

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

AMBASSADOR FRANCIS T. UNDERHILL

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INTERVIEW

Q: Francis, let me start off by reading into the record a little bit about your career, just the bare bones. And then you can add or subtract from it as is correct or as my information is not correct.

You were born in New Jersey in 1921. You have degrees from Wesleyan in 1942, and Fletcher, an M.A., in 1943. You've also finished at the Army War College. During World War II you were a lieutenant in the U.S. Navy. And you became a Foreign Service Officer in 1947. Your Foreign Service posts were at Lisbon, Bilbao, Djakarta, Warsaw, Kuala Lumpur, Manila, Seoul, and Kuala Lumpur again. You speak Indonesian and Spanish. Is that substantially correct?

UNDERHILL: Yes, that's right. The only thing I'd add is that I was sent to Yale for a year as an Indonesian language and area student.

Q: At what stage did that take place?

UNDERHILL: That came after Bilbao and before Djakarta. I was, I think, the third officer trained in Indonesian.

Q: But you pulled the one tour in Djakarta, though, is that right?

UNDERHILL: Yes. I also served for six months in Medan.

Q: And your last tour was at Kuala Lumpur as ambassador from 1975 to--when was that?

UNDERHILL: It was from 1974 to 1977, three and a half years.

Q: 1974 to 1977.

UNDERHILL: I think that you should add also in the record that I was the Indonesian Desk Officer from 1954 to 1959. Then from 1964 to 1968 I was, first, the Deputy Director of the Office of Southwest Pacific Affairs, and later, when they changed the organization of the Department, the Indonesian Country Director for two years. My Departmental assignments, totaling eight years, were involved directly with Indonesia and Malaysia and Southeast Asia.

Q: It's a personal ideosyncrasy on my part, I tend to leave out Departmental assignments when I recount these things because Departmental assignments sometimes are a little bit more convoluted.

UNDERHILL: Yes.

Q: But they are important and they should be a part of the record. What was it that caused you to decide to pursue a Foreign Service career?

UNDERHILL: I think it was when I was in high school, perhaps a sophomore in high school. Some friends of my parents included me in a dinner party where the guest of honor was George Messersmith, who, had been the consul general in Berlin during the rise of the Nazis. I sat absolutely fascinated through this dinner party listening to Messersmith describe his life in the Foreign Service, and how Hitler had come to power. That's when I decided that this was the career for me.

Q: Was that in the late 1930's?

UNDERHILL: Yes. Well, I graduated from high school in 1938, so it was probably 1934 or 1935.

Q: You aimed yourself at the Foreign Service. You took courses that would lead to a Foreign Service career?

UNDERHILL: Yes. I majored in history and government in Wesleyan and then I went to the Fletcher School with the idea of taking the Foreign Service exams when the war was over. I can recall, on my way out to the Pacific, going to a convent or a monastery in Hawaii and getting a French Bible so that I could try to keep up my smattering of high school French.

Q: You took them in 1946?

UNDERHILL: Yes, the fall of 1946.

Q: That was, of course, the four-day exam, the long exam?

UNDERHILL: No, I don't think so. It was a two or three-day exam. There were seven exams altogether, as I recall.

Q: Let's jump ahead, then, to your senior officer experience, which is one of the main things that we want to talk about in this series of Foreign Service interviews. You went as DCM to Korea in 1971. How was it that you were chosen to be DCM?

UNDERHILL: That's a question for which I've never found out the answer. The ambassador was William Porter. I had never met Bill Porter before. He had never laid eyes on me. I never asked him why he chose me and it's something I regret because he died recently, and it was a question that I'd always meant to ask him.

I didn't know, that he knew that he wasn't going to be in Seoul very much longer. I arrived in January of 1971 and he left in May or June to go to Paris to take over from Habib, who was the principal negotiator with the North Vietnamese. Phil Habib then came to Seoul as ambassador.

I did know that Habib had been at least consulted because he was going to inherit me as the DCM. He told me that, Porter had said, "Is Underhill acceptable to you if I pick him as my DCM?"

Q: I saw the process once, myself. I'll just inject this here. The selection of a DCM at Kathmandu when I was there. I was there for several years. And the desk officer came out with a short list, and presented the short list to the ambassador, and made an oral recommendation or two. I happened to be there at the time when it was going on. And the ambassador said, "Well, I'll take this one since that's your first choice" It was a short list

of three or four names. And none of them, I think, was a person that the ambassador knew.

Well, anyway, when you arrived there in early 1971, what were the issues that were outstanding between the United States and Korea at that time?

UNDERHILL: Well, I guess the main issue was the aftermath of the decision to withdraw one of the divisions of American troops. This had been an extremely difficult period because the Korean Government didn't want us to withdraw troops. I think they feared it as a first step towards a major disengagement. We were trying to reassure the Koreans that the troop withdrawal did not mean a disengagement. The Koreans saw it, also, in the context of the Nixon doctrine, letting Asians manage their own defense to a greater degree.

Q: The President was Park?

UNDERHILL: Yes.

Q: I have information that the Vice President, named Kim, wanted the U.S. to withdraw. Is that correct?

UNDERHILL: No, that wasn't the case. Kim Chung Pil actually didn't become Prime Minister until a bit later. But the job of Prime Minister in Korea, was largely without power. He was an administrative lieutenant to the President job.

The Koreans were extremely concerned about keeping the relationship with the United States. The thing that struck me on arrival was the degree to which Korean policy resembled a fly in amber. Nothing had changed very much. Since the armistice in 1953. Our military wanted to stay. The Koreans wanted us to stay. The Japanese would just as soon have us stay. Our relationship hadn't really, changed for 20 years.

The Koreans however were beginning to want to put a little distance between us. For example, my predecessor as DCM had a monthly luncheon with the Chief of Staff of the Blue House, in which, the two of them went over current issues. This was a mirror of another monthly luncheon between the ambassador and the prime minister.

Q: Excuse me, I didn't understand who the DCM's meeting was with.

UNDERHILL: The DCM's meeting was with President Park's Chief of Staff.

Q: All right.

UNDERHILL: He was the equivalent of the National Security Advisor, but more than that. His position combined that of the White House Chief of Staff and the National Security Advisor. In Korea it was one person.

When I arrived I was told that the Blue House Chief of Staff would let me know when he would like to have our first luncheon. That time never came. Rather than say so directly they just postponed, and temporized, and "I'll call you next week." After about two months, it was clear that the Chief of Staff didn't have any intentions of resuming the luncheons. He was perfectly accessible. I could always get to see him when I had a problem, but he didn't want this institutionalized regular luncheon.

They had changed the prime minister at that point, too. The new prime minister gave Bill Porter the same message, using exactly the same technique. "I'll be out of town at the time of our regular luncheon. I will call you," Porter was quite prepared to end this institution, too.

So there was some effort at a modest kind of disengagement. The main problem was how do we deal with a situation in which, or at least from my point of view, the American ambassador in Korea had a pro-consular role. There was this huge American establishment that was the carryover of a period where we were the patrons, and the armorers, and the defenders of Korea.

Q: We had about 40,000 troops there at that time?

UNDERHILL: Yes.

Q: Why did the U.S. military want to stay?

UNDERHILL: It was a mission that they had become used to doing. Seoul had become as much of a routine assignment going to Ft. Benning, or Ft. Sam Houston. The rationale was that the DMZ was the line standing against Communism and Communist aggression in Asia. You heard in Japan that the troops in Japan were necessary for the defense of Korea. You heard in Korea that the troops in Korea were necessary for the defense of Japan. It was the memory of the Korean War, the continued military confrontation of Communist China, the fact that the war was going on in Vietnam. It was a place where an American policy had, to an extent, succeeded. And there was a reluctance to tamper with anything that had worked for 20 years.

Q: And it was a command.

UNDERHILL: It was a four-star command. In the military, general and flag officers are entitled to one personal servant per star. The number of personal servants of flag and general officers in Korea outnumbered the total State Department representation in the country.

Q: That's a delightful little sidelight.

UNDERHILL: We had one four-star general, and three three-star generals, and more than a dozen two-stars and one-stars. It was a huge command with a hospital, and golf course, and officers club, and schools; a gigantic military encampment right in the middle of Seoul. It was very pleasant duty for our Senior military.

The same is true for AID officers. We had trouble in getting them to leave. There were AID officers that had been there eight and ten years. Every year or so they would get their Korean counterparts to write a letter saying that the continued service of Joe Blow was absolutely essential to the economic prosperity of Korea and that the prospect of him leaving Korea was just too much to imagine. They got themselves extended.

It was a pleasant inexpensive place to live. It was one of the sleepers in the Foreign Service.

Q: I guess it still is. We used to say that most Latin American posts were a well-kept secret as to their pleasantness.

UNDERHILL: Yes.

Q: Seoul is, apparently, the same thing. The other side of the coin was that by 1973, when the war was winding down in Vietnam, the Republic of Korea pulled its troops out, of course, too. Was there consultation on that?

UNDERHILL: No. The problems were mostly of administrative. We had leaned on the Koreans very heavily to get them to send troops to Vietnam. After a fairly short period of active fighting in Vietnam, the Koreans made a sort of enclave of their camp and worked out a deal with the Viet Cong. "If you don't bother us, we won't bother you." Then they sat tight for the rest of the time that they were there, shipping back shell casings to make into brass trinkets in Korea.

The Koreans would come to us to finance the insurance policies or the annuities of the families of the soldiers who had been killed in Korea. There were, in other words, money problems. The Korean troops were mercenaries and they were coming around to us for part of their pay. I'm putting this in pretty crude terms, but this was the kind of problems we faced.

Now the other thing that was of concern during this period, was the opening up of our relationship with China, what they called in Asia at the time, the Nixon Shock. For Korea, and for Taiwan, and for our other "intimate allies" the things that Nixon was doing in establishing relations with China raised serious questions about their relationship with us. Immediately after the Nixon visit, for example, the East Asian Assistant Secretary Marshall Green came to Korea to hold hands and assure them that no deals had been made that would damage Korean interests.

The Koreans have a very strong historical sense of uncertainty because they can point to times in history where we have, from their point of view, sold them down the river.

Q: I'm drawing a blank on that. When would that be?

UNDERHILL: At the end of the Russo-Japanese War when Teddy Roosevelt helped to negotiate the treaty at Portsmouth, we, in effect, said, "Okay, you can have Korea." That was the beginning of the Japanese takeover of Korea. The Koreans felt that we also betrayed them at Cairo. In the arrangements between Roosevelt, Stalin, and Churchill no provision was made for the independence of Korea at the end of the War. They felt we had betrayed them by signing the armistice in 1953. Syngman Rhee, as you recall, wanted to keep fighting and march north to unify the country.

The Koreans were not signatory to the armistice. Those are three "betrayals" that come to mind, but there was also another that I can't recall. Underlying all of the American-Korean protestations of friendship, there are strong Korean concerns that sooner or later the United States is going to make a deal with China, Japan, or the USSR which is going to be damaging to their interests.

Q: How important did you find, or how much time did you spend on, economic questions such as textile imports to the U.S.?

UNDERHILL: This was becoming an issue. I didn't spend too much time on it because the economic counselor and the AID director were the same person. Porter had brought together the AID and the Economic section of the Embassy. He called it the U.S. mission. The AID director had two hats. It was a very good thing because the same man that was in charge of providing economic assistance was also the man that went to talk to them about negotiating the Textile Agreement and honoring their Civil Aviation Agreement. In many other places these jobs were done by two people and the host government was very skillful in playing off one against the other. I was involved but it was not, I would say, a major aspect of my job.

Q: Did the ambassador worry about that kind of economic question very much?

UNDERHILL: Yes, he did. I think he felt that it was part of the change in the relationship between the United States and Korea. Korea was already in a phase of rapid economic development; but they were still thinking of themselves as a prostrate, dependent country. They felt that a flow of American dollars into Korea was the normal state of affairs. They were shocked and disturbed however when, Gulf Oil, after major investments in Korea wanted to remit profits.

Korea signed an Air Transport Agreement with U.S. When Korea got to the stage where their airlines were flying to the U.S. and our airlines wanted some aspect of reciprocity, the Koreans said, "Oh, but this isn't what we expected." In other words, they were used to a one-way street. I think we're still seeing aspects of this attitude in current economic

problems with Korea. The ambassador, felt that he had to put pressure on the Koreans to start playing by the rules if they wanted to become an important economic power.

Q: Habib was the Ambassador the rest of the time you were there?

UNDERHILL: Habib was ambassador the rest of the time. He was less interested, I would say, in economic issues than Bill Porter. But they were both quite ready to go to bat with the Koreans. Both were skilled professionals. Neither of them had any localitis problems.

Q: To shift gears a little bit, before we get away from Korea, for the benefit of those who may be reading these transcriptions later on, could you describe how you and Habib split up the responsibility of running a, presumably, very large mission. What did Habib look up to you to do? What did you take care of on a given day and, that sort of thing, as a manager?

UNDERHILL: Well, I think the first element in the situation was that Habib had served in Korea before as political counselor. He was an incredibly active person and he knew far many more Koreans than I knew. He arrived back in Korea as ambassador with close relationships with, literally, hundreds of people. He also had the advantage of knowing them when they were younger, ten years before. He was a magnificent poker player. The Koreans love to gamble and love poker. Phil used to stay up all night, as a young officer, winning most of the time, playing poker with them. In the dealings with the Korean Government at the upper level he knew virtually everyone.

Habib handled, you might say, the very top level stuff. We had constant streams of CODELs. Our CODELs often included some of the less savory members of our Congress. He let me pretty much handle them assigning control officers and getting their programs organized. I often went with the CODEL to see President Park. Almost always they wanted to see Park. He left to me the general management of the embassy. He let me do a lot of the work in dealing with the military.

The other key element in our service together was that, four months or five months after he arrived, he had a very serious heart attack. He was back in the United States for quite a while. When he returned to Korea he came to the office for two or three hours a day. During this period, and for a good bit of our service together in Korea, I was chargé.

Q: Who did you use as de facto acting DCM when you were chargé?

UNDERHILL: It's an interesting question, Henry. I don't remember that I used anyone as acting DCM. I think that I just let the senior officers at the embassy handle the things that would normally fall in their province. But I don't recall moving somebody up to be my deputy.

Q: One other question, and I'm not trying to trap you into anything.

UNDERHILL: No.

Q: I'm just interested. When you were DCM and, say, the ambassador was on board, how much political reporting did you do, yourself, as a former political counselor?

UNDERHILL: Keeping my hand out of political reporting was one of the most difficult things I had to do in Korea. I enjoyed being a political counselor. I think, in many ways political counselor is one of the best jobs in the Foreign Service. We had a good, strong political section, and I let it do its job. I dabbled just a bit occasionally suggesting areas that I thought might be worth reporting on. But for the most part I resisted the temptation to continue as a political counselor.

Q: Can you give an instance of reporting priorities that occurred to you that you passed on to the political section?

UNDERHILL: I'm afraid it's been too long. I can't think of one.

Q: Kissinger visited Seoul in late '73. Were you still there?

UNDERHILL: Yes. I didn't leave until January of 1974.

Q: Well, for the benefit of the reader of these pages, describe briefly, if you will, how the embassy got ready for Kissinger's visit.

UNDERHILL: Well, it wasn't really a visit in the classic sense. Kissinger and Habib had a long relationship, going back to Vietnam. They were quite close personal friends. Phil left Korea to be, first, EA Assistant Secretary, and then Under Secretary for Political Affairs under Kissinger. There were henceforth no special arrangements when Henry came on a visit. Kissinger actually came through twice. He came through once after being in China with a fairly large entourage. The other time had something to do with the final arrangements in Vietnam. Habib, in fact, was flown down to Saigon secretly at one point to join in persuading Thieu to accept the agreement that we had reached in Paris. It was one of the few times in my Foreign Service career when I was ordered to lie to the press and tell them that Habib was still in Korea.

Q: Why was Habib able to bring special influence to Thieu?

UNDERHILL: I suppose, they were drawing on the fact that he had served in Vietnam, that he had been in the Department for a couple of years working on Vietnam affairs, that he had succeeded, Harriman and Cyrus Vance as the negotiator in Paris, and was familiar with what had been going on. I suppose that Henry also wanted him there because he's an absolutely indefatigable bargainer.

Kissinger respected Habib. Habib was not afraid of Henry and was ready to argue with him when he thought that Kissinger was wrong. I think Kissinger valued this. Phil was quite prepared to shout at Henry when Henry was shouting at him, and shout a little louder.

Q: Because of the circumstances, then, we do not get the full-blown treatment of a Kissinger visit with all the scenarios and everything else, then?

UNDERHILL: No. It was much more the arrival of an old friend of the ambassadors. There wasn't the same sort of drama. If Kissinger had asked for it, Habib would have said we were too busy for that sort of foolishness.

Q: After you left Korea as DCM, you went almost directly as ambassador to Malaysia. And you were saying earlier, perhaps you can repeat it now, something about the great difference between the one posting and the other.

UNDERHILL: It was curious that Korea and Malaysia reflected, it seems to me, the extremes in the possible kind of relationship which an American embassy could have with a host government. In Korea our presence was substantial with 40,000 troops, a military assistance group, 75 Peace Corps volunteers and AID mission, and a huge American complex in the middle of the city. Our Ambassador was a Pro-counsel. I recall once when Habib asked me to invite the Blue House Chief of Staff to lunch. In the course of lunch, in tones which were not at all subtle, Habib demanded to know whether there was going to be any cabinet changes, or any plans for any revision in the structure of the government.

Q: Habib asked?

UNDERHILL: Habib asked that. When I talked to him about it later, Habib said, "Frank, you just don't understand. We have a right to know this sort of thing. We have a right to know what the Korean Government is doing because of our presence here."

In the course of the time that we were there there were two or three major changes including martial law that came as a surprise. The Koreans had deliberately decided that we would not be brought in until after the fact. In each case Habib's reaction was one of extreme displeasure, rage almost, that they had dared to do something without telling us first. We had such an intimate relationship that the American Ambassador felt he should have been privy to everything the Korean government was planning to do.

In contrast, the American ambassador's role in Malaysia was completely different. We had no AID program there and no military assistance program.

The only non-diplomatic function was the Peace Corps. The Peace Corps had come to Malaysia in the early 1960's, as a gesture of the Malaysian Government towards the United States, and done under the magic of the Kennedy personality.

Q: They didn't really need one, in other words?

UNDERHILL: No. They didn't really need one. Malaysia was a very nice country to do good in because the life was pleasant there. There were some tentative offers in the early 1960's from AID in Washington to establish a mission there. One of the things that AID insisted on was diplomatic status and privileges for their AID people. The Malaysians said, no. No other foreign service was granted this status. Malaysia was doing very well economically and really didn't need American AID.

The position of the United States was illustrated when I arrived there as ambassador in 1974 and discovered that one man in the Foreign Office was in charge of North America, South America, and Africa. In contrast, ten officers were in charge of their relations with Indonesia and the other ASEAN countries. We didn't loom terribly large on the Malaysian horizon in the political sense. We were however very important to them economically. There were many more officers involved in economic relations with the United States.

Q: What was the nature of these economic ties?

UNDERHILL: Malaysia is the world's largest producer of rubber, tin, and palm oil, so access to our markets was of immense importance to them. They were very much interested in anything that would restrain, or restrict, or reduce trade in these important commodities.

Q: Now to continue on Malaysia. You had this completely different situation when you arrived in Kuala Lumpur from the setting and circumstances that you had in Seoul. Did you find the lack of these close ties, the lack of leverage, frustrating? Or did you find it a relief?

UNDERHILL: I liked it because there was a decent distance between the two governments. There was less manipulation in the way that the Malaysians dealt with us.

American diplomacy faces a serious problem when we are providing economic and military assistance, a Peace Corps, and other programs of active cooperation. When you go to them for something, they must ask themselves, if I say no or if I don't agree, what is going to happen to our assistance programs. There is therefore a conscious or unconscious element of manipulation in how they deal with us. There is a great difference between how they talk to the American ambassador and how they talk to the New Zealand ambassador, for example. A country that can do so much to them and for them is in a different position. I could deal with the Malaysians without this fog hanging over the relationship since there were no assistance programs other than the Peace Corps in the country.

My return to Malaysia was like Habib coming back to Korea. I knew the people, and they knew me. It was an extremely easy assignment because the younger officers that I had

known twelve years earlier were now at the top. They knew and trusted me. I had no problem in getting access.

In fact, on problems which at other posts would have involved a formal call at the foreign office, I could handle over the phone.

Q: This would be, for example, representation that you had been instructed to make?

UNDERHILL: That's right. Sometimes there would be a urgent request from Washington that Malaysians vote with us on an issue that was coming up in Geneva the following morning. The time element was extremely critical. Other countries that I've worked in in Southeast Asia would use their known inefficiency as a way of avoiding these decisions. They would agree, but later you would discover that the instruction never arrived at New York or Geneva. You were never sure that it hadn't arrived through inefficiency or because of deliberately duplicity.

If the Malaysians disagreed with us they would tell us directly, "No, we don't agree with you, and for these reasons, cannot vote with you on this issue. We're sorry." On the other hand if they agreed, a telegram went out promptly and Malaysia voted with us.

Q: There was no leverage involved, there was no implied punishment, or reward involved?

UNDERHILL: That's right. I recall one instance, of a U N vote on Korea. We were putting strong pressure on Malaysia to change its decision to vote against our position. Pending at the time was an offer to sell Malaysia small arms left over from the Vietnam conflict at rock bottom prices. I suggested that if the U N vote was that important, we might use the leverage of the arms deal to bring Malaysia around. The Department said "no." Then I discovered that the South Korean ambassador was not making anywhere near as strong representations as I was instructed to make. I told Washington that I didn't feel that I should be taking the lead in this issue. I learned later, from Phil Habib that Henry wasn't happy with me and the way that I had handled things. I saw no reason for us to be more vigorous in protecting South Korean interests than the South Koreans were prepared to be.

Q: The reason was to be more Catholic than the Pope.

UNDERHILL: That's right.

Q: One other questions I wanted to ask before I get off on something else. Did you have a club of ambassadors in Kuala Lumpur that met weekly, monthly, for luncheon, or anything of that sort?

UNDERHILL: No. We had nothing like that. The only thing that was comparable to it was a Saturday morning golf game with a group of Asian ambassadors. I and the

Australian, I realize some time later, were the only Caucasians in this group. It was the Burmese, the Korean, the Filipino, the Singaporean, and the Indonesian. Those were the regulars. I found that this was an extremely valuable source of information and gossip.

The general run of ambassadors in Kuala Lumpur were held at some distance. Malaysian priorities were concentrated first in their ASEAN partners, and then in the nonaligned group, the Islamic group, and the Commonwealth. The major powers, the United States and the USSR were out on the outer fringe. It was like a series of concentric circles. There wasn't much point in talking to the Belgian ambassador, for example.

Q: And you actually got work done and you made contacts?

UNDERHILL: Yes. Some were people I had known from other Asian assignments. The Indonesian ambassador for example had been the military attaché when I had served in Kuala Lumpur 12 years earlier. The Indonesians and Singaporeans through their own local communities, had access to gossip, and information which wasn't just generally available. They could also interpret things that I had read in the newspapers. I made it a practice to read the Malay language newspaper because it provided a different slant than you got from the English language paper.

We'd start the golf game at 7 o'clock on Saturday morning and by 11 o'clock we'd be finished. Then I was usually able, if it was anything really important, then to go to the office and send a short message. Most of the time it wasn't necessary.

Q: But it happened?

UNDERHILL: Not very often, Henry. One of the things I felt was a measure of my success in Malaysia was that neither Henry Kissinger nor any other trouble-shooter came on a visit.

Another thing that illustrates our relationship with Malaysia was that we had very few congressional visits. We had no programs, to inspect, no shopping, no tourist attractions of any great consequence. When a congressman did come, he got no more attention from the local government than a Malaysian congressman would have received in Washington.

Q: Didn't automatically get to see the reigning monarch?

UNDERHILL: The Malaysians would not have thought it appropriate. The Asian Development Bank had a meeting in Kuala Lumpur in the summer of 1974. We sent an obscenely large delegation of 60 people led by George Shultz, who was then the Secretary of the Treasury.

Q: My experience with posts that I served in, congressmen were always pretty royally treated. I guess it's just a function of the particular country. In Malaysia, though, you were saying American congressmen received no great, special treatment?

UNDERHILL: In the almost four years that I was there, we had not a single congressional visit that came to Malaysia as the end purpose. We had a few that came through on their way to somewhere else, or was part of some other meeting.

At this Asian Development Bank meeting there were, as I recall, three senators and four congressmen as advisors to our 60 man delegation. The Malaysian Government had a dinner for the delegates and the alternate delegates. Each country had a delegate and four alternates. Our senatorial and congressional group, though, were all just advisors and they weren't invited to the Prime Minister's dinner. They were allowed to stay at their hotel.

In either the Philippines or Korea, where I had served immediately prior to coming back to Malaysia, American congressmen would have been automatically included in any entertainment of this sort.

Q: Did the American congressmen take out their dissatisfaction with this state of affairs on you?

UNDERHILL: I got no indication that there was any dissatisfaction. I had a reception for the American delegation and not one congressman complained to me about not being invited to the Prime Minister's dinner.

Another example of this Malaysian attitude was reflected in the way they treated CINCPAC. The Commander-in-Chief of the Pacific, in most of the other places where there is a military assistance program or a big American presence, is treated royally. CINCPAC tends to regard himself as a sort of regional ambassador standing above all the other mere country ambassadors. He arrives on his own special aircraft, and expects to see the Prime Minister, the Foreign Minister, the King or the President.

When he came to Malaysia the Malaysians were duly informed. I went personally to the Foreign Office to announce the visit and to be sure that they understood who he was. The visit was placed in the hands of their senior naval officer. The senior civilian that he saw was the Director General of the Ministry of Defense. CINCPAC was so displeased that he cut short his visit and left a day and a half early.

Q: Well, that will show them. Who did you go to see in the Malaysian Government to inform them about the forthcoming arrival of CINCPAC? What level would you announce something like that?

UNDERHILL: Henry, I don't recall. I'm pretty sure I went to the Ministry and left an aide memoire. I could have seen the Foreign Minister at the golf course also. I might have gone to the Chief of Protocol or I might have called on the senior civil servant, the Director General of the Foreign Office. He was the career professional that I did most of my business with. I talked to the Foreign Minister on more ceremonial occasions, not the usual run of embassy business.

Q: This contact that you dealt with normally on the usual run of embassy business would be the equivalent of what in Washington?

UNDERHILL: It's kind of hard to find an exact counterpart. It would be the Under Secretary for Political Affairs, probably, or the Deputy Secretary of State.

Q: Of course, at much larger scale of operation.

UNDERHILL: I had access to virtually anybody in the Malaysian Government that I had needed to see. In Malaysia the ambassadors from many countries had relatively little to do and would try to get to see various ministers for no other reason than to pass the time of day. The Malaysian Government tended to be a bit standoffish for this reason.

I was criticized by a Foreign Service inspector because I didn't see more ministers. I had no problem at all when I had business, but I think that they respected the fact that I didn't bother them if I didn't have business. When I did want to see them, I got in immediately.

Q: Another reason, I suppose, for the ambassador from Austria, for example, seeking out a minister or two so that he could report to his government that he had seen such and such a minister.

UNDERHILL: That's right. Yes.

Q: To shift gears again. Now, the first year that you were there, in August, there was a serious hostage incident. The Japanese Red Army raid, which included as one of the hostages a consular officer on your staff.

UNDERHILL: That's right.

Q: Could you describe that? Not so much what happened; that anybody can find out. But anything that happened behind the scenes that wouldn't show up in the reporting. And, even more particularly, how did you handle a crisis situation like that? How did you organize the embassy to deal with such?

UNDERHILL: Henry, the ironic thing about it was that I was in Flat Rock, North Carolina, when this took place.

Q: I just assumed that you were there.

UNDERHILL: I wasn't. I was home on leave at the time. I had a good DCM, and we were, in a sense, on the periphery. We were the hostages, but the issue was between the Japanese Government and the Japanese Red Army. The United States did not have to bargain with the terrorists. The terrorists demanded that the Japanese Government release

their colleagues from jail and provide an airplane to take them to Libya. The Swedish consul had an office on the same floor and was taken hostage at the same time.

It was over, I think, in about four days at the maximum. Before it became necessary for me to go back, the crisis was over. I had a good DCM and he handled the situation well.

Q: Who was it?

UNDERHILL: It was Robert Dillon, who was later ambassador in Lebanon. Kuala Lumpur was the last place in Southeast Asia where the United States embassy was not in its own building. We had three floors of a large office building. The Red Army people looked like young Japanese businessmen until they took their Uzis out of their briefcases. They got on the elevator, get off on the ninth floor, walked down the hall with business offices on both sides, went into the consular section and took everybody there, including the consul hostage.

Q: So the DCM was just a floor or two above while all of this was going on?

UNDERHILL: That's right. Yes. He was two floors above.

Q: What about the residence? Did we own the residence there?

UNDERHILL: Yes. We had a very nice residence on a golf course.

Q: Golf, once again.

UNDERHILL: Yes. Golf was a very important aspect of life in Kuala Lumpur. Golf Digest Magazine in May of 1988 has an article I wrote called, "The Third World on the First Tee." And it's an analysis, somewhat tongue in cheek, of why golf is so popular in the Third World.

Q: I'll have to take a look at that. My niece lives in Kuala Lumpur and is married to a Malaysian Chinese. It's not my niece, it's my second cousin. Her father, my first cousin, is a great golfer so he goes out there as often as he can--not a great golfer, an avid golfer.

Well, were there any other instances during your time in Kuala Lumpur when you had to organize on some kind of streamline basis of that sort?

UNDERHILL: No. I don't think there were, Henry.

Q: So it was a relatively relaxed tour there?

UNDERHILL: It was a relatively relaxed tour.

Q: One question that is perhaps of interest at this stage has to do with your policy recommendations now, in retirement, after you've had a chance to reflect a bit, on what kind of people we should be recruiting for the Foreign Service, what kind of people we should be getting into the Foreign Service. And then I'll have, as they say in these press conferences, I'll have a follow-up on what kind of people we should be appointing as ambassadors. Let's look at junior types first, though. Are we getting the kind of people we need?

UNDERHILL: I thought highly of young people that I saw during my final years in the Foreign Service. I felt that we were getting very good people.

The other exposure that I got was when you and I were working on the Selection Board in, I guess, '82 or '81.

Q: 1980.

UNDERHILL: Was it 1980? I was favorably impressed with the young people that appeared before us as examiners.

I think that the Foreign Service needs the broad-gauged generalist; the man or the woman with an understanding of the United States, a good general background of history, and the liberal arts, and the sciences. We have had some very good officers come to us from the Peace Corps.

Q: They make good FSOs, you think because --

UNDERHILL: The ones that I have seen have been very good FSOs.

Q: Why is that?

UNDERHILL: I think, they've already discovered whether they enjoy, and can relate, and can deal in a foreign culture. Usually, they have acquired some linguistic skills. The kind of idealism and dedication that prompted them to go in the Peace Corps reflects a general philosophical attitude beneficial to the Foreign Service.

Q: You didn't find that, occasionally, they had a tendency to go native once they became real, live diplomats?

UNDERHILL: No. I haven't seen that trait in those that were in the Foreign Service.

Q: Well, I think that I would agree with you that we are seeing, in our examination process, some very good people. Not all that young, either, in many cases.

UNDERHILL: That's true.

Q: As to ambassadors, what are the minimum essential qualifications of a good ambassador? Let me give you the statement in that regard of a political appointee of just a few years ago. He said an ambassador should be intelligent and he should have close relations with the President--period.

UNDERHILL: Close relations with our President?

Q: Our President.

UNDERHILL: Well, I guess I would say that it depends from country to country and from President to President. I don't think the relationship with the President is important unless there are problems requiring access to the President. This doesn't happen very often. An ambassador ought to have had some exposure to the part of the world where he is assigned. It takes too long for him to get up to speed if he comes absolutely cold. A non-career ambassador should be a person not afraid to admit ignorance. He should use his staff wisely. I have seen political appointees who became excellent ambassadors because they were prepared to listen and to use their staffs properly.

Q: The fairly long period of time that you were an ambassador, did you have occasion to deal with the President?

UNDERHILL: With the President of the United States? No. I was appointed by Nixon. Four months later he resigned. Then it was Ford for a relatively brief period. I left the post six months after Jimmy Carter became President.

We had no major problems with Malaysia. There were no State visits. I had no occasion to have any direct dealings with the Secretary of State.

Q: Not even a ceremonial call?

UNDERHILL: No.

Q: Which used to take place in the good old days when things were a lot slower.

UNDERHILL: I didn't see the President before I left to go to Kuala Lumpur. This was understandable because the Watergate Crisis was boiling at the time. I didn't see the Secretary of State before I went out. I saw Mr. Rush, The Deputy Secretary of State.

This absence of high level contact ;in our government was a reflection of the fact that our relations with Malaysia were on an even keel. We had no major problems and I kept it that way.

Q: Should an ambassador, everything else being equal, which is hard to do, but let's assume for the moment everything else is equal, should an ambassador be a careerist?

UNDERHILL: I think the answer is, in most instances, yes. Ceremonial jobs in places like Paris and London might be better filled by a wealthy, non-career ambassador who is engaged primarily in, protocol functions. In most of the posts in the world you will get better representation of the United States from a career officer than you will from a non-career officer. It takes too long for a non-career officer to get up to any degree of proficiency. You get from him, at the best, good performance during the last six months or last year of his tour. I think that the career officer is less likely to catch localitis, to become the apologist or the advocate, the ambassador of the country that he's accredited to.

Political figures also, are so professionally oriented to being liked that they are very unhappy when they have to tell the host government things that they know the host government is not going to like.

Q: Well, we're about to run out of tape here, again. You see the thrust and purport of these interviews, is there some question I should have asked that I haven't? Some question I could have asked that I haven't?

UNDERHILL: I can't think of one, Henry.

Q: Well, I appreciate your sitting still for this. And we will get back to you as soon as we have a transcript of it. And I'm sure it will be very interesting and very useful to the readers of it in future days.

End of interview