

OMAN

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DAVID E. ZWEIFEL Deputy Chief of Mission Muscat (1974-1978)

David E. Zweifel was born in Colorado on September 13, 1934. He received a bachelor's degree from Oregon State University and served in the U.S. Navy overseas for five years. He joined the Foreign Service in July 1962 and served in Brazil, Lebanon, Jordan, Mexico, Oman, Yemen, and Washington, DC. Mr. Zweifel retired in 1995 and was interviewed by Thomas Dunnigan on September 3, 1996.

Q: What was your job in Oman?

ZWEIFEL: I was the first-ever DCM at our Embassy in Muscat. That was in 1974. Bill Wolle was our Ambassador.

Q: How did you find conditions when you got there?

ZWEIFEL: Oman had just really started to be a petroleum exporting country, so the place was being transformed before our eyes. But it was still very primitive at the time of our arrival. For example, the only paved road in the country ran essentially from the international airport about 30 miles north of Muscat down to the heart of that capital. If you wanted to go anywhere else, it was a four-wheel drive environment. We were the first occupants of what was then the DCM residence. We lived there during our entire tour without benefit of piped water, paved roads or central air conditioning in an incredibly hot climate. But it was an adventure, fun. We enjoyed it.

Q: What was the attitude towards the United States after the 1973 war?

ZWEIFEL: In Oman, that chapter of the Arab-Israeli conflict was a distant rumble. That far down the Gulf, there was relatively little emotional involvement or, let's face it, political interest. The Omanis were loyal members of the Arab league and supported that organization's positions such as the Arab boycott. But they were not out beating the drums for the cause. So we did not feel the same vibrancy on those issues as you experienced in Jordan, Syria, Lebanon-places closer to the actual confrontation.

Q: What were our main functions, our reasons for being in Oman?

ZWEIFEL: You have to go back to the concept that we held at the time, still do except now it is being constrained by budgetary considerations. U.S. foreign policy was based on universal representation. We wanted to be wherever we were welcomed. We also felt that it was necessary to have a presence where we could in order to forestall forces antithetical to our interests. In short, we did not want the Soviets to move into vacuums. We felt that when we had a diplomatic presence, that would stymie the Soviets. In the case of Oman, that was the case during my tour there. The Omanis were very conservative in their international political positions and they looked to Washington for guidance and support of various sorts. We had a Peace Corps program in country, and we were building up a modest program of military cooperation. So it was a good relationship.

Q: I guess I wanted to ask a question in that regard. We were equipping the Omani army?

ZWEIFEL: Not really. Our program was more in the realm of training. The Omani army was equipped by the British, and the armed forces commanded by seconded British military officers. The commanders of the army, air force, and navy were all serving British flag officers. The British influence was still dominant in the lower Gulf at that time.

Q: And oil was then coming on stream?

ZWEIFEL: Oil had been discovered almost coincident to the succession to the throne of Sultan Qaboos who, as you may recall, overthrew his father. Petroleum exports began in about 1970, but only began to be a really significant source of income around 1974, the year I arrived in Oman.

Q: Were American oil companies coming in?

ZWEIFEL: American oil companies had been in and out of Oman over the years. Most of what was being done at that time was under the auspices of Petroleum Development Oman (PDO), a subsidiary of Shell Oil.

Q: Were there guerrillas there or not?

ZWEIFEL: When we got to Oman there was a low-level guerrilla insurgency in the Shofar region, the southern area of Oman. The group went by the name of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman, PFLO.

Q: What was the extent of Saudi influence, if any, in Oman at the time?

ZWEIFEL: The Saudi influence throughout the Arabian Peninsula was significant because of the economic power they had. The Omanis, however, were a little bit sheltered by geography. Although they are neighbors of Saudi Arabia, the inhospitable Empty Quarter separates the two. Oman historically has been an outward looking, seafaring nation, which once controlled a rather extensive empire including territories along the coasts of East Africa and the Indian Subcontinent. Omanis had developed their own cultural traits and were more independent in their attitudes than some of the states further up in the Persian Gulf.

MARSHALL W. WILEY
Ambassador
Oman (1978-1981)

Marshall W. Wiley was born in Illinois in 1925. He attended the University of Chicago, where he received a Ph.D. in 1943, a J.D. in 1948, and an M.B.A. in 1949. Mr. Wiley was a lieutenant in the U.S. Navy from 1943 to 1945. He joined the State Department in 1958 and his career included posts in Yemen, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Oman. He was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 1989.

Q: Well, could you describe what were American interests in Oman at the time? We're talking about '78. Carter was just in for about a year or so at that time.

WILEY: When I went to Oman, I think, it was not, again, in the forefront of the minds of policy-makers in Washington. In fact, I was only the second resident ambassador.

Q: You had a treaty there since 1832, I think. By the way, when you talk about Oman and Muscat, is that the same?

WILEY: Yes, they use to call it Oman and Muscat, but the name was changed to where it was just Oman, after the conflict back in the '50s, when the British helped the Sultan and put down

the Imams revolt in the interior, and after that they stopped calling it Oman and Muscat, it was just called Oman after that period.

The major thing that was probably of interest to policy makers, when I went there, was what was happening in Iran, with Oman being just across the water. In fact, apart from Kuwait, I was the closest ambassador to Iran. We didn't have an ambassador in Baghdad, of course, in those days. The rather key position on the Strait of Hormuz, of course, going into the Persian Gulf, and over the oil flowing through Strait of Hormuz, and so forth. So that made it geographically important on one side of the choke point, and Iran being on the other side of the choke point. You know, into the Persian Gulf.

Q: For somebody who was not too familiar with dates, what, briefly, was happening in Iran at about this time?

WILEY: Riots and demonstrations were going on, which started while I was still in Saudi Arabia. Interestingly enough, when they first started going on, I was then in the embassy in Jeddah. We were getting lateral distribution on telegrams describing what was happening. Then, all of a sudden, we stopped getting them. Apparently, orders had gone out that any telegraphs that might indicate that the Shah was in trouble should not be distributed any place, except to the proper authorities back in Washington. Because, apparently, we didn't want it too widely known, even among the other embassies in the area, that the Shah was having problems. This was part of that cocoon, again, around the Shah.

Q: It really is amazing what happened within the bureaucracy. This was when Kissinger was out at this point, but we still were trying to preserve this relationship. If you didn't say ill things, nothing would happen.

WILEY: Well, remember Carter, himself, I think, was pretty much taken in by the Shah.

Q: Yes, he went to that coronation business.

WILEY: He made some outrageous statements, at the time, I remember.

Q: Were you beginning to get more and more indications that Oman may become a key player in the Iranian business?

WILEY: Yes, as we got to the point when, finally, when the Shah was forced to leave Iran. I sent in some--

Q: This was '79, wasn't it?

WILEY: Yes, it was '79. I sent in some telegrams that I heard later were actually given to Carter to read personally, talking about the consequences of the shift in Iran, and the importance now of protecting the Strait of Hormuz. The access to the oil supplies, and so on, which go through the Strait of Hormuz.

Until that point, most of our cards had been based on the two-pillar policy of the Shah and the Saudis as representing our interest in the area. We gave the Shah this military equipment, presumably, on the theory that he was going to maintain security in the Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz, and keep the access to oil open for us. Now that he was gone, we no longer had anybody doing that. I pointed out that the supply lines in and out of the Gulf through these important oil fields was now much more tenuous. You know, we didn't really have a good security plan for that area. This, of course, started a lot of thought back in Washington. They eventually got even more concerned, because it was just after this time when the Russians invaded Afghanistan.

Q: That was in December of '79, I guess, wasn't it?

WILEY: I think that is correct, if I remember correctly, yes. So it was shortly after the Shah had left the country, and the revolutionary regime had taken over. Then you had the Russians coming into Afghanistan. So these two events really got people worried. They were afraid of military expansion by the Soviet Union into the Gulf area. At the same time, we had lost our pillar of our support there in the Shah. That's what started the whole idea of the rapid deployment force.

Carter made a speech in which he mentioned the Gulf area as a third area of vital interest to the United States. This was done after a lot of debate within the bureaucracy, implying that we would, if necessary, use military means to protect our vital interests in the Gulf area. Then when he turned to the Pentagon and asked them to tell him just how we were going to go about protecting these vital interests. The Pentagon was not really able to come up with anything, because they didn't have any military muscle that could be projected into that part of the world. This got people pretty concerned. The President was out on a limb. He had said we were going to fight, if necessary, and we didn't have the means to fight, you know, in that area.

So, in deciding what to do about it, the Pentagon developed the rapid deployment force concept, which said, in effect, that we would identify certain highly mobile units around the world that could be put into the Middle East area quickly, if need be. Then we set about trying to make basing arrangements or access agreements with various countries in the area, who would make it possible for these forces to be moved into the area quickly, if we had to do so at some future date.

We had to think about things like pre-positioning equipment, having training activities in the area, so, if the troops ever had to go in there, they would know the kind of terrain they're facing, what the problems would be, and so on. We did some pre-positioning down in the Seychelles Islands of ships with military equipment on board, and so on. All focused again on the Gulf area, and the oil resources in the Gulf.

Q: What was the government like in Oman, and then how did you deal with them on this issue?

WILEY: It was very much a one-man rule under the Sultan, and he had a group of mainly merchant families with whom he cooperated closely. These merchant families generally supplied the ministers for his cabinet, since, when he took over the country, the merchant families were the only people that could read and write, apart from some of religious establishment in the

country. So he relied on them, and in return he gave them favored positions as far as being agents in government contracts, and things like this. So that you ended up with a very wealthy group of merchant families close to the Sultan who were really running the country, which was not that much different from what we had in Iran, prior to the revolution.

One major exception was that the Sultan avoided getting into an open fight with the religious establishment, where as, the Shah was in a pretty open conflict with the religious establishment in Iran. The Sultan never did that. He was able to avoid that. But it was a government run by merchant families, in effect, and the Sultan and his family. The British were still very influential. The commanding officers of all three branches of the military were Brits. The principal advisor to the Sultan was a Britisher, Tim Landen, who, again, was a military officer, British, although he had retired as a British military officer, and was on contract then with the Omanis. The Brits still had a great deal of influence in the commercial life, and in the government policy, generally, in Oman. I think Landen, who didn't always see eye-to-eye with the British government on these issues did advise the Sultan to co-operate more closely with the U.S., because the Brits were withdrawing from all over the world.

Q: We had actually taken over the responsibility with COMIDEASTFOR back in the '50s when the Brits had withdrawn most of their naval force from that area.

WILEY: Yes, but that was never much of a force.

Q: A couple of destroyer tenders, I think, something like that.

WILEY: Yes, and the one supply ship that was the admiral's flagship in the area. So our forces stayed through all of this, but it was based in Bahrain, of course, not in Oman. Then the Brits withdrew from the Masirah Island, which had been just an island just off the southern coast of Oman, which had been an important British airfield, when they had interest all through that part of the world. So Masirah Island was left unprotected, basically, after the British withdrawal.

I think the strategic thinkers around the Sultan, like Tim Landen, did encourage them to enter into some kind of a working relationship with the U.S. for his own security. The access agreements emerged out of that, where we had the rights to use certain military facilities in Oman, on condition that, first of all, we get the approval of the Omani government, on a case-by-case basis. They could be used either in an actual emergency or for training purposes. In return, we spent quite a bit of money building up these military facilities. Hangers, aircraft, air fields-- we did a lot of work down in Masirah Island in building up the facilities there, so that you could move a squadron of fighters from Europe down there if we wanted to at some future date. That was the thinking behind it.

Q: There was a confluence of interest there.

WILEY: Yes, the Brits didn't want us to go too far. They wanted us to have some kind of a protective umbrella over Oman, but they wanted to continue to run the Trucial Oman Scouts, and they wanted to continue to sell very expensive, and often quite inappropriate military equipment to Oman without U.S. interference. [Laughter]

Q: Did you have any sort of set-tos on this particular issue?

WILEY: I did locally, but I never got much backing in Washington. Washington was happy to let Oman stay British. If they wanted to waste their money on tanks that were designed for the nuclear environment in Europe, which they could never use in Oman, but which cost ten times what a normal tank would cost, that was the decision the Omanis made, and Washington was not going to get involved in it.

Let me talk a little about the strategic working out of this. I had two major concerns about the rapid deployment for us. In the first place, I thought it was oriented the wrong way militarily, and that was partially because of Pentagon politics. When this came up as an important strategic area, of course, the three services were all anxious to get a piece of the pie. A piece of the budget would go along with it, of course. The only way the Army could justify a major role in this was in the role of a U.S.-Soviet confrontation. That's the only reason that you should put anti-tank weapons, heavy armor, and so on, in Oman was in the context of a possible invasion of that region by the Soviet Union.

I thought that this was a diversion of resources. I didn't think the Russians were ever seriously going to invade that part of the world. It would have been general war. If there was general war, there were a lot better places for us to fight than there at the end of these tremendously long supply lines, and hostile environment in the Middle East, you know. So I didn't think that we should build up our forces in Oman, or in the Gulf, generally, as a counter to the Soviet Union. I thought what we should do is put in relatively light, highly mobile forces, which meant essentially Navy and Marine units, who could be used in case of local emergencies, in local conflicts, or attempts to subvert our friends in the area, that kind of thing. I thought we needed some force in the area, but the force should be in the context of the regional politics, not in the context of U.S.-Soviet relations. Of course, the army opposed this, because that would have frozen them out of the action in the Gulf area. It also made me rather unpopular with some of the military types, particularly the army, because I sent in long telegrams discussing these issues, pointing out the real purpose of our forces there should be thinking about how we can apply force quickly, if necessary, to help our friends in local disputes, and that it was only a bogeyman to talk about a Soviet threat to the area. The Pentagon, of course, wanted to use the Soviet threat to get more money, not only for the Army, but for the military, in general, out of the Congress. So they didn't like my saying this about the Gulf area, as such.

The other concern I had was that we had to keep it low profile. If it were too high a profile, it would hurt our friends. It would hurt the Sultan, because foreign troops on Arab soil are never very popular.

Q: That's very definitely true.

WILEY: That concept was pretty hard to sell back here.

Q: How did this play out?

WILEY: We did keep a low profile. That I did succeed in doing with the help of the Sultan, who also didn't want too high a profile around there. Although he was willing, I think, to go for a higher profile than I wanted. I thought he went too far in accepting a higher profile of the U.S. military. In fact, it did work out to be a pretty low profile operation.

Q: Did you have problems with American Army people or Navy, but basically Army people, coming out and trying to sell their idea to the Omanis? You're telling them, "I'm in charge here. Don't do this." Was this a problem?

WILEY: Yes, to some extent, the debate would go on before they actually came out. The Pentagon's idea of a small presence, was not my idea of a small presence. When the Pentagon thinks of something small, they are thinking of 300 or 400 men, when I'm thinking of something small, I was thinking of a unit of 10 people. There was this constant tension this way. They would put out what they thought was a small operation, what I thought was outlandish in terms of the high profile it would create in the country. So I had a lot of debate with the policy makers on these issues. We did end up with a relatively small profile.

The one thing that I opposed, which is still going on, is the use of Oman for Marine landing exercises, as part of this Operation Bright Star in Egypt. In the Gulf area, we're still doing this on an annual basis, and we land a few Marines on the beach, and take them back onto the ships again. I thought that was bad both from the point of view of the high profile, and the simple cost. We've got beaches in California you can land marines on for training. You don't really have to send them half-way around the world to do this. The amount of money these exercises cost is fantastic, both in Egypt and in the Gulf area.

Q: The real reason for doing this sort of thing is to show that we have a commitment there. Did you feel that we shouldn't be showing that type of commitment, or did it make that much difference?

WILEY: I think the commitment is of value to the elite and the power structure in these countries, who are working with us, and this is an important commitment. The commitment is not that important to the average man in these countries, who, if anything, resents the presence of foreign troops. I thought there were ways that we could reassure the elite and the power structure without actually landing forces on the beach, where the average man could see them. I didn't think that was necessary in order to reassure the people we were trying to reassure that we were behind them, in terms of the relationships in the area.

I was rather unpopular with the Pentagon, because I was constantly trying to cut back the size of the operations that they had in mind. They had big plans about converting Masirah into kind of a "Little America" and things like this, and I was constantly opposing this.

Q: Yes, a big PX, officers' club, the whole ball of wax, I would say. What about other problems there? In the first place, obviously your attention was focused to Iran, which was going through all sorts of turmoil. Did Israel play much of a role in any thinking at that time, or was it really almost another world?

WILEY: Oman is about as far removed from the Arab-Israel situation as you can get and still be in the Arab world. Oman looks out on South Asia and Africa. A lot of the Omanis came from East Africa, where they had been forced to leave Zanzibar.

Q: Zanzibar used to be the seat of the Sultan of Muscat and Oman at one point.

WILEY: Until the British separated the two, and then they made the Caning award to Oman, which is a sum of money paid every year to Oman in return for having lost their Zanzibar colony. But a lot of Omanis stayed in Zanzibar until the '50s, when the revolution came down there, and then the Arabs were kicked out at that point, or killed, some were killed, actually.

Q: There was quite a shock when our embassy was attacked in Pakistan. There were demonstrations and fear of attack on all of our places. This was '79, I believe. Was this right after the hostage crisis started?

WILEY: I think this was in '80. This was after the hostage crisis in Tehran.

Q: The hostage crisis in Tehran, where our embassy was seized for 444 days. It started, I believe, in November of '79. So we're talking about 1980, and there was an attack on our embassy in Pakistan, in which some Americans were killed. It was burned. What happened in Oman, if I recall, there was concern there?

WILEY: Well, back in Washington, there is a tendency to look at all of these countries as being similar, to a much greater extent than, in fact, they are. Vance, at that stage, who was Secretary of State, put out an order, ordering the evacuation of all dependents, and cutting down the staffs of all the embassies in the Gulf area, after this Pakistani thing, and the attack of Damas in Saudi Arabia came at about that point too. Except Saudi Arabia, the Saudi's desk officer went in and said we can't do it in Saudi Arabia, because we have too many people there. We can't cut back the embassy, and take out dependents, and so on.

Although the attack had taken place in Saudi Arabia, Vance still ordered that all of the lower Gulf countries--he ordered this over the vehement objection of all of the ambassadors, all of us screaming back to him, "Why are you evacuating these companies? They are safer than New York or Washington for our people."--and they were, literally. But Vance absolutely had his mind made up, and he would not listen to any of the ambassadors, or anybody else on this. He wanted all of the dependents out of these countries, and staffs cut back. We all lost our families for a period of 3 or 4 months, and we all got very quizzical inquiries from our foreign ministers, saying, "What are you afraid of here?" It was very embarrassing to answer. I'd say, "I don't know what we're afraid of." [Laughter] As far as I could see you're as safe as can be. This was orders from Washington.

Q: This shows the value of saying, "It's the ambassador on the spot who should call the situation, rather than coming from Washington."

WILEY: Vance absolutely had his mind made up on this one, and he would not to listen to any of the ambassadors, and he got very angry at the ambassadors for protesting this. The feelings

got very tense between the ambassadors and Vance after awhile over this issue, because we could release no reason at all for evacuating these countries. There were no threats of any kind to our staffs, or our people, or our embassies. Why Vance did it, I still don't quite know why he was so adamant on this.

Q: I suppose that with the Tehran business, and the seizing of the embassy, the whole idea is it would never happen again, we're all prepared for the last war.

WILEY: We would send in these long telegrams pointed out as logically and as rationally as we could that there is no particular threat to the embassy here, anymore then there has always been. He would say, yes, that is what they told me from Pakistan. Then, the next day, the embassy burned down.

Q: There was talk, at one point, about basing Iraqi planes in Oman. Did you get involved in that at all?

WILEY: Yes, that was a rather brief attempt early in the war, where the Iraqis approached the Omanis in the possibility of flying sorties out of Oman against Iraq. We strongly recommended to the Sultan that he not buy this and he didn't. Whether he would have done it anyway, I don't know. We strongly advised him to stay out of the Iraq-Iran war.

Q: This would just be a lightning rod to attract Iranian counter-attacks.

WILEY: And the Omanis were not that well defended.

Q: Did you get involved at all? This was the period of the tremendous oil shock that hit all over by OPEC countries. Was Oman producing enough oil to be a player in this?

WILEY: No, Oman was a relatively small producer of oil. That actually had come about earlier in the '67 War, and the aftermath of that when the oil shock took effect, and when we had our gas lines, and so on here. The Omanis, in those days, were not producing enough, and they never were a member of OPEC, and they still are not a member of OPEC. They sold their oil either on the spot market, or in quarterly contracts to Japanese and other oil companies that lifted it out of there. Their prices fluctuated more on the spot market, than on OPEC, no fixed rates.

Q: Do you think this about covers your period in Oman, or is there anything else?

WILEY: Yes, I think, we covered most of the interesting points. I had my differences with the military on the rapid deployment force, and with Mr. Vance on his evacuation of personnel, which I found very hard to defend.

JOHN R. COUNTRYMAN
Ambassador
Oman (1981-1985)

Ambassador Countryman was born in New York and raised in New York and California. He was educated at Fordham University, Miami University and the Frei University of Berlin. After service in the US Navy he joined the Foreign Service in 1962. An Arab language speaker and Middle East specialist, Ambassador Countryman served abroad in Istanbul, Beirut, Dhahran, Tripoli, Libreville and Oman, where he was US Ambassador from 1981 to 1985. In his service in the State Department in Washington, he dealt primarily with Arab Peninsular affairs. Ambassador Countryman was interviewed by David Reuther in 2001.

Q: Toward the end of your tour in ARP in late '80 comes the transition between the two administrations, the departing Carter and the incoming Reagan administration. How does the transition affect your office? Did you go through the normal exercise of papers for the transition team?

COUNTRYMAN: Of course by then, I was beginning to get some tentative feelings about the possibility of going out to Oman as ambassador. I went out in the summer of '81. As a matter of fact, I was in the very first batch of ambassadorial appointments when Ronald Reagan came in.

Q: How does that work out? Well let's move on to the process mechanism and excitement of becoming an ambassador. Who first broached the issue to you?

COUNTRYMAN: I think, well when we had been in ARP we had sent out a couple of ambassadors to, we sent one to when I was there, to Bahrain. Joe Twinam, who the Deputy Assistant Secretary covering ARP, said to me, "I want to save you for Oman you know." I said, "Marvelous. That would be great." There was a sort of an atmosphere that you know, all things being equal I would probably go to Oman. If I hadn't I wouldn't have been all that disappointed, knowing how difficult these things are. Peter Constable who was the senior Deputy Assistant Secretary, and some time in very early '81, he called me and said that my name was going up on the short list of three to the White House for ambassador to Oman. He called me very shortly thereafter and said, "Come on over and let's talk." He said, "It was very interesting. You know we sent it to an office over there and that is where they sort out whether they are going to have a political appointee." He said, "Our White House liaison came back to NEA and said, before you send up that list for Oman, I hope that you will give a great deal of thought because we have very decided opinions up here as to who should be the next ambassador there, and he happens to be a career officer. It is a career officer that we want." So he sent up the list and the White House came back and said, "You have got it right."

Q: Who is your friend in high places?

COUNTRYMAN: I think we had gone out to Omani national day, and I had taken a group of distinguished Americans out including both Democrats and Republicans. Out to Oman for Omani national day in the summer just about the time we signed the agreement. Omani national day is like in September or October. October I guess it is. I had taken these people out. I think they had come back and said you know, "Countryman seems to know everybody out there. If you want a good man take Countryman."

Q: Do you recall who the head of the Reagan Administration transition team for NEA was and how the process of assigning papers unfolded?

COUNTRYMAN: I think that was Bob Neumann who later went on to become ambassador to Saudi Arabia. He was in charge. On assigning papers, I don't know. I think this is done by the executive assistant to the secretary. I think the transition team goes up into the 7th floor and they sit down and obviously the people who are on the new administration's team know something. I mean they wouldn't be on the team if they didn't have some expertise. So just take, and they do this for the whole world, so I mean for NEA the people come in and just sort of sit down. They come up with the joint list. If you know anything about the area it is obviously you are going to do a paper whatever it is called Current state of Arab-Israeli relations. That is the obvious. You are going to do something about arms sales. You are going to do something on oil and the dollar. You are going to do something about relations with Iraq and Iran. I mean almost any fool could come up with a list and what you call it. It is a question of how you going to do a separate paper. I think there was a lot of horse trading. Is there a separate paper on this or do you do this and include these things. These were some of the bureaucratic. As I recall, there were no surprises for us in ARP.

Q: As you end your tour in ARP, how would you say the various countries that you covered sort of stacked up in importance and problems. Obviously Saudi Arabia was the main one. Oman we had this new relationship. Where did the others that ARP covered sort of sit in the...

COUNTRYMAN: Oman used to be way down the list in importance, but with the access agreement, Oman almost came up to number two after Saudi Arabia. We had a long relationship with Kuwait. Of course, there was a lot, at that time there was not the threat of the Iraqi invasion. But we had a long relationship with Kuwait, and there was a lot of oil there. Bahrain we had a certain amount of importance there because of the U.S. Navy presence. The UAE less important and Yemen, if anything Yemen probably got the least attention. In some ways it should have gotten more. At this time there was still the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, South Yemen, where we had no representation. It was a communist state. So there was a certain amount of attention to Yemen but it was always very much overshadowed by Saudi Arabia because the Saudis didn't like the Yemenis, and the Yemenis did not like the Saudis. But I think at the time I left ARP the pecking order of time and attention was probably Saudi Arabia clearly, then Oman and Kuwait, and then Bahrain, Qatar, and the UAE and then Yemen.

Q: Becoming ambassador, there is actually a number of steps between sending your name over to the White House and getting off the plane. How did that unfold?

COUNTRYMAN: Again Peter Constable called me and said, "Be home tonight at seven o'clock, for sure, because you are going to get a call from the President." He said "tonight," I mean, no advance notice. Well, my wife and I never went out, but we had...for some reason we were invited out to dinner that night. So I called her and said Call so and so and we will get dinner when we can because I have to be home at seven o'clock. I will tell you why later on. So I got home early from ARP, like 5:30 to 6:00. I took a shower and I was sitting on my bed at about quarter of seven in my shorts and the phone rang and this voice said, "Is this Mr. Countryman?"

Please stand by and in about ten minutes you are going to be receiving a call from the White House." So I quickly got dressed. It wasn't appropriate speaking to the President in just my shorts. Sure enough at 6:58 and ½ I got a call that said it was from the President. It was Ronald Reagan of course. He said, "John this is Ronald Reagan. This is the President. I just wanted to call you and say I would like you to go to the Sultanate of Oman and serve as my ambassador. How does that sound to you?" I really hadn't rehearsed anything. "I am deeply honored. I would be very happy." "Well I understand you are just the man for it. You are well respected and do a good job out there. I am glad that is all right with you, and I hope you enjoy your evening. We will look forward to seeing you in the White House before you go out," click.

Q: As director of ARP you have five or six ambassadors under you. Has this happened before or is this something the Reagan administration brought in, a call from the president to the nominee?

COUNTRYMAN: I don't think it happened in the Carter administration where I had most of my experience. I don't think they did. This was Ronald Reagan's style. Of course, when I would call on him, that is another story. He was very, that was his style. He wanted to have some contact with his ambassadors.

Q: State forwards your nomination to the White House. The President has called you. Then you go to the Hill for confirmation hearings. You're experiencing the whole American constitutional mechanism.

COUNTRYMAN: I went up for my hearings before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Rudy Boschwitz, Senator from Minnesota, chaired the Middle Eastern portion. I went up with Dick Viets who was going to Amman. One of the staffers on the Foreign Relations Committee, who had been a State Department officer, I forget his name. He called me and said, "Rudy Boschwitz is going to ask you some questions on Oman. I am not even going to bother to tell you what those questions are. John, if you can't answer the questions he is going to ask you, you don't deserve to go to Oman." So we went up. Dick and I sat down. Dick went first. He really didn't...I was surprised at how few questions he asked Dick Viets. Dick, of course had been DCM in Tel Aviv and was very well qualified. It was very brief. I thought "My God, what's going to happen now?" Well, Rudy Boschwitz was fascinated with Oman. He asked me all kinds of really detailed questions about the tribes and how the British had gotten in there. I understand there is oil but not very much and the Sultan had been to Sandhurst. I mean these were things I knew. Questions if you knew anything about Oman, if you spent as much time as I did, they were not probing questions, and very friendly. He said, "I would love to come out." I said, "I would be delighted to have you come out Senator. I am sure that the Omanis would be delighted to have you."

Q: What do you suppose was the source of his curiosity?

COUNTRYMAN: I thought he was just fascinated by Oman. It was different. He had seen pictures of the Sultan who looks very exotic in his turbans and all this sort of thing. But he was very friendly. Of course I was voted through, it went fine. Then I was sworn in, in August of '81.

Q: The swearing in ceremony usually takes place on the 7th. floor of the State Department in the formal rooms...

COUNTRYMAN: You have your choice. I wanted to make it not the biggest splash in the world, but I took the Benjamin Franklin, the biggest room there. Then you have to arrange to have it catered. I paid for that, with champagne and very simple hors d'oeuvres, there is someone who helps you do that. Then you can pick who you want to have swear you in. A good friend of mine, Wally Stadtler, who I went to high school with, Antonin Scalia went to the same high school we did, and he had Scalia come in and swear him in. Scalia had not been appointed at the time I was made Ambassador to Oman. But I had been called in by Walter Stoessel who was the Under Secretary for Political Affairs, who congratulated me when I got the nod from the White House. He said, "There is one more career person we have nailed down. That is you." He was always pushing for career people. So we talked a little bit. I had met him before as ARP country director, but he didn't know me very well. He wanted to know someone who is going out to be ambassador, he wanted to know who I was, so we spent not a lot of time but about 20-30 minutes talking about Oman and myself, So I asked Walter Stoessel which he did.

Q: Those are always occasions where your colleague would come up and enjoy the day.

COUNTRYMAN: I had my wife and my daughter and mother-in-law, and my mother and sister. Then after I was sworn in, then the White House said to stand by, you will call on the President on Thursday. The day before I was to call on the President, the air controllers strike hit. The morning I was to go to ARP where I had a little office and I was to hold there. My call to the President was going to be something like 11:00 or 11:30 in the morning, but from 9:00 on I was to be in the office waiting on the call. Of course the office was all alerted. When the White House calls, all other calls are put on hold. So at about 9:10 the White House calls and says the President has a chaotic morning because of the strike. Stand by we may reschedule this. So my wife and daughter and mother and mother-in-law were just told to wait. At about 10:00 I got a call that said it would be 11:00 sharp. So I went over with my family and we had gotten wind, this was in the holding room in the White House. There were a couple of other ambassadors. Our ambassador to Turkey was there with somebody else, and some staffer from the White House came down and asked "Are you John Countryman?" I said, "Yes." So it was a few minutes before 11:00 that we went in. Richard Allen was Reagan's National Security Advisor. You walk in the door and of course here is this phalanx of families who arranged themselves. Richard Allen almost rudely grabbed me by the arm and sort of dragged me over to the President and said, "Mr. President this is John Countryman." The President said without so much as a hello, "John, we really expect you to put that military relationship with Oman on the map. It is very important. I take a personal interest in it. I understand you are the person who is going to do this for us. This is very important" So we chatted about a couple of minor things. He got on to the subject of what my father had done. He was in the newspaper business and so on and so forth. He said, "Well I am sure that whatever pictures he had of me were good pictures." That was it. But I remember that very forcefully, evidently that was on his agenda. I took that as my guidance.

Q: And then shortly after that you go through the pack up and you arrive at post. Who was DCM?

COUNTRYMAN: Steve Buck, who had been the DCM for Marshall Wylie, and I asked him to stay on. Also the secretary for Ambassador Wylie who had been close to Marshall Wylie. I thought I would be a very different ambassador from Marshall Wylie both in style and substance,

but both Steve and the secretary were real pros. I remember writing both of them or calling and saying I don't consider you holdovers. You are my first choices.

Q: This is an ambassadorial prerogative to organize the front office any way you want.

COUNTRYMAN: Oh, yes.

Q: How big is the Embassy and how is it organized at this time?

COUNTRYMAN: At that time we had an ambassador, a DCM, two secretaries in the front office. Two consular officers. A secretary, an economic officer, a pol-mil officer, a pol-mil secretary, a USIS officer with a USIS clerk-secretary. Then the joint commission which got into being about the time I got there which consisted of on the American side a director, a program officer, a secretary, a budget person, so there was four on the American side, and we had about three on the Omani side. A Marine who was the senior military attaché, and an Air Force Major who was the assistant. They had about three or four enlisted people. Then we had about four communicators.

Q: On the other side who is now the director of ARP in Washington, who will be your liaison?

COUNTRYMAN: Bob Pelletreau. But I dealt a great deal with Jim Placke who was Deputy Assistant Secretary.

Q: When you first arrived in the late summer of '81, other than the military relationship, what were some of your other priorities?

COUNTRYMAN: Well, with the opening of the relationship, all of a sudden there are a lot of questions about Oman. Oman suddenly becomes a lot more important across the board, so I had a really full plate. When I arrived, of course, there was no military relationship, just the papers. But even when I presented my credentials to the Sultan, I had to break a standard kind of diplomatic canon, if you will, that you don't get into substance when you are presenting your credentials [Editor's Note Ambassador Countryman presented his credentials on October 14, 1981]. The military wanted to have an exercise in a couple of weeks with the Omanis and we were against time constraints. Given sometimes the difficulty of the Omanis getting to the Sultan, I asked the Foreign Minister if I could ask the Sultan when I presented my credentials about this military exercise. He sort of rolled his eyes. So I had to do that. So none of the things existed yet. They were all to be done.

Q: So you are actually having to build what you just negotiated.

COUNTRYMAN: Exactly. I was really concerned that we get going on the celebrations of the 150th anniversary of the treaty of commerce and amity. I had a superb, absolutely first rate, marvelous USIS officer. I can't remember his name. He had come to me before and wanted to go to Oman. I was waiting for the question because I knew who he was. He said, "You know I am Jewish." And I responded "I am Catholic. So?" He said, "Well." I said, "No, this is no problem. Not with the Omanis and not with me."

Q: But he had served in the Middle East before.

COUNTRYMAN: Yes, and was an excellent Arabist, and just had a great PR sense. I called him in the first day after I got my bags unpacked and told him my vision for the hoopla I wanted for this 150th anniversary. He just understood right away. He got brochures, got the money, got Hermann Eilts to come out, banquets, worked with the ministry of cultural heritage.

Q: What is Ambassador Eilts at this time?

COUNTRYMAN: He is retired. But he was, of course, this great scholar. He had written, he had gotten some documentation on the trip on the voyage of the Omani vessel Sultana. He had it published by the Boston historical society. He had discovered that in the 19th century, the Omanis to further their relations with the United States, had sent one of their big seagoing dhows to New York with presents and they called on the President. It was PR deal. They went and got some American machine products and so forth. But this voyage of the Sultana had been played up by the Omanis and had been recorded heavily in the American press with these exotic people with turbans coming into New York and the riches of the east on display and picking up guns and American hardware and this sort of thing. He had been in our office in Aden many years ago. He wasn't ambassador there but I guess when it was under the British it was almost a consulate. He had been accredited to Oman and called on Oman, so he was one of the few people outside of myself who knew something about Oman. He came and gave a whole lecture on the voyage of the Sultana and some historical research on the treaty of amity and commerce. So we did that.

Then the rest of my tour, and that was important. We also wanted to increase trade with Oman. It looked like there was depth and texture to the relationship so that it didn't seem all one sided, that we were only there for military access. So I did a lot with the Department of Commerce. I got a very good, as a matter of fact...I was cited in my efficiency report, because of the way we did things on those days, you didn't say this in so many words, but I got some write up about how I had been particularly attentive to...not diversity because that wasn't a cliché yet...but broadening the base of the embassy. We had a Jewish officer. I had the first woman who had service in Oman. She came in as head of the economic section in the 1984 summer rotation.

Q: Who was that?

COUNTRYMAN: What was her name? Dianne Markowitz. She later went on to be consul in Poznan. She was proposed to me, and what I wanted was not only someone who would be a trade promoter, but I wanted a real economist. I thought there was all kinds of stuff, and it wasn't the fault of my predecessors, but I am not a trained economist, but I know the kinds of things you should know about a country's economy. No one knew the files on Oman better than I did, both from Agency and our reporting. There was trade promoting, but I didn't understand very much about the economy of Oman. I knew they had some oil. I didn't know anything about the banking system. So this gal when she came out did a lot of excellent economic reporting. So there was that too. As it later worked out, and I got a sense of this over time that you know, anything I needed for Oman to enrich the relationship, to help the relationship, something that Washington could do, people would do it.

During my tour I really got very high level attention. The Sultan made a state visit to the States, to the U.S. That was in '82. And in '83, as we were getting ready to go to the run up of the renegotiation of the treaty of amity and commerce, of the security agreement, the Omanis we had some minor problems, mainly from the Omanis feeling kind of isolated. I got George Bush to come on one of his trips and visit Oman when he was Vice President. So it was a very active place with the Sultan going to the United States and George Bush coming to Oman, plus the big celebration of the treaty of amity and commerce. So for my period there, little Oman was getting a lot of headlines in both countries.

Q: Give us a little background. How does one encourage the Vice President's staff to put you on their schedule?

COUNTRYMAN: I got wind of this way back. What you do is you play everybody's chord. I was the Ambassador which means I had a position to visit the other agencies. So I went to the station chief and said, "You know it can't help but help you. I mean George Bush of all people coming out here. You use your channels. I don't even want to see the messages, but encourage the Agency to encourage George Bush to come out."

Q: Because he obviously had the agency connection.

COUNTRYMAN: Yes, obviously, and he was the Vice President and they briefed him and so on and so forth. So when somebody goes over to brief the Vice President and says "I understand you are going to be out in Pakistan. Boy our people in Oman could really use a trip. It is a great place and blah, blah." I used my military connections. I went to the head of the CENTCOM, Central Command, General Bob Houston. Of course, they were all for it. So of course the military said you have got to go out to Oman. I talked to the State Department and pushed them. This trip must have been planned for quite awhile because I had a lot of lead time on this to set up my bureaucratic diplomacy. Then I did a long the typical ambassadorial think piece type of thing on the U.S.-Omani relationship the grabber being the Omanis feel lonely and that they are well intentioned toward us, but how the British, although not opposing us, don't particularly help. The incident they had with the Indians about talking about getting too close to the Americans, not that the Indians mean that much, but we needed encouragement and where we stood on the relationship and how we were doing on military access. The last paragraph was how helpful it would be for the Vice President to come and speak directly to the Sultan. as part of his trip.

Q: Did you have any CODELs (congressional delegations) in the four years you were there?

COUNTRYMAN: Oh, yes. Chuck Percy came out. That was a big CODEL. We had kind of...I forget what the auspices of that was, but it was sort of a mass CODEL. I forget, it wasn't a committee. I think it was sort of...H (Bureau of Congressional Relations) said everybody is interested in Oman. Let's fill up an airplane with people who are interested in Oman. So a bunch of people from various committees came out. I hosted them, and the Omanis were very good about that.

Q: Let's just get into some of the process there. You have got a major CODEL coming. You tell the Omanis, you suggest to them you'll host a dinner and the Omanis host a dinner.

COUNTRYMAN: Oh, the Omanis were very PR conscious, and they were very well set up at the various palaces. So for instance when Senator Percy came, I gave a major dinner at my residence one night and invited very senior Omanis to it plus the few Americans I had here. Of course I knew that the Omanis would be told to make sure that they would come. Then of course, we called on the Sultan, and we met with him and his guard in the afternoon at one of his palaces outside of town. The Seeb palace. Then there was a dinner given by the Foreign Minister. The Omanis were very good about this.

Q: At the time you are there, the Iran-Iraq War emerges, if I have the time line right, and that just impacts on everything. How does that look from your perspective in Oman, the start of the Iran-Iraq War?

COUNTRYMAN: Well, of course we had both an Iranian ambassador and an Iraqi ambassador in Oman. It was very interesting that when that was on, the Iraqi ambassador of course I spoke to him because we had relations with Iraq. He was sort of my buddy, you know. I mean he always came over and said hello to me you know. Of course I did not shake hands with or recognize the Iranian ambassador at all.

Q: That was U.S. policy.

COUNTRYMAN: Yes. The Omanis of course, had been very close to the Shah and the Shah had helped them in the Dhofar rebellion, had sent Iranian troops to help them. The Sultan had been close to the Shah. The Iraqis had meddled a little bit, not having gotten very far, but because Omani society was kind of Iraqi-Ba'ath-Party-proof, Saddam-Hussein-proof, but there were things that we got through intelligence sources and police sources that the Iraqis had tried to ferment some problems in Oman. It never got even halfway to first base; it never got off the ground, but there had been. So there was a suspicion on the part of the Omanis toward the Iraqis.

Q: How did the Omanis see this conflict, as religious, ethnic...?

COUNTRYMAN: No I think the Omanis saw it strictly as a national conflict between the Iranians and the Iraqis. I think their view was the best outcome of the war was that both Iraq and Iran would lose somehow, if it were possible.

Q: Getting back to your comment that Oman was Ba'ath Party-proof, what variables in Oman are you using to come to that conclusion?

COUNTRYMAN: The Omanis were simply not that nationalist inclined. There had never been because of the British presence there, there had not been opportunity for the Iraqis to proselytize the country, to get their message across. People didn't listen to the radio from Radio Baghdad. I don't think the reception was good; I don't think you could get it in Oman. So they just never had a chance to infiltrate. The population in the interior of Oman was...a lot of them were illiterate, pretty loyal to the Sultan. I mean it was not a, and they were away from the Arab

nationalist atmosphere of Nasser and his thing. They had their own Omani problems and saw themselves as Omanis and rather self sufficient, so they were sort of immune to wanting to overthrow the Sultan and set up an Iraqi Ba'ath presence.

Q: The Middle East is still a fairly unstable place when you are in Oman. In '82 Israel invades Lebanon, the bombing of the Embassy and the Marines in Lebanon. How are those kinds of events portrayed and impacting on your environment in Oman?

COUNTRYMAN: Because of the history of Oman, there were practically no Palestinians in Oman. A lot of the other gulf sheikdoms because they didn't have an educated populace, they had hired Palestinians and there was at least a Palestinian advisor in various ministries and so forth, and the Palestinian presence was there. There was a sense in which they had to play the more Palestinian line in the local press. Oman, of course, had never recognized the PLO (Palestine Liberation Organization). That is a very important thing. All the other countries had a PLO representative or some kind of relationship. Oman refused to recognize the PLO because the PLO had supported the Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman in South Yemen. They had supported the overthrow of the Sultan, so the Omanis did not recognize them, the Palestinians. We always thought, I pushed the Agency to find out for us, but I had some indications myself, the Omanis had some clandestine relationship with Israel, at least on the intelligence sharing. So what happened in the Levant, what happened in the Palestine-Israel problems was of concern to the Omanis because it tended to poison the general Arab well and tended to...

Q: You were saying the lack of resident Palestinians and Oman's own political history gave these events a totally different presentation in Oman. Now, your Oman tour lasted four years...

COUNTRYMAN: Yes, I was only supposed to be there for three, but Dick Murphy called me as a courtesy, you know, what was I going to do with my life, it must have been a little over two year mark and said, "Would I stay on for the fourth year because the fourth year was when we would re-negotiate the access agreement. In the access agreement, one of the provisions was it would only go for five years because it had been signed in '80. So, in '85 it would be up for re-negotiation. He said, everybody here said we can bring you back here if you are going to stay and not retire and you can advise us, but he said nobody knows the ins and outs. He said, "We want somebody there who can say, well don't you remember Mr. Minister back when we negotiated. Didn't we say," so and so and that never got into the record but we did it anyway. It was our sense that blah would happen. We want that kind of a thing. He said, "Defense wants it and the White House wants it. We all want you to stay." So I said, "OK."

Q: By that fourth and last year, how would you characterize the difference in priorities from when you first arrived in '81?

COUNTRYMAN: I think they were still the same. I would like to feel that I had done much to redress some of those areas where we were really weak. Now one of the things I did in the Embassy,...and I always thought it was one of the greatest compliments I ever got,...Sheldon Krys, who was in charge of NEA/EX, said to me after I had been there about 2-21/2 years. He said, "You know if there were some kind of an award for an ambassador who administered his post the best, you would get it hands down in NEA." Because of the expansion, we did an awful

lot administratively. I told you that I had picked the ambassador's residence and chancery. And that had been the best game in town. By the time I was there, we had wildly outgrown it. So I persuaded the Department to...and we had it on the books, of course, I had pushed for this, a new chancery. Before I left, I had gotten the plans approved. Shortly after I left they started breaking the ground for a new chancery and ambassador's residence. But that was all in the future.

But from my time there, I got myself moved out of the second floor in the chancery building. I lived above the embassy. My wife deserves a tremendous...some kind of medal from the State Department. She negotiated really our new house. She found a beautiful house for us on the outskirts of town that had been built by the Omani who has the title of riz baladieh, i.e., the president of the municipality. He was like the mayor of Muscat. A lovely house. She just drove around with my driver. I don't know where she got these tips. There weren't for sale signs, but she heard about it. She went and saw this house and she loved it. I called his office, and they said, "He is going to move into that." So I said, "Tell him the American ambassador would like to call on him." So I called on him. He was so flattered the American Ambassador came a calling. "Of course, I will move someplace else; of course you can have it." We got it for a fair price which, of course, freed up all kinds of room in the building where other people could get better offices. The AID director, the head of the joint commission, his wife was a nurse. I got permission to put her on the payroll, and I got a little outbuilding that was in our compound, got it refurbished, and we had a nurse's office there. In a place like Oman although we had an American medical mission that could take pretty good care of us, and the Omani medical hospital system was not bad for a third world country, but it was still a great morale thing to have. So that was another thing we did.

The husband of the gal who was the station chief's secretary's husband was retired, and had nothing to do. I got him put on the payroll as our commissary superintendent. We opened up a commissary so we could order stuff in. You didn't have to wait for shipments outside like cigarettes, like a PX, liquor and this sort of stuff. So he ran that. It was open a few times a week. People were asking all kinds of questions about Oman. Oman is as large as Kansas. It is not a huge country, but it is a very beautiful country, great differences of vegetation in the desert and so on and so forth. I always thought that one of the prerogatives of the ambassador particularly in a country like Oman, was to get to know his country. I took two trips while I was there. Oman was divided into 12 wilayah, states, like governorates. There was a governor's office that was a kind of a center administration in each one of these 12 wilayah. So I went to every one of them. I went out with the political officer and drove and went to these wilayah and talked to them, saw their hospitals and saw their irrigation problems and wrote it all up. So that by the time I left, someone coming to Oman have a very good sense of the country and not just Muscat.

Q: You've just illustrated the wide range of responsibilities an ambassador has, from dealing with quality of life issues, to focusing political and economic reporting, to representing the United States. Now, you noted you had a number of women officers, the nurse, are there any particular problems operating in this environment?

COUNTRYMAN: No, Oman was very liberal on that. They are Muslim, but they were very, there was no problem on that back then. The women, I never had any regulations I promulgated.

But it was...my wife was helpful on that, sort of getting the word out that, I mean there were a lot of beaches, and of course there were a lot of British and Dutch women in bikinis and everything. But when you went to the souq or you went downtown, all the women somehow knew this, and I got the word out very subtly, yes, you didn't wear short shorts or a halter, that sort of thing. You wore reasonable dress with a reasonable knee length and some kind of a little sleeve. I think the only things that impacted was in...I used to advise very strongly that in Ramadan, don't eat in public. Don't be eating an apple in the car as they drive you home. Don't smoke in the car as you are going out. I am a great cigar smoker, and during Ramadan I would not smoke in public.

Q: Another quality of life issue for ambassadors is the annual evaluation report for each person in the staff. Did you allocate that to the DCM? It is a pretty small post.

COUNTRYMAN: The DCM wrote everybody's efficiency report, and I reviewed it. I thought that was a better way to do it because both my DCM's, Steve Buck and then Chuck Cecil...having been a DCM, I knew what I wanted out of a DCM. There were certain things, because you were small there was a lot of you know, presence of the station chief and the military attaché tended to deal directly with me, but they were both very, very smart bureaucrats, and I would always want either to have my DCM in on it or they would sort of keep him abreast. Without laying down exact rules, things worked out very well. I mean the station chief would go by Steve Buck's office and say, "I am going in to see the Ambassador. If you need more details I will tell you, but we are going to bug the Iraqi ambassador's office with the Omanis." You know, that kind of thing. The military relationship because the generals and admirals wanted to deal with me, the first military attaché I had was not all that good, but then I got this guy, Air Force Colonel Samuel L. Hall, who was absolutely superb. I wrote to the State Department and used my contacts in DOD to make sure I got a star performer. I got a great guy. He had been a navigator on Air Force One, you know, the flight which flies the president around.

He was...I mean not only did he know his military stuff very well, but he was just a very good diplomat, got along beautifully with the Brits, and had a lot of contacts with the Brits. His number two was a Marine Major by the name of John Marr, and he was equally very good. The two of them was good a team as I could possibly imagine.

Q: This is an interesting thing, you now have the access agreement that covers various and sundry things, but there is no U.S. presence if you will, so you have these U.S. military groups sort of coming through the country from time to time?

COUNTRYMAN: There is a U.S. military presence. We had not only the military attaché and the assistant military attaché. I forgot we had a MOS officer, military sales officer, who was an Air Force major. He was assigned about the time I got there. Then we had the Corps of Engineers that came in, because part of the access agreement was expansion of the airfield at Seeb and the building of the prepositioning buildings. So we had a Corps of Engineers colonel.

Q: The job of the embassy is to know what every American, official American in country is doing. How did you, were you satisfied that you understood what groups were coming when exercises were being done?

COUNTRYMAN: Well, I had a number of things. With the Corps of Engineers, I called when I arrived there. The corps was just setting up. I called on the first guy there, and he was replaced by another fellow who later became a brigadier general and was the spokesman for awhile during the Gulf War. But I told them, I said, "Look, I don't know anything about strength of materials or the thickness of concrete, and I don't particularly want to know about it." I said, "It is your responsibility as you deal with the Omanis on this construction project if it gets political, and I expect you to know what political means. I want you to let me know. Because that is what I am here to do. I am to help you achieve your technical goals and keep you protected from political fallout, that is problems with the Brits or problems with the Omanis of a political nature, you come to me and I will solve them for you."

Q: And of course you have an officer assigned to pol-mil relations and it is his job to know what groups are there, what things are planned...

COUNTRYMAN: And not to look over their shoulder, but to be let in on what is going on. We had some minor problems but they were minor problems because we got at them before they became large problems.

Q: Of course it required a lot of liaison with CENTCOM and DOD.

COUNTRYMAN: Yes. And I had when I went out to...the CENTCOM was started shortly after I got to Oman. We used to be under the European theater. So I went to Frankfurt, Germany, and met with the commander of the European forces before I went out to Oman, General Billy somebody. He and I came to a great understanding. He understood, I mean I quoted to him what Ronald Reagan said about the military relationship, about putting the military relationship with Oman on the map. He understood the points that I wanted to make, and I wanted to know what was going on. I said, "You know, I am your pol-mil officer out there." I continued, "If you are going to be planning on doing something, I can just foresee what is going to happen. I am going to be at a cocktail party for the visiting Pakistani minister of posts and the minister of interior, who is very close to the Sultan, will come up to me and say, "Ambassador, I understand that so and so is going on." I have got to be able to answer him right then and there in order to further your military objectives. If I can't give him...because if the answer doesn't satisfy me, it is not going to satisfy him; so brief me in. Let me know what is going on." He was very supportive on that. "If anyone doesn't give you what you need, come right to me, John, and we will fix it for you."

Q: Oman is a small country. What other embassies were there?

COUNTRYMAN: What you would expect. The major Europeans, British, French, Germans, Italians, Spanish. A lot of people, of course, had embassies as far away as Beirut or Kuwait, that were regionally accredited. The Canadian ambassador became a good friend of mine. He was resident in Kuwait. He was accredited to everybody up and down the Gulf. The south Asians, India and Pakistan, Bangladesh, and to give you a flavor for them being there, Pakistanis actually had an arrangement with the Omanis where they encadred, really ran the Navy. A lot of the enlisted men in the Omani Navy were Pakistanis. Because Oman, until the '50s, had an enclave

in Pakistan called Gwadar that was Omani. They gave it up. The people there were Baluchis. They had a Baluchi regiment in the Omani army. One of the provisions of their pulling out of Gwadar was that they would have in perpetuity the ability to go to Gwadar and recruit mercenaries to be in the Omani Army. They kept that up.

The Bangladesh ambassador, when I called upon him, was a very delightful fellow. He asked me some questions and I gave an unclassified answer about our access agreement and the United States. He said, "Mr. Ambassador, to give you an impression of my duties here, it is very easy. I have one job and that is to get jobs for men from Bangladesh. And that is my only job. We have very little trade, but I but I am here to present the fact that Bangladesh people work very hard and we can...any kind of a contract and we can provide 50, 75, 300 people for it. Building of road, or anything. That is my purpose to get jobs for people in Bangladesh."

Q: An interesting view of third-country employment. In your personal accommodation you have a cook or other household servant. Were those Omanis?

COUNTRYMAN: No. I inherited them. They worked out very well. I had Christians from Lahore, Pakistan. Before I came to Oman I didn't even know...I had been in Pakistan very briefly when I was in Saudi Arabia,...I didn't know there was a Christian community there. There is evidently a Christian community in Lahore. I don't think they are anywhere else and they are Catholics. Of course, they are very much despised and second class citizens in Pakistan. So my entire staff were these Lahore Pakistani Christians.

Actually, Oman had always been somewhat receptive to some emigration and had a large subcontinent population. They were actually Omani citizens who were Indians who came from Bombay because of the proximity across the Indian Ocean and the old British empire line. You know, very strong ties between Bombay and Oman. There was a large...some of the more wealthy Omani merchants, Khimji Ramdas, was an Indian. Some of these people, it was very hard to get Omani citizenship, but some of these Indians had been there for generations and they were Omani citizens, spoke fluent Arabic as well as whatever they speak, Gujarati, whatever they speak in Bombay, and English.

CHARLES O. CECIL
Deputy Chief of Mission
Muscat (1983-1986)

Ambassador Cecil was born in Kentucky into a US military family and was raised at several military bases in the US and abroad. He was educated at the University of California, Berkeley and the School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS). He entered the Foreign Service in 1966. A trained Arabic Language speaker, the Ambassador served abroad in Kuwait, Dar es Salaam, Beirut, Jeddah, Bamako, Muscat, Tunis and Abidjan. He was US Ambassador to Niger from 1996 to 1999. He also had several assignments at the State Department in Washington, DC. Ambassador Cecil was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 2006

Note: Subsequently, Ambassador Cecil served as Chargé d'affaires of the US Interest Section of the Belgian Embassy in Tripoli, Libya from 2006 to 2009.

Q: Today is the fifth of March 2008. We're talking about 1983 till when you were in Muscat?

CECIL: Eighty-six.

Q: Chuck, let's start. In 1983 you're off to Muscat. What was your job there, and then describe what the situation was there.

CECIL: I went to Muscat as deputy chief of mission with Ambassador John Countryman. John Countryman was an Arabist, a career officer, and we had worked together earlier when he was deputy country director for Arabian peninsula affairs, and I was the desk officer for Saudi Arabia at the time back in the '75 to '77 period.

I was very happy to go to Muscat not only because the job was an important job but the country was an important one. Because of my earlier service in Zanzibar I was especially interested in the historical links between the Arabian peninsula and East Africa. Sultan Qaboos had been in power 13 years when I arrived in '83. He had overthrown his father in 1970 with the help of the British. His father was not a modern man, and the country was facing a communist supported civil war in the south in a region called Dhofar which was of grave concern to the British. With British help, and I believe they also had help from Jordan and Iran, the sultan managed to put down that rebellion. By then—'83—the country was a modern country with a wonderful infrastructure.

Q: I wonder if you could talk a bit for background of how Qaboos ousted his father but also how this Marxist rebellion was put down with the help of outsiders.

CECIL: I wouldn't want to try to take the place of writers and historians who have studied that and written very carefully in detail about it. It all happened before I arrived. Let me just say that Sultan Qaboos was sent to England by his father to Sandhurst, a traditional military academy, and that was probably his father's fatal mistake. That gave his only son a modern British-inspired military education. After finishing at Sandhurst Sultan Qaboos went on to Germany as a member of a British military unit in Germany at that time. That would have been sometime in the late '60s.

Q: The British army of the Rhine.

CECIL: Then Qaboos returned to Oman to Salalah because his father spent most of his time in Salalah. Qaboos's mother was a Dhofari from southern Oman. The father kept his son under virtual house arrest in the palace. The government of South Yemen—the People's Democratic Republic—was a communist government with strong support from the Soviet Union and perhaps from the Chinese. I've forgotten now the extent of the Chinese involvement. That communist government instigated a rebellion in the Dhofar Province, the southern province, of Oman.

Q: It was [inaudible].

CECIL: Right. The war was a difficult one, not going well. Oman itself was virtually closed to the outside world by the father, Said Taimour. He wanted to keep all modern influences out. He did, in fact, in the '60s allow the Dutch oil company, Shell, to come in and start exploring. They quickly found oil, so there was an anomaly there. It was a little enclave where the oil prospectors and developers lived and worked. Aside from that, it was extremely difficult to get into the country.

Money was not being used to support the development of the people. You'll find incredible statistics such as in 1970 the number of miles of paved road in Oman was probably less than 10, and that was in the capital city of Muscat. There was I think one school. The British were quite concerned that the rebellion might gain more support from the people. The British role has always been pretty quiet. You don't want to overstate what their role was, but certainly they condoned what was basically a palace revolution in which the father was basically told to go. I think he was actually wounded by a gunshot if I recall one account that I read. I don't think that anyone was killed in the palace action. They may have been but certainly it was a very minor thing. The father was then sent off to London where he spent the rest of his life in one of the big hotels in London.

Qaboos took over the leadership in 1970. He was an educated, modern man. Perhaps the best educated of all the rulers on the Arabian peninsula certainly back then and probably still so now. I'm mentally going down the list, and I'm not quite sure of what the education level is of some of the newer leaders. In any case he was a very modern man, and he started to open up the country.

When I arrived in '83, though, it was still a very interesting combination of British support and Omani attempts to manage their own country. When I arrived British officers commanded all branches of the Omani armed forces, and the senior commander over the entire military establishment was a General Timothy Creasey, a British general. The sultan relied very heavily on Britain for support and for expertise to help run and manage his country. He loved and admired anything British and, in fact, in 1985 when it was time to celebrate the 15th anniversary of his coming to power, the sultan invited the London Philharmonic Orchestra to come to Muscat to play as part of the celebration. He was criticized for that by the Omanis. They thought this was a needless expense, an extravagance. Some people didn't like that use of money.

While I was there at some point during the '83,- '86 period, the sultan did finally appoint an Omani as army commander, and an Omani became the deputy commander of the air force. He would have become commander but he unfortunately died in an airplane crash in the far north on the Musandam Peninsula when the plane he was piloting ran into a mountain at the end of a runway. That set back the effort to put Omanis in charge of the air force. I'm sure by now all the military forces are commanded by Omanis. That was, after all, more than 20 years ago.

At the top level the United States and the United Kingdom were in close agreement with our goals in that area, but we had what we call "working level" difficulties. Oman was really, I must say, almost the last outpost of the British empire. It's as if a high tide washed up all the colonial ex-pats who had no home to go to or any other profession other than being colonial civil servants.

They all settled in Oman for the last hurrah, and they jealously guarded their positions and their influence. They saw our presence there as part of a zero sum game and any increase in American influence the British saw as being at their expense.

On the working level our relations with the British were cordial but not particularly friendly. I remember once the second econ-commercial officer that came during my time, a lady named Diane Markowitz, told me once when I asked her, "How are you being treated by the people you have to deal with here?" She was the first woman economic-commercial officer on the embassy staff. She told me her problems were much greater with the British that she had to deal with than the Omanis. The Omanis treated her like an educated professional, but the British business managers were very chauvinistic, very sexist oriented in the way they treated her. That might be typical of the attitude that was very common there.

The major issue during my three year period which had preceded my arrival was the question of access to facilities for our military forces. Talks had originated in the Carter administration around 1979 or 1980, and we had negotiated an access to facilities agreement with Oman. As part of that agreement we were constructing very large facilities in Oman to pre-position military equipment. We needed someplace to store that quantity of vehicles and armament and everything you can think of that we would need if we ever had to engage in military action in the Persian Gulf region. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers was present in Oman overseeing the construction projects to allow us to pre-position the equipment.

They reached the peak in their activity around 1984. I remember that their target date for leaving was September '86. I'm not sure that the corps of engineers actually met that departure date or not, but it was around that time they probably did leave. We renegotiated that access to facilities agreement during my time. We renewed it for another five years.

Q: With all this equipment we must have had to have a certain amount of residual American presence there to keep an eye on it and maintain it so things didn't rust and all that when there.

CECIL: Very small. Very modest. Let me say a word about what constituted the U.S. presence at that time. The embassy itself was located in old Muscat—the old capital. We were in an old building rented from an important Omani family called the Zawawi family, and the building was called The Bayt Zawawi. It was an old style Omani residence three stories tall, very traditional in its architecture. It was adjacent to the British embassy which was also adjacent to the Sultan's Palace. There on the waterline of Old Muscat you had the sultan's palace, the British embassy, and the American embassy. A very cozy little arrangement.

I can't remember exactly how many Foreign Service Officers we had, but it was small: the ambassador, myself, a political officer, two consuls, an economic-commercial officer, one admin officer, a GSO, a Budget and Fiscal Officer. That's about it for the State Department side. I believe a junior economic-commercial officer came for the first time near the end of my time there. The Federal Aviation Agency had a representative at Seeb airport to advise Omani aviation authorities on various matters.

We had a defense attaché and an assistant defense attaché plus an office called the Office of Military Cooperation headed by an army major. Then we had the corps of engineers. I don't remember how many people were in the corps of engineers office. Not excessively large, probably less than 10. We had a small office called the U.S.-Omani Joint Commission which was a USAID staff office. It had about three or four American officers. The joint commission was mutually funded by the U.S. and the government of Oman. They were nearing the end of their work. I know they were involved in a fisheries project and in some kind of education project. I can't remember the details anymore. We had a USIS office with a PAO.

Again, their geographic location and their being on a peninsula just across the water from Iran. They were always very careful to maintain a proper relationship with Iran.

We had an interesting example of the Omani attitude. In 1984 on the 14th anniversary of Sultan Qaboos's ascension to power, the sultan invited General Kingston who at that time was the commander of CENTCOM to come as his guest and attend the national day celebration.

Q: CENTCOM being the American Military Organization that had responsibility for that area.

CECIL: Right. You're like Jim Blair who always explains to the audience what the acronym stands for! The Central Command. That's exactly it: He was commander of our military forces that were responsible for anything we might have to do in that part of the world. You could say the pre-positioning facilities were really being built to serve his needs. A four star general he was. General Kingston came. He had a seat on the reviewing stand with some other hundred guests, and the sultan would take them to a number of special ceremonials, but the TV cameras never picked up the American general when the ceremonies were being broadcast, nor were any photos in the press or any articles written that ever mentioned his presence. So he was there and he wasn't there. They treated him as the guest they wanted him to be, but they certainly didn't want any public attention focused on the close working relationship that we were developing. We thought it was a very nice gesture that the sultan invited him, but we understood why they were careful to avoid being criticized by their neighbors for being too close to us.

Interestingly enough, I remember from a letter I wrote back to a family member, the day after General Kingston left we had a four star admiral come in—Admiral Foley—who was commander of our Pacific fleet, CINCPAC. He had been to Oman five years earlier in some other capacity, and now he was coming in for an update and to have a look around just to see what was going on. He was on his way back to Hawaii but made a stop there. He was warmly received by the Omani government.

A couple of weeks after that we had Admiral Fallon who was the commander of our Mid-East forces, three ships in those days. He came with his ship, *The LaSalle*, spent three days in Muscat on a port visit. Throughout the three years this was maybe not typical. This was a bit excessive, but we did get constant periodic visits by military personnel. The Chief of Naval Operations came. Lots of people.

Q: As you were looking at it, we're talking about '83 to '86, what was the feeling about the Gulf and what might happen? As I recall the Iran-Iraq war was going full blast, wasn't it, at that time?

CECIL: At full blast? I'm not sure, but probably it was.

Q: It pretty much stopped around '89, I think.. We had the flagging of Kuwaiti ships at the time. What were our military preparations in your mind and the minds of others? What were we pre-positioning for or against?

CECIL: I'm sure the Pentagon always has its war plans, its theater plans and obviously because of the importance of oil and free access to the Persian Gulf, we had to take prudent measures to be ready for whatever the challenge might present. I don't think at that point we were focused on any one or single country simply because of the need to ensure that oil can keep flowing through the Straits of Hormuz. Because of our concern for the stability of the traditional Arab leaders, certainly the Saudis and the sultan himself, the Kuwaitis, I think it was part of a general prudent series of measures taken to ensure that we would have the ability to respond to whatever threat might present itself. The regime in Iran was hostile to us at the time and still is, so we had to bear that in mind. Oman was a welcoming country because it tended to conduct its affairs very discreetly, it seemed to be able to reconcile its desire to be on good terms with us with its own need to preserve good close relations with its Arab and Iranian neighbors.

Q: Let's talk about the Omani-Iranian relationship during this period of time. So many places like Bahrain and all had a significant Iranian immigrant population, and they were restive or could be. What was the situation in Oman at the time?

CECIL: While there was no resident Iranian population, there was a historical rift. Iran had, I think we could say, colonized the northern part of Oman centuries earlier for some period of time. There was a kind of wariness. Hostility wouldn't be the right word, but a sense of caution about the Iranian relationship and the obvious size, population, and wealth of Iran would always make it a potential threat.

In the modern era Iran had not threatened Oman in any way similar, for instance, to the way it threatened the United Arab Emirates when Iran occupied the little islands of Abu Musa and the Tunbs in the Persian Gulf, nor did Oman have anything like the Shia population that Bahrain had, where Iranians had historical claims on Bahrain. There was nothing as poignant as that. Oman was always very careful to treat Iran with all the care and respect that such a powerful neighbor would have.

I can recall one incident involving an Iranian in my time. An Iranian pilot flew a military aircraft to Oman and asked for asylum. The foreign minister called me in. I was chargé at the time. I don't remember where my ambassador was. The minister called me in and asked me if the United States would please take this Iranian off their hands. I said no. I knew that we would not be able to do that. I said, "First of all, the normal channel for such requests is the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. If this fellow is requesting political asylum, he has to go to the UNHCR." I told the foreign minister—it was Yusuf Al-Alawi Abdullah, still today the foreign minister. They have wonderful stability in Omani government. I said to Yusuf Al-Alawi, "It's not only in our interest that the UNHCR handle this, but it's also in your interest because neither of us wants it to become known that if you're an Iranian seeking political asylum, all you have to

do is get to Oman and they'll turn you over to the United States. You would begin to have lots of these people, and neither you nor us want that.”

I remember he was not happy with that answer. In fact, the chief of station came to me and said, “You’ve irritated the foreign minister, and he’s actually thinking in terms of sending you home.” PNGing me, in other words. It didn’t happen, I’m glad to say, but obviously the minister did not like to be turned down. Perhaps it is an example of how sensitive the issues involving Iran might be.

Q: Do you know what happened to the pilot?

CECIL: No, I don’t. I presume he did go to the UNHCR, but I don’t know. There’s some other reasons that recommended Oman as a good site for pre-positioning military supplies, and those probably should be noted. You may ask yourself why is Oman different from the other countries on the Arabian peninsula. In fact, now in this century, other countries have agreed to welcome us as well. We have personnel and equipment in the UAE and in Qatar. Things have changed. In the mid ‘80s, this was before the first Iraq war and certainly before the second. It was a different atmosphere back then.

If you looked at Oman in that time, the first thing you realize is that the general security situation was a very good one. There was no local population that would create an internal problem. I mentioned the case of Bahrain. There’s no restive Shia community in Oman. There’s a tiny community called the Luwati community that came originally from India. They are Shia but they are not numerous and not a political problem. They tend to be merchants and keep a low profile.

There are no Palestinian residents in Oman, so you don’t have the problem that you have in the eastern province of Saudi Arabia for instance, where you always have to wonder about the loyalty of Palestinians around the oil facilities. Kuwait had a large Palestinian population in that time. Oman didn’t have these domestic minorities, foreign populations that could cause a problem. They had good local security service, quite well informed, able to keep track of developments in their own country.

On the other hand, you might have to say that their borders were somewhat porous in the sense that there’s nothing near along the desert border, the Rub al-Khali. A real determined person could probably come overland from the UAE or from Saudi Arabia but more likely from the UAE and get into Oman without permission. That was an issue. The very fact that U.S.-Omani relations were so good did tend to attract the attention of people who opposed our presence and our interests in the area. I can’t say that it was without concern, but it was on the whole a pretty secure place.

You might ask, “What else makes Oman different?” First of all, I would say that historically it has been largely isolated or insulated, insulated from the Arabian Peninsula interior. The Nejd, the area around Riyadh, has a reputation for being a very conservative Muslim area. It wasn’t easy to travel from central Arabia to Oman.

Omani attention has always been outward looking. They were sea merchants, they had their ties with East Africa, they had their ties with India and an area now Baluchistan in Pakistan. They were very much oriented toward the sea. Sinbad the Sailor in Arabian literature was an Omani. In the more modern era, their gaze was oriented toward London because of the British influence. The British had been very important in that area from the 19th Century onward.

This rebellion we mentioned in Dhofar had nothing to do with the common traditional Middle East problems, nothing to do with the Arab-Israeli problem. It was strictly a Marxist-supported rebellion, and that made Oman a factor in the Cold War. That's why the United States and Britain and the western countries were so concerned that the Omanis and the British put down this rebellion. It was seen as another attempt by the communist world to expand its influence and control.

During my three years there were a couple of other things that were important evidence of our close relationship. We had two visits by Vice President Bush during my three year period. He came first in May of 1984, and he came again in 1986. I forget which month that was, but I left probably in July, so it was before July. Those were interesting experiences dealing with the advance team and having some contact with the Vice President himself and with Mrs. Bush. The lasting impression that I have and I think the embassy staff have was how pleasant they were to deal with. They were not demanding; they were not unreasonable. They were very nice people.

One point to demonstrate that is that we were told by the advance team that the Vice President insists that in every program, no matter how busy it is, there has to be at least one full hour for the Vice President and his wife to meet the embassy staff. In our cases there was a reception at the ambassador's residence where the Bushes circulated as much as they could, available for pictures with family. Kids were welcome. I have some photos given to me: Vice President Bush shaking hands with my kids and things like that. Every member of the embassy who had kids has those kinds of photos.

Some of the high level visits can be very difficult because the advance team is unrealistic in what they ask for. Usually I found in my career that advance teams reflect the personality of the principal. If the principal is demanding, then the advance team will convey that personality. This was a wonderful example of perfectly pleasant people to deal with. He came twice. I can't say anything tangible resulted, but the visits were the visible symbols of a close working relationship. Bush had good meetings with Sultan Qaboos on both occasions. On the second visit he went to the city of Salalah, the southern major city which Qaboos always regards as his home. That added a new wrinkle to make the visit more interesting.

We had another interesting visit, again of symbolic importance but not a lot of substance to it. Former President Ford came as the head of a delegation for the fifteenth national day, the anniversary of Sultan Qaboos's accession, in November of 1985. Mrs. Ford came with him and a group of a dozen other prominent Americans in the Republican party. These were not office holders but mostly big contributors, and they were rewarded by being invited to come with the former president as part of our delegation for the National Day ceremony. That's an example of how the party in power can repay favors and keep good relations with its financial and political supporters.

During my time we should note a trend that was underway in Oman. That was the gradual tightening up. Despite all of this good will, the gradual tightening up on restrictions on diplomatic activities, not just ours but across the board. It did this through early 1984. I don't think it was so much in evidence when I arrived in the summer of '83, but in '84 one of the new requirements was to require advance approval for travel. In September or October of '83 the political officer and I had driven from Muscat to Salalah, an all-day drive. We drove down and back even though it's barren desert country, nevertheless, I like to see the terrain. Salalah itself was quite interesting.

In '84 the requirement to get advance approval for such travel was instituted.

I remember that our economic officer at the time, Robert Dry, was denied permission to go to Salalah with our agricultural attaché who was residing somewhere else on the peninsula. I don't remember where he was from, but he was coming on a visit to explore possibilities for sales of U.S. agricultural products. Rob Dry had asked to take him to Salalah to talk with merchants down there. They were denied permission to make that trip on the grounds that Salalah was a military area. That's one example.

The other thing that the Omanis instituted was the requirement that all appointments with government officials be made in advance in writing through the foreign ministry by diplomatic notes, and the diplomatic notes had to be in Arabic. This was a real pain, a real nuisance, and it really did hinder—slow down—our ability to meet and talk with government officials. Some Omanis would give us appointments if we called without waiting for the foreign ministry to do the preliminary contact, but many would not. Many were very careful about procedures. This slowed things down.

We had a serious problem over the handling of diplomatic pouches. The Omanis had a form you had to fill out in advance to clear a diplomatic pouch in the airport. On that form, one of the boxes you had to fill in was the weight of the pouch. The Omanis claimed they were tightening up on pouches because, they said, they were afraid that countries like Iraq might be smuggling weapons in to their embassies through the diplomatic pouch, so this was their rationale.

Our pouches were put together in Bahrain. They were flown out from Washington and from Frankfurt, and Bahrain was a central distribution point. Then a courier, a little charter airplane, would fly down the Gulf stopping at the various places, Doha then Abu Dhabi, and then on to Muscat. The pouch was literally only put together at best the night before the flight, sometimes the morning of the flight, so it was almost impossible for us to know the weight of that pouch before it arrived. We had a difficult and contentious period there where the Omanis showed very little flexibility. Eventually over time we got them to accept the form with that box blank, to be filled in at the airport at the time of arrival. It was a serious issue, and the Omanis were not very flexible.

Q: Not only the pouch business, but the appointment business: Was this a bureaucratic tussle between powers within the government or was there cause for this? I imagine you got together with other diplomats and talked about all this.

CECIL: The Omanis justified it on security grounds. I think it reflected their desire to know everything or as much as possible about what foreign representatives were doing in their country. We were obviously a target, but because it did apply to all the diplomatic corps, I can't say it was solely because they thought we were too active. We certainly were active. We saw our job as getting to know as many Omanis as we could and to understand the society as best we could. That meant meeting as many different types of people in government and out of government, and in the business sector whenever possible. I think certain Omanis at the top of their security service and perhaps in the foreign ministry wanted to be very much in control. They didn't like the idea of foreigners freelancing.

Another point that I should mention is entry into the country was still not easy. Visas were difficult to get although the country had modernized by 1983 outwardly. Superficially they had a wonderful road system, it had wonderful quality architecture for government offices; every year wonderful new ministries were opening. Communications were improving. Nevertheless, the Omanis were still careful whom they let into their country. To get a visa you had to have a sponsor inside Oman. You could only get a single entry visa. If you wanted to come as a visitor—a tourist—the only way you could do that was to be part of an organized tour group under the umbrella of a travel agency. There was none of this Stu Kennedy or Chuck Cecil deciding they wanted to go see Oman. They controlled entry still very carefully, fairly rigidly. Today you can get a visa on arrival at the airport. It has totally changed.

Another example, perhaps, of their desire for maintaining control of our activities is they closed out the Peace Corps presence in early 1983. I'm not sure when we got started, the early '70s, but I'm not sure which year. I think we were there about 10 years. I, in fact, had arrived on July second or third, 1983 expecting that the Peace Corps was still there. My predecessor hadn't even told me. They had been phased out, and I was told that it was the Foreign Minister's feeling that they were no longer needed in Oman. Why? Perhaps it was partly appearances. Oman didn't want to seem to be a poor third-world country that needed the Peace Corps, but I also think an element of that was that the senior Omanis didn't like the idea that these Americans were living in these small towns and going to various parts of the country out of senior officials' view. Who knows what they might be learning and what they might be saying? I think that was the primary reason for phasing them out.

Another example of the desire to control activity was the question of our building a new embassy building, a chancery. The old traditional building that we occupied in downtown Muscat was unable to house all of us. The Omanis, as evidence of their wish to control, designated an area of land that they wanted to turn into a diplomatic compound. They wanted all embassies to be constructed in this new area along the sea about five to ten miles from Muscat, quite close to where we lived in a residential area.

We began talking to Washington about designing and building an embassy and acquiring the land. FBO—Foreign Buildings Operations—came out with a design, and it was a somewhat traditional U.S. embassy type of design, with a very business-like appearance. The Omanis said, "All construction in Oman must be reflect the Islamic character of the nation." They had a very strong architectural control committee in the capital area, and any new building had to be

approved by the architectural control committee before it would be build. FBO said, “We’re not a Muslim country. We don’t do Islamic architecture.” The Omanis very politely and very calmly said, “That’s fine. When you really want to move ahead with this, you come back with your new design and talk with us again.” There was a period of a stand-off where Washington thought they didn’t really mean it, and the Omanis meant it absolutely. In the end FBO came up with a so-called Islamic design. It’s got some arches, some features. It blends in nicely with the local environment.

It also probably goes back to the Sultan Qaboos and his education and his refinement. He’s very concerned about appearances. He wanted his country to look nice, and he wanted it to reflect his culture. A rule was that any Omani government employee must wear traditional Omani dress to the office. No western dress was allowed. He also wanted his country clean. You could immediately tell the difference when you crossed the border from Oman into the United Arab Emirates. We drove a couple of times along that road over to Abu Dhabi. Out in the countryside away from any town, you would find usually Bangladeshis or Pakistanis all along the highway with flat plastic garbage bags and little spiked sticks picking up any piece of trash that was found. When the bag was full they would tie it up and leave it to the side of the road. Later a little pickup truck would come along picking up all the garbage bags. As soon as you crossed the border into the UAE it was absolutely filthy. The roadsides were littered with plastic trash that would never decompose. It was evidence of the sultan’s insistence that his country would make a good impression on the world.

There was also a very famous rule that you could be fined if your car was dirty. The Omani police didn’t really like to enforce that rule because the fine was a very heavy fine, something like 50 rials (about \$150), if you were caught with an unwashed car. I think the only time it was ever really enforced was at ceremonial times, national day celebrations when a lot of foreigners would be coming in as invited guests. It was another example of how the sultan was concerned about his country’s appearance.

Q: Let’s talk about the government of Oman. Was he bringing in democracy? What about ordinary citizens running? What was happening?

CECIL: If I can give a plug for an article I wrote a year and a half ago or so, the quarterly journal Middle East Policy published an article I wrote, and I believe the title was, “Oman: Steady Progress toward Representative Government,” in which I tried to look back over the period of Sultan Qaboos’s rule. In it I catalogued and put down for the record the gradual opening up of the political process over which he has presided.

There is now universal suffrage in Oman. Men and women do vote; men and women do sit in a popularly elected advisory body. They don’t call it a parliament. They have two bodies: one is appointed and the other is elected.

From sometime in the late ‘70s or early ‘80s the sultan very carefully gradually opened up the political process. At first the electorate was very limited. You had to meet certain qualifications like being a property owner. Over time the right to vote was granted to more and more people. It’s a wonderful example of how one man’s leadership can gradually move a country along

toward a more representative system. I'm reluctant to use the word "democratic." It probably wouldn't meet whatever criteria you might pose for being democratic. Omanis are very respectful of one another, and the idea of free-swinging political campaigns among parties in which you criticize your opponent, that is very difficult to imagine in Oman. There are no political parties.

There are alignments or tendencies. The sultan, of course, has no children. He was married only very briefly, so the question of who his successor will be is still before us. It's not one we talked about much in the '80s because he was only in his mid-40's then. As time has passed it's become a question which probably pre-occupies more Omanis and more outsiders as well. He's 67 or 68 now. I've never heard any rumors of bad health, but I wouldn't be in position to know anymore.

There is a procedure set down in what is called "the basic law." They don't call it a constitution. There is a procedure for selecting the next sultan. If the people charged with this duty do not agree, the sultan has written two names inside of an envelope which is sealed. There are two copies of it, one in Muscat, one in Salalah. Supposedly if the group, which is primarily family members, are unable to agree on the next ruler, they are supposed to open the envelope and decide between the two names which the sultan has written. I'm not sure why he thinks that would actually happen. In any case we obviously don't know how the transition will proceed. It's a question that no doubt occupies the attention of our embassy staff there right now.

Q: What about education and the role of women in the society?

CECIL: In a way you're pushing me up to the modern era, and I hesitate to say much about it.

Q: Let's talk about the time you were there.

CECIL: A lot of government resources have been dedicated to education. They established the university during my time. In the summer or fall of '86 the university opened its doors. It has just as many women students as men; in fact, perhaps a slight majority of women, so education has been very important. Women are not normally veiled as they are in Saudi Arabia. Some more conservative families might wear a veil. I have certainly seen veiled Omani women. You find Omani women working in banks, working in professional positions in offices. Some of them have been very important in the business sector. In some ways I would compare it with Kuwait where women are full participants in society. We could see, certainly, the beginnings of that.

I recall a little meeting I attended once where the head of our U.S.-Omani Joint Commission signed an agreement with the minister of education. We were assisting in some way in the educational system. The Omani minister told a story on himself. He said he had a few months earlier signed some kind of an agreement with the Chinese minister of education who had come on a visit. After they signed the agreement they were having their tea, and the minister was chit-chatting with the Chinese. The Omani minister was very proud. He said, "We have a hundred thousand children now in our primary school system." He continued, "How many do you have in your system?" Without blinking the Chinese minister said, "Three hundred million." [laughter] Even in the mid '80s they were already devoting resources to educate both sexes, which is the point of the story.

Q: There must have been a significant number of expatriates particularly, I imagine, from Pakistan, maybe India, maybe Bangladesh in the area doing all the work.

CECIL: Like the rest of the Gulf, Oman has turned to the Indian sub-continent for its manual labor needs. There are historic ties to Baluchistan in Pakistan. Oman, in fact, owned part of the current-day Pakistan for a long time. One of the earlier rulers—I don't think it was Sultan Qaboos's father, but it could have been—sometime back in the colonial era sold their land in Baluchistan. There's been a lot of cultural interchange, a lot of settlement, migration. There's a strong Baluchi element in Omani society. Most Omanis will recognize them by their names, not so evident to me. I think some of the influence in Omani dress comes from the India and Pakistani area. What the Omani call a turban is different from the 'agal and ghutra that the Arabs of the Gulf wear. So yes, they turn to those three countries especially: Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh for manual labor.

Q: Are they at all a factor of political concern?

CECIL: No.

Q: Were they at the time?

CECIL: No. They keep a very low profile. I think there have been some protests in Dubai and Abu Dhabi about low pay and lack of workers' rights and protection. I remember hearing recently, about two or three years ago, about construction projects in Dubai being stopped because the Indian or sub-continent workers were protesting. I've never heard of that happening in Oman. It may have happened and just escaped my attention.

Q: I would think that for an embassy you were obviously tapping into sources of information, political and economic and all, that the merchants would have been a prime source—the Omani merchants because they were an entrepreneurial people from time immemorial Did you find this true?

CECIL: They certainly were an important modernizing element. They certainly turned to Western countries and companies to help build the infrastructure that Oman was building at that time. I don't think that they were active politically. They didn't want to do anything to create problems for themselves. They just concentrated on the business sector.

I don't think I would ascribe a strong political role to them. In general, if you had to make generalizations, I guess you would say that they favored trends toward openness. If it was difficult to get a visa, that could cause problems in carrying out projects, for instance, so they probably would have been a force for liberalizing visa policy. I'm extrapolating a little bit here beyond what I specifically remember.

I can give you another example of the Omani efforts to control information flow, going back again to the travel question, the appointment question, and the Peace Corps question. Sometime, I don't know exactly when it started. Sometime during my time there the sultan was given access

to the U.S. Armed Forces Radio and Television Network TV signal. The TV signal was received from a satellite, received by a ground station somewhere out near the airport and was then repeated in a narrow band along the coast to the sultan's palace so that he could receive every day the latest news and whatever else the U.S. armed forces happened to be broadcasting. It was the news we were told which was of most interest to the sultan. Again, you have to remember it's the mid '80s. There's no internet. Newspapers would arrive days after publication.

Q: CNN was not a factor in those days?

CECIL: I don't remember CNN. We had the BBC. We were outside the VOA broadcast area. VOA reception was impossible or very, very difficult. You could listen to the BBC on the radio and get your news that way, but to actually see broadcast televised news, the AFRTS signal was quite a nice thing to have. Its broadcast signal was repeated in this narrow band to the sultan's palace. If you happened to live close to that band, you could pick it up. All you needed was the television set. Because of the location of the airport and the palace which were maybe 10 or 15 miles apart I'm guessing, most of the residential area of Oman, of the Muscat capital area, was within that band width. There was a time when we all enjoyed watching the AFRTS news.

However, again, some senior Omanis, I don't know who they were, but I think they felt that the news that we broadcast was a little bit too free-wheeling. There was one particular case I think was responsible for what happened. I believe it was in Massachusetts there was a terrible incident in which a woman was raped in a pool hall on a pool table. There was a trial going on at the time, and every day the news would carry reports of the latest testimony in this trial. That was just too much. The Omani leadership said, "We can't have our people listening to this sort of thing," so the signal was not stopped but it was encoded. The sultan was given the decoder and he could still receive the news, but normal people like us weren't given the decoders so we were no longer able to have access to the news. The ability to receive it lasted for a few weeks, maybe a few months, I don't remember again, but we all were very sorry when it stopped.

One other thing that needs to be noted is that after I was there two years, John Countryman left. He finished his three year tour as ambassador and departed in late summer, maybe mid-summer, '85. He was succeeded in September by the first political appointee ambassador to Oman, a fellow named Cran for Cranwell, Montgomery.

Q: Whom I interviewed, by the way.

CECIL: Cran Montgomery worked 10 years for Senator Howard Baker as his foreign policy expert when Baker was in the senate, and part of that time majority leader. Cran was very well informed about Middle Eastern issues. He didn't need any help, really, with the issues. He was quite well versed especially in the Israeli-Palestinian problem. He came in September. He had not, of course, worked in the State Department, and I guess that's the typical classic role of the DCM when you have a political appointee. You keep the embassy running and occasionally have to remind the political appointee of certain rules and regulations that we have to follow. That was a good experience for me to work with a political appointee. He had fresh new ideas.

One of the first things he did was when we had an aircraft carrier out in the Gulf of Oman, he arranged a visit, and he took the foreign minister Yusuf Al-Alawi Abdullah and his 11 year old son out to visit the carrier. They had a wonderful demonstration of takeoffs and landings on the carrier, and you were treated very, very well. It made a wonderful beginning of his relationship with Yusuf Al-Alawi. I remember Cran writing a telegram back to Washington when it was over just summing up the benefits as he saw it. He said, "Every ambassador really needs to have one of these aircraft carriers offshore!"

[laughter]

CECIL: Another example after Cran came—not that Cran had anything to do with this—another example of the importance with which we regarded Oman was that Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs Dick Murphy came to Oman in November of '85 to brief Yusuf Al-Alawi on the Reagan-Gorbachev summit. We wanted to show to the Omanis how much we valued their friendship. I'm sure Murphy probably also stopped in Saudi Arabia and probably Kuwait. I don't know his itinerary now. Nevertheless, the fact that he came to Oman was very much appreciated.

We had other visits. We had Admiral Poindexter, who was at the time National Security Advisor. Donald Rumsfeld was sent on a special mission. He at the time did not have a government position, but he came out to discuss the problem regarding purchases of aircraft. So we had a lot of high level attention all during that period. We had not too many CODELs, though., Congressional Delegations.

I remember one group of four senators spending the night with us, but they were essentially on their way to Pakistan, and they needed a place for crew rest and overnight for their air crew. That was Senator Glenn, Senator Nunn, Senator Johnston, and Senator Sasser, and their wives. They came into Oman the afternoon of one day, spent the night with us. We gave them a driving tour of the town, an hour, hour and a half embassy briefing, then sent them on their way. These were always valuable opportunities for us to be able to talk to members of the Congress about the importance of our relationship, and I'm sure they probably learned something. We probably learned something, too, from their questions, just listening to their concerns.

Q: Given the controls of the Omani government, how did your USIA—your information officer—operate? What was he doing?

CECIL: Dan Sreebny was there when I arrived. The name of his successor was Karl Nelson. I don't recall particular problems associated with our effort. I guess all I can say is that either means the PAO was able to handle them without bringing them to the front office or there weren't any particular problems. I'm sure we had an international visitor program with certain grants to Omanis to visit the States. I don't think that was a problem. There were some Omanis coming to the States for education, probably not so many as were going to the UK, again because of the traditional role of the UK but they were beginning to come to the States.

One thing we haven't talked about is what you might call family life or living conditions in Oman in that period. We might say a few words about that.

I would say on the whole it was a good family post for Foreign Service families. As I suggested earlier, it was safe. It was secure. It was a wonderful country for outdoor activity. It's a very beautiful country because of the mountains, and it has along the coast deep mountain valleys, waddies as they call them. We spent a lot of time camping in family groups from about October till March.

After mid-March you really couldn't do it. The temperatures would be so high that there would be no pleasure in it at all. But in those five or six winter months the temperatures were wonderful. You could go anywhere as long as you used common sense and didn't intrude on Omani villagers' housing and you were careful about their gardens. Nobody would bother you. You were perfectly secure and safe anywhere, so we spent a lot of time out. I remember a note, a letter home, about the climate. In December of 1984 we were driving back from the UAE, and we came across the north from Sharjah over to what's called Khor Fakkan where we spent the night. The next day, driving on the coast down to Muscat, we actually saw rain. It was the first time in 18 months that we had seen any rain in Oman. It's a very, very dry climate. We never had to worry about rain gear when you went camping.

I had three children. When we arrived in '83 my oldest son was almost 13, going into the eighth grade. His sister was 11, and my youngest son was just six. The 13 year old went to what was called the Sultan's school. There was no American school in Oman, but the Sultan had established a school basically for rich, well-to-do Omani families to prepare their children to go to the university either in the UK or the U.S. The school had an American headmaster. It followed an American curriculum, American text books. It was taught in English. Arabic was taught to the Omanis as a course required for them but not required for people like my son although he did take the basic Arabic that they had for foreign students.

He went there for the entire eighth grade but although it was a high school, we couldn't keep him after the eighth grade because we learned after a few months that it really wasn't up to the American level. As we looked carefully at the text books being used, we saw words like in introduction to teachers—the preface for teachers—say things like, “This is a very carefully designed text book for the academically challenged student.” It made good sense if you think about it for the Omanis. English was a foreign language, so it was very hard for them probably to read all this material in a foreign language, so the language was somewhat simplified. The material was somewhat simplified. But if English was your mother tongue, our son was just sailing right through, had homework he could do in half an hour. We saw he couldn't continue at that level if we really wanted him to be prepared for good universities, so for the ninth grade and the tenth while we were still there, he came back to the States to a boarding school.

Q: Where did he go?

CECIL: He went to Northfield-Mount Hermon in western Massachusetts where a lot of Foreign Service kids go. Our daughter, who was in the sixth grade when we arrived, was the only American in her class at what was called the Muscat English Speaking School, MESS, a British school. Our six year old who was I guess in kindergarten, first, and second grades while we were there, he also was the only American in his class. In the total school, which I recall went through

the eighth grade, the total enrollment was seven percent American. The vast majority were British. There was a sprinkling of other nationalities.

It was a different approach to education than we were used to in the United States. My daughter once said to me, “Dad, how could you do this to your child?” because the British use such techniques as ridicule in the classroom if the student doesn’t always have the right answer. The teachers were not using the same traditions and techniques we’re used to in our schools, so it was a little bit difficult for our children, but I think they also got a good education out of it.

We still in those days had to boil our water even though I say the infrastructure was fairly modern. The regional medical officers still advised us to boil our water. We still had to take malaria medication not because there was malaria in the capital area but because if we went out of the capital area into those mountain waddies and into the villages, there was still malaria being borne by mosquitoes.

Especially after we lost the few months there of the AFRTS TV news, I turned to my step-dad back in the States and asked him if he would please record 60 Minutes for us every Sunday and send it out on video tape, so that’s one way we kept up with serious news by getting the weekly video tapes from home.

On the whole it was a good family environment. Our children did not have many opportunities to make Omani friends. My son made a few at the Sultan’s school, but since he was there only one year, that didn’t carry on. You always regret that you don’t have more opportunities to interact with the local culture.

Omanis did not seek us out socially. They would come. The parents, especially the fathers, would come if we had a diplomatic reception or if we invited them to dinner or lunch, would usually come, but the women did not usually come to those kinds of social gatherings, so there was not a whole lot of family interaction and certainly none between children.

Q: What was the relationship with the British embassy?

CECIL: I think we would say it was very good and very proper. One of my two best friends in the British foreign service to this day is the fellow who was the deputy chief of mission, head of chancery I guess was his title during those years. We certainly had a very fine and cooperative relationship. We tried to pool our knowledge about Oman as best we could. You couldn’t escape the feeling prevalent in the British community outside the embassy as I mentioned earlier.

Q: It was sort of the last...

CECIL: If we gained any influence it was at their expense, but at the working level between our embassies, I’m sure my ambassadors—both of them—had very good relationships with the British ambassador and my relationship with my counterpart was fine and had absolutely no complaints and as I say, we’ve been friends ever since.

If you have more questions, I can try.

Q: Only what I can come up with right now is, was Iraq at all impressed with us?

CECIL: They had an embassy. They were watched carefully by the Omanis. There was concern about what they might be wanting to do, but I don't know of any incidents that ever were brought to anyone's attention. I think I would have to say it was probably not a major issue, just one you always wanted to keep your eye on if you were an Omani.

Q: I'm not quite sure at the time of the country was the Democratic People's Republic of South Yemen?

CECIL: PDRY: People's Democratic Republic of Yemen.

Q: They'd been beaten in the war, but what was happening there? Was there any spillover? Was there concern about that or not?

CECIL: I think that was considered as an issue that was behind us in the mid '80s. There was no diplomatic relationship between Oman and the PDRY. My history is weak. I can't recall when the PDRY merged with North Yemen to become Yemen as it is today. That's quite a while ago. It could even be easily almost twenty years ago that they merged.

Q: But anyway, it wasn't sort of a cloud over the horizon.

CECIL: Not once the Dhofar rebellion was put down. What happened at that point I guess you would say, as the benefits of development and oil became widespread throughout Oman, any grievances that the southerners had were pretty much addressed. They got medical care. They got education. They got jobs in the expanding economy. Because the sultan's mother was from Dhofar, he always regarded that part of Oman with special interest and concern. Many Dhofaris were brought into the government. I think the grievances they had under the old sultan, the father, pretty much were handled by the son.

Q: Just thinking of a court. Wasn't there a lot of pressure on the sultan to go out and find a young lady and have children by her or not?

CECIL: Pressure. I don't know about pressure. It's commonly said that the sultan is gay. I never fully accepted that. It seemed to me people said it too glibly, sort of implying they know things you don't know. He was married for a short time. That's all we really know publicly. Why the marriage didn't last, I don't know what the real explanation is. I can't say that I'm aware of any pressure for him to go find another wife.

Q: What about Islam? How important was Islam? I'm thinking of particularly they were a more strident form of Islam that we're so concerned with today.

CECIL: There's very little what you would call fundamentalist Islam in Oman. The Omanis are primarily what are called the Ibadhi Muslims. It's the third branch of Islam. It's neither Sunni nor Shia. It has historical roots going back to the 7th century. The sultan himself is a very strong

force for moderation. It's out of context on this tape, but I can tell you when I went back to Oman in 2005, I learned in a meeting with another senior foreign diplomat who has good access, let's say. I learned that the sermons that are given in the mosques every Friday throughout the country are first edited, then approved by the sultan. I know this to be true.

The sermons are drafted by the ministry of Awqaf which is Islamic endowments, Awqaf and Islamic affairs. First drafts are done there, and then they're given to the sultan for editing, and he takes this very seriously. They are then distributed to the Imams throughout the country. The sultan is a very broad-minded man. I remember reading one of the commentaries which he wrote, and he drew attention to a statement in the Koran where Mohammad said, "If the Lord thy God had so wanted, He could have made mankind one people." Qaboos points to that to say, "Diversity is God's will. He didn't want us to all speak the same language. He didn't want us to all have the same culture. He wanted us to have the experience of dealing with different cultures, different ways of doing things, different vantage points and outlooks, and this is all part of God's plan."

That's a very tolerant message. That's a 2005 observation, not a 1983 observation, but I suspect the sultan has long been that way.

Q: I would have thought there would have been concern because during this period the Saudis were quite aggressive in schools and mosques, preaching a pretty fundamentalist Islam.

CECIL: You bring another 2005 example to mind from my visit. I went back for three weeks in 2005 just mainly to update myself and also in retirement I've made photography my second career. It was always my hobby, but now I'm interested in third world cultures, especially Islamic culture, so I went back in 2005 to spend three weeks in Oman getting good photographic coverage of the country and the people. I still had friends both in the American embassies and some other embassies in town and some Omani friends.

Another story: Saudi Arabia had sent a group of Imams to Oman, about 30 of them. They were spread around the country in different mosques, and probably every one of them were Wahhabis preaching a very conservative form of Islam. The sultan one day was traveling in the countryside, and when he travels he often travels with a minimal entourage. It was a Friday, and it was time for prayer. They were in some small town or village, I don't know the place, but the sultan said, "We'll go here for prayers."

He went into the mosque, and he took a place in the back without receiving any particular attention. The prayers were conducted. Then the Imam, who was a Saudi, started giving his sermon. One of the points the Saudi said was, "There are many people in this country who do not stop work for the noon prayers. They keep working throughout the day, and this is not a sign of good religious faith and practice." The sultan, who I guess you have to say has a more pragmatic approach to what he thinks his government officials should be doing, he told my friend, "You can't run a modern country like this where you interrupt work for half an hour in the middle of the work day." He stood up, said to the Imam, "As-Salaam aleikum." The imam was aghast to discover the sultan is looking at him across several rows of people and could barely manage the customary reply, "Wa aleikum as-Salaam." That's all that was said. The sultan went on his way,

and very shortly afterwards he issued instructions to his ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs that all of the Saudi Imams should be sent home. And they were. So, another evidence that he is very sensitive to any source of fundamentalist influence.

Q: In '86 you left.

WILLIAM A. PIERCE
Desk Officer, Oman and Qatar
Washington, DC (1985-1987)

Mr. Pierce was born and raised in Georgia and educated at Davidson College and the University of Georgia Law School. Entering the Foreign Service in 1973, he was first posted to Surabaya, Indonesia, followed by a tour at Damascus, Syria. After completing Arabic language studies in Washington and Tunis, Mr. Pierce was assigned as Political Officer to a number of Arabic speaking posts, including Khartoum, Jeddah and Riyadh. In Washington, Mr. Pierce dealt primarily with Middle East Affairs. His final post was Surabaya, where he was Consul General. Mr. Pierce was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 2001.

Q: What were you doing?

PIERCE: I had two assignments. The first was the desk officer for Oman and Qatar in NEA Arabian Peninsula Affairs.

Q: So '85 to '87?

PIERCE: Yes. And then early '87 I transferred out a little bit early and became the deputy in the NEA Public Affairs Office, which was a specific office under NEA which managed the approach to MidEast issues for the Department: the public approach.

Q: Let's start with '85 to '87. Oman and Qatar.

PIERCE: That's right.

Q: Why not the UAE (United Arab Emirates), too?

PIERCE: Just the way it worked out.

Q: Because Qatar sort of sticks up there and its next door neighbor is the UAE and then...

PIERCE: Quite frankly the next door neighbor that it loves to hate is Bahrain. Always.

Q: Yes. So you almost have to treat them separately, don't you?

PIERCE: You do treat them separately.

Q: I go back to my time in the late '50s when I covered Bahrain, Qatar, and the Trucial States as the consular officer there and we did that out of Tehran. Well let's talk about Qatar first. What was the situation in Qatar in this period and what were we up to?

PIERCE: Qatar at the time was seen simply as a backwater in the Arab world and in the Gulf. It had potential natural gas resources. I believe at the time its oil was beginning to level off or go down. It certainly was not seen as a place of the future for oil. Natural gas, on the other hand was different. You had extremely rich fields. But at the time natural gas was not a problem, not a crisis, and our interest in their natural gas exploitation, was not very high. It was sort of a non-descript member of the GCC (Gulf Cooperative Council), and of the Gulf community and the Arab world. It was just a member of the GCC.

Q: What was the situation on the Iran-Iraq War? Had that stopped by this time?

PIERCE: Not at all, but again, it was not of major consequence. It was a major concern to any Arab government in the Gulf, but not a major topic in our conversations with the Qataris.

Q: Did the tanker flagging and that sort of thing enter into anything there?

PIERCE: I think the tank flagging became more of an issue when I moved into my new position. I'm sure it did.

Q: Moving over to Oman, which of course is a bigger area, were we in the process of trying to turn it into a supply depot?

PIERCE: The Omanis certainly thought so. As you know, Oman is not a member of OPEC (Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries) and its oil production was limited at the time and had little potential. It did not have the economic base of the other Gulf states; it did not have the same Arabic identity as the other Gulf states. It was trying to create an Arabic identity, which only began with the accession of Sultan Qaboos in '69. A significant number of Omanis did not use Arabic as their major language, their first language. That included the sultan as well as the minister of state for foreign affairs who was one of our closer colleagues. The use by President Carter of Omani landing fields for the botched attempt to rescue our hostages in Iran without informing the Omanis had caused a great crimp in our relationship. They also feared that our agreements to upgrade their military bases for our use would ultimately turn them into a parking lot for CENTCOM (U.S. Army Central Command), Tampa East.

When I got in, we saw Oman as critical – and our access agreement with them as a key to Gulf security, given our limited ability to get into the Gulf or use the facilities in the Gulf in the event of a crisis. What we were trying to do was to broaden the political relationship above and beyond simply a military one. We had been viewing the bilateral relationship almost entirely in military terms; we had no political dialogue with Oman beyond simply briefing them on what we were doing on other issues in the Middle East, mainly Iran and Iraq, or the Middle East peace process.

The Omanis were very supportive of our attempts in the Middle East, and more hesitant, but at bottom supportive, of our approach to Israel-Palestine.

Q: The other huge war that was going on was the Iran-Iraq one.

PIERCE: They were most interested in that, but I think they were more cautious in approaching us over that.

Q: Well we had no role. What I'm saying is we were messing around and being kind of nice to Iraq and giving information and that sort of stuff.

PIERCE: That's right.

Q: But I mean there wasn't a peace process as far as the United States was concerned.

PIERCE: No. The peace process I'm talking about is the Israeli issue, and they were very supportive of our efforts there. They never posed any of the great objections that you would see in any of the other Gulf States as to how we conducted the peace process. On the Iran-Iraq War they were much more interested in our assessment; they were far more guarded, I think, in the sense of what they believed, simply because they felt under the thumb of threat with either of the two sides.

We had almost no economic relationship with Oman except an oil one, and no assistance relationship. We had already begun certain things in trying to broaden our relationship, and one of them was that we started a very modest AID program – economic support funds (ESF). In essence we tried to modernize various parts of their society, but it's very difficult to sustain that, and at the time we were going through constant pressure to change priorities in terms of security assistance as well as to cut. We'd also had earlier some military assistance loans, but the Omanis were hesitant to accept more of those simply because they were loans. While they weren't officially tied to the renewal of our access agreements, they were always, by implication, tied to them. Consequently, if we were to help more in terms of security assistance – economic support in this case, which does not have a military aspect – or with military grants, it was never spoken, but it was always difficult trying to work out all of the details in terms of access agreements – just what we were supposed to do to help upgrade their military facilities and what they were supposed to do in allowing us the actual access into their military bases. That was a very touchy issue. And basically less than two years into that job, I saw continued pressure to reduce the ESF. In essence we were able to keep reductions down from 20 to 15 million, not a lot of money, but it was a victory even keeping that and not getting it further cut. Ultimately I believe ESF was lost to Oman but then the whole situation in the Gulf changed.

Q: What about relations with Saudi Arabia, because back in my time the Saudis were not a very nice neighbor.

PIERCE: Well, no one is really a nice neighbor to anyone else on the peninsula. I mean Saudi Arabia had quarrels and quibbles with virtually every one of its neighbors in the peninsula. I'm trying to think if it had some with Bahrain. It's kind of hard maybe where that border is in the

middle of the strait. I'm not aware of any with Kuwait, but certainly with the UAE (United Arab Emirates), with Qatar, with Oman, and with Yemen and PDRY (People's Democratic Republic of Yemen) at the time. Yes, they always had problems. But there were also always problems among the others. There was some confusion over the Omani-UAE border and the fate of the Musandam Peninsula. The border between Dhofar, western Oman, and PDRY had been worked out as I recall but still obviously big questions remained between Oman and Saudi Arabia. But you'd get into that tremendous "little war that wasn't" between Bahrain and Qatar over the Hawar Island and the future of that relationship. And the constant lambasting of the Al-Thani family in Qatar as being a bunch of nouveaux. Gangsters that the British had insinuated into Qatar in the 1880s, 1890s – very nouveau. Then a recollection by the Al-Thanis that the Bahrainis and the Al-Khalifahs used to be in Qatar until they were so weak that the Al-Thanis were able to kick them out 70 years before the Al-Thanis even came to power under the Brits. It's the nature of the beast there.

Q: And of course I don't know, but until about your time anyway the succession usually was doomed by assassination, usually by nephews knocking off uncles and that sort of thing. I mean in the Gulf area.

PIERCE: Well, yes. I mean Qaboos came in because his father was removed; because his father was a man of the 14th-century and was going to stay that way and the country needed to move on, apparently with the help of the British. The Al-Thani, was it Khalifa I forget, who was in Qatar was ultimately removed by his son. [Inaudible] keeps chugging along in Bahrain; you know the old belief had just died. The situation I think has dramatically changed today.

Q: Yes.

PIERCE: There are some very positive aspects, at least in Bahrain and in Qatar.

Q: The Yemen that bordered on Oman was a Marxist regime, wasn't it?

PIERCE: On and off, yes, it was. I mean historically it was. It became milder over the years. The Dhofari rebellion – and I would have to check my history books to see when the Dhofari rebellion occurred – the Dhofar being the most western part of Oman, basically it had a pretty good chance of moving along because that was the border adjacent to the PDRY.

Q: PDRY being?

PIERCE: The People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen).

I'm trying to put the date on the Dhofar rebellion; it probably was just before Qaboos and just after Qaboos was in a position to resolve it. Qaboos' mother was from Dhofar, he had a number of ministers from Dhofar. There was great interest in Dhofar.

Q: Did we get involved at that time with looking at the Omanis? I'm talking about that time when you were dealing with the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen.

PIERCE: I wasn't dealing with that.

Q: No, but I was wondering whether, on the Oman side, there was any concern during the time you were there?

PIERCE: I think they frequently had contacts with the PDRY, on a regular basis in trying to make sure that the border stabilized and stayed stable. As far as I know there was always a great concern, given the history of the PDRY and its total instability and radical bent. But I don't think there was any sign that it was exploiting instability into Dhofar or intended to do that. This was just before the PDRY became more seriously engaged in on-again, off-again talks across the border with North Yemen, and there was a lot of pressure from Saudi Arabia. This was just before the flirtation about reunification, leading up to what actually occurred over the next several years.

GEORGE C. MONTGOMERY
Ambassador
Oman (1985-1989)

George Cranwell Montgomery was raised in Knoxville Tennessee. He attended the University of Virginia and Vanderbilt Law School before serving in the U.S Navy during the Vietnam War. After the war, he worked with Senator Howard Baker on issues pertaining to the Foreign Relations Committee. He was appointed as the ambassador to Oman in 1985 and was there until 1989. Mr. Montgomery was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy on December 15 1993.

Q: You stayed with Senator Baker until 1985. And then you became Ambassador to Oman from '85 to '89. How did this appointment come about?

MONTGOMERY: As I was, to back up a little bit, from that beginning instruction of the Senator's to get to know Sef Telman and find out everything he knew, I took that to heart and I got to know Sef Telman. I'll spend the rest of my life trying to find out what he knows about the Middle East. It did fire an interest.

His becoming the Minority Leader and then the Majority Leader, afforded me the opportunity to travel extensively on my own at the expense of taxpayers. And I did that mostly in the Middle East, it became my predominant interest. Particularly during the first 4 years of the Reagan administration. I spent a lot of time first in the Arab-Israeli conflict traveling to Egypt, Israel, Jordan. Then as Beirut became more of an issue for the United States--to Beirut. And then as the Iran-Iraq war became more of an issue for us--to Iraq, to Baghdad and also to the Gulf states. As a matter of fact, Graeme Bannerman and I, were the first relatively senior officials, to visit Baghdad in the period after, following our break in relations in 1967.

But in any event, that became an interest. There were some that would have described it as an aberrational obsession but it was something in which I wanted to stay involved. And as I thought

about what I wanted to do when Howard Baker left the Senate, I thought I wanted to stay involved in the Middle East. And the best way to do that, the most influential way to do that, would be to become an Ambassador there.

My first interest, frankly, was Jordan. In our discussions with the White House that seemed to be a real possibility. As it turned out, the State Department had gotten too far along the road in the Fall of 1984 to insert a political appointment in that process. The White House said, "We're interested in appointing you somewhere in the region. These are the possibilities, and what would you be most interested in." Among those possibilities was Oman and given the relationship that we had with Oman, I thought that would be the most interesting and challenging possibility.

Q: How did you find, you'd already had obviously contact with the Near Eastern Bureau. But here you came and there aren't as many political appointees in the Near Eastern Bureau as there are in the others. How were you received and briefed and all that?

MONTGOMERY: I don't want to overstate my welcome. I think I was perhaps better received by the bureau because I had been involved. Because they knew that I was generally, and had been generally, supportive of the foreign service during my tenure in the Senate. And because I was not purely a political appointment. I was a non-career appointment but I had been involved in the region, I knew something about it.

I think the foreign service quite rightly, tries to retain as high a percentage of Ambassadorships as they can. I think they were more cooperative with me than they might otherwise have been. Just because of my background. Because they knew me and I was not a preacher as far as they were concerned.

Q: Before you went out there. In the first place, what did you gather were American interests in the area. And what were you going to accomplish, your set of goals, when you went out there.

MONTGOMERY: My principal goal was to implement fully the security agreement with Oman that Reggie Bartholomew had negotiated in 1980. That included not only access to Omani military facilities but the building of considerable military construction on these facilities. Both to provide storage for war reserve material and to improve those facilities so they could accommodate US forces should the situation require the presence of US forces.

We spent about, in the 4 years between the negotiation of the agreement and when I went out there, we'd spent about \$270 million in military construction. The agreement, to the extent that we were actually implementing a major and significant part of it, and that was the pre-positioning of military assets, had not been implemented. The Omanis resisted the full implementation of the agreement for a variety of reasons. So getting that agreement on track and working and functioning to the satisfaction of both countries was my major objective.

Q: This pre-positioning and having supplies and all, at that time, we're talking about '85, our principal concern was Iran at that point and the Gulf area. Was that what we were thinking about? Or was Iraq on an equal level?

MONTGOMERY: You would have to say that we were well into our policy that we were not enthusiastic about the Iraqi government. But that we were far less enthusiastic about the Iranian government. Well we did not necessarily want Iraq to win the war. We certainly did not want Iran to win the war. And therefore we tilted in favor of Iraq. Which gets you into a whole different set of issues and events that are perhaps beyond the scope of this discussion.

But one interesting aspect of it was that when I went to Muscat in 1985, in the Fall of 1985, the Omanis had decided that the Iran-Iraq war was not going to end until there was a more, to use a Sef Telman and Howard Baker's phrase, an even-handed approach to the 2 combatants. They therefore needed to normalize and start improving their relationship with the Iranian government. A decision that they put forward and supported in the 1985 Fall of the GCC Summit which happened to occur in Muscat.

Q: *GCC?*

MONTGOMERY: GCC is the Gulf Cooperation Council, organization of the 6 Gulf states. It was formed in about 1981 principally as an economic mechanism that became a security mechanism. So while we were tilting in favor of Iraq, at least visibly, and against Iran, the Omanis were improving their relationship with Iran.

In fact, that Fall, offered to serve as a channel of communication between the United States and Iran. That offer we initially accepted but then perhaps because other things were going on with respect to US dealings with Iran in the Fall of '85, that only a few people knew about. We went back to the Omanis and said, "While we appreciate the offer and think it was a good idea, it would perhaps be best to put that offer on the shelf for the time being."

Q: *This has a little to do with the Iran contra affair and the secret contacts between the White House and Iran because of American hostages in Lebanon and all that.*

MONTGOMERY: It was during that period. I don't think the decision to put the Omani offer on hold was directly related to it, it was in that context. While I am confident that I did not know all the details, I know a few more details I cannot get into in this environment.

Q: *Were we trying at all to dissuade, either when you were there early on or before, dissuade the Omanis from opening up to Iran?*

MONTGOMERY: Not at all. We thought generally it was a good idea. We accepted the rationale that there needed to be some credible government in the region that could talk and deal with Iran on a more or less normal basis. It was interesting to me that the Iranians, initially when Husar Fharoukin was the Foreign Minister of Oman, began the exploration of normalizing his relationship with Tehran. The government in Tehran put up objections on the basis of Omani-US relationship but as the Omanis persisted, those objections faded.

To the point that there was such strong perception in Oman, amongst the Omanis, to the extent that we knew what was going on in Tehran, somewhat of a perception that the Iranians actually

sort of valued having a relationship with someone who had a strong relationship with the United States. Notwithstanding the fact that it was a strong military/security relationship. And that may appear at some other point in the interview.

The strongest evidence I have to support that contention is that in the Summer/Fall of 1987, I had to go to Sevala to meet Sultan Qaboos. And there is a daily shuttle flight from Muscat to Sevala, for government ministers and others who have dealings with the Sultan during that period that he is in residence in Sevala.

Q: Sultan Qaboos was the Sultan.

MONTGOMERY: Yes, of Oman. And as it happened, on that day he also had a meeting with Iranian Foreign Minister Ayati. We were placed in the VIP lounge part of the airplane down to Sevala together. And the Foreign Minister greeted me quite cordially and we exchanged pleasantries. And then the Omanis, much to their amusement in the 2 hour flight from Muscat to the South, would ask me a question and get an answer and then turn to the Foreign Minister and say, "Mr. Foreign Minister, what do you think about that?"

They were tactful enough not to put us in a position of direct face-to-face conversation. So for 2 hours we engaged in this 3-part conversation. And Ayati seemed to be amused by it. And again was cordial when we parted. Had there been a true resentment of the Omani relationship with us, I don't think he would have responded that way.

Q: How was Oman run and how did you see it at that time?

MONTGOMERY: Oman is a monarchy. It is a country that until 1970 was ruled by Sultan Qaboos's father, Sultan Saheed. Sultan Saheed had been vigorously resistant to the 20th century. To the effect that in 1970 there were 6 miles of paved road, 1 school, 1 hospital and virtually no diplomatic relations with the outside world. Partially because of that resistance to development, economic and infrastructure development of Oman, in 1970 there was a Yemeni supported and inspired insurrection in the South of Oman that had become dangerous to the existence of the state, threatening to the existence of the state.

The primary motivation for the coup that brought in the son and the royal father was the fear that if the policies of the old man continued, and the situation in the South continued to deteriorate, and the war had begun to move towards Muscat in the North, the state could fall. So when the Sultan came in in 1970, his first responsibility was to end that war. Which he successfully did with significant help from King Hussein of Jordan, the Shah of Iran, as well as the British. Because it remains a factor in their relationship with their neighbors that with very little help from their neighboring Gulf states, he did successfully win that war in 1975.

He began the process of developing the country and by the time I arrived in 1985, they had successfully entered the 21st century. There was an abundance of schools and hospitals, major infrastructure projects, roads all over the country, two major international airports, diplomatic relations with the rest of the world, membership in all the relevant international organizations and an active foreign policy.

I think the hallmark of Sultan Qaboos in his first 15 or 20 years was that not only was he developing a country, bringing about a petroleum financed remarkable economic transformation of a country, he was doing it without most of the dislocation and stress on the fabric of a society that occurs in a rapid economic transformation. And at the same time he was also proving to be very Omani in his independence, an independent approach to his foreign policy in relations with his neighbors and in his relations with the outside world. The very best example of that, perhaps the 2 best examples of that were first his support of President Sadat and his decision to go to Jerusalem and subsequently to

Q: '77 to '78?

MONTGOMERY: '78 roughly, subsequently to that, to negotiate the Camp David agreement which Sultan Qaboos also supported. He became the only Arab leader with the exception of Sudan, I think, to maintain his close and supportive relationships with President Sadat. In fact the only one with the exception of Sudan, not to break diplomatic relations, threw Egypt in isolation for 10 years or so.

And secondly to negotiate with us a security agreement which became the first written security agreement between the United States and an Arab state. A decision that was vigorously condemned by his brother Arab states. Most vigorously by the Kuwaitis and the Saudis.

Q: *Sort of ironic.*

MONTGOMERY: Became very ironic. The Omanis were much amused when in 1988 the Kuwaitis asked us to escort their tankers through the Gulf through the Straits of Hormuz. We're not unmindful of the fact that when Kuwait was invaded by Iraq, who also vigorously opposed the security agreement, that the initial response by the United States to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait was made possible because we had a billion and a half dollars of war material in Oman that we could move rapidly into Saudi Arabia.

Q: *What was this agreement? What did we have in Oman?*

MONTGOMERY: What we had was a 2-part agreement essentially. That in a situation developed in the Middle East, and remember that it was negotiated in 1980 in light of or as a result of the fall of the Shah, one of Henry Kissinger's pillars in the Middle East, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

Q: *We're talking about '79 really.*

MONTGOMERY: The agreement was actually negotiated in 1980. And what we got out of that was things. One was--If the situation required it and if the leader of both countries, the President of the United States and the Sultan of Oman, agreed that the situation required it, then United States forces could make use of Omani military facilities and the strategic location of Oman.

The other main thing we got out of that is the pre-positioning of material at Omani facilities for use in such a contingency that required United States forces.

As an adjunct to all that, there was also a great deal of cooperative military training between the United States and Oman; the billeting of the United States navy, which was supporting an Indian Ocean task force, to use Omani facilities for the logistic support of that task force; to use the Omani military as training opportunities for navy pilots; and for the ships in the task force; and also to use Masirah, as very frequently happened, as a safe haven when it was unsafe to land planes on a carrier for a variety of reasons.

Q: Do we have much of a military presence there to protect and maintain it?

MONTGOMERY: The only extra military presence we have in Oman, because of that agreement, is the small group of air force personnel, a Lieutenant Colonel, a Major and about 12 or 13 enlisted people who are the air force quality control, or the contractors who maintain and reposition the equipment.

Q: A contract operation mainly. The whole idea of keeping the military presence down to almost nil. How did you deal with the Omanis? Did you work through the Foreign Ministry, the Sultan? Every country has its own way of getting things done.

MONTGOMERY: I guess it might be expected my principal contact and principal interlocutor was the Foreign Minister of the State for Foreign Affairs. Developed as well a close relationship with the Deputy Prime Minister of Financial Affairs who had been the Foreign Minister, and in fact had been the Foreign Minister when the 1980 Access Agreement was negotiated.

Because of all the military activities, exercises, the implementation of the pre-positioning of the Access Agreement and so forth, I developed a very strong relationship with the military leadership, both uniformed and political. The uniformed military leadership when I arrived was principally British. While I was there it evolved to become increasingly Omani. To the extent that by the time I left, I think the only British commander left was the Commander of the Navy. And the senior military representative from her Majesty's government, was the former Commander of the Air Force. Only 2 senior officials left but only one of them was in a command position. And within a year the entire military structure was Omani commanded after that.

But you worked, I worked closely with all those people. I had the good fortune to go at the time when I think there was in Oman a desire to improve, strengthen, broaden the relationship. Amongst the Omanis, an unstated, perhaps a desire, albeit it unstated, to balance the relationship with Great Britain. And then a corresponding receptive attitude to strengthening the relationship in the Reagan administration and certainly in the State Department, and in the persons Richard Murphy and Michael Armacost.

Q: Did you go to the Sultan often or did you sort of save this?

MONTGOMERY: I tried to go to the Sultan enough to maintain a sort of continual dialogue and when I had to. But not to wear out my welcome and particularly with the frequency that did not

give the Foreign Ministry the impression that I considered the Sultan the only decision maker in the country. I did not go to him every time I needed an answer for something.

Q: Some governments in that part of the world, you almost have to deal with the ruler or whoever is head of state. But here there was a structure that you could deal with.

MONTGOMERY: A structure that you could deal with, you had good people in terms of the Deputy Prime Minister who was the de facto Prime Minister of the country, and the Foreign Minister and the military leadership. We had a Sultan who was generous with his time and seemed to enjoy the opportunity to talk. I thought there was a need to not overuse that and also to not create the situation that every time I needed a decision or something I expected to go back to him.

Q: Could you explain what the boundary situation was with Oman and the Yemen. What constituted the Yemen in those days?

MONTGOMERY: I arrived in Oman in 1985. In the context of Oman human relations, that was then 10 years after the end of the Dufar rebellion, which was a South Yemeni and thus a partly supported Soviet insurgency in the southern mountains, the Dufar of Oman. The Dufar region of Oman, Hadhramaut of Yemen, is an area where tribes overlap, state boundaries move back and forth. There was a number of areas as I remember, that were ill or not defined in terms of natural boundaries. Where Oman thought its territory ran to a certain point. And South Yemen, the Peoples Democratic Republic of Yemen, thought its boundaries ran to another.

So there was still contested areas. As a matter of fact, there were still periodic discovery of weapons, caches in the South, supposedly coming from Yemen. And during one instance while I was there, in late '87, October '87 I believe, there was a significant cross border incursion by South Yemen military that was countered by significant force by the Omanis. It was resolved after a number of days of ground fighting patrols entering Oyadis and encountering opposition patrols and so forth. It was resolved finally by the Omani air force. Essentially locating a major portion of the Yemeni incursion force in an open area and pretty well bombing it to bits.

There was a good deal of confusion at the time. I'm not sure if it's ever been satisfactorily resolved as to whether or not it was a conscious decision on the part of Aden to provoke the encounter. Or whether a local commander perhaps with family on the Omani side of the border or whatever, had personally inspired the incursion. In any event sort of frightened both governments, I think, to the point that mutually decided we've got to solve this thing, and resolve it before something worse happens.

And I think it was then or it may have been even before because I can't remember the sequence of events, but at some point Sultan Qaboos decided that and helped with the mediation of Sheik Zayid's United Arab Emirates. He decided that he needed to end this contest, that he had other problems to deal with. Typical of Qaboos to put problems to rest so that he could deal with other things. And he started a process of normalization.

Until that point there had only been a Charge level of diplomatic exchange between the two countries. They agreed to exchange Ambassadors, I don't know remember when that occurred, but it occurred while I was there. They started the process of negotiating the boundary. Zai An Farad, the Deputy Prime Minister for Legal Affairs of Oman, was the designated negotiator in the boundary dispute.

And again where the major border incursions fit in the sequence of those events, I don't remember at all. But it was a part of the process. And then it led finally, after I left, it led to a final resolution of the border, an agreed border between the two countries.

Q: Did this have any play as far as what you were doing, the fact that the Omanis knew they had a problem on the border which had not been solved when you were there. You think this made relations a little easier for you or not.

MONTGOMERY: Again I'm not remembering the sequence but that's a good question. I may have mentioned at some point that we had an understanding with the Omanis that on request, assuming there was not a carrier in the area, and on request that we would provide a squadron of F-16s should they feel threatened. At least part of that was as a counter to the Yemeni threat. At some point in that process, again I'm assuming that it came after the major border confrontation, where there was a significant loss of life. In that picture, but at some point they invited General Krist to make an extended visit to Oman.

Q: He was who?

MONTGOMERY: General George Christ was then the Commander of Central Command. And he had been to Oman before but never had been extensively hosted. For this visit, which I think was after that incursion, again I'm not sure, for this visit they not only had him stay for a considerable bit of time but they fussed over him. He had major interviews. I think he met with the Sultan which he had never done before. They took him down to the South and paraded him around the ramparts of the border. It was in a way a situation somewhat reminiscent of Quemoy in the PRC where both sides were standing there looking at each other through binoculars. Or maybe North Korea and South Korea.

Q: The demilitarized zone.

MONTGOMERY: They made sure that the Yemenis saw the Commander of Central Command walking about inspecting the defenses of the South.

Q: Central Command was a command set-up so that in case of emergency within that area, particularly the Persian Gulf. Which resulted eventually in the Desert Storm operation against Iraq. But this was the command that was set-up that he would take over this particular...

MONTGOMERY: It was Central Command that owned the pre-positioned assets that were stored in Oman.

Q: Did we have any feel about what the designs; were we reading, the time you were there, that this was part of the tentacles of the Soviet Union reaching out to grab the South Yemenis. How were you reading that at that time?

MONTGOMERY: I think we were reading that as a, certainly when I arrived in '85, it was the Soviet Union's foothold on the Arabian peninsula. In the period of '87, maybe '88, it was clear that as far as Yemen was concerned, their relationship with the Soviet Union was a declining asset. And that almost certainly was a major element in their consideration that we need to resolve this Pitri situation with Oman because we no longer are going to have the support of our patron in the Soviet Union.

Q: The United States didn't have relations with Aden in those days.

MONTGOMERY: Did not have relations with Aden at all at the time. Like I said, it was a Charge, lower representation in Muscat. We would nod to each other but wouldn't speak.

I was trying to remember. There was also a period in there significantly earlier, where there was a major internal confrontation in Aden. A shoot-out in the politburo. I would say that was late '86, maybe early '87. One of the things that we were doing, Oman was a good place from which to watch Aden, of course. I was trying to figure out what role the Soviets played in that internal Pitri confrontation. We basically decided that the Soviets too were caught by surprise by the situation and had not played a major role in it. Other than to try to placate the different parties and bring the conflict to a close.

One good thing that we did, that's worth observing I think, one good thing that the United States government did was ensure that in Muscat we almost always had somebody who was knowledgeable about Yemen. And who could take advantage of that observation point and the exchange of information with the Omanis to our mutual advantage.

Q: Were there, often a good source are basically refugees, Yemeni refugees coming in and all who were there, that one could talk to?

MONTGOMERY: There were a number of those, a number of prominent Omanis had strong links to Yemen and particularly to South Yemen. A number of members of prominent families of South Yemen who weren't willing to live under the regime and become welcome ex-patriots in Oman that had kept their contacts. And according to some rumors, moved back and forth quite freely. They were good sources of information. Like I said, it was also good that we had somebody in the Embassy that was knowledgeable enough about Yemen that they could evaluate what we were hearing and seeing.

Q: Were we reporting through State channels? I'm assuming that most of this was done through the CIA but how about through State channels. Were we reporting on the Yemen? Were you sort of the designated hitter as far as Yemen was concerned?

MONTGOMERY: I guess I'm reluctant to make a distinction, one from our own internal process. I think we in Muscat and we in Sanaa were probably the 2 designated hitters. I suspect

they got a lot more, certainly they got a lot more than we did on in terms of what was going on in the South. But we had, I think we got a good bit. And I think it was a good reference point check for what we were hearing in Sanaa which would be covered by, a lot of that being filtered through North Yemeni perspectives rather than Omani perspectives.

Q: This is the thing, when you get into these things it depends, your information, not only where you are, where you're sitting, but whom you're talking to and where they come from.

MONTGOMERY: I think it was valuable.

Q: Coming to back to this major thing and this is the oil tanker business escort. We're talking about the Iran-Iraq war spill-over. Could you explain the context at the time you were there, what was happening and our involvement.

MONTGOMERY: In 1985 it was then 5 years after the negotiation of the US-Oman access agreement. It was shortly after the first 5 year review of that agreement. In which it was modified not significantly but mostly to codify into the protocols of the agreement, the practice that had developed over the 5 years of implementation. And it was about that time that we started fully to implement the pre-positioning aspects of the agreement. And that took about a year or two.

It really took about 2 years fully to stock all the warehouses and fill them with trucks, weapons and all the material. The period '86 to '87 was generally the bringing to full fruition all the components of the US-Oman access agreement. That included, in addition to the pre-positioning, it included the fairly regular use of Omani airfields at Thamarit and Masirah, the island. Occasionally at sea, which was outside of Muscat. The principle use of a regular basis, was maritime surveillance, the P-3 patrols.

Q: P-3s is a type of airplane.

MONTGOMERY: P-3 is a naval surveillance aircraft, 4-engine Lockheed, turbo-prop--Orion--long time service. Primarily an anti-submarine asset but can be used for surface surveillance. And we would use it, the P-3 squadron itself was based in Diego Garcia, it was staged at Masirah and then fly the Indian Ocean, Gulf of Oman patrols out of Masirah for a period. That aircraft would go back to Diego Garcia and be replaced by another. So there's almost a continual use in that respect of the Omani facility at Masirah.

Q: What were they looking for?

MONTGOMERY: That was mostly anti-Soviet in its inception, looking for Soviet assets, perhaps Soviet submarines in the Indian Ocean. Remember this is post-Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. A long time suspicion of Soviet, if not Russian designs on a warm water port in the South. But also the Russian Soviet ability to choke off a squad over to the West, like putting submarines in the Indian Ocean, it never got to that point.

In the mid to late 80's, a transition into using surveillance assets against Iranian activity as opposed to Soviet activity. The Soviet threat declined. I guess it's worth noting that at least when

the Oman access agreement was negotiated in 1980, one of the considerations that went into the need for it was the major Soviet use of the Yemeni island, Socotra. It never had a major base but it had facilities and could use the island as a logistics point.

Other major use that we used of Masirah under the access agreement as a regular course, not because of any other special activity, was to logistically resupply the Indian Ocean battle group. Which we had by and large kept in the Indian Ocean during the period of the Iran-Iraq war and of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. It was not always there but it was usually there.

And there was a good deal of debate between commanders of Central Command and the commanders of the navy's specific fleet as to the navy's commitment to keep a battle group there. And to have more operational control of that battle group. That's a whole different debate, that's a military debate. Not a diplomatic debate but we did get involved in it. Like I said, that's more tangential to this story.

But in terms of access agreement, in the Omanis, there was more often than not a battle group in the Indian Ocean. When there was one there it was logistically resupplied through Masirah.

Frequently there would be Omani navy military exercises. We would fly and they would strike at Thamarit, Oman would come up and defend, we got Omani pilots and navy pilots working together in different kinds of exercises. We would use the Omani bombing range, active live ordinance bombing range, at Rubcut I think, doesn't sound quite right but it's something like that, down near Thamarit in the desert. We had a good exchange.

The other value to us in the course of our normal relations with Oman, in keeping the group in the Indian Ocean, was whenever an aircraft had a problem that made landing on the carrier somewhat risky, they would send it to Masirah for recovery. Where that had a long runway and they could foam the runaway, and they had nets and so forth. By the time I left Muscat, they had recovered at Masirah something like 60 aircraft. Anywhere from 15 to 30 million dollars a copy. You could pay for a lot of access agreements.

Q: I'm always a little hazy on dates, but there was a crisis in the Persian Gulf because the Iranians and the Iraqis started to go after each others tankers and all of this. That must have impacted on you didn't it.

MONTGOMERY: Yes. I know I'm sort of rambling to that point but I was trying to describe, because I think it is useful to the knowledge of the relationship, to know what in the normal course of events, without anything extraordinary going on, what use and what benefits we acquired from the access agreement with Oman.

Q: But as I talk to you, to me it's a whole revelation the fact that we really had this very advantageous, to both sides, agreement. As you were talking about just using the airfields and all this without much publicity or intrusion into, you might say the culture and the problems that we have in other areas where we had agreements. I mean we didn't a lot of personnel and all this. Just as a very useful and in a way non-intrusive type of arrangement.

MONTGOMERY: I think it's a marvel from any number of aspects and you've described several of the most important. The other was, as you say, with virtually no publicity. Which is not always been to our benefit because without the publicity it's hard to get attention and gratitude in some respects of the folks on the Hill.

On the recovery point at Masirah, let me cite one instance because it's probably the most illustrative of all of them. There was a time, again I don't remember the time frame, I think it was after the Gulf war had heated up quite a bit, we were significantly involved, but we did have a carrier in the Gulf.

The carrier had launched a flight of aircraft, had gotten something like 21, 22 aircraft up in the air. And this was on the day after the Admiral, carrier Admiral, his name was Denny Brooks, a great guy, had made some remark that had been reported on in Oman. I think he made it actually in Oman. To the effect that he was proud that during his tenure as a battle group commander, he had not once had to send an aircraft to Masirah for recovery. That he had been able to recover all of his aircraft during his tenure.

Then the next day he launched something like 20 or 21 aircraft. And right after that launch, one of the cranes on the aircraft carrier deck broke an axle right in the middle of the deck. Their option was to get a tractor and push it over to the side or try to repair it on the deck. A valuable piece of equipment, no one wanted to push it to the side unless you absolutely had to. Of course they had about 20 aircraft up there that had to land in about an hour or so. And there was nothing they could do after they'd refueled them a couple of times but send 20 aircraft, half a billion dollars of aircraft maybe, to Masirah. At which point the commander on the Omani air force, who was then British Air Marshall Bennett, sent a message to the carrier that said: Quote -- To Admiral Denny Brooks - said quote God, Brooks, no hubris -- close quote.

Somewhere, I guess it was mid '87, the Iranians began to attack shipping in the Gulf, it seemed to focus most heavily on Kuwaiti shipping. Of course, they had the longest transit time through the Gulf. And the Kuwaitis tired of that and asked that the ships be reflagged under the American flag so that they would be then protected by the United States.

I can't remember with great detail if we every did process, but it wasn't an automatic answer because we did consult with our Gulf allies on whether or not we should do that. I think we by and large decided that we wanted to be responsive and that we would do that. But in any event we discussed it. I remember discussing it with the Omani Foreign Minister who expressed some reservations about it.

Also at some point Admiral William Crowe who was Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, came out and we went out into the desert. Talked about it with Sultan Qaboos who was then on his annual progress to the South. Sultan did not express in that meeting strong reservations as I remember, but did voice some concerns about the reflagging proposal.

It really came down to an Omani position that: "We don't think it's a good idea. We don't think it is economically justified on the part of the Kuwaitis. They're not losing enough to make it worthwhile doing this. Because in doing this you risk a great escalation of war, you risk a direct

confrontation between Iran and the United States that will pull us all into a war against Iran. We in Oman have been normalizing and improving our relationship with Iran. We think we can live with those people. We don't want to get into a confrontational situation with them."

You know, more arguments along that theme. But it always concluded with, "But if you are determined to do it, if having taken all those things into consideration you still think that you should do it, then of course we will support you." And they did.

Obviously they were not only an Indian Ocean battle group in the area to support "Operation Earnest Will" which is what the escort of the reflagged Kuwaiti tankers was called. There was a significant enhancement of our forces in the region. There was a unification of the command of the ships in the Gulf under the Middle East COMIDEast Force which had been there since the '40s I think.

Q: When I was there in the late '50s it was well established.

MONTGOMERY: And the Indian Ocean battle groups as a whole operation was under the operation control of a single commander. Who for most of the period was Admiral Tony Less who was also a hell of a guy. There was continuous significant assets in the area beyond just about ----- Middle East COMID East Force, all those assets had to be supplied through Masirah.

It meant that we were running daily initially C5 flights, a very large cargo transport. We discovered that the C5s were very hard on the runways at Masirah because of the softness of the acreage or something. Anyway unless absolutely necessary, scaled us back to several C141 flights which were the next largest transports. But there were daily flights. Obviously a lot of Masirah recoveries--aircraft flying off carriers and so forth.

A good deal of cooperation, in that the Omani had a naval base right at the head of the Straits of Hormuz at the northern point of Oman from which they can observe virtually the entire Straits. Visually look across and see the Iranian island of Aba Musa, a little of 19, 20 miles away. They ran naval patrols out of that base. We of course were at that time, operating ships up through the Straits and into the Gulf.

There was significant discussion between ourselves and the Omanis as to the nature under international law of the passage up through the Straits. The Omanis wanted to characterize it as innocent passage, I believe. Which has the connotations of the passage of a warship of a combatant in a conflict. I believe we wanted to characterize it as transit passage. Which is somewhat more neutral but also allowed us to take somewhat more defensive measures than we could under innocent passage. Such as have helicopters in the air and trained gun mounts and so forth.

The Omanis considered the flying of the helicopters particularly provocative and did not like that. We worked out an arrangement where we would do as little of it as we could. And that was primarily the arrangement of Admiral Hal Berntsen with the Omani military.

Q: Did you find that being a former naval officer, although you were a junior naval officer, but at least you understood the language. I mean you were part of the "navy club" in a way. Did you find in this particular thing, that this must have been helpful for you, wasn't it, on both sides?

MONTGOMERY: I think it was. It was enormously pleasurable. Sort of an ego trip. Well, I'll correct your record a little bit, to say by that time I was Captain in the United States Naval Reserve and had stayed active in that respect. I think the navy appreciated it too in a certain respect, it gave us a good common ground over which to talk. Particularly when I had to say either we've got to do something about the helicopters, or the other problem that we frequently ran to, was the Omanis during this period were flying daily scheduled civilian aircraft. Commercial aviation flights up to the Musandam and up to Khasab where there's an airport.

Q: This is in Iran?

MONTGOMERY: Oman. Remember that there is a point of Oman that is separate from continental Oman. That literally sticks right up into the Straits of Hormuz. It is geographically isolated but when the UAE was created, those people who were interesting people, mostly the Shahab and they're different. I mean like so much else of Oman, they too are different, but the Shahab wanted to be Omani. And of course Oman real estate is strategically located. Generally that portion of it that controls the Straits of Hormuz is itself, God knows how much per foot, if they wanted to sell it.

But they were running commercial aircraft, aviation, up there everyday. The ships, the escort ships, because you had several Iranian airfields in the vicinity, most significantly Bander Bass but also down the Straits into the northern gulf of Oman, were flying aircraft. Ships were required to identify aircraft, friend or foe. And there were occasions when they would challenge, somewhat aggressively, Omani aircraft who were just doing their little milk run to Khasab. That prickled the Omanis quite a bit.

And we worked hard on communications procedures and had to insist that the navy work hard on getting that problem straightened out. There's generally a problem with newly arrived skippers who hadn't seen what happened to Stark and seen what happened when you're not at the keen edge of anticipation. They weren't going to be accused of taking anything for granted. You sort of understand it but after they got sort of worked in to the region, they got a sense of where people were and so forth, they got better.

Q: Just for the record, the Stark was an American destroyer that was hit by an Iraqi aircraft with an excel-set missile and very badly damaged. Then you had the case of, I mean exactly what you're talking about, came up a little later or what is during your time, was the Long Beach?

MONTGOMERY: I was going to get there. It was not Long Beach, in fact I know Long Beach pretty well and I don't think it ever got to the Gulf while I was there. But in any event, you're right. Instances like that where you tell the navy--Look, we've got to work it out, it's a communications problem, we can work it out. But being able to talk to communications, being able to talk to them and say--I know your priorities and so forth but we've got to keep these folks happy. And, I think it helped that I had the navy background.

I took a gratuitous advantage of hospitality in the navy to go out and spend days on the carriers and days on the destroyers, which I most enjoyed. Also it helped when we got them into port. By the time that I left, we had a ship visit a week in Muscat. And that's worth talking about a little bit at some point, maybe now.

Q: *Why not.*

MONTGOMERY: One of the things we would do of course is to, at first we would send a Naval Attaché who was generally a Marine Major, out to the ship before it came in, and sort of do a briefing for the ward room, the commanding officer. To emphasize on them that they're coming into an Islamic country. You've got troops who've been at sea for quite some time. You need to press on them that this is a privilege that is being guardedly extended and could easily be revoked, and that behavior has got to be superb.

After a while we got to where we would do those arrival briefings when they got into port and discovered that the commanding officer and the senior enlisted leadership on the ships were doing a very good job of impressing on the troops the need to enjoy themselves but to be careful.

The Omanis in turn made available to the troops hotels, would turnover the recreational facilities of a hotel to the ship with all the sports: tennis, swimming, softball, the beaches. They would have hamburger and hot dog cookouts. Of course the hotels could serve alcohol so there would be beer and when the troops were in town in the evening, they could go to a hotel and get a drink and so forth. It was a tribute to the Navy that we had not one incident when I was there.

Q: *That's remarkable.*

MONTGOMERY: Like I say, by the time I left in early '89, we were running a ship a week, at least, in Muscat. The Omanis really extended themselves in making facilities available, taking them out of the country up to the mountains. American families, of course, would take them in particularly when they were there over a holiday. We would always have a sign-up sheet for folks to have 5 or 6 sailors for dinner. The ships would let us use the commissary, the dentist, some of the things we didn't have too much available.

One particular incident about that that was instructive to me was that at some point in the Fall of '88, one of the destroyers, tenders, the ships that we sent over to take care of and repair and maintain the escort ships, came in to Muscat. It was a little bit different from the combatants in that 10% of its crew was female, were women.

I debated whether or not to tell the Omanis that this ship was a little bit different than the other Navy ships that we had had in. I finally decided, no, it is a United States naval ship, everybody aboard are United States Navy personnel, I will not make that distinction. And we sort of held our breath till the ship was there 4 or 5 days, over a weekend. Like every other occasion, the sailors sort of disappeared into the woodwork of the town. There were no incidences. Nobody was aware of it. I mean it was a ship.

They went without incident but there was an incident where an Omani, who had gotten somewhat inebriated, sort of cornered one of the female sailors in a hotel lobby. He was being abrasive or aggressive, or whatever. One of our boys came up and tried to sort of pacify the situation. The Omani took a swing at the sailor and he restrained himself, did not react whatever. And before that could blow up, the Omani police arrived and apologized to both of the Navy folks, took the Omani drunk off and resolved the situation. We got an apology the next day from the Omanis. Nothing happened.

Q: What was the Omani reaction to the American flagging on the Kuwaiti ships and our heavy involvement there. They obviously didn't like this to begin with, were they kind of watching it very closely? What was the end result of watching how we did this?

MONTGOMERY: You're going to have to indulge me one small story before I answer that question.

Q: Sure.

MONTGOMERY: Because I think that too is sort of instructive about the Omani attitude. And that is that, perhaps I won't identify him, but shortly after that ship, that particular ship was in Muscat, I had a meeting scheduled with a very senior Omani official. Who was very frequently involved in the relationship, somebody that I saw fairly regularly, had gotten to know quite well, who called me by my first name, and all that sort of thing. It was a fairly important meeting, I can't remember what the subject was, but I had folks there and he had his staff there. We had a long talk.

At the end of the meeting, with a tone I wasn't used to hearing, he said, "Mr. Ambassador, would you mind dismissing your staff? I have something that I would like to discuss with you." I asked my folks to leave and he asked his folks to leave.

He closed the door and he turned to me with a stern look and said, "You had a ship in this past weekend." I said, "Yes, sir." I thought, uh oh.

He said, "It had women aboard didn't it." I said, "Yes, sir." He said, "Did you tell us it had women aboard?" I said, "No sir, I did not."

He said, "Well, let me tell you something Mr. Ambassador, you have another ship in here, it has women aboard and I don't know about it and I don't get to meet any of them, I will tear you (some obscenity) one side to the other." And I said, "Okay, sure. I'll make sure you get to meet some of them, next time." And breathed a deep sigh of relief.

But anyway, they did not like it: they thought it was a bad idea; thought it would lead to confrontation which it did between the United States and Iran; thought it was not economically justified by the losses that the Kuwaitis were incurring; thought it would jeopardize their normalization with Iran; maybe lead them into conflict with Iran. But having harbored all those thoughts, said, "We will support you." And they did.

We could not have done that operation as well, as safely, and as thoroughly without the Omanis as we did. We could have done it, it would have been possible. But it would have been damn difficult and a hell lot more dangerous.

But you know, somehow through that, even while making it possible for us to become virtually a combatant against the Iranians in the Gulf -- We were shooting at Iranian ships, we were shooting at Iranians on platforms, we were killing Iranian sailors, and taking them prisoner. And the Omanis were making it possible for us to do all that. Their normalization process in their own relationship with Iran continued to proceed. It's a tribute to them and a tribute to us in a certain extent, in that the degree to which the Omanis supported the operation was never publicized.

Q: This is how you get things done, particularly in that part of the world.

MONTGOMERY: A well kept secret. A year and a half we held our breaths. I guess it helps in some respect that the Omanis do not make it easy for the western press to come in and inquire too much. I think it's more of a hindrance than a help, at least now. I think they've got a good story and ought to be willing to tell it. They're gradually opening up but it's been a slow process. That prevailing mood--that we think it's a bad idea but if you're determined to do it, we'll support you--carried through even after July 2, 1988. When Vincennes

Q: This is a cruiser, a guided missile cruiser.

MONTGOMERY: A guided missile cruiser in the Straits of Hormuz, between the Omani Gud Island naval base and Iranian commercial or military airfield Oban Dhurbas, shot down an Iranian airbus and killed 200 and some odd Iranians.

Q: A horrible thing. We're talking about a civilian airbus.

MONTGOMERY: A civilian aircraft, regularly scheduled. The Omanis with their observation capability, understood how we might have had difficulty figuring out what kind of aircraft that was. And that may have helped with respect to their not being too upset about it. Other than of course being upset as anybody would be over the loss of innocent life. I think it's worth saying, without saying too much, that the Omanis helped us in our reconstruction of events. To figure out a good deal about what actually happened and how we got confused between what we thought was a military aircraft and a commercial aircraft. It was helpful to us.

Q: The major point being that they did not say--I told you so. Because it was a horrible thing that happened.

MONTGOMERY: You know they had already been vindicated in certain respects in their concern about the reflagging. In that prior to the Vincennes shooting down the aircraft, there had been other instances of confrontation between ourselves and Iran. That aspect had come true, sort of with a vengeance.

There had been occasions where we had taken Iranian prisoners, at least 2 occasions where we had taken Iranian prisoners. And could not figure out how to repatriate them to Iran. Oman

became--I don't know if this has ever become public, it may have been, I don't think it's particularly classified--but Oman became the intermediary and allowed us to repatriate the Iranian sailors whom we captured on several occasions.

There was another irony in all this too, that I may have brought up in another context. It greatly bemused the Omanis, that it was the Kuwaitis who came to us and asked us to do this. To undertake this endeavor that required the support, logistical and otherwise, support that we obtained through the Oman access agreement and out access to Omani facilities. When it was the Kuwaitis who were most outraged, 7 or 8 years before, that Oman would sign such an agreement with the United States.

I think it's worth pointing out that still it was the first agreement between the United States and an Arab nation. It was bitterly opposed by the Gulf Arabs and most vehemently by the Kuwaitis. And it was a source of no little amusement to the Omanis, that it was the Kuwaitis who came and asked to take advantage of that agreement.

Several guys across the table were British Army officers, and for that matter, a couple of American lawyers. I think the British were smart, and surely some of the British edited, the Americans are cutting into our turf, sort of edited behavior, but by and large, the senior guys were difficult for us to deal with because for their own credibility in the country, and because they knew the Omanis had had less experience in negotiating agreements of this nature, and implementing arrangements of this nature. They sort of had to be more Omani than the Omanis. They grated on our military who felt they could have gotten a much better deal, perhaps taken much more advantage of the Omanis than they were able to do otherwise. But in the long run, because the Brits were so prickly, because they were so insistent on protecting Omani sovereignty, and because many of them remembered the rescue attempt...the Irani(?) attempt when we intruded on the Omani sovereignty, somewhat better than the Omanis did, I think we came out of it with a better working relationship, we came out of it with a candid working relationship as a result of being able to do that ___ exercise, and do it with relatively few problems, as we had. I might be overstating the case, and might be defending them a bit too much, but I really believe the Pentagon, on that issue, has been wrong.

Q: In other interviews, I found again and again that there seems to be a problem with the military negotiating status of forces, and everything else, agreements where they try so hard to get the very best deal, and sort of use the weight of the United States, it's pretty counter-productive because in the long run it's not how good a legal deal you've got, but one of what's the relationship of the country you're dealing with. And this seems to be a very common problem in every country where we had military arrangements.

MONTGOMERY: I think that is exactly the point. To say it again, I think the reason that the Omani relationship has worked as well as it has, and it has truly been a model because principally the Brits were such sons of bitches when they were supposedly negotiating the agreement, and implementing the agreement. And now that they have stepped aside, we are left with a good working relationship that the Omanis are comfortable with. It has proved beneficial to both countries.

A couple other side issues about this that are worth recording, I think. One is that when they agreed to do it, they said, "Of course, we don't agree that you should do it, but if you're determined to do it, we will support you." The Omanis were generally somewhat amused that the security agreement between the United States and Oman that would make this operation possible had been adamantly opposed by the Kuwaitis some seven or eight years before to the extent that the Kuwaitis had even offered them several billion dollars to try to buy them out.

Q: *What was the purpose there? Just to not rock the boat.*

MONTGOMERY: The Kuwaitis thought that signing this agreement, the Omanis would be bringing us into the region in a much more intrusive way than they thought was proper and right.

Q: *In light of the saving of Kuwait by basically American forces.*

MONTGOMERY: Even in '87, much less in 1990. The Omanis enjoyed that bit of irony.

Q: *Do you find the Omanis as far as in the Persian Gulf, that they had a different outlook than maybe the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain, and Kuwait, and even Saudi. Were they a different breed of cat?*

MONTGOMERY: They are a different people. We tend too much, and the newspaper reinforce it, to think that a group of countries like that are all alike, and we do it not just in the Middle East, and Latin America, and everywhere else. And the Omanis are as individualistic and different from the rest as they come. They were isolated from the rest of the peninsula by the Empty Quarter, and by their own mountain range. They were seafarers and traders when the rest were still Bedouin. They had an empire that included East Africa, and some bits of South Asia, which meant the influx of those people, both African and Asian created a much more cosmopolitan...

Q: *Zanzibar was actually their capital.*

MONTGOMERY: Until the late 19th century. You can still get Swahili in Muscat.

Q: *...the Eastern Africa lingo.*

MONTGOMERY: They had a much more cosmopolitan looking at the Indian Ocean and that part of the world rather than inwardly. I think its that heritage that Might have induced us to support Sadat at Camp David. To be able to do the security agreement in 1980, they have a different outlook.

Q: *You mentioned last time a fascinating subject, and that is one of our stated policies, one which we believe in, is bringing democracy, we feel this is a good thing to other countries. But here the Arab countries have been singularly either committed or successful in doing this. And here is an absolute monarchy, or pretty close to it at least.*

MONTGOMERY: Certainly that's a monarch. About the time of the negotiation of the security agreement, Sultan Qaboos created what was called the State Consultative Council which was a council that I described as somewhat as a nascent parliamentary body. It was appointive, composed of a third government junior ministers essentially, a third the leading businessmen, and a third appointed by the Sheiks and elders of the various tribes. And it had very limited powers. It could review legislation. Sometimes it didn't get around to reviewing legislation before it was published as a royal decree, but over time it gradually assumed the role of a body that would summon ministers, have a debate on the five year development plan, or the annual budget. It took regularly to reviewing decrees before they were published. And gradually it obtained a bit of a legislative character to it. In the same meeting we went down and sat in the desert with Sultan Qaboos, Admiral, and I. At the end of it, as sort of a footnote as we were chatting about something or another, Qaboos made the remark, "I'm thinking about establishing an upper house to expand the legislative side of the government." I took that as a significant remark, also took it as a remark that was made to me personally as rumination of the ruler and not something that he particularly wanted communicated, so I didn't. But it stuck with me, and then two years ago when he created a State Constituted Council, I was not surprised a little bit. I guess put off by the continuing newspaper reports that he was doing this trying to keep up with the wave of democracy that seemed to be springing up with the power, or the demise of the Cold War. I think this has a vision that includes democratizing Oman that he has followed for some time. And I think the State Constituted Council with its increased responsibilities, and more democratic selection process, not an outright election yet is but one step in what will eventually be...I think his ultimately legacy to Oman, and that will be some sort of parliamentary democracy.

Q: Looking at this, you had been involved in the political process when you worked with Howard Baker, did you find that maybe we were pushing our style of democracy maybe a little harder and were not as responsive to other ways of handling things in other societies, other cultures?

MONTGOMERY: Not so much that we were pushing it because we had only started to think in '89 really what all these transformations were [going to lead to]. But in our judgements of those systems I think we've traditionally underestimated the degree of consensus building that is inherent to an Arab society. And it was particularly betraying the Omani bias, I suppose. I think it was particularly applicable to Oman, which has a tradition of democratically selecting its leadership. And Qaboos was, I think, is very conscious of the need to build consensus, and have a sensing- mechanism that works both ways in terms of what the people want, and what the people think, and how they feel.

Q: Would he travel quite a bit around and hold majlis?

MONTGOMERY: The Omani citizenry has some reason for complaint, but it is not on a variety of issues, that autocratic un-sensing rule is not one of them.

Q: What about succession? Were we sitting there and looking and saying all right, if something happens, was succession going to be...is the tradition to be violent, or orderly, or within the family?

MONTGOMERY: The tradition, in the not too distant past, in dynasties previous, has been that there is not necessarily a linear succession. It frequently has been a lateral succession, and frequently has been violently--perhaps not so often violently--but certainly vigorously decided.

Q: I know that in the United Arab Emirates, at least the Trucial states in those days, most of the leaders usually were knocked off by a nephew or a cousin, or a brother.

MONTGOMERY: I can't remember the last time that happened in Oman. Actually, the empire that included Africa broke up when the Sultan of the late 19th century, in the 1870-1880 period, died and left two sons who could not resolve among themselves who was to succeed him, and the British proposed a compromise that gave one Muscat and Oman, and the other Zanzibar. It ended the empire, and had to entice the one who took Muscat to accept the compromise, and to compensate him for the loss of the more wealthy kingdom which was Zanzibar.

Q: Yes, with the cloves and spices.

MONTGOMERY: Particularly after the Brits persuaded them to give up the slave trade, which was a major income gainer.

Q: You left there in '89, what were your final thoughts about this experience, as being an ambassador, coming from outside? What contribution did you feel you made, and what you got out of it?

MONTGOMERY: One of the most satisfying contributions that I made is coincidental to having been the ambassador. That is establishing a school, which we did on very short notice--decided in April to open a school because the secondary school, the English speaking school in Muscat, decided they would close their secondary school. And between March perhaps, and September, we made the decision to open a school, acquired the land, acquired the buildings, and opened the school with 260 students, and a full faculty. That school is now up to 650 and is flourishing, and has become the English-speaking school in Oman.

Q: You say the English-speaking school, who went to it?

MONTGOMERY: Every ex-patriot in Oman could go. The Omanis prohibited Omanis from attending it. Our student body was essentially 30% American, 30% English, and 40% other, and the other was some 30 nationalities. I mention it because I wanted to make certain it was noted in this. It was not my accomplishment, but the opportunity to participate in it was one of the most satisfactory parts of my service as an ambassador.

I think the other was working for three and a half years to broaden the relationship beyond simply the military relationship; to try to get Washington to view it as a barter relationship, to dispel the Omani perception that we thought of them as somewhat a cheap base, to be there when we needed them. I think the relationship matured a great deal while I was there largely as a result of Kuwaiti reflagging -- that we did it, that we did it well, that we kept our commitment.

Q: When you came back, one last question--I'm afraid I know the answer--but were you able to impart your experiences when you came back to the Department to say farewell, or was it just sort of here's your flag, hand in your pass, and on your way.

MONTGOMERY: Well, I never got my pass, or my passport. I did get the flag. I have kept a very close relationship with the Department, NEA, the sixth floor down to the fourth floor, and that's a part of the continuing interest in the relationship, at the desk officer level, at the country director level, and Dick Murphy, etc.

Q: Do you feel our course with Oman during the Desert Shield operation, and the war against Iraq, the foundations were laid and they came out pretty well as far...

MONTGOMERY: I think so. As recently as last year at some point, Yussaf (Inaudible) remarked to me--there seemed to be a sly grin on his face--that despite all his complaining about the level of consultation, etc., he wanted to tell me that he was finally satisfied.

DOUGLAS R. KEENE
Deputy Chief of Mission
Muscat (1986-1989)

Mr. Keene was born and raised in Massachusetts and graduated from Colby College. He joined the Foreign Service in 1967, serving first in Viet Nam and subsequently at Middle East posts including Jerusalem, Karachi, Cairo, as well as Amman and Muscat, where he was Deputy Chief of Mission. His Washington assignments also concerned primarily Middle Eastern matters, including the Arab-Israel problem. Mr. Keene was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 2007.

Q: Oh it was Draper, yes. I've interviewed all three of those. Okay. Well, where'd you go in '86?

KEENE: Muscat.

Q: And you were in Muscat from when to when?

KEENE: '86-'89.

Q: What was Muscat like when you got there in '86?

KEENE: Disneyland. It was almost unreal—picturesque and well kept. It was a place where nothing ever went wrong. There was never a robbery or a traffic accident or any bad news ever heard of or reported.

Q: I've interviewed Walter Schwinn who was my consul general when I was in Dhahran—this goes back to the '50s. He negotiated the first updating of our 1930 treaty with Muscat. He talked about—I think there was one key to the gate, and you shuttered it at night and it was...

KEENE: Yes...

Q: First of all, what sort of government does Muscat have?

KEENE: There was a sultan; it's a monarchy. And it was the current sultan's father who locked the gate at night and who forbade, essentially, modernization. There was, like, one school, about two kilometers of paved road, one health facility. It was illegal to wear glasses, it was illegal to be out past the gate after dark, all kinds of amazing restrictions. They must have been living in the—I don't know—17th or 18th century. The current sultan overthrew his father and started a modernization process. Then they got a little oil money and really rebuilt the place. Too much so, in the view of some, because they just ripped down the ancient walls and replaced them.

Our embassy was in a historic house, so it was right down near the palace, on the water, just about, and just a beautiful building--the ownership of one of the very, very wealthy families at that time, the Zawawis, one of whom was the minister of finance and one of whom was the advisor to the sultan. Some of the richest men in the world. Then we had another building right there, also in the compound, Beit Nassib. The British Embassy was next door—another nice old building. Then they decided they didn't want that so they were forcing diplomatic missions out into a new diplomatic area on the beach. And so there weren't very many left downtown...two or three when I got there. Then they wanted us to move, too, and that was fine, because FBO (Foreign Buildings Office) wanted to put one of those new, secure buildings there, so that went on when I was there, and we moved into it maybe six months before I left.

Q: Was there any sort of program going on in Muscat when you were there?

KEENE: The major issue of the day really was our response--well, two things: we sought access to facilities agreement with Oman, and we started an escort operation for oil tankers in the gulf, because the Iraq-Iran war was going on. The facilities thing really was sparked at the end of the Carter administration by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and we sought agreements with Oman and Somalia, Kenya and later on, Qatar, UAE, Kuwait. British influence was very strong still in Oman; it had been—well, legally, rather a strange situation. I don't think it was ever formally a protectorate, but it was all but run by the Brits for a while. Still a very strong influence—particularly strong in the military, navy.

One major fallout of the escort operation was the shooting down of an Iran air passenger jet by the USS Vincennes.

As part of the facilities agreement, we agreed to set up a small AID program and an International Military Education and Training (IMET) program and sell some military equipment. That meant we had a facilities maintenance team, a defense attaché office, an office of military cooperation (OMC) and an AID mission. This in an embassy with one pol-econ officer plus a JO (junior

officer), one part-time consular officer and a three person admin section (two of whom were JO's).

Q: Yes, the Trucial Oman Scouts were quite a ...

KEENE: There was Trucial Oman, too—well, all these little sheikdoms had tangled boundaries, and a lot of what was Trucial Oman is now UAE. Oman is actually split by part of the UAE. There's the bulk of Oman, then a strip of the UAE, then out at the Musandam, at the tip, of the peninsula Omani again. But at that time their navy and their air force were commanded by British officers. British officers served in the ranks in the army and played a very major role. So that was a little different. We're kind of used to being a preeminent power in many countries; we were definitely number two there.

Q: Again, when I was in Dhahran—we're talking about the late 1950s, the British troops were fighting in the Jabal al Akhdar, the Green Mountains. Was anything going on there?

KEENE: Well, that was the Dhofar Rebellion, yes. No, we could go to the Jabal; it was pacified; it was mountainous and that was quite beautiful. But there was still fallout from the Dhofar Rebellion. Dhofar was treated in an especially delicate way, and they made sure that there was balance in the cabinet and in the army, and the sultan had his winter palace in Salalah, the major port in Dhofar. So, it was treated with kid gloves.

Q: How about Yemen? I mean, there were two Yemens; this would be over to eastern Yemen?

KEENE: North and south. It was South Yemen. Aden.

Q: Aden was a rather virulent socialist thing; how were relations along the border when you were there?

KEENE: It's a very wild and difficult border—mountainous, very sparsely populated. There were border flare-ups from time to time. It caused the Omanis to build a very expensive road so that they could get into that area with their military and repel incursions, set up some border stations. So we did have incidents; we didn't have major outbreaks, though. A concern, but not a major, major issue.

Q: What was your job?

KEENE: I was DCM (deputy chief of mission).

Q: Who was the ambassador?

KEENE: Cranwell Montgomery, a political appointee. I was chargé for my final eight or nine months as his replacement, Dick Boehm, had to wait a long time to be confirmed.

Q: How did things work regarding getting facility rights there for stockpiling military equipment?

KEENE: Well, the negotiation was protracted, but finally agreed. That was led essentially out of Washington, out of PM (Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, Dept. of State). They got those agreements, and then—and there was lots and lots of haggling about every little step of implementation, particularly—most of the stuff was for the air force, and the head of the air force there was British--Air Vice Marshall Eric Bennett—he was a tough nut to deal with. He knew an awful lot, a very experienced guy who had done this sort of thing before, and he wanted to extract the maximum out of every issue. So, it took a long time, but eventually we ended up fulfilling the agreement, had an awful lot of stuff there, and then we had a group of people to maintain it. They were mostly contractors, but it meant a few extra air force officers on the staff. And as part of that deal, we agreed to provide them with a little military assistance, and a little bit of military training. They share the Straits of Hormuz. Historically—Oman has a very interesting history. Historically, they had occupied the Iranian side of the strait, too, for several centuries. And Baluchistan, and what's now Pakistan, and they had a little empire.

Q: Down to Dar-es-Salaam, and Zanzibar.

KEENE: Which is another interesting. Anyway, now, of course, the balance of power has shifted, and they'd be happy to be our allies, but they never want to antagonize the Iranians while they're at it. So, their sensitivities were touched. But, eventually, didn't involve them too much directly. The Omani Foreign Minister was always asking us if he could carry some message for us to Tehran; we very rarely took him up on that. And later—or earlier—I forget the time, the ships escorting the tankers had had a run-in with some Iranian boats, and there had been an exchange of fire, and we'd captured a number of Iranian--I think they turned out to be Revolutionary Guard. We didn't really want to keep them, so we arranged an exchange, and that took place in Muscat. That was a big deal, too. We had to set all that up, and the International Committee of the Red Cross was involved, and Oman had to agree, and then they flew them in on a bunch of military helicopters and handed them over at the airport. Our military was—Oman was perfectly peaceful—but they were very nervous and high strung—weapons all over the place.

Q: Were there any Iranian revolutionary groups trying to stir things up in Oman?

KEENE: They had an embassy, and there was some intelligence from time to time, and there was a Shia community. There was some intelligence they were trying to gain some influence over that group. Nothing happened when I was there; later, I understand there were some religious demonstrations that did occur. Exactly why or how, or what was behind them, I don't know.

Q: Well, was the sultan making any move to bring about a better deal for Omani women or for democratization, or anything like that?

KEENE: Yes, but it was really glacial. He did set up a consultative council, at first appointed, later partially elected with so many seats set aside for women. That's it, as far as I can tell; don't get a lot of news about Oman in the paper, but I don't think it's progressed a lot.

Q: How are relations with the United Arab Emirates?

KEENE: Pretty good, as far as I understand. I know we have an element of CENTCOM (United States Central Command) that's there and some facilities there, and some communications gear and various other things. We used to go up there; that was about the only country you could get to from Oman, and it was just staggeringly modern and well developed.

Q: Did you drive?

KEENE: Yes. Of all things, there were international softball tournaments held up there; they were fun.

Q: Well, I take it that with modest oil wealth, there was no such thing as had happened with the Arab Emirates.

KEENE: No, they're more modest. I mean, it's not so bad; I think they're now close to 700,000 barrels a day, and for a country with a population of only a couple of million, it's adequate, and they've developed quite a bit. But it's not like the UAE, no.

Q: I take it this was not a place you got many tourists or congressional delegations, or that sort of thing?

KEENE: Actually, when we got there, there were *no* tourists, and they finally started to open it up, but on a selective basis. And they didn't want any young ones; they wanted older, organized groups. Now I understand that it's easier, because, I mean, there's a constituency for tourism. There are a lot of pretty wealthy businessmen who want to fill their hotel rooms and things like that. And it's a beautiful country. I guess there is some tourism now, but we actually went from nothing; we saw the start of it, and it was very modest. We had some CODELs, but not many; those that did come were interested in the pre-positioning thing. Some people came. You know who came--Baker came, had a Secretary Baker visit in my last week or two on the job there. It turns out that the first President Bush had told him what a nice place it was for a rest stop, so he dropped in...dropped in to see it, but not too demanding in terms of visitors.

Q: Did you get any reflections about the Iran-Iraq war? Where stood Oman?

KEENE: As far away from having to take a formal position as they possibly could. They didn't want to get involved, which was smart, actually.

Q: Well, I assume you had something that passed for a political section?

KEENE: Yes, one guy.

Q: I was going to say, in a place like that there wasn't much political life, was there?

KEENE: No. It wasn't easy to get it. It was there; they were a bit afraid to talk too much. But, you keep working at it, you make some friends, you get around, you hear this, you hear that, somebody drinks too much.

Q: Was this a place where people spent their afternoons—the men with, what is it, ghat, or whatever it is?

KEENE: No, actually.

Q: I understand in Yemen.

KEENE: Yemen, yes, absolutely.

Q: Is it ghat, or what?

KEENE: I've heard many—khat...

Q: It's basically a type of hashish, isn't it...no, it's a stimulant.

KEENE: It's a mildly narcotic leaf. No, they didn't do that there. The government closed at 2:00; they went home and had a big lunch, and had a siesta.

Q: What did the better-off Omanis do?

KEENE: Well, a lot of them had farms in the country.

Q: The farms would just be a summer place?

KEENE: Yes, a place to get away. They would travel; a lot of them had a fair amount of money, and they would go to London. A surprising number of them had big houses in Washington, actually.

Q: What about the Omani women; did you get any feel for their role?

KEENE: This is where the history of an empire makes it interesting. When Tanzania became independent, you know Zanzibar joined Tanganyika. They pretty much expelled the Arab community, which was essentially Omanis, most of whom then returned to Oman, where most of them had never been. And they were speaking Swahili, and not Arabic. So you had an integration problem that goes on to this day. The other side of that coin is that they were generally much better educated, because remember, the old sultan didn't let anybody go to school. So, they got this literate cadre of people back, and to the resentment of many, because of their education, they landed government jobs. But the women there were not retiring; they were used to participating in commercial life, political life, and that's still true today, too. The Zanzibari women have formed the women's organizations, the women's faculty at the university, run businesses, do this. The Omanis—indigenous Omanis—don't do much of that, so it's interesting.

Then, there are the Baluchis. They had been recruited for the army under the old sultan, and they came over from Baluchistan, of course, and many, many just settled there. Or they were given

some land as a reward for their service, and—there's just a lot, so they're a distinct group, too, within the society.

Q: What did they pick, religious-wise, as a whole group, there in Oman?

KEENE: There's some Shia there, mostly from the sub-continent, originally. Oman's trading patterns were different than most of the Arab world; they traded with India, Iran...

Q: Following the trade winds.

KEENE: Yes, exactly, which you don't see in most of the Arab world. It snuck into their food, and there are people who may now have intermarried, but originated in India, or what is now Pakistan. They moved there, and they set up shop, so you have that small community. But the majority of Omanis are Ibadi—neither Shia nor Sunni. And it's a very tolerant branch of Islam, practiced only, I am told, in Oman, and for some reason, Tunisia. I don't know how that worked out. You don't get a lot of religious strife; you do get a little anti-Shia sentiment.

Q: This was during the period, I guess, when the Saudis were setting up the religious schools, the madrassas, which preached a form of rather intolerant Wahhabism; was that going on there?

KEENE: Not in Oman. No. I heard later that there were some arrests that took place—this was after I left—of people who were accused of being over-fanatic in their religious beliefs.

Q: Was there anything going on such as explorations—people like the National Geographic looking for lost cities and all of that? The area had been much more fertile at one time, hadn't it?

KEENE: Absolutely. It was on the old frankincense road. Yes, there were archeological sites that could be visited. Later they found more; a lot of those were in Dhofar. There were also a series of quite ancient inland forts that you could visit. And the area had been briefly colonized by the Portuguese. At the entrance to Muscat harbor, on each side is a massive Portuguese fort that is very picturesque, right downtown, where the palace is.

Q: Was there a place where up and coming Omanis went away to school; did they go away to Britain?

KEENE: Yes, mostly to London. We have some in the States, but mostly in London. There is a university there now; it was fairly new in those days: Sultan Qaboos University.

Q: How were relations with the British embassy?

KEENE: Good. We made it a point, recognizing their influence, to get along with them. There were those in the mission who resented the Brits, but I never thought that was going to get you anywhere.

Q: How about the Omani government--how was the foreign ministry, and was it an effective government?

KEENE: Yes, but... Well, I knew a lot of people in the foreign ministry, but there it was typical, I guess, of a new government, and it was really only the minister, and maybe the undersecretary, who was going to make any decision. So you had to get to know those people. It was all very well to know the head of the American section... And in a lot of those ministries, you'd walk in there, and people just reading the newspaper, drinking coffee.

Q: Did you feel much the heavy hand of the Arabian peninsular desk or the NEA (Near East and Africa) bureau?

KEENE: Arabian Peninsular Affairs. No, not too much; I don't think we were high on their list of priorities.

Q: I was going to say, I think they had other things to do. Did you get ship visits?

KEENE: Yes; after the escorts started, constantly.

Q: How did they work?

KEENE: They had a nice, modern port at Mutrah. We'd get the authority for it; they'd come in, tie up for a couple of days. The sailors would get leave, not that there was an awful lot for a sailor to do in Muscat.

Q: Well, could you sort of bus them off to a park, or the equivalent thereof?

KEENE: Yes. They'd set that up, out to see a fort or one of the old houses. There was a city that was only about an hour away called Nizwa, that had a fort and a souk, so that was good for visiting people. You could do that. The hotels actually were allowed to serve alcohol to foreigners, so it was liberal to that extent. And they'd re-provision there—one of the reasons they'd come in. Ironically, most of their vegetables were via Iran. So, we were in a position of buying Iranian goods while we were patrolling the gulf. No, we had a whole lot of ship visits.

Q: Did the name "al Qaeda" cross your desk at all?

KEENE: Never saw it, in those days, no.

HAYWOOD RANKIN
Deputy Chief of Mission
Muscat (1989-1992)

Haywood Rankin was born in the District of Columbia in 1946. He received both his bachelor's degree and law degree from the University of North Carolina in 1968 and 1971, respectively. His career has included positions in Tangier,

Algiers, Cairo, Damascus, Baghdad, Muscat, and Abidjan. Haywood Rankin was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy on July 24, 1998.

Q: In '88 what did you do? What did they do with you? It was '89 probably.

RANKIN: It took me some time to get myself collected after this departure from Baghdad. I almost immediately interviewed with Richard Boehm who was meant to have gone out to Muscat to be ambassador to Oman. He was caught up in the longest, what's the word I'm looking for? Ambassadors are held in limbo after they get agreement, they've been named and then Congress has to do its thing. Richard Boehm had previously been ambassador to Cyprus and this was to be his last ambassadorship. He was meant to have gone out before the elections in November 1988 but for some reason he didn't get through the congressional process either in the summer or in the fall. Congress finished and he didn't make it. The whole process had to start all over again and the man finally arrived in October 1989.

He was looking for a DCM. He was interviewing a lot of people. I happened to arrive in Washington at the perfect moment, December 1988. I see in retrospect that I probably should have gone somewhere other than NEA to get bureau diversity. I was offered also the consul general job in Belfast and I would have been wise in retrospect to have taken that posting. But I wanted to use my area knowledge of the Arab world and my linguistic knowledge of Arabic. I liked Ambassador Boehm from the first moment, despite his reputation as a still, "old school" ambassador. I thought he had a superb sense of humor, but it certainly is true that Dick Boehm did not suffer fools lightly.

I had just been made into an O1 and wouldn't it be great to be immediately made a DCM? In retrospect, I think it is unwise to be a DCM too soon after becoming an O1. What happens is, and I only know this in hindsight, people look at you after you've been a DCM once and then you're DCM twice and they say he has already been DCM. He hasn't made it to ambassador, he hasn't made it into the Senior Service, we don't want him. If you go too soon to DCM, you can find yourself in trouble. That's not a substantive issue but it is interesting to show you how the Foreign Service works.

Q: You went out to Muscat when and how long were you there?

RANKIN: I was six months on the Arabian Peninsula Affairs office doing Oman, being deputy director of that office off and on.

Q: Were you involved in the flagging business? That was already over by that time so the Arabian peninsula was rather quiet wasn't it at that point?

RANKIN: That's right. It was between the wars. I was able to use that six-month period to get acquainted first with Oman from the Washington standpoint. It was a great advantage going out to Oman knowing the Washington perspective not only on Oman but on the whole Arabian Peninsula. This was very, very useful because I had never served in the peninsula. Then I went out in the summer. Still Ambassador Boehm was held up. I found myself in the remarkable position of arriving as chargé. I was chargé d'affaires for three months.

It was the only tour in my entire Foreign Service career in which I served for three years. I had been three years in Egypt but one year was Arabic language training. I actually filled a three year tour. I left Oman in '92.

It was a wonderful assignment. Wonderful for me as a student of the Arab world. Wonderful for me as someone who likes to get out-of-doors and meet people. Because it was a rather small embassy I as deputy chief of mission wasn't completely saddled with management. It was a small enough embassy that there was time enough also to be, to some extent, a reporting officer and have time to continue to think in political-economic terms as well as administrative terms. Obviously as the deputy chief of mission your first job is management and your first role in management is administration. It was the first time in my career that I became familiar with all the complexities of administration.

We had just moved into a 55 million dollar embassy. I was a bit sad that we had left the embassy in old Muscat. The building was still there and I would visit it from time to time. We moved into a brand new, extremely expensive, extremely beautiful embassy. I don't think we are building much of them like that anymore. It met all of the greatest security standards and it was built like a fortress. A beautiful fortress, but certainly a fortress. It should be the envy of anyone, that lovely plot in Muscat right by the Gulf of Oman.

The three years in Muscat were punctuated by two very significant events. One was the renegotiation of the Omani-American military treaty which had first been negotiated in 1980. It was time to renegotiate. Why is that important? It so happens that Oman was, and I suppose remains, the site of a multi-billion dollar military armaments prepositioning effort by the United States. We had a huge amount of materiel positioned principally out in the desert in a place called Thumrait. The other big event during my tour there was the Gulf War. The renegotiating of this treaty was March 1990.

Q: Why don't we talk about that first?

RANKIN: This negotiation proved to be extremely important because of all of those armaments that were prepositioned and all of those facilities that we had helped build. We built huge airstrips that were far, far, far more than anything Sultan Qaboos would ever need. Why did we do that? All of these things were in constant use a few months after we renegotiated this treaty. Of course we didn't foresee that at the time but it just goes to show that sometimes things can work out well.

Q: What was the political situation? What was the situation in Oman when you arrived? Then you can talk about the negotiations.

RANKIN: Sultan Qaboos is an able, wise leader of his country and I could speak to you at length about that. It is a small country, less than two million people. The southern edge of the Strait of Hormuz is actually part of Oman and is known as the Musandam Peninsula. Therefore Oman is a neighbor of Iran. It was a difficult relationship but one that had been managed very sagely by

Sultan Qaboos. He was able to be a close ally of Britain and the United States and yet maintain a non-hostile relationship with Iran. That is already an extraordinary accomplishment.

He had on the other side the PDRY, the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, a staunch Soviet ally and very hostile in any ideological sense with Sultan Qaboos. There was a problem with ethnic groups that straddle both sides of that border. Then you had Saudi Arabia, a country with which he had long had problems: territorial disputes and religious disputes because the Saudis are Wahhabis, the most fundamentalist Sunnis. The Omanis are borderline Sunnis, Ibadhis as they are called. They are looked down upon by the Saudis as not being proper Muslims. Finally, the various Emirates of the United Arab Emirates, some the Emirates themselves disputing territory with Oman.

This was the international context I found on arriving in Oman. We had a treaty that had been negotiated by a younger Sultan in 1980, which had been the subject of much criticism in the Arab world and by Iran. The treaty gave the United States the right to use air fields, to build huge air strips and to store materiel for the use against whom precisely? If you are PDRY, you think it is against you. If you are Iran, you think it is against you, correctly may I say. The instigations for the treaty were the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the Iranian hostage crisis, and the rise of Khomeini. The Sultan went very far out on a limb as far as Iran and most of the Arab world were concerned.

Now 10 years had gone by. The Iran-Iraq War was over. Khomeini was still there, but now the Sultan was much less nervous about his relationship with Iran. Somehow the Iranians and he had come up with a modus vivendi. Relations were also better with the PDRY. The Sultan had come to power when his father, Sultan Said, was teetering and there was rebellion in southern Oman (which is called the Dhofar). In 1970, there was a general fear that the PDRY was about to take over Dhofar and bring down the whole house of Said. Now instead of being 10 years from the searing memory, we were 20 years from it and much less concerned about the PDRY. The Saudis had been a big problem during the Buraimi crisis in the 1950s.

Q: The Buraimi Oasis was disputed territory there?

RANKIN: Actually just inside Abu Dhabi. Those disputes always lie there latent, but it was another ten years since there had been any problems on that score. Now you are saying to yourself if you are Sultan Qaboos, do I really need this treaty? It is causing me a little bit of flack. I still get people throwing darts at me saying you are a stooge of the west. I have been a brilliant diplomat. I have controlled all of these international problems. Do I need these Americans with all their armaments and stuff here? How does it serve Oman and what am I really getting out of this?

Of course we had to pay. We had to pay rent and we had an aid relationship which had grown up out of the 1980 treaty. Do we really need all of this, we asked ourselves. Did he need any of this, he asked himself. Meanwhile, we have back in Washington people saying this is a country that receives our aid, is not poor, is doing nothing for us, and has the audacity to want more from us. So from both sides there was pressure to reduce the relationship. That is the background to the renegotiation of the treaty.

In fact it was a brilliant success. We agreed to increasing some of the rents, but we maintained that relationship pretty much as it was. When August then rolled around, there were a lot of people who were incredibly grateful that none of this apparatus had been dismantled, that we could still rely on all of it and rely we did. That was the next phase of my presence there.

Q: Was it with Oman or the United Arab Emirates that we had come up with in the summer, a small air exercise, air refueling, or something like that which aroused Saddam Hussein? Does that ring a bell with you?

RANKIN: Yes, we did various kinds of exercises with countries all up and down the Gulf. Actually the Emirates were the hardest to get to play ball with us on those sorts of things. You are right but I can't remember exactly who it was with but it wasn't with Oman. There was, and I don't think it was the UAE, an issue there.

What we began seeing through that year, 1990, was Saddam Hussein increasingly being hostile to the United States. He was increasingly flexing his muscles.

There was an Arab summit convened in Baghdad in, as I recall, April of that year. It looked as if the Arab world were crowning Saddam Hussein as the greatest of the Arab leaders. Everybody went to that summit, all the Arab leaders - with the exception of Sultan Qaboos of Oman and King Hassan of Morocco. It was a pretty disgusting spectacle, to tell you the truth, that all of these Arab leaders did obeisance to Saddam Hussein. Sultan Qaboos did not go. He was very willing to develop civil relations with the Iranians and maintain them with the Iraqis but he wasn't going to go to Saddam Hussein's party and he didn't. Even Sheikh Zaid of Abu Dhabi went, amazingly enough. Sheikh Zaid is the richest man in the world, and he thinks he is the most important man in the world, but he went to do obeisance to Saddam Hussein but Qaboos did not.

Q: How did the invasion and seizure of Kuwait hit you? Were there indicators? Here you are at the embassy and what happened?

RANKIN: No, there were no indicators before it happened. In fact April Glaspie had come down to us for a visit in March of that year. She and my family went all over the lovely mountains of Oman and of course we talked about how things were going in Iraq. They weren't going well. She herself had never even had a one-on-one meeting with Saddam Hussein. Obviously it was an uphill battle. We were seeing all the things we had most feared happen with Saddam Hussein, the repressiveness, the megalomania were all becoming worse rather than better. Having, as it were, won the Iran-Iraq War only brought out the worst elements in Saddam Hussein.

You could say that we all should have foreseen the invasion, but whether we should or shouldn't, I think we operated in the only sensible way we could have. April Glaspie obviously did not foresee what was to happen in Kuwait. It was clear that Saddam had been flexing his muscles for months, but I defy anybody to say they precisely foresaw what was to happen.

The invasion occurred and we went on, just like the Department of State, a 24 hour basis of working. For months it was full-time. We had an enormous military presence in Oman that quickly developed. A lot went on. We had a lot of visits. Even General Schwarzkopf came down. Ships were passing by all the time. Our embassy became one of the support missions for the developing operation. We also even were the locus to which our embassy from Mogadishu evacuated in January 1991, believe it or not.

Q: I've interviewed Jim Bishop.

RANKIN: He came through Muscat and I was the person who arranged for the offloading of our Mogadiscio personnel, along with hundreds of other evacuees, from a massive troop ship. General Schwarzkopf was calling his ships up into the Persian Gulf for the operation that was soon to take place. It was no time to be evacuating embassies down on the Indian Ocean coast so rather than sending the ship down to Mombasa, as originally planned, Schwarzkopf said, "I want you up here and you can just drop those folks off the first place you can." The first place was Muscat.

It was an operation that involved frenzied activity over several days. Omanis don't like to operate that way. They don't like sudden things. They don't like a lot of strange people coming to their shores. We had little advance notice, but we managed.

Q: I would have thought that one of the major problems you would have had would be one of the stipulations of the treaty that you had with Oman. Sure there'll be a couple billion dollars worth of military equipment in the country but you are not going to have a lot of Americans running around. With a war on I imagine a lot of Americans came, didn't they, including our female military people?

RANKIN: The way we did this was pretty wise going back to 1980. Our major airstrips were on a desert island off an isolated part of the coast and Thumrait in the Arabian Desert, a long way from where anybody can see. The tricky point was some of the repositioning that we had in Muscat, actually north of Muscat at their airport called Seeb. Even that we had made a pretty low-key operation. Most of the flights in and out of Thumrait were just in and out of Thumrait. Most of the populace couldn't see them. That was all part of the intent from the very beginning.

We pressed them, and they agreed, to setting up a military hospital at Seeb airport. We had all kinds of construction activity going on for a few months, but it was all temporary. We had a whole tent community set up out there. I was surprised that the Omanis would agree to a visible presence at their international airport, but they did. The Seeb operation did bring in a certain number of American personnel into the Muscat metropolitan area, including females. We never saw any particular negative reaction to that, none that we could measure. Again it was testimony to the Sultan's willingness to be helpful when the crunch was on.

Q: When Iraq invaded Kuwait was there a problem? Did the Sultan see immediately that this was the danger and was he on board or was there persuasion? How did this work?

RANKIN: There was a certain amount of persuasion although I think the Sultan was on board from the very beginning. The Omanis tend to dislike the Kuwaitis intensely.

Q: I think all the Arabs do.

RANKIN: Omanis for years before oil was discovered in Oman, back to the days of the old Sultan, had managed to escape from the country and had tended to go up the Gulf and very often they went to Kuwait. They worked as laborers, especially dock yard workers, and they were treated very badly. There is this deep memory in the Omani consciousness of the high-handedness of the Kuwaitis. I never met an Omani who didn't say the Kuwaitis had it coming.

Of course Oman is the further away of the Gulf countries from the locus of activity. The furthest you went away the less intense was the concern and fear. Nevertheless, the Sultan was in fact on board from the very beginning. As you can see, he was helpful even in ways that contravened his basic policies. His policies always were to keep any trouble making or trouble makers out of the country.

Q: Did the Omanis contribute troops to the force?

RANKIN: A handful, a symbolic handful, and it was nice that there was a symbolic effort there. Of course we spent a lot of effort on making that happen. The symbolism of it was important to us. Any participants that we could add to our efforts were useful.

Q: More flags.

RANKIN: More flags and it was very important for Jim Baker to be able to say here is my list. We expended a lot of diplomatic and military effort to make that happen. In my role as the DCM, one of the vexing parts of the problem was the issue of evacuation. Most of the embassies in the Arabian Peninsula, except Muscat, were evacuated.

Q: Well no, oddly enough Riyadh didn't either. If Riyadh had gone, that would have meant the American oil workers in Dhahran would have gone and so we needed these Americans there.

RANKIN: You are absolutely right. Even though there was an incident in Jeddah where a bus was attacked with Americans in it.

Q: There were Scuds coming in too in Dhahran. It was an interesting situation.

RANKIN: The State Department evacuated all those other countries, even the UAE much to my astonishment. I think in the case of Abu Dhabi and Dubai it was voluntary but this voluntary evacuation business is not very pleasant either. First of all, you send a poor political message to the host country. But worst of all is the effect on families that take up the offer. Families can't just turn around and come back when the danger is over. It can take the State Department six months before it finally decides that the coast is clear. It is a tricky business.

In Muscat we were confronted with people at the other end, in the State Department, broadly hinted that maybe we should go to some form of evacuation, in this case voluntary. We were also confronted by a few people in the embassy, nervous nellys, who said we ought to evacuate. I am old school and the issue of evacuation was my ultimate undoing in Algeria, which is the next chapter of this. I am old school, I just don't believe in it, and in Oman it didn't make any sense at all.

Curiously, it was only the CIA and the military who lobbied for evacuation within the embassy. The military are used to being separated from their families, and they want to be separated from their families if there is the slightest whiff of danger. This is sort of a military family attitude. I don't know how to explain the CIA attitude but we, the ambassador and I, had pressure from the Agency people to order a voluntary evacuation.

There was the political dimension to our thinking, to be sure. We did not need to do this to Sultan Qaboos, who had such a close political and military relationship with us and had bent over backwards to be helpful in ways that were essential to American interests. But the bottom line was that it didn't make any sense. We searched with a fine tooth comb all the intelligence that we were receiving from the self-same CIA, which was telling us we ought to authorize an evacuation. There simply was no evidence to suggest there was a threat. They couldn't even fabricate evidence that would stand up to scrutiny.

The fact of the matter is Oman is a remarkably airtight country. The Sultan and his services had for years and years and years done wonders in keeping Palestinians, Lebanese, Jordanians, Iranians, ne'er-do-wells of any kind, shape, or form out of the country. Of course there is always a risk and that was a risk that Ambassador Boehm and I were than willing to take. We did not make friends among the CIA and military. If people wanted to leave that was fine but we did not feel it was justified for Uncle Sam to have to pay their way.

I suppose in today's world of a military which will not send its men to be killed under any circumstances or even put them in the slightest bit of danger, and of a State Department which is unwilling to face the slightest danger anywhere in the world, this must seem to be a very strange attitude. But that is how I came up through the Foreign Service. It was a different Foreign Service.

RICHARD W. BOEHM
Ambassador
Oman (1989-1992)

Ambassador Richard W. Boehm was born in New York in 1926. He served in the U.S. Army during World War II and joined the Foreign Service in 1954. His career included positions in Japan, Germany, Luxembourg, Nepal, Turkey, Thailand, and Washington, DC, and ambassadorships to Cyprus and Oman. This interview was conducted in 1994 by Charles Stuart Kennedy.

Q: You left Howard after a year. You were at Howard from 1987 to 1988. Then what happened?

BOEHM: Well, just before I left Howard, the Department said that it would nominate me to be Ambassador to Oman. I am a pretty straightforward person who respects the Foreign Service for its professionalism. I said, "I'm honored that you want me to be your nominee, but surely you have some very bright young Arabists around who would serve the purpose as well. I'm not an Arabist. I hope that I'm bright, but why me?" They said, "Well, you have some qualifications that are needed at this time." I should say that the Iran-Iraq War was on at the time. I knew what they meant. They wanted a political-military person who knew how to deal with the US military and could act as a go-between, working between the US military and foreign governments. I had had some experience in that respect, which most of our Arabists had not had. So they said that there are reasons, without spelling them out. I knew what they meant. I said, "All right. I'll be your nominee."

This nomination had to go to the White House first, and a very long process was set in motion, because it was an election year [1988], the Senate was being recalcitrant about hearings and all of that, and the matter dragged on. It took three months to get the agreement out of the Omanis because all of these things had to be approved by the Sultan himself. The Sultan had taken off on his yacht somewhere, and they didn't want to bring unnecessary business to him. He wasn't considering agréments at that point, so it took three months to get it. By that time we were in September, with the elections coming up in November. Congress was getting ready to do its election thing, which we all understand. So the nomination didn't reach the Senate before it adjourned prior to the elections. I was getting rather fed up at that point. I spent six or eight weeks studying Arabic and filling in my time until this appointment was ready. It didn't come along, and Congress went home. I was getting ready to hang it up. I was almost at the compulsory retirement age, as I was 62 at the time. I thought that perhaps I should just retire.

Then the Department called me and said, "The President is going to make a few recess appointments. You're going to be one of them, if you accept." I said OK. I thought, "In for a penny, in for a pound." Indeed, on December 1, 1988, after the elections in which George Bush was elected, President Reagan made three or four recess appointments, including me. So then the question, of course, was to go to Oman. My predecessor...

Q: Cranwell Montgomery.

BOEHM: He didn't leave. I told the Department that time was going by. They said, "Oh, he's going to leave." But he didn't leave. He came back to Washington and then went back to Oman.

So January, 1989, came, and he was still there in Oman. At that stage I was thinking, I have credentials signed Ronald Reagan. By the time I get to Oman and present my credentials to the Sultan, Ronald Reagan isn't going to be the President. I thought that I should not present credentials signed by someone who is not the President of the United States. And I'm not sure that the Omanis would accept them if I did. So I said that I was not going to go. I would stay here and wait. If President Bush chooses to reappoint me and give me credentials signed "Bush," I would go to Oman.

Well, in due course, on January 20, 1989, President Bush was inaugurated. His first order of business was not the appointment of an Ambassador to Oman. [Laughter] It was John Tower as Secretary of Defense. So it took him a while to get around to this matter. Eventually, President Bush decided that he would appoint me. It took a long time. It was October, 1989, when I finally went to Oman.

Q: What do you do in this sort of situation?

BOEHM: You do whatever you can. I was too far advanced in my career and too long in the tooth to do busy work. So I'd drop by the Department, read the cables, try to keep in touch with what was going on, and visit people who had some knowledge of Oman. I made many calls here and there on various people, but this was just spinning your wheels. As I say, I was really discouraged and was tempted, many times, just to chuck it and resign. But then I thought that I had gotten this far. I might as well sweat it out, which I did.

Of course, the ironic part of it was that the reason for which they wanted me to go to Oman, my political-military background in the context of the Iran-Iraq War, had disappeared. The Iran-Iraq War had ended. [Laughter] By the time I got to Oman there wasn't any war. So I was wondering what I was going to do for the three or four years I would be there. Being in a new place is always interesting, but in terms of the job itself I could see nothing there which would have engaged me for several years. But then along came the Iraqi attack on Kuwait.

Q: Was this while you were still in Washington?

BOEHM: No. I went to Oman, as I said.

Q: You got to Oman in October, 1989?

BOEHM: I presented my credentials in October, 1989. The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait began in the following summer.

Q: Before we get to that, because it raises a whole new situation, what was the situation in Oman when you arrived?

BOEHM: The situation in Oman was not without its interesting and useful aspects. Roughly 10 years earlier the United States had concluded what was referred to as an Access Agreement with Oman which gave the United States Air Force access to Omani military airports and air bases under various contingencies. There were ongoing contacts with the Government of Oman about how we would use these facilities. And as is usually the case, the Government of Oman wanted to hold on as tightly as it could, not only to its sovereignty, but all the trappings and appurtenances of sovereignty, controlling everything we did. The US Air Force, of course, wanted operational flexibility, which is perfectly understandable. These are matters you find everywhere abroad where you have US military and other kinds of bases. There is always a kind of quiet struggle between the host government and the US as to who's in charge here. So there was that kind of thing going on, to be dealt with.

From the professional point of view, shortly after I arrived, a border crisis with Yemen broke out...

Q: At that time Yemen was two countries, and this was the Marxist...

BOEHM: Marxist South Yemen, whose territory extended over to the Omani border.

Yemen, after all, had an enormous population for that part of the world--between eight and 10 million people. Oman had a population of about 1.5 million. Yemen was poor, Oman had oil, and some of the oil was down there in the border area. So anything around the border [with Yemen] was sensitive. The border had always been disputed, like many borders in that part of the world. It had been drawn by a British survey team many years earlier. So it was a delicate issue. The Omanis were telling me that the Yemenis were violating the border. They were allegedly attacking some border police posts. The Omanis wanted our support.

At that time we were discussing various aspects of our relations with South Yemen at the UN in New York with a view toward their improvement. This was something that the South Yemenis very much wanted. I saw a possibility there of getting our Ambassador to the UN to let them know that if they were going to threaten our friends in the vicinity, there wouldn't be very much of a prospect of improving our relations with them. By chance we also had a military exercise coming up at that time in Oman, near the border with South Yemen. I was afraid that somebody in Washington might get the idea of postponing or stalling that exercise to avoid getting involved in any conflict. I said that that would be the worst thing the US could do. We have a lot at stake here. Let's go ahead with the exercise. And there were other things that we could do.

We did all of those things, and the Yemeni then backed off. That was good for me, because I was able to move into the situation and be of assistance--to get Washington to be supportive of the Omanis. So this gave me some stature in Oman. Eventually, Oman and Yemen signed a border agreement which legally settled the border.

Q: You also were drawing on your political-military experience, knowing not only what the normal problems are but also how Washington operated as far as exercises were concerned: what might happen and to anticipate...

BOEHM: What might be too difficult for Washington to do. So I was able to make suggestions not only to Washington but to the Omanis as well--to avoid asking Washington to do things that they couldn't do. Yes. Political-military experience was helpful. So the Department turned out to have been right in making somebody available [as Ambassador] with political-military experience to go to Oman.

Anyway, that launched me well. All of that happened before I had even presented my credentials to the Sultan.

Q: In connection with the period before the Gulf War, which, of course, was the beginning of a real crisis, could you talk about how you dealt with the government of Oman?

BOEHM: Well, it was very interesting. It was the first autocratic government which I had had to deal with as an ambassador. Cyprus, of course, has an elected, democratic government. Oman does not. It is a one-man show. It's an absolute monarchy. It was fascinating to me to try to come to grips with it and figure out how to deal with this absolute monarchy in which only the Sultan basically has the power of decision on any important matters. There is a whole array of ministers.

Q: You were saying that Oman had a whole array of ministers.

BOEHM: It has all of the trappings of a government, including ministers, ministries, departments, and so forth. They conduct the day to day business. However, no one is willing to make a significant decision without being sure that the Sultan would approve of it. I don't know whether this is typical of all absolute monarchies or one-man governments, but my guess is that it probably is. Government officials at a lower level--and that includes ministers--always find it easier to say "No" to anything you want because saying "Yes" would involve going to the Sultan and getting his chop on it. He dealt with all kinds of matters, some of them seemingly of lesser importance than others. So you never knew whether a minister or other official would think that he had the authority to deal with the issue or whether he was going to have to go to the Sultan. I think that they were reluctant to go to the Sultan, unless they knew that the matter was something that he would like to be brought in on. So the government tended to be difficult to move, although the officials were very polite and, I think, wanted to be helpful in many circumstances--or most of them did. It was just hard to get things moving. But if a question were important enough, you'd take it up with the Sultan.

I tried to save the Sultan for really important matters and not go to the well too often, lest I should drop my pot and break it. That meant telling those who had questions--American interests of one kind or another--to be patient and try to work things out at the lower level. Eventually, with patience you could do this, but it took time. You knew--or you felt it in any case--that the minister or other official with whom you were dealing was probably going to have to take this matter up with the Sultan. And you were going to have to wait and be patient. So you had to choose the issues to take to the highest level. I did that. It meant exercising patience and getting other people to be patient--getting our military and business firms to be patient.

Oman has money. It has oil. It is not fabulously wealthy, like the United Arab Emirates or Saudi Arabia, but it has money. The Sultan is very much interested in developing and modernizing the country, so there's business to be done there. There were a lot of US firms who were interested in doing business in Oman. They sometimes would encounter obstacles and roadblocks which were normal in Oman but which were very frustrating to American businessmen. I would occasionally have to tell them, "Well, take it easy. If you don't win this one, you'll win the next one."

Foreign companies operating in Oman--it is not a uniquely Omani practice--were required to have an Omani partner or sponsor. This basically meant somebody whom you paid to represent you.

Q: It's true in Saudi Arabia.

BOEHM: It's true all over the place. The sponsors tend to be well placed. They were successful, wealthy Omanis. I think that the system makes sure that you get taken care of this time and the other guy gets taken care of the next time. If you happen to have the wrong sponsor for this project, he might turn out to be the right sponsor for the next one. [Laughter] When you have people like Senator D'Amato, for example...

Q: Go public and expose...

BOEHM: ...charge that a relative of the Sultan is on the take, you're going to have problems.

Q: Senator D'Amato is the Republican Senator from New York. He is sort of a joke, really.

BOEHM: Whether he's a joke or not, in his efforts to help a New York firm, he was threatening to make accusations of that kind, involving a member of the Omani royal family. He was threatening to accuse and expose this man on the floor of the Senate. I said, "For God's sake, this is the worst possible thing that you could do. It isn't going to get them the contract. It's going to rule them out of all future contracts which they could get." Well, it turned out eventually that Senator D'Amato did not go public, and the company did land a nice contract about six months later. [Laughter]

Q: Were there any other particular problems outside of the normal desire to get more from our military who visited Oman?

BOEHM: Would you repeat that question?

Q: Did you have any major problems during this period with the American military?

BOEHM: No, I don't think so. Of course, the European Command [EUCOM] was interested [in Oman] because sometimes they had to supply assets for one reason or another. However, the Command which had authority in the area in the event of military action was the Central Command, which was commanded by the famous General Norman Schwarzkopf. I had gone down to their Florida headquarters, of course, to be briefed by them before I went to Oman--long before, when I first thought that I was getting my appointment.

I had always made it crystal clear, the older and more crotchety I got, that when it came to United States activities in the country to which I was the ambassador, I was the boss. They seemed to accept that. They seemed to understand that I could get the things that we needed, if they'd just let me work and do it. It would take some time, of course. A good example was certain construction projects. The way it worked in Oman was that, since we were planning to use Omani air bases, when necessary, and since the United States really doesn't operate too well on a bare base footing, we like to have things all over the place. Some things are really necessary, like fuel for airplanes. Other things are not that necessary, like recreation facilities and that sort of thing. In any case, we had a very ambitious military construction program in Oman of warehouses in which to store equipment, fuel dumps, and that kind of thing. Getting [such construction projects] through the procedures in Oman and getting these things built could be difficult.

At that time the Omani Air Force was commanded by Air Marshal Erik Bennett, an Anglo-Irishman who had been there for many years and who was determined that Omani sovereignty should always be very clear. This sometimes caused difficulties for things that we wanted to do. He was the main contact on all of these projects, because they involved Omani air bases, which were his. So he was able to frustrate projects he didn't like, or to insist that some of the construction be usable by the Omani Air Force. Real or potential use by the Omani Air Force.

Sometimes these projects looked as if they were going to be of much more use to the Omani Air Force than to the U. S. Air Force. We had people in Congress--Congresswoman Pat Schroeder, for example--who was on the Military Construction Subcommittee--and who watched all of this stuff very closely. Congress wanted to be sure that this money was used for construction in connection with U. S. military activities. Air Marshal Bennett, a British officer who had been seconded as commander of the Omani Air Force, was equally determined that Oman was going to get some value out of these facilities. [Laughter] He was ruthless. He would block things until he got what he wanted. I had to deal with Erik. It was fun, sparring with him. He was a very shrewd guy--a delightful man. I enjoyed the struggle with him. At times I just had to go over his head to the Sultan.

Q: Can you give your evaluation of the Sultan?

BOEHM: Yes.

Q: Who was he and so forth?

BOEHM: The Said family is a 200-year-old dynasty which has ruled Oman or Muscat for generations. Oman was once two things: it was the Sultanate of Muscat and the Imamate of Oman. The Imamate of Oman was a theocratic state which included most of present-day Oman outside of Muscat. Early on in the history of the Said dynasty the Sultan of Muscat had acquired or colonized a good part of East Africa, including Zanzibar and what is now the coast of Tanzania and Kenya. So they were a colonial power in the Indian Ocean area. At times the Sultan of Muscat would manage to take over the Imamate of Oman, so that he would be both Imam of Oman and Sultan of Muscat. Well, there had been a vacancy in the Imamate of Oman for quite some time. At the end of that phase they were separate: there was an Imam of Oman and there was the Sultan of Muscat. There was a war, which led to the conquest of the Imamate of Oman by Sultan Said of Muscat--the father of the present ruler, Sultan Qaboos. Said unified the country with a lot of help from the British.

During the 19th century the Sultanate of Muscat, which included Zanzibar and a lot of East Africa, had split because of a contest between two brothers. One of them got Zanzibar, and the other one got Muscat, and they lost most of the rest of East Africa. But there was the Sultan of Zanzibar and a separate Sultan of Muscat.

At that time, long before oil was discovered, Zanzibar was richer than Muscat. Zanzibar had cloves--and slaves as well.

Q: We had a treaty [with Zanzibar] going back to, what, 1832?

BOEHM: Yes. I forget the exact date. We had an early treaty with Zanzibar.

Q: One of our earliest treaties, under President Andrew Jackson.

BOEHM: In fact, that treaty dated back to the period before the split, when the Sultan of Muscat also had Zanzibar. But they split. By the time that Muscat acquired the rest of Oman, they had lost Zanzibar and their East African territories. This is the history--over the last few hundred years--of what is today the Sultanate of Oman. After the unification of the two territories, it was called the Sultanate of Muscat and Oman. They gradually dropped the word "Muscat" to indicate the unity of the country and the extinction of the Imamate of Oman. This happened fairly recently.

Q: I used to see the Imam of Oman quite frequently because his residence was always at the Majelis of Saud bin Jiluwi of the Eastern Province [of Saudi Arabia] back in the 1950's. He used to sit there with his Omanis and glower. [Laughter]

BOEHM: You're absolutely right. And there was another relative--of the last ruling Imam of Oman who is today the Grand Mufti of the Sultanate of Oman. He is sort of a cricket-like, spry old guy. [Laughter] So I think that the period of the Imamate [of Oman] is finished. That isn't to say that tribalism no longer exists. There was a big tribal element involved there, too.

Anyway, you were asking me about the recent history of Oman and how the Sultan achieved his position. His father was a very old-fashioned man who kept Oman tightly closed. Until 25 years ago--and that's very recent, after all, in historic terms--the city gates of Muscat would be closed at sundown. Nobody could come or go. People were not allowed out on the street at night without carrying a lantern, so that everybody could see who was out there. He had taken a dislike to umbrellas. Nobody could walk along with an umbrella. I think that he wanted to be able to sit on the balcony and see everything. [Laughter] He liked Salalah, the capital of the Southern Province. He didn't go to Muscat, the capital of Oman, for the last 20 years of his reign. He was becoming increasingly hermit-like and anti-modern: no automobiles, no schools, and no roads. Oman was a very primitive place.

But he did do one thing: he sent his son to England to be educated. There are these English families--very often ministers and teachers and their wives--who take in or board foreign princes and wealthy young men. That was done with the present Sultan. He had lived with an English family for a number of years. Then, when he finished his schooling, he went to Sandhurst [Royal Military College, Sandhurst], the British West Point, and graduated. He then served for a year or two with the British Army of the Rhine, as an officer in the British Forces in Germany. So he had that background.

Then he went back to Oman. His father called him back to Oman, where he was put under lock and key, more or less house arrest, in Salalah, in one of his father's palaces. An uncle of his, a brother of the Sultan, was a modernist. His name was Prince Tarik. He had actually left the country and gone into exile because you couldn't be a modernist in Oman at that time. At a given

moment it was time for the old man to go. He was running the country into the ground, and it was time for a change. There was a palace coup d'etat. The old Sultan was thrown out and packed off to spend his years of exile--which weren't very long--in London. He died a few years later. The son, who was the only child of the old Sultan, became the new Sultan. His uncle, Prince Tarik, returned from exile and became Prime Minister. Oman began a modernization process, in the hands of a modern man, the young man who was British-educated...

Q: And a British officer.

BOEHM: Who had lived in Europe and had modern ideas. He set about modernizing the country, at the very moment, luckily, when the oil revenues were beginning to come in and he had some money. So Oman began to modernize. It's now well equipped with roads and schools. It has a university and good hospitals. It provides medical services to the rural areas of the country. It is a modernizing country that is doing well in that respect.

So that's the Sultan. In connection with the annual Human Rights Report, Oman is a country which, in my view, has a decent respect for human rights. The record is not perfect, but neither do we have a perfect record. But our human rights crowd in Washington tends to equate human rights with electoral, Jeffersonian democracy. Oman does not have a Jeffersonian democracy. So they regard that as a violation of human rights. It's always a struggle with the Department every year, in connection with this unfortunate Human Rights Report which we keep putting out, giving everybody around the world a report card, sticking our noses into places where we shouldn't be. We seem to think that we know better than anybody else what system they should have. Of course, as a loyal Foreign Service Officer, I carried out my instructions. My own conclusion was that the system that they have in Oman was one that the people were comfortable with. They accepted it. It was not our system of democracy, but it was their system, which involves a lot of sitting down and talking, with wise, older heads giving advice and consensus-building and all of that. That's the way it works out there on the Arabian Peninsula.

The Sultan uses that system. He's the ruler, all right. He makes the decisions, but those decisions tend to be accepted by everybody that I could find. I didn't see any signs of serious disaffection with the political system. The Sultan himself feels that, as time goes by, there should be increasing, popular participation in government. So you now have an elected, Council of State, an advisory body which can deal with the ministries, call the ministers in, get them to report on what they are doing, and criticize them if it wants to. And it happened that the first meeting of this Council of State was televised. It had succeeded an older Council of State which had fewer powers and which was chosen on a different basis. The new Council criticized some of the ministers. It doesn't have the power to call in certain ministers, like the Minister of Defense or the Minister of Foreign Affairs. It can call in any of the other ministers--transportation and education, for example--put them on the line and say, "Why haven't you built that school?"

So when the Council of State began calling in ministers--it had just met for the first time--they were giving them what for. They said, "You promised to put telephones in my town, in my district. You never did. When are you going to do it?" The first time I saw the Sultan after this, he was still chuckling. He had watched this process on television. He was delighted at the way his ministers had been called down and subjected to the scourge of a political body. He told me

that he intended to continue along those lines. The then new structure of the consultative council, or Majlis As-Shura, as it was called, was only a transitional phase. In turn, it was going to be succeeded by another body, which would represent a further opening to popular participation involving an electoral process.

Q: Did he ever use you as a sounding board? The American Ambassador is outside the normal give and take, unlike the British, who have been there a long time. He is somebody you can bounce ideas off without having to get too involved. Did you ever find that?

BOEHM: I wouldn't put it that way. I must say that I found my meetings with him always interesting. They were usually one on one. When I first got to Oman, he would tend to have the Foreign Minister or other note takers present for meetings with me. To my pleasure, he dropped that and began to meet with me privately, which meant that I could speak much more openly about certain things--especially if I was having some problem with a part of the government. The Sultan liked it that way, too, so during the bulk of my stay there we met privately. He has a very lively mind. He is interested in everything.

I wouldn't say that he used me as a sounding board or as a source of comment on the ministries. He clearly wanted my opinions and, once in a while, my advice on matters involving Omani-American relations.

Q: Before we go to the operations of the Gulf War, one further question. You mentioned human rights. Did you get involved in, or what was the role of women there?

BOEHM: You would get different opinions from different people. If you asked the National Organization for Women in the United States, they would say that the role of women in Oman is awful and totally unacceptable.

Q: You're talking about the American organization.

BOEHM: Yes. On the other hand, if you asked the King of Saudi Arabia, he would say, "Much too liberal." [Laughter] Again, [the answer to your question] is comparative. As the Gulf goes, Oman is certainly one of the more enlightened countries on the scale when it comes to women. There are as many women as men at the university, and not all of them are studying home economics. They're studying chemistry, physics, and architecture. Women can drive automobiles. Not only can they drive, but anyone who's been anywhere else in the Gulf would be startled to see that they can take driving lessons from a male instructor, with just the two of them in the car.

Oman, as I said, is on the liberal end of the scale. There are many women who remain quite conservative, especially among the tribes in the rural areas who still wear a kind of mask. It's not a veil. It's a leather mask that covers the nose and eyes and perhaps the top of the mouth. Not a veil. It serves the same purpose. They wear the mask voluntarily, not only because their husbands want them to. There's no legal requirement to be veiled. Oman is a country which, until very recently was quite traditional, as I described it before. Many women--I think, by choice--continue to live in a rather conservative and traditional way. However, and especially among the

wealthy, they send their daughters, as well as their sons, abroad to school. Many of them go to the United States--or England. When the girls come back, you see them running around in Muscat in blue jeans. They water ski and so forth. So a woman can be modern if she wants to be. I think that this situation is coming along. They're doing a good job at modernization, taking it as fast as they can but without outraging the general conservative feelings of the population.

Q: Coming now to the Gulf War, you arrived in Oman in 1989. Maybe my dates are wrong, but wasn't it August 1 or 2, 1990, when, pretty much to the surprise of everyone, although there had been rumblings of trouble, Iraq invaded Kuwait and took it over. How did that hit you and what happened?

BOEHM: Well, it hit me the same way as everybody else--on CNN.

Q: This is the broadcasting station.

BOEHM: I hope that all of our listeners will know what CNN is. It's the Cable News Network which broadcasts globally via satellite. When I called on the Foreign Minister, he had on a television set, with CNN on all the time. [Laughter] That was true all over the place. It was a principal source of news for chanceries and foreign ministries all over the world. Anyway, that was how I learned of the invasion.

The crisis had been building up. Iraq was reported to be massing troops on the Kuwaiti border and had certainly been making threatening noises against Kuwait for quite some time, having to do with oil prices and oil quotas and the fact that Iraq for many years had claimed that Kuwait was a province of Iraq. There was a longstanding dispute on that, but the proximate cause was OPEC [Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries], oil production, and Kuwait's unwillingness to keep the price of oil up by limiting production. There had been meetings. The Iraqis and Kuwaiti had met in Saudi Arabia. There were various reports on whether that meeting did or didn't succeed. It appeared not to have succeeded. Other Gulf and Arab leaders were traveling around, trying to make the situation simmer down. The Kuwaiti were whistling in the dark--the Kuwaiti Ambassador in Muscat, anyway, on whom I called to ask how he saw the situation.

Q: How did the Kuwaiti see the situation? I understand that they were not really liked in the Arab world.

BOEHM: They're very unpopular, especially in Oman. Let me recall to you that this was of interest to the US. After Oman signed the military access agreement with the United States in 1980, Kuwait moved to expel Oman from the Gulf Cooperation Council [GCC], which consists of six states. Kuwait was the leader of the pack denouncing Oman. Oman, moreover, had never broken relations with Egypt when Egypt and Israel recognized each other at Camp David. Oman was one of only two Arab states that didn't break relations with Egypt. So Oman has always been willing sort of to do its own thing. Kuwait had been among the most active critics of Oman. So the Omanis had a good reason for not liking Kuwait. The Kuwaiti were generally unpopular anyway.

Q: Too much money and...

BOEHM: Too much money and too flashy, pushy, and domineering style. I remember talking to the Kuwaiti Ambassador. There had just been a visit to Baghdad by some major figure from the Gulf. This had been followed by rosy forecasts of the future. When I called on him, the Kuwaiti Ambassador told me that there was no problem any more. It was all settled, sort of. A few days later, Wham! Iraq had walked into Kuwait. But I didn't kid the Kuwaiti Ambassador about his bad prediction.

So, anyway, there we were. The Iraq forces took over Kuwait in a very short time and these horror stories began coming out of Kuwait. But President Bush decided--and a very good thing that he did--that, "This will not stand." The idea then was to mobilize the UN and anybody else who could be mobilized to get Iraq out of Kuwait. The Iraqis were showing no signs of getting out, and we decided that we were going to have to go to war. This required, of course, a lot of logistics.

Q: This is exactly what the agreement between the US and Oman was all about.

BOEHM: Precisely. That was what the access agreement was for. This was what the Sultan said when we went to him. Dick Cheney, then Secretary of Defense, made a swing through the area. He'd been preceded by Paul Wolfowitz, the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, who was sent right out to the Gulf to tell the various countries what we needed and how we planned to carry out this operation. This initially involved, as you recall, Operation Desert Shield, leading up to Operation Desert Storm.

Q: Desert Shield was basically to build up our forces in the area and also to protect Saudi Arabia.

BOEHM: It was intended to serve both purposes. Wolfowitz went around the Gulf and he told the various countries--Oman and the others whose territory we wanted to use--where we wanted to put things and roughly how much we wanted to put there, as well as what we wanted to do.

He came down to Oman. The Sultan was then in Salalah, in his summer capital in the southern part of Oman. We went down there and called on him. Wolfowitz made his pitch to the Sultan, who agreed. He understood these things very well. He had been a military officer. The Sultan approved of virtually everything that we wanted to do. Then Wolfowitz went on his way.

Q: Initially, was there any wavering on the part of the Omanis?

BOEHM: No.

Q: The issue was there, and they knew what...

BOEHM: They knew what Iraq had done. They didn't like it and were glad to see that somebody was prepared to do something about it. They couldn't do anything themselves. They were fully cooperative from the very outset. They said, "Yes, fine. Yes, good." There was a Gulf military

structure in which Oman had some forces. It was stationed in Saudi Arabia. The Omanis had some troops up there, which eventually got involved in Desert Storm. They couldn't get involved in the air campaign because they didn't have aircraft that could go that distance. They stayed out of the air war but participated in the ground war. Omani troops were among the first [coalition] troops into Kuwait City.

After the Wolfowitz visit we flew back to Muscat that day. It was late at night by then--probably midnight. Our aircraft were going to land in Oman in about two hours. [Laughter] They were on the way. We had to scramble very hard, but I had a lot of very able and bright military guys on my staff. So at midnight they contacted the necessary Omani military, formed a coordinating committee, and told them, "Here is what's coming in in a half hour. So we'll put these aircraft at this field and those others at that airfield." It was a marvelous show. They handled it very, very well. Both the Omanis and our people worked very well together. It went smoothly.

Then Secretary of Defense Cheney followed with his own visit to the area at which he discussed matters at a policy level and not so much the specifics of the military operations. This visit was also a sort of tip of the hat to the Gulf rulers, who had already received Under Secretary of Defense Wolfowitz and now received the Secretary of Defense. Secretary Cheney made two visits, as I recall. This was his first visit. He made another visit later on. So Oman was right in there, cooperating very, very well.

Q: Were there any particular strains in this situation? Sometimes when we come in, we come in big and...

BOEHM: No. Our people behaved themselves extraordinarily well. They were almost entirely from the U. S. Air Force, but we had lots of U. S. Navy visits. We had Marines all over the place--mostly offshore. But they'd get shore leave in Oman. We had all kinds of military people and very little trouble. On those occasions when somebody might get drunk or break down hotel doors, the Omanis were very understanding. They'd just hand them over to us, and we'd pay for whatever damage there was. [Laughter] There were no problems. Everything went very smoothly, indeed. Our military were very sensitive. I had them all call on me, or I'd go and visit them. I visited the Marines. We had something like 20,000 Marines at one point. I went out and toured the fleet. Some of the equipment which they had was fascinating--mind-boggling. I'd make a speech to the Marines and sailors on "why we fight," and that kind of stuff. I always told them the truth. I told them that oil had something to do with it. Washington didn't want to say that. They wanted to talk about a small country being beaten up by a big country. One time Secretary of State Baker publicly used the word, oil, but never again. I think that in Washington they decided that it was too crass to talk about that.

Q: Well, some people acted as though the fact that Saddam Hussein of Iraq might have wound up controlling most of the oil of the Middle East was not important. If we hadn't moved in, the Iraqis would certainly have taken over Saudi oil, which accounts for at least one-third of the world petroleum supplies.

BOEHM: Washington refused to talk about oil as a reason. In my view, there was no reason for this. The American people understood this anyway and are perfectly capable of understanding

why oil was one of the objectives. For whatever reason--presumably, public relations reasons--Washington decided to base its public case on the principle of not accepting the bullying of a small country by a larger country. That was fine. Maybe it was better for the UN or whatever, rather than talking about oil. I didn't mind telling Marines and sailors that oil had a lot to do with our being there. They understood that much better than they understood any other reason why we came to the defense of Kuwait.

You asked what problems we had. I said that we had no problems with our people, who were very well behaved. The Omanis were very helpful. Once in a while there would be an issue of Omani sensitivity on something. They didn't want too much use made of the main airport at Muscat. They preferred that other bases be used. We used the base at Muscat and had plenty of transport planes there. The Omanis didn't want fighter planes in Muscat, so we accepted that. We put aerial tankers--KC-135's mostly--at the main, civilian airport in the capital, and we put the other planes elsewhere. Once in a while our Air Force would gripe at the fact that they couldn't put any plane just anywhere. I didn't regard that as a serious problem, and it wasn't. We had that kind of detail problem once in a while. But there was great cooperation.

Q: At the end of the war, was the drawdown easy as far as our forces were concerned, or did we end up with a lot more there...

BOEHM: No. It was easy. During the conflict, our people who came in--mostly from the Air Force--were housed in tents. They built tent cities, where most of them lived. We had pre-positioned supplies in Oman, as I explained before, as part of the base agreement. We had brought in all kinds of material and pre-positioned it--replacement parts and everything. We used that. A lot of that stuff, in fact, was shipped North to our forces in Saudi Arabia. When the war ended, it was not so much a matter of getting out. It was a matter of replenishing, bringing stocks up to replace the stores we had used during the fighting.

Q: We won the war handily. We had allies, but basically it was a very impressive, American effort. It was considered that there was an extremely strong, military force in Iraq, which had just sort of won the Iran-Iraq War. We already had good relations with Oman, but I would have assumed that this would have added to America's prestige--the America can deliver type of thing.

BOEHM: It got everybody's attention, yes. [Laughter] Of course, General Schwarzkopf is a figure who knew how to project this image. He came down to Oman several times. He is a very engaging guy. I have read that his staff was terrified of him. Books are coming out, saying that he was a tyrant and all of that. I didn't find it that way, but, of course, I didn't work for him. I found him a very engaging and charming man. Just after the war ended, he made a farewell visit to Oman. I had invited something like 500 people to a reception in his honor. Each one wanted to have a photograph taken with him. He patiently posed with every one of them. They all got this picture to hand down to their great-grandchildren. I liked him very much and thought very well of him.

Our stock was already very high. Everybody knew that we were a very powerful country. This demonstration of the crushing power of the United States really impressed people. At the same time you have to recognize that we don't live there. We chose to project our power into that

region of the world, for that purpose. However, just as we projected it, we can withdraw it or decline to project it. And the countries that are there, of course, have to take account of all of that.

So you have this problem with Iraq. What do you do about Iraq? You have Iraq and Iran. There was a lot of sentiment in favor of really punishing Iraq--almost putting it out of business as a country. However, Oman took a somewhat different view of it. They see the great weight of Iran up there--different, religiously. Shi'a Muslims instead of Sunni Muslims. They see Shi'a sympathetic with Iran in Iraq, particularly in southern Iraq. There are Shi'a in Saudi Arabia, near the Kuwaiti border.

Q: Up in Al Qasim province.

BOEHM: So they see possible difficulties here. If Iraq is weakened too much, then you're going to have a lot of problems. So the Omanis didn't favor exterminating Iraq. They weren't terribly sympathetic to that. When they had to take positions which they thought would be unpopular with Iran or Iraq or some other country, they liked to do that in unison with the GCC.

Q: The GCC is the...

BOEHM: The Gulf Cooperation Council, which consists of Oman, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia. They meet frequently at the foreign or defense minister level and occasionally at the chiefs of state level. They coordinate policies. On foreign policy issues that come up they try to [work out joint positions]. And they put out statements. If you [i.e., Oman] have to make a statement that is going to antagonize Iran or somebody else, you do it under the GCC rubric. [Laughter] And you don't say anything as a single state. That was the way it worked there. The Omanis were very happy to have that way of doing things.

Q: While you were there, what were the relations with Iran? Iran was the big neighbor.

BOEHM: Iran and Iraq both had ambassadors in Muscat, throughout the Iran-Iraq War. Of course, we didn't have relations with Iran at that time, so to me the Iranian Ambassador was a non-person. I ignored him. I had cordial relations with the Iraqi Ambassador until Iraq attacked Kuwait. Then, if someone brought him to a party, I'd turn away. I wouldn't shake hands with him.

Oman had and wanted to have as good relations as possible with everybody. They had regular contact with Iran. The Omani and Iranian foreign ministers were constantly visiting each other. Likewise Oman, despite the Gulf War in which it participated--and it had given us the use of its bases--wanted to maintain the best possible relations with Iraq. Shortly after the war they didn't send their ambassador back to Baghdad, but they sent back junior officials to reopen the Omani Embassy in Baghdad. We didn't have anybody in Baghdad, of course. So Oman tried to maintain relations with anybody who might threaten them, which makes perfectly good sense. They conduct a very sound foreign policy in terms of their national interest, which isn't always the same as our national interest.

Q: Was there any sense that the Iranians were trying to stir things up in terms of the Shi'a community in Oman?

BOEHM: Well, not when I was there. There previously had been some history of that. There are very few Shi'a Muslims in Oman. The Shi'a community is well placed. It has been in Oman for hundreds of years, mostly in Muscat itself and the Muscat area more generally. The Shi'a are traders and businessmen. Most Omanis are neither Sunni nor Shi'a. They are Ibadhi Muslims, a small sect that emerged within Islam at a very early stage--even in the lifetime of Ali [cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad], I believe. It goes that far back. It's a very old sect. It is now regarded as the state religion of Oman. It is also found on a few islands off the coast of Tunisia. It is much closer to Sunnism than to Shi'aism.

As I say, there were a few Shi'a. They tended to be prosperous businessmen in the Muscat area. There had been some plotting among them. A few youths were arrested. This happened long before I got there.

Q: But they weren't able to affect the religious...

BOEHM: From within? No. Within Oman there was no problem of Shi'a insurgency or anything like that.

Q: Were there any problems with Saudi Arabia which you were involved with?

BOEHM: Well, Saudi Arabia in the Gulf is like the United States in the Western Hemisphere--big brother. It is so much bigger and is so much wealthier than the other countries. As is always the case when you have a small country next to a big, powerful country--whether the United States and Mexico or Saudi Arabia and its small neighbors or Luxembourg and Belgium--there is always a sensitivity and a sense of fending off and a tendency to see the worst in the big neighbor, as well as a suspicion that they might want to push you around. Saudi Arabia inevitably occupies that position in the Gulf. They can't help it. Oman is no exception in this respect.

Again, the Sultan holds the view, as he did with Yemen, that he needed to settle the border. He had done it with Yemen. He had to give something away. He had said, "It's worth it. Instead of having another hundred years of bickering, let's settle this issue. I'll give something for that." So he did.

He reached a settlement with Saudi Arabia. They had an unmarked border. The Empty Quarter runs through there. As you get over toward the border with the United Arab Emirates, the border gets very fuzzy. There is a long history of fighting there.

Q: Yes, involving Buraimi Oasis and...

BOEHM: It's right there. So the Sultan settled that border. I don't know whether they have yet signed that agreement. He was also settling the border with the Emirates. There are seven of them. They all are autonomous or at least semi-autonomous areas. Some have borders which are

scattered around in little enclaves in Oman. So they have border problems, but the Sultan is determined to settle these things peacefully--and generously. He's ready to give something to get these borders settled.

Oman, by the way, has that little piece of non-contiguous land there, the Musandam peninsula, which sticks out into the Gulf of Hormuz and controls one side of the straits at the mouth of the Persian Gulf. This is another reason why Oman is an interesting place to serve.

Q: After the Gulf War was over, were there any other issues left over?

BOEHM: Yes. James Baker, President Bush's Secretary of State, hoped that the outcome of the war against Iraq would provide a promising opportunity for getting to the Arab-Israeli problem and getting it settled. He launched an exercise aimed at that. The object then was to get as many Arab countries as possible to agree to participate. That led eventually, I think, to the Israeli-PLO [Palestine Liberation Organization] settlement. That was what Secretary Baker was then working on. Oman was one of the first to say, "Sure, we'll participate."

Then there was the question of what to do about the breakup of the Soviet Union. Again, the United States wanted to organize some kind of international effort. Oman stepped right up and was one of the very first to say, "Yes, we'll participate." So it wasn't hard. The Omanis were forthcoming on these things.

Q: You left there when, in 1992?

BOEHM: I had arrived in October, 1989, and stayed in Oman for just over three years. I presented my credentials [in November, 1989], and then left just after midnight on November 1, 1992.

DAVID J. DUNFORD
Ambassador
Oman (1992-1995)

Ambassador Dunford was born in New Jersey and raised in New Jersey and Connecticut. He was educated at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), Stanford University and the National Institute of Aerospace Technology of Spain. Entering the Foreign Service in 1966 Mr. Dunford became an economic, commercial and trade specialist serving in Washington, Helsinki, Cairo (Economic Minister-Counselor) and Riyadh (Deputy Chief of Mission). In 1992 he was appointed Ambassador to Muscat, where he served until 1995. Ambassador Dunford was interviewed by Elisabeth Raspolic in 2006.

Q: So off you went.

DUNFORD: Off I went to Muscat. I was eager, as you can imagine. I arrived in Muscat on either the same day or the day after my predecessor left. This is almost unheard of.

Q: Yes, it is.

DUNFORD: Liz McKune my DCM was already there. Muscat was more low-key than Saudi Arabia but still it proved to be a very interesting three years. During my three years, U.S. Government decided to end an economic assistance program that had been operating since about 1980. In many ways Oman had outgrown the need for a U.S. assistance program so there was some logic. The problem for me was the way it was done. Ending the program was a USAID initiative. I never got the sense that the Department or the U.S. Government as a whole focused on the fact that the economic assistance program was a quid pro quo for a military base access agreement.

Q: Oh my lord. They forgot about it?

DUNFORD: They seemed not to take it into account.

Q: Yes, yes.

DUNFORD: We had, in Oman while I was there, an agreement which allowed us to preposition Air Force equipment at three of their air bases: at Seeb near Muscat; Masirah, a little island off the coast, and Thumrait in the southern part of Oman. The Omanis were not amused. We compounded the problem by giving them the news on a Friday, the Muslim Sabbath and the one day everybody stays out of the office. I got about two hours' notice before the press conference by the AID administrator in DC. Oman was just one of a number of countries that they decided to cut from the rolls. So, my job was to call the foreign minister on a Friday and tell him that his \$20 million a year aid program was out the window.

Furthermore, the new AID Administrator, Brian Atwood, was also hell bent to squeeze more savings out of the existing AID program. You know how AID works, they obligate money to various projects but the money may not be disbursed until much later. .

Q: That is right; years later.

DUNFORD: USAID proposed to rescind some of the money obligated but not yet spent on projects in Oman. They call these rescissions. So, in addition to telling the Omanis that they no longer would get new economic assistance, I had to explain about upcoming rescissions. They were understandably thunderstruck to learn that money promised to them would be taken away. In the initial stages, I had no talking points to deal with the relationship between economic assistance and base access even though the Omanis understood this relationship clearly. I was able to manage this issue, albeit with some difficulty, because I had a very good relationship with the Omani Government, particularly the sultan and the foreign minister; a very crusty but very straightforward guy, Yousef bin Alawi.

Q: Did you have a staff that you needed in Oman or were you overstuffed, understuffed?

DUNFORD: I thought our staffing was about right. We had a DCM; we had a political officer; an economic officer, a consular officer...

Q: Public affairs?

DUNFORD: And a public affairs officer. We had a small AID mission which was there through my time because they had to still clean up the program. We had defense attaches, a military assistance group and we had an Air Force team that looked after the prepositioned equipment. All in all, the Embassy had 50 to 70 Americans. I do not recall that we had anybody sitting around doing nothing.

The other main issue which came out much better for us was a peace process issue. The Madrid conference in 1991 set off a multilateral track, as well as a bilateral track. On the multilateral track there was a Water Resources working group which the U.S. chaired. During a meeting of the working group in Beijing there was a proposal that the next meeting be hosted by the Omanis. The Omanis were quite anxious about taking this on. I remember some late night phone calls to the foreign minister but we persuaded the Omanis to host the next meeting. That led to official Israelis coming to the Arabian Peninsula for the first time in modern history and that was very exciting for the Israelis. Israeli Deputy Foreign Minister Yossi Beilin led the delegation.

Q: Did the Omanis take much flak from their neighboring Arab countries?

DUNFORD: Some, but the Omanis are willing to put up with a certain amount of flak. Their most important foreign policy principle is to get along with everybody. An interesting thing about being ambassador in Oman in the early 1990s is that there was also an ambassador from Tehran and an ambassador from Baghdad. I was not allowed to engage in substantive conversations with them, I would see them everywhere and do my best to be polite.

Q: Sure.

DUNFORD: The Israeli delegation thing was a big deal. The Israelis were excited to come as was the Israeli press that accompanied the delegation. They interviewed me and were so excited about the prospects for the future. Of course, the future did not work out. Then Israeli Prime Minister Rabin came a few months later afterwards and visited the sultan. That breakthrough turned out to be the key to getting us past the aid shutdown crisis. The final step was getting Al Gore, then vice president, to come to Muscat with a pledge to contribute three million U.S. dollars to a Middle East desalination research center to be located in Muscat. It remains in operation, one of the few things left over from the Oslo process that still works.

Q: How interesting.

DUNFORD: The Gore meeting was both the high point and low point of my tour because he got off the plane visibly angry. Rumor has it that the aircraft toilet did not work and it was clear his wife Tipper was not happy. Tipper did not have a great day in Oman. All sorts of events were

planned for her and she made it clear that she did not want any part of any of it. My wife Sandy had to apologize for her.

Q: How long were the Gores in Oman?

DUNFORD: About four hours and 45 minutes.

Q: I see, okay. I thought it was two or three days.

DUNFORD: No, just a few hours.

Q: Well that is unfortunate.

DUNFORD: Yes, they left Amman in the morning and were due in Saudi Arabia in the evening so it was a tough day for them.

Q: You spent three years-

DUNFORD: I voted for Gore anyway.

Q: That is alright. We are all entitled to a bad day.

You were in Oman for three years?

DUNFORD: A few months short of three years.

End of reader