were the large labor organizations, primarily the miners but including the farm workers as well. [The farm workers] were at that time under the sway of Juan Lachine, a rather well known figure in Bolivia who was then or sometime nearabouts also a senator. But while there was a significant leftist influence in Lachine's organization and in his own orientation and political stance, I think the U.S. was sufficiently alert to the problem and sufficiently forthcoming in trying to take some actions to forestall any problems of that kind in a timely way, that it was avoided. At that time Washington decided on the basis of embassy reporting and recommendations that it would be well to designate a special mission to visit La Paz for the purpose of assessing how we might lend support to the existing Bolivian government. That [] continued for several weeks and did result in some action by the United States on the aid side that I think was very helpful at the time.

Q: Now you served under two career ambassadors, if I'm correct, Phil Bonsal and Carl Strom.

THOMPSON: Yes, and I was still there when Ben Stephanski came.

Q: Were these ambassadors effective or could one be effective with the Bolivian government in those days?

THOMPSON: I think they were as effective as one could hope to be; it was not an easy post for anyone. At least in the early part of our relationship, our AID activity was not at a level that contributed greatly either to their stability or to our relations. That improved somewhat, later on.

One vignette from our stay in Bolivia that I recall very well is that I think it was on the eve of the 1960 elections I undertook a sort of a countrywide tour to take its political pulse and see what was going on and in the process stopped at the great historic silver mine of Bol Potosi, which as you know the Spaniards worked for many years during the colonial period. Since that time the silver had long disappeared and is now a major Bolivian tin mine. But at the time of my visit the mine manager offered me a guide to take me down into the mine and into the workplaces to get some notion a what life for the miners was really like. I learned more about it I must say than I ever intended to. This

miner took me down the elevators to a very low level of the mine and then led me through a circuitous and almost impassable passage, part of which we had to negotiate on all fours, to an area where he wanted to show me what they called a chimney, which is an upright shaft branching off the main corridor, if that's what one can call what we were in, with a platform above.

My guide preceded me up the ladder to this platform, and I was just stepping onto the platform when he suddenly turned to me and said, "Get down. Get down. There's gas." So I began to climb down only because he had asked me to do that, fully convinced that this was the old-timer's indoctrination of the newcomer and he was simply trying to give me a big scare. I continued to believe that until all of a sudden he fell flat on his face with his legs hanging over the edge of the flooring of this chamber and started to breathe in a very studious manner. I then understood there really was a problem other than his trying to have fun with a greenhorn and proceeded to notice that, either from pure nervousness or from the gas, I was getting rather woozy myself. I was partly down the ladder by then but I came back up to try to bring him down and pulled him off the platform and started back down the ladder only to discover that one of his legs had gone through the rungs of the ladder and he was hanging by his knee as I was trying to bring him down. Which meant that I had to go back up and put him back on the platform and untangle his leg from the ladder before we could start down again.

Q: Were you carrying him or how?

THOMPSON: Carrying him to the extent. Fortunately, he was not the biggest man in the world. But I'm sure the devil has spoken to me a lot of times during my life but never so clearly as on that occasion. I remember very well that when I discovered that he was immobilized with his leg through the ladder and that I was going to have to go through a lot more to get him out of there it came to me very clearly, I was a relatively young man still in my thirties with a young wife and two very young children, and the question was what in the world was I doing in this place running this kind of a risk. Happily, I recognized that temptation for what it was and put it behind me, but I must say it was a shaking experience.

In any case when I finally got him down off the platform and away from the ladder, there we were back in this small corridor up which we had traveled. I thought I knew the direction in which to go and asked him and all I could get out of him was "Get out. Get out." So I took him under one arm and did the best I could to get us down the corridor in the direction I thought we had come. I turned out to be right and ultimately we came to the point where we had to go on all fours again. I had considerable difficulty getting him through there. But as we went on he began to revive and was able to move on his own volition and strength. By the time we got back to the main working area of the mine, he was walking again, but disappeared immediately thereafter never to be seen again. When I asked the mine manager how it was that I never heard any word from this beneficiary of my largess, he simply explained it was too embarrassing an experience for any miner to go through to have a greenhorn rescue him in his own mine.

Q: That was a fascinating but very dangerous situation for which you were not decorated by the Bolivian government I guess.

THOMPSON: Oh, no. I was decorated by the American government. I received honorable service award or distinguished service award or something of the kind [in 1960].

Q: You should have at least gotten congratulations.

THOMPSON: At the time but that was all the recognition there ever was.

Q: I imagine you didn't visit many mines from then on in Bolivia.

THOMPSON: [You're right!]

Q: Well, your tour in La Paz came to an end in 1961 and you were transferred back to the department to the Bureau of Latin American Affairs [ARA] and you became Deputy Director of West Coast affairs. What did West Coast affairs comprise in those days?

THOMPSON: [In January 1962] it included Colombia, Peru, Bolivia, Chile, and Ecuador, five countries. All of which I may say were at that time under what was known as somebody's watch list. It soon became apparent that we were going to be reporting to the Attorney General and Governor Harriman on a very frequent schedule in person with regard to those three countries.

Q: Which three were they?

THOMPSON: Colombia Bolivia and I think it was Ecuador.

Q: Why were they interested in this?

THOMPSON: This was at the time when the U.S. government first began to gear up against insurgency threats and instability and created a kind of dedicated mechanism to keep the highest levels of government apprized of developments in those countries.

Q: The high priest of counter insurgency was the attorney general Bobby Kennedy. This was not related to the Alliance for Progress which was going on at the same time in which you probably were involved in some way.

THOMPSON: Well, yes, but they both grew from the same root. In other words the Alliance was described with great public fanfare provide a public kind of rallying point for the desire for development in the hemisphere both in other countries and in our own. While in a much quieter way, the anti-insurgency group was put together to do its work.

Q: You were deputy director of West Coast affairs for the Latin American bureau. Who was the director at that time?

THOMPSON: Toby Belcher was the director of West Coast affairs when I arrived.

Q: Did you and he divide the work up or the countries or did you pay attention to some subjects?

THOMPSON: As I recall we didn't have a formal division of the countries. We both in effect rode herd on all of them. But in the course of time it fell out that we developed somewhat different areas of expertise. I guess Bolivia and Chile became mine, possibly along with Colombia. In any event, I recall that soon after I returned to the department, this major exercise was undertaken that required that a large country book be prepared for every country and then submitted to George McGee as then undersecretary for political affairs. The lead time I recall was a reasonable one for preparation of these papers. Of course, our office, having five [countries], was pretty heavily burdened with them. I recall that we simply didn't get the Bolivia paper in time. Toby and I finally decided that the only way we were going to get a Bolivia paper done was for me to write it. So I closeted myself for several days and wrote this book. By the time it was finished, however, George McGee was on an absolute rampage about how late so many of these papers were and had committed himself to a personal excoriation of every officer responsible for a delayed country book. The Bolivia country book of course was delayed. Since I had written [it], I became the one responsible for its delay.

Q: You, rather than the Bolivian desk officer.

THOMPSON: Yes, of course. I, rather than the man who should have written it. Just one more of the injustices of the Foreign Service. But in any case, it was very amusing because Toby was insistent that I was not going to go up there by myself and be brutalized by George McGee when he was perfectly aware that I was not the responsible officer. So he insisted on accompanying me to George McGee's office. I can't remember what the meeting was like at the time, but I appreciated Toby's support.

Q: Well you're here today so it couldn't have been all that bad.

THOMPSON: That's right.

Q: Now those were the days when a great deal of attention was being paid to Latin America. In the early days of the Kennedy administration one thinks of the Alliance for Progress, the Peace Corps, increased aid. This obviously had a reflection of what you were doing there to which you had to pay attention.

THOMPSON: Well, yes. We were involved in all of those activities as well as others like the special group or whatever it was called under the Attorney General and Governor Harriman designed to keep a top level eye on threatened countries in the hemisphere. Three of our five countries were grouped in that category: [Colombia], Ecuador, and Bolivia. This became a rather burdensome activity for the office, because we not only had to do, as I recall, special background books on each country to put forward as the basic briefing book for this group, [and monitor] the countries as we would have had to do in

any case for ourselves, but [also] had to make personal appearances and reports before the group on each country on a fairly short time scale.

Q: Now this was a period when we were having Presidential interest in this area too, and I recall President Kennedy made a triumphal trip to Bogota at one time with Mrs. Kennedy and that received a great deal of publicity. Did you accompany on that trip or did your boss get to go along?

THOMPSON: I can't recall when that trip took place, but I think I was not yet in the department when that took place. As I recall that was sort of an early phase in the Alliance for Progress.

Q: It was. It took place about 1961.

THOMPSON: I was not yet there. But of course the Alliance for Progress and all that was associated with it was a major theme of our activity at that time.

Q: Yes, there was a great deal of attention to it. And there was also a good deal of attention to the nefarious Mr. Castro and what he was doing in the region. Did that influence a good deal of your work or not?

THOMPSON: Yes, I think in part the anxiety that had given rise to both the alliance and the special watch group for these countries was because of the inroads that Castro had made in the hemisphere and the continuing difficulty of trying to deal with him and the rather clear and overt Cuban threat to other countries in the hemisphere.

Q: There was a problem that arose in this period with Peru as I recall. An election was in dispute and settled by a military coup, and we suspended our aid and did things like this. Broke relations for awhile.

THOMPSON: Yes, that's right. To go back a little further, it was perfectly evident to our embassy and to us that the then civilian government was in deep trouble and was in great danger of being overthrown by a military coup. There was then serving in Washington as military attaché, a very senior Peruvian army officer who was slated to return home from his assignment almost immediately. It was decided that it would be a good idea to give this officer a Dutch uncle talk about what United States reactions would be in the event of an unconstitutional change in government in Peru. For reasons no longer clear to me it fell to me to have that talk with that officer who was believed to be in a position to make a serious impact on the top echelons of the army if indeed they were considering this move. We had our talk which was starchy but correct. He left and went back to Peru. As far as I was able to ever observe, while the effect on him may have been appreciable; it had no effect whatever on the military leadership who proceeded to carry off the coup.

Q: This was also a period when we had a number of visits by the President to these countries. I presume that took time in each case from your busy agenda.

THOMPSON: Yes, that's right. I can remember accompanying President Pass to the White House when he came for his visit and one of the very amusing episodes in Dr. Pass' talk with the President. The subject of communism arose I think because something was going on with Tito at the time, and one or another of the Presidents referred to Tito Whereupon President Kennedy cast a sidelong glance at President Pass and said, "Yes, but of course President Tito is a very conservative communist."

Q: Surprising Pass no doubt. Were there other issues you'd like to mention in connection with your service in West Coast affairs?

THOMPSON: None that I think of especially at the moment. [For the last months of the tour, I was the acting director].

Q: Well then, in August 1964 after three years on the desk, you were assigned to the National War College for a year, which was a pleasant interlude before your next assignment. In August 1965 you returned to the Department where you were made executive secretary of the department, a 7th floor assignment. Who was the executive secretary at that time?

THOMPSON: Ben Reed.

Q: What were your principal duties there?

THOMPSON: Well, in addition to rallying around and supporting whatever secretariat activities were underway, the two deputies had responsibility for distribution within the department and to other agencies of all highly restricted cable traffic and for supporting officers on the so called S/S line [S/S-S] who did liaison with the bureaus directly on a day to day basis. I was the deputy responsible for the operations center, which was then a new creation. We also had some very special responsibilities vis a vis President Johnson who wanted to know everything about what everybody was doing and received from the secretary a so-called night reading on a daily basis outlining significant activities which had taken place during that day, either meetings abroad or meetings in the department or activities that were visible at the UN which needed to be brought to the President's attention. In addition, the President wanted to monitor the press contacts of the senior officers of the department. There was a requirement to produce on a weekly basis, as I recall, a summary of all press briefings held by the assistant secretaries. One can imagine what it was like trying to extract from an assistant secretary like "X" in charge of Southeast Asian affairs at the time in the midst of the Vietnam War a recital of what he had done last Saturday in briefing correspondents. It was, I must say, a thankless task but we managed to get it done.

Q: Did you travel with any of the principals of the Department or not?

THOMPSON: Yes the S/S staff officers always accompanied the secretary when he was traveling abroad. I think the only trip I went on was to accompany the secretary to the meeting of the Inter-American council in Rio in 1965.

Q: Did the Executive Secretary get involved in some of these difficult cases the Department has to handle? I was thinking of the Otto Otepka case. It was the Jenner and McCarthy period and he was suing the Department because he had been unjustly treated.

THOMPSON: I vaguely remember the case. I don't remember that I was involved at all.

Q: There was also difficulty in the passport office with Frances Knight and her chief Mr. Schwartz who couldn't get along and that spilled over into the newspapers.

THOMPSON: We managed to stay out of that one as well.

Q: Good. Well any other comments about your service in the secretariat?

THOMPSON: No. Only that it was a fascinating bird's eye seat on the goings on in the world and a rather exhausting assignment. I don't know when I've been so glad to give up 14 hour office days. When that assignment came to an end [in October 1967, my reward was] a field post.

Q: Which brings us to 1967 when you went to Buenos Aires as political counselor. What was the atmosphere there on your arrival? There was a military dictatorship, I believe, in power.

THOMPSON: Yes, the military regime was in power. We had rather formal, if not warm, relations with that regime. I remember particularly my arrival there because the DCM was on consultation in the department just before I left to go to Buenos Aires, and then as I recall, went on personal leave. While I was making my way to Buenos Aires, Ambassador Martin was called away to perform a function related to an international agriculture group that he was heading at the time. And so to my astonishment on setting foot on Argentine soil I discovered that I was the chargé d'affaires, which went on for some time.

Q: Was there evident anti-American feeling in Argentina at that time.

THOMPSON: Not really. I suppose in the nether reaches of the Peronist movement there were plenty of people who undoubtedly had difficulties with the United States, but it was not very public or noticeable.

Q: It didn't affect your dealing with the officials there or your movement about or discussions with other people?

THOMPSON: No, it wasn't a problem.

Q: What about communist and Cuban influence there at the time?

THOMPSON: Well, the control of the military was pretty effective acting as a prophylactic against subversive activities in Argentina. Later of course the internal situation became much more difficult, that is, under succeeding military regimes and the

period of the "dirty war" came along. But none of that was in evidence during my assignment there.

Q: And yet during that period the Ambassador's residence was fired on and the USIS library was attacked so there were obviously underlying forces there at work.

THOMPSON: Yes that's right. I think if I recall the USIA center in Cordoba was fired while we were there. Cordoba was a rather yeasty place given that it was the principal locus of Argentine industry and the heart of the Peronist labor movement was there. There was a rather large and violent strike I remember in Cordoba close to the time of my departure as I recall.

Q: The former head of the Argentine government Juan Peron was, at the time you were there, in exile in Madrid. Was his influence strongly felt in Argentina or were the people glad he was in Madrid? Would they have welcomed him back? What was your impression?

THOMPSON: Well, it depends on which people. I suppose the Peronists in theory at least would have been glad to have him back as head of state as he proved to be some years later. On the other hand, certainly the military regime had no desire to have any truck with Peron. And while Peron was said to be periodically sending emissaries to the Peronist movement in Argentina and there was a certain amount of speculation and press commentary about what he was doing, the fact was there was not a significant Peron influence apparent at that time in Argentina.

Q: Two or three ambassadors arrived while you were in Buenos Aires.

THOMPSON: Ed Martin was ambassador when I arrived and was replaced by John Lodge.

Q: Where did Carter Burgess come in?

THOMPSON: Oh, yes, you're right. Carter Burgess replaced Ed Martin and in turn was replaced by...

Q: Which one was the most effective there in terms of handling...

THOMPSON: My bias would be to say that the career officer Ed Martin was the most effective of the three. On the other hand, I did not serve with him as long as with the others as he was replaced not long after my arrival. Carter Burgess had been a Democrats-for-Nixon leader in business circles in the United States and had some very ingenious ideas about entertaining at the residence. He had the practice of designating an officer of the embassy as coordinator for every social event held in the embassy. Each had to have a theme with appropriate favors relating to the theme to be distributed to the guests during the entertainment. All in all these were rather big productions. John Lodge of course came not only with his political history of having been governor of Connecticut

but his diplomatic experience of having been ambassador to Spain. More than that his Hollywood experience from his days as an actor in Hollywood. All these features conjoined in him to [create] a very public personality who was committed to a constant stream of pressmaking events and interviews which kept the public affairs officer fully engaged as his personal spokesman. Enough said about those poor creatures.

Q How were the duties divided between the ambassador and his deputies? Did the ambassador behave like a chairman of the board and let the deputies run the organization or did any one of the three take a direct hands on approach?

THOMPSON: Well, I think that Ed Martin had a very hands on approach. I think in the cases of both Carter Burgess and John Lodge, they performed in a kind of chairman of the board role where the DCM was responsible for running things other than social events and public affairs which were their domain.

Q: Did the embassy and Washington see our relations with Argentina in the same light at that time or were there differences of opinion?

THOMPSON: I'm not able to recall that we were on different wavelengths at any time during my tour there.

Q: Looking backward, when you were in Argentina, could you foresee a time when there would be a war over the Falklands?

THOMPSON: No. I would have to say that was inconceivable to me at that time. The Falklands as it had been for many years and as it was still to be for many years was an issue in UK relations with Argentina. But the notion that the Argentines would ever engage in the madness of an invasion of the Falklands really was not on my radar.

Q: Well, after three years in Argentina, at mid-cycle you moved north to Panama and there you became DCM to Ambassador Bob Sayer. Had you requested this assignment, or did he request you or how did it work?

THOMPSON: I'm not clear on whether he requested me. I'd certainly not requested the assignment. It became somewhat of a cause célèbre in Buenos Aires with Ambassador Lodge choosing to take the position upon his return from leave in Spain, that he had somehow been undercut during his absence with his political consular removed from his staff although always with appropriate sounds of regret. He continued to look upon me until my departure as one that had willingly broken up the Lodge team.

Q: You were deserting the ship, is that it?

THOMPSON: In effect, yes.

Q: Too bad this does not make your leave taking any easier, I know.

THOMPSON: No. On the other hand, be it said in the ambassador's behalf, he and Mrs. Lodge gave a very lovely farewell reception for us on our departure from the post and we left on the best of terms.

Q: Now you arrived in Panama in January 1970. Did the ambassador there give you much authority. Because here you are career officer DCM to their ambassador. Did you divide the work between you or did he use you more as a staff aide as can often happen with a DCM?

THOMPSON: In all my DCM incarnations, which were many, I did not at any point have to play the staff assistant role. I was fully employed in Panama in effect as chief of staff under the ambassador.

Q: What were your relations with the Canal Zone authorities, the U.S. military authorities and so forth?

THOMPSON: Well they were very cordial in the sense that the Canal Zone authorities, particularly the governor were given to frequent entertainment of Panamanians from the republic, and were always careful to include embassy personnel in those events. To a lesser extent the same was true of the Commandant of Southern Command [SOCOM], who also maintained a somewhat less active social schedule, but always included embassy personnel. There also was a coordinating body whose name escapes me at the moment, which met on a weekly basis in the Canal Zone in the office of the governor, where the principals were the ambassador as chairman and the governor and the CinC [Commander in Chief] of SOUTHCOM as members.

Q: Would they produce joint papers for Washington's consideration?

THOMPSON: No, we didn't really produce papers. Clearly it was designed to seek to harmonize policies and programs and I think on the whole, served very well what really was a Rube Goldberg kind of arrangement on the peninsula. I attended always with the ambassador and chaired the group in his absence.

Q: Now it was at that time we were beginning talks or continuing talks about a new canal treaty. Did you get involved in that?

THOMPSON: Oh, yes. We were in a stage where I suppose you could say the embassy was trying to build a negotiating base in Washington from which some actual talks could be undertaken with the Panamanians about how to deal with the extended future of the Canal Zone and our presence there. It was a rather uphill road at the time as I recall and we were constantly engaged, the ambassador and I, in sending papers to Washington trying to point out the importance of the U.S. reverting to a more normal relationship with the government of Panama than the one extant since the building of the canal.

Q: Now those recommendations were not coordinated with the people in the Canal Zone who might have had different views on that.

THOMPSON: They were not formally coordinated. They were fully aware of our views, and there is no question that their's were significantly different from our own.

Q: Where did the U.S. military authorities stand on that issue?

THOMPSON: The military authorities were disinclined to rock the boat. Remember if you will, that the Governor and the Lieutenant Governor of the Canal Zone were both military engineering officers by career, and the Lieutenant Governor was still in active service although the Governor had retired.

Q: What was the extent of communist and Cuban influence in Panama while you were there?

THOMPSON: It was certainly not great. I think the communist direct influence on the ground in Panama was minimal, and the whole Cuban situation was used more as a kind of rallying cry against the United States than anything else.

Q: There was no Cuban embassy in Panama at that time was there?

THOMPSON: No.

Q: You left Panama after three years. That was in 1973. What were your impressions at that time?

THOMPSON: Well, I recall departing with a good deal of frustration in the sense that while I thought that the ambassador and I had both contributed significantly to trying to achieve some kind of modernization in U.S. policy and attitudes with regards to Panama and the canal, it was like trying to break into another time warp or something to really change attitudes. It was quite clear that the military as an institution had no interest whatever in modernizing the relationship inasmuch, of course, as they were comfortably ensconced and in complete security control of the canal and the whole security area. Similarly the Canal Zone administration had no desire for any sort of change and regarded all efforts in that direction as direct threats, not only to U.S. control, but [also] to effective operation of the canal and to all of their personnel in the canal.

Q: So you felt you were pushing a boulder uphill.

THOMPSON: That's right. Or pushing on the distant end of the string. I did not leave with any degree of satisfaction that we were moving by any means fast enough to try to normalize or modernize our relationship with Panama.

Q: Were these frustrations mirrored in Washington?

THOMPSON: I think so. I think as far as the ARA bureau was concerned and our personnel there, they very much shared our frustrations.

Q: What did it take to finally break that impasse?

THOMPSON: Well, I think it took a good deal more jawboning from the embassy and from the Latin Americanists at State and once the basic decision was made to enter talks with the Panamanians, then [it took] the vigorous pursuit of those talks by the secretary and Ambassador Bunker and others.

Q: Well, you left Panama in 1973 for an assignment that was even hotter in nature and that was as DCM in Santiago, Chile.

THOMPSON: Oh, yes!

Q: When did you arrive in Santiago, Chile?

THOMPSON: We arrived in Santiago in late August, 1973.

Q: That is a month before the great coup.

THOMPSON: A little less. I think we arrived on August 20 or thereabouts, and the military overthrew the Allende regime on the 11th of September.

Q: What was the atmosphere you sensed on your arrival?

THOMPSON: The atmosphere was unique in my experience. The city of Santiago, the capital, was for all intents and purposes shut down. A truckers' strike had been in effect for some weeks and had stopped all significant deliveries of goods and foodstuffs and everything else into the capital. As one walked down the streets, while store doors were open, it was plain that stores contained no goods, whether haberdasheries or markets or whatever. At the same time of course there was significant political stress apparent in the system, inasmuch as the socialist firebrands on the left of Allende's coalition were at white heat in terms of public pronunciamientos about the enduring nature of the Allende government and the need to keep pressing to the left and so on.

Q: Now the strike you mentioned, that was a political strike instead of economic wasn't it, or did it have elements of both?

THOMPSON: Yes, I think it had elements of both but I think it was primarily a politically motivated strike against the Allende government. This was also a time when there was ample evidence of public unhappiness with the Allende regime. I remember later being told by a Chilean lady that she had had, up until around that time, the custom of picking up military officers on their way into central Santiago as she came in from the suburbs in the morning to go to her job. Public transportation being an absolute disaster, and taxis being at a premium because of gas shortages, she did the kindness of picking up these military officers going in. But the time came when her frustration and that of other middle and upper class Chileans with the behavior and performance of the Allende regime was so great, that she would stop and curse at the military officers and then continue on her way without picking them up, which as you can imagine in a Latin

American society was scandalous to say the least.

Q: So that was the atmosphere, tense.

THOMPSON: That was the atmosphere. On the other hand there was enough civility still in the country and enough indications of the Allende regime having armed its own militias and so on that it was not readily accepted even in our own mission that a military coup was a distinct possibility. I recall that in the brief interval between my arrival and the coup, Ambassador Nat Davis was called on to go to Washington for consultations. While he was away, the level of political rhetoric heated up to the point that I called a country team meeting to begin to lay out the responsibilities for the eventuality of an overthrow of the Allende government.

Q: We were discussing your period in Chile which was the most exciting this century in that country. You were there in 1973 when the government of Salvador Allende was overthrown. Did you and the embassy see it coming?

THOMPSON: Well, I thought I saw it coming. Although I was promptly told by those officers in the embassy who should have known, below my level, that the chains had marched up and down this hill a hundred times and that there really was no reason to be particularly concerned.

Q: Did that include the intelligence people, too?

THOMPSON: They didn't argue with that.

Q: So they had seen it so often that they thought it was just one more...

THOMPSON: One more show that the military would ultimately back down from.

Q: But as we know, the military didn't back down. On the 11th of September you had the deposition of Allende. Where were you at the time it happened?

THOMPSON: I was at home. I had a call early in the morning from our air attaché telling me that there was reason to believe our military people up on the post thought that the navy was coming out of its installations and taking over locales in various places on the coast and offered to swing by and pick me up on his way in to the embassy. I said absolutely and went in with him. We then discovered that we had no trouble getting in, but it became apparent that others who came into town a little later had great difficulty getting by roadblocks and so on to make their way in to the embassy. In fact we had a full compliment in the embassy by 11:00 or 11:30 in the morning when it was perfectly clear to me that we had far too many people locked up unnecessarily in the center of town recognizing that the target was going to be the Presidential quarters which were just around the corner from our embassy. So I recommended to the ambassador that he leave me in charge and allow me to select a skeleton crew to stay at the embassy, and allow him and the rest of the staff to go home until the bullets quit jumping around quite so

wildly. He did that and I must say never forgave me for it because he was not there in the ensuing three or four days whatever it was, when we were locked down in the embassy and doing all the reporting to Washington about what was going on.

Q: Tell me a little about your reporting to Washington. How did you get word there, how quickly? Did you phone or cable?

THOMPSON: As I recall I guess we sent a flash cable early on that things seemed to be beginning and then just followed up with a hailstorm of reports.

Q: How did you get your information if you were locked up in the embassy?

THOMPSON: Well, it wasn't very difficult to see the bullets coming through the air conditioners in the embassy proper to the point where even before we were able to evacuate most of the people out of the embassy I had to get everybody out of their offices and into the central corridors away from all the windows because I think that some of the Allende crowd were not only shooting wildly but not averse to taking a shot at the American Embassy while they were at it. Of course they were right there within a block of the Presidential offices so that it was not difficult for them to do.

Q: You had Marine guards with you in the embassy?

THOMPSON: Yes, we had a couple who stayed.

Q: You were imprisoned in the embassy for how long?

THOMPSON: Three or four days. What happened was that shortly after the Ambassador had gone and I had released most of the rest of the staff, the military imposed a curfew even though it was broad daylight, imposed a curfew on Santiago. Nobody was to move other than the military authorities, and there was a good deal of shooting at the time so people were not disposed to challenge that unless they had a life or death reason to do so. That curfew remained in effect 24 hours a day for the next three or four days, so none of our people could come back. We couldn't change staff. Those of us who were in the embassy couldn't trade places with those on the outside, and they couldn't come in. It was only after the 24 hour curfew was lifted and then it was only lifted in daylight hours after the fourth day or so that we were able to go back to some sort of normal schedule.

Q: How did you exist? Did you have food in the embassy?

THOMPSON: Luckily we had a small dispensary in the embassy which had been used primarily for inexpensive lunches for our local staff. I chose with great care a number of ladies on the staff who I thought could man that effectively when I let others go. They did in fact run a very good restaurant for us with what we had to deal with, but that was going in good shape.

Q: Presumably you slept in shifts.

THOMPSON: Yes, when possible, but there was not a lot of that there.

Q: When did you learn about Allende's suicide and was it a suicide?

THOMPSON: I guess the military had taken over the airwaves early on in the day, and I suppose it was some point in the late afternoon or early evening, the now nationalized airwaves began to broadcast President Allende's demise which of course was reported as a suicide and may well have been. On the other hand, given the fact that the troops under an infantry colonel were making their way into the building at the time he was supposed to have committed suicide, his death could very well have come about under other circumstances.

Q: There have been many stories over the years of U.S. involvement or U.S. instigation of the coup, would you like to comment on that?

THOMPSON: Yes, we lived through a lot of that rather tortured comment. I must say it never had any substance, in the sense that the Chilean military at no time needed either our assistance or our advice in terms of taking over the Chilean State. They were quite able to do that at any point they thought it was politic to do so, and when they did they simply did it on their own without any collusion with us. That didn't deter the leftist press worldwide, including in the United States and to the extent outcries could be made in Chile, alleging that this was a United States organized and engineered coup. As I say, it had no basis in fact, but I was astonished to find, I suppose it was almost a year later, when the Congress sent down a delegation from the General Accounting Office [GAO] to go through the embassy and established the supposed facts of what happened at the time of the overthrow, that I was confronted with GAO questioners who required me to confirm that I had held a special country team meeting in the ambassador's absence just before the coup. The allegation was that this clearly had to do with our prior knowledge of and preparedness for the military overthrow. I, of course, sustained the position which was perfectly true, that my calling of the country team was no more than the contingency measure in an effort to be ready if the worst happened as of course it finally did. But I discovered that the GAO spokesman persisted in insisting that my having taken action in advance of the coup clearly meant foreknowledge of the coup which had been delivered to us. I tried to explain to them that I was a career Foreign Service officer and I had done political work for a long time before I became a deputy chief of mission, and that it was my professional responsibility to be aware of things of this sort either going on or in the making and that I would have been remiss in my duty had I not attempted to be prepared for what I thought at the time was a very real contingency. I was not successful I must say with the GAO, but on the other hand somewhere the GAO report must have been shot down in Washington because Washington was under the same kind of onslaught, that is to say the department was. In the end I don't recall that an ugly GAO report of the mission came out. But so much for [professional training].

Q: During that period, were you getting instructions from the department or the White House or both?

THOMPSON: Our instruction channel was from the department. Of course, during those first chaotic days there wasn't much in the way of instruction coming, we were just reporting on a minute by minute basis what developments were occurring as far as we could ascertain by telephone. Oddly enough the telephone system remained up and we could talk to people outside the embassy, and from the broadcasts that the military were permitting to come over the open radio.

Q: Were there American correspondents in Santiago at that time?

THOMPSON: I don't recall that there was any American correspondent present at the time.

Q: They certainly came later.

THOMPSON: Oh, yes, they were out in good force.

Q: I ask that because they are often a very good source of information; they get around town and know what is going on. What was the reaction of the Soviet and Cuban embassies to the overthrow of Allende?

THOMPSON: Well, we didn't have any way in the beginning to assess what their response was. I mean we had no contact with them and no way to directly observe directly what they were doing. As I recall, my impression is that they simply went to ground waiting for a better day.

Q: They had a disappointment and they just had to wait and see.

THOMPSON: Yes, they were obviously very unsympathetic to the idea of Allende's overthrow and the accession of the military.

Q: How large was our CIA unit in the embassy? Was it overly large because you are more aware than I of the stories that have come out about their involvement in secret subsidies and so forth?

THOMPSON: Yes. Well, for all the talk, and a limited degree of American political activity mainly through the trade unions which was subsequently admitted by President Ford, the size of the mission did not impress me as being grandiose or out of proportion.

Q: When did we establish relations with Pinochet? Tell us how that happened and what our relations with him were.

THOMPSON: Well, I can't really recall when

Q: We never broke relations really with the government.

THOMPSON: No, so that I suppose there was a kind of mirage in place that our relations were continuing or would be as soon as some personnel with whom we could talk were identified by the Chilean side. My recollection is that it was done without a lot of public shenanigans, in other words that we simply on a given day after the government had been formed and was in place, began to conduct business with the new government.

Q: There were several deaths of American citizens during this period. The embassy was criticized and I believe movies were made and books were written about the embassy's handling of these cases.

THOMPSON: Yes, that's right. I think it is not just lack of objectivity on my part that prompts me to say that no one was ever able to fault the performance of the embassy in the protection of American citizens during or following the overthrow. It is true that one American was killed under circumstances that strongly suggested that the military might have been responsible for his arrest and assassination, but before we in the embassy even knew that he was missing events later demonstrated that he was dead. In other words there was nothing that we could have done about it because we were simply not aware of where he was or what he was doing and were not informed until after his death that he had been under some kind of detention. We of course were doing the best we could to keep track of the private American community in Chile and doing whereabouts and welfare reports by cable on them to Washington to the extent that we could develop information. We were also making our communication channels available to other missions in town to simply report their sort of status of welfare in the immediate aftermath of the coup. So we served a number of interests beyond our own immediate requirements.

Q: How long did Ambassador Davis serve there after the overthrow?

THOMPSON: As I recall it seems to me that he was there perhaps three months after the overthrow and then was reassigned.

Q: Was there a long interruption before Ambassador Popper arrived?

THOMPSON: Yes, there was it seems to me about 7 or 8 months between.

Q: Were you in charge in a very dicey period I gather in our relations with Chile.

THOMPSON: Yes, a very difficult time.

Q: Were there high level visits at all from the U.S. during that period?

THOMPSON: No. There were some rather high level demarcates that I was obliged to make on a variety of subjects, including [important] representation on behalf of American businesses, which had been nationalized by Allende, seeking their return from the new government. In fact, I remember the most important was the return of the large mining companies to their properties, which I remember working out with Admiral X. He was then Pinochet's deputy for all economic affairs.

Q: Were the Chileans under Pinochet sympathetic or helpful in the return of our properties or not?

THOMPSON: Yes, they certainly were. It was difficult going at first but after hearing us out and giving the matter a little reflection, they decided they were going to disgorge and reverse the policy of the Allende regime.

Q: Did Ambassador Popper come with new instructions for our relationship?

THOMPSON: Not that I recall.

Q: What else can you tell us about the situation after the coup and how you found it, the atmosphere, the change, and what it meant to Americans in Chile?

THOMPSON: Back to the days immediately preceding the coup, I arrived sometime in the latter half of August and very kindly, Ambassador Davis had arranged for the entire country and their wives to be at the airport to greet me on arrival. In those days as in other times in Chilean performance, the civil airports were under the command of active duty military officers, and the day I arrived, the colonel in charge came into the VIP room where I was received by the country team and warmly greeted me. I gave no other thought to this until in the days immediately following the coup, the ambassador again departed for consultation in Washington, and I went to the airport to see him off. The airport at that time was under severe civilian control and all non-official personnel were being unloaded several blocks from the terminal and being bussed under guard from there to the terminal. In any case, as I entered the airport alone that morning, I had no more than got inside the door than I heard a shout from the far reaches of the main lobby of the airport and identified a military officer by now on a dead run coming toward me across the vestibule, shouting at the top of his voice, "Mr. Thompson. It's Mr. Thompson. The man who brought the coup to Chile."

Q: So we finally uncovered the rascal who did it.

THOMPSON: That's right we finally identified the one who was truly responsible. I tried for some seconds to disappear into the terminal floor, but it really wasn't possible, so I grappled with him and got him to quiet down and led him off to a more private area. The level of responsibility he attributed to me was both great and very clear.

Q: Well, I don't know whether to congratulate you or not but even so that is certainly a memory of those days. What were the relations between the ambassadors you had and the chiefs of station? Were they cordial; were they businesslike, helpful?

THOMPSON: Yes, I think they were certainly generally cordial and businesslike. I'm not sure they went much further than that.

Q: The ambassadors felt they were being well served by the intelligence they were

getting?

THOMPSON: I think as well as they thought they might be or as they thought likely.

Q: How did the ambassadors use you in the function of DCM there? Did they divide the work with you or did the two of you work on the same problems? Did you run the Staff? How was it divided?

THOMPSON: Well, essentially the ambassador and the DCM at that post during the time I was there operated as on executive unit. I suppose I did more staff interface certainly than the ambassador did, but that was not to mean that the running of the operation by any means had been delegated to me. I was simply his second in command.

Q: Any other comments on those two turbulent years in Chile?

THOMPSON: Nothing that I think of at the moment, thanks.

Q: Well then in 1975 at the end of that tour, you went to Mexico City as DCM, an even larger embassy. There you had two ambassadors, Ambassador Jova and Ambassador Lucey, I believe. Is that correct?

THOMPSON: Yes, that's right. With a substantial hiatus between them during which time I was chargé.

Q: What were the principal problems that you encountered on arrival in Mexico?

THOMPSON: Of course, one has to live in and deal with a border country, perhaps other than Canada to have any sense of what relations with Mexico are like. Perhaps the best introduction I had to things Mexican was that within days after my arrival, we had a CODEL [congressional delegation] arrive that insisted on meeting with the President. As a result, the ambassador and I took them, two Congressmen, to the Presidential Palace and participated intermittently, rather participated in what proved to be an intermittent nighttime meeting with the President, Echeverria, which I suppose began at 9:00 P.M. and ended sometime after 1:00 A.M. At some point, First it must be understood that President Echeverria's work method was to have a variety of consultant groups and conclaves and meetings with supporters going on in the palace simultaneously. He would move rotating from one group to the next so that our conversation would reach a certain point in our group when he would turn to the foreign minister and ask him to continue and excuse himself and disappear. For the next 20 minutes the conversation went on without the President at which point the President might or might not intervene again, and then be gone again. Somewhere in the course of this rather chaotic evening, I remember excusing myself to locate the gentlemen's room, and upon being told where it was, I found I had to traverse a long corridor which was also a kind of petitioner's waiting room, so that the corridor was full of people lining the walls waiting and hoping to speak to the President or someone. This is after midnight, because Echeverria was famous for his night hours. As I went down this hall, I was suddenly struck with the realization that

what I was looking at over the heads of these waiting Mexicans were drawings of the gun emplacements of General Scott at the time he invested Chapultepec. It suddenly dawned on me that the President of Mexico, every day, walked past those symbols of American occupation of his capital, and it helped to a degree to explain some of the attitudes.

In addition to the great peculiarities of serving in and with a country which shares an immense unguarded frontier with the United States, I had supposed that personal relations would be very difficult in Mexico because of the constant stress of endless problems being sifted by representatives of both governments in Mexico City. To my surprise I found that the Mexicans were very adept at distinguishing between personal relations and official difficulties and did not tend to carry one over into the other. I found Mexican officialdom not only very cordial but very cooperative and enjoyed a splendid working relationship during the time I was there, despite the problems we were constantly being confronted with.

Q: Was the fact that you had come from Chile a strike against you in the Mexican eyes? Did they ever bring up the question because they did not sympathize with Pinochet as I recall.

THOMPSON: That's right. Mexico was in a state indeed about Pinochet, but no one on the Mexican side ever adverted to my having been in Chile when I came to Mexico.

Q: Now Henry Kissinger visited Mexico when he was Secretary of State in '76. Did that have any effect on our relations or on your peace of mind?

THOMPSON: Oddly enough, I don't recall that it did. I do recall that - oh, that was earlier - I had accompanied President Johnson on a visit to Mexico while I was in the secretariat, so I had some notion of what state and quasi-state visits entailed on the ground. I had had some warning of what was to come so I was not surprised.

Q: While you were there, President Echeverria was succeeded by Lopez Portillo, I believe. Did that have an effect on relations between our countries?

THOMPSON: Not any major effect. Lopez Portillo was more flamboyant, I think, in both his behavior and his menage than was Echeverria, but in terms of overall relationships, I don't think there was any great change.

Q: Were you involved at all when ambassador Andrew Young visited Mexico City?

THOMPSON: It wasn't on my watch.

Q: What were the leftist influences there, the Soviet and the Cuban in Mexico because both have had large embassies there I understand.

THOMPSON: That's right and of course at some point very late in my tenure we had the whole falcon incident or whatever the trade name it went by of the Americans who were

apprehended on the grounds of the Soviet embassy and all that. But certainly the Soviet and Cuban embassies were massive installations in Mexico and certainly were very active people.

Q: Were they influential or just active?

THOMPSON: I wouldn't say so much influential as active. In fact, of course, the revolutionary pretensions of the NMRP party despite its 70 year tenure in Mexico was I think an important bulwark to the development of leftward sentiment and political activity in Mexico. In other words, the Mexican government itself monopolized to a large degree the space on the left that the political stage allowed, and there was very little opportunity for the others to operate. I think its also true that while the Mexicans found the Soviets and the Cubans very useful in their games with the United States, they were also very security minded in terms of their own well-being and were not in a mood to tolerate any nonsense from that quarter. After all, Echeverria had already gone through the student riots of 1968 which were a great black mark on the tally sheet of the Presidency, and certainly had those missions in large part to thank for his troubles.

Q: Now were you there when Vice President Mondale paid a visit to Mexico City?

THOMPSON: I don't know where I was when all these visitors showed up. When was Mondale there?

Q: And Secretary Vance?

THOMPSON: I may have been there when Vance was.

Q: You served under two ambassadors; describe your relations with them. They were quite different men, John Jova being a consummate professional; Ambassador Lucey being a former governor.

THOMPSON: And a consummate outsider. Well, relations in fact with both were reasonable working relationships. I obviously had more sympathy with Ambassador Jova and shared more assessments with him that later proved to be the case with Ambassador Lucey. That being Ambassador Lucey's first post of any kind, whereas Ambassador Jova had a long record of service in the career. I had known Ambassador Jova years before when we had worked together in Western European affairs, so it was the resumption of an old relationship to appear on the scene as his DCM. None of us of course had had any contact with Ambassador Lucey or I'm sure could quite imagine all of the elements of that relationship.

Q: Did they use you to full effect as DCM? The ambassadors?

THOMPSON: Ambassador Jova did deliberately and with full intention. Ambassador Lucey did, but I suppose more because I rather forced my activities on him that was responding to direction from him to undertake certain efforts.

Q: Did he bring any of his own people with him?

THOMPSON: Oh, yes! He brought with him a very able young staff officer who had been his secretary of administration in his gubernatorial administration in Wisconsin. This young man of course was brought to Mexico City under the trappings of the ambassador's staff aide or staff assistant. In fact he loomed far larger on Ambassador Lucey's horizon than that description would account for. I must say however that while it may not have been altogether to Ambassador Lucey's liking, that gentleman did not play the role of DCM while I was at the post. We maintained perfectly cordial working relationship, with it being clear to him that he was the ambassador's man and not mine, but that I was also the Ambassador's man in a quite larger sense.

Q: When you were there we had a large number of consular offices. Did you get to visit them?

THOMPSON: I think we still had 10 functioning consulates which was down from about 14, as I recall, some years earlier, and is now still fewer. I did make the rounds to all the consulates and consulates general while I was there as DCM and consulted with all the officers at post, and did such things as visits to American prisoners in Mexican prisons at each stop. It was a large swing to get around to all of them.

Q: Did you drive or air travel or both?

THOMPSON: We traveled by car.

Q: You traveled by car because you have mountainous terrain, deserts, everything.

THOMPSON: Everything. But the travel mode was largely dictated by security considerations rather than the most expeditious means.

Q: Speaking of security, say a word or two about that. Were you ever under any threat, or the embassy under any threat while you were there?

THOMPSON: Well, going back a ways, we received lots of threats in Panama. Persistent threats; to a lesser extent in Chile, and somewhat more actively in Mexico. In all 3 places we were required to operate with a security detail which was a great nuisance.

Q: Armored cars and things like this.

THOMPSON: I didn't have an armored car. The ambassador had an armored car. I just had an ordinary vehicle with a follow vehicle behind.

Q: Would you say the Mexicans were pleased that the President chose a former governor to come down as Ambassador? Did they regard that as a recognition of their importance?

THOMPSON: I don't think the state governor aspect was very meaningful to them. On

the other hand, the Mexicans are very class conscious when it comes to Mexican-Americans and quite correctly believe that the major influx of Mexicans to the United States has been from the rather backward rural areas of Mexico, and that as a consequence any Chicano who would aspire to the position of Ambassador to Mexico City is highly unwelcome. That has not of course prevented the United States from naming a succession of Mexican-Americans as Ambassador to Mexico who have served.

Q: With varying results I gather.

THOMPSON: I presume.

Q: Were the Mexicans pleased when the Democrats took over in '76 with the election of President Carter?

THOMPSON: I don't think that the Mexicans had any particular hopes of a better shake from President Carter than from President Ford. I suppose in general their tendency would be to assume that they're going to be somewhat better off under a Democratic regime in the United States, but I think they can't demonstrate that on the basis of events in the relationship. They, of course, had their presidential election that installed President Lopez Portillo simultaneous with the Ford-Carter turnover, so that their attention was rather distracted from our election to their own.

Q: You had two new Presidents confronting one another. Was the Carter administration's emphasis on human rights well received in Mexico or cause them problems? Or did they react to it at all?

THOMPSON: As I recall, the Mexicans, that is the government, did not react particularly at all. The Mexicans having handled this business much more adroitly than other governments in the hemisphere over the years, did not have clean hands altogether in this area, but they never showed their hand in a way that could make it an international incident.

Q: During your period there was it evident that Mexico was being used as a drug conduit to the U.S.?

THOMPSON: I think the Mexican role was more as a producer than a conduit at that time. Mexico of course was producing huge amounts of marijuana and was also cultivating other narcotic products, but it was not at that time a significant way station to the United States. I remember the drug problem was a major problem that we had to keep an eye on because it, and our problem of Americans in Mexican jails on drug charges, were two areas Ambassador Jova asked me to be responsible for immediately [upon my arrival], since when one wasn't driving us crazy, the other was.

Q: How were your relations with the CIA station in Mexico City, which I presume is rather sizable?

THOMPSON: I think they were no worse than other places.

Q: Your tour ended in Mexico in 1978 and you were sent to the University of Texas as diplomat in residence. Tell me a little about what you did there.

THOMPSON: Elspeth Rostow had urgently requested the department to assign a diplomat in residence to the University of Texas [UT] with the thought that he could be very useful to the LBJ [Lyndon Baines Johnson] school which she was running. Walt Rostow was at the time on the economics faculty at UT. When I arrived, I was assigned to both the government department of the university and to the LBJ school but initially housed in the offices of the department of government. Except for doing the Foreign Service odds and ends like talking to anybody who wanted to talk about Foreign Service as a career, that sort of thing, I was mainly on call for those two departments either to lead or participate in seminars or to conduct short courses of one kind or another. I spent a major amount of time trying to get around to the other major academic institutions in Texas.

Q: Did you travel to other campuses?

THOMPSON: Yes, I did. I did radio interviews at each campus and had meetings with senior faculty and the top administration and usually gave a presentation of some kind at each university where I was. I was only there for a couple of days at a time and then back to the University of Texas.

Q: What was the attitude of the students and also the faculty toward you?

THOMPSON: I had a very pleasant, unexpectedly pleasant, experience with the faculty at the University of Texas. As you know, they have a very important and very good hemispheric studies program at the University of Texas under professor X with a number of very well qualified professors on the staff. I had found it a little difficult to envision fitting in to the academic bureaucracy under those circumstances. To my pleasant surprise however, the dean of the School of Government and all those associated with the Latin American studies program were most cordial and welcoming and took some advantage of some knowledge I was able to provide for them but on the whole were generally friendly and supportive. To students I think I simply fell into the kind of professorial limbo where students place the faculty and was not distinctly recognized or distinguished from faculty in any way.

Q: No criticism of our policy toward Chile while you were there?

THOMPSON: No, there was no furor on campus that involved me.

Q: You were indeed fortunate, Sir. Did you find much interest in students wanting to make Foreign Service a career?

THOMPSON: No, I did not. But on the other hand I did not have the best opportunity to

assess that, because at the time I was there, to my surprise, a recruiter from Washington arrived and did his thing on campus quite independent from me. Which seemed carrying coals to Newcastle to me, but that is the way it was done.

Q: Well, at the end of that interesting year, very refreshing year, you came back to Washington to the Bureau of Inter-American Affairs, and served as office director under Assistant Secretary Vaky.

THOMPSON: Yes, Bill Barbour was there when I came back, and then he was succeeded by Pete Vaky. Yes, I took over the office that was responsible for all things congressional affairs, public relations, and human rights for the hemisphere. So you can tell from the breadth of that assignment that I didn't want for things to do, however I did not stay long in the post, asking to be relieved after about a year or a little more inasmuch as I had been invited by Ambassador McGee to come down and take the position of Deputy U.S. permanent representative in the OAS [Organization of American States].

Q: Well, with three balls in the air at once you probably never had an opportunity to stop running. Handling human rights for the ARA during the Carter administration must have been a rather difficult assignment.

THOMPSON: It was fairly difficult as I recall it. The Congressional affairs was an active beat at the time as well because the whole Panama Canal thing began to heat up on the Hill at the same time. I was pulled into service on that front as well as others.

Q: That was about the time of the overthrow of General Somoza in Nicaragua, too, wasn't it?

THOMPSON: Right. It was closely attendant thereon.

Q: Public affairs had to come into play there.

THOMPSON: It was also of course the first days of the Reagan administration as well, which had notable effects in the bureau of inter American affairs.

Q: There was some concern in the latter days of the Carter administration about Soviet troops in Cuba. Did that come into your purview at all at the time?

THOMPSON: I don't recall being heavily involved on that front.

Q: Well, that was ginned up quickly and it disappeared rather quickly because it turned out the troops were there and we had known it all along so it wasn't anything new. Anything else you'd like to say about your tour as office director?

THOMPSON: No, I don't think so.

Q: Then in 1980 you were released from that to join Ambassador Dale McGee at the U.S.

mission to the Organization of American States. You, in effect, became his DCM as Deputy Permanent Representative.

THOMPSON: I also became the U.S. representative to the two specialized councils of the OAS apart from the council which is the political organ of the OAS.

Q: From whom does OAS get its instructions?

THOMPSON: You are assuming that OAS is instructed by someone. I'll tell you there is a whole saga that has gone on for years about this relationship between the USREP and ARA and indeed other areas of the departments as far as that goes, but I mean we had a lot to do with IO all the time, they had the budget, and they had things to say about things like human rights and so on, but it is just so chaotic it is pitiful. The trouble is that the ARA front office persists on looking on our mission to the OAS as some kind of painful boil that they wished could be lanced and sent away, because they think we are representing the unpleasant views of people who themselves have no role in hemispheric affairs, rather than realizing they are simply another mouthpiece for exactly the same stuff that is coming out of the capitals. But Washington refuses to acknowledge it when it comes through the OAS channel.

Q: I had the same experience.

End of interview