

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

JOHN R. DAVIS, JR.

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

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INTERVIEW

[Note: This interview was not completed and was not edited by Mr. Davis.]

Q: To begin with, can you tell me when, where you were born and a little about your family?

DAVIS: I was born in Wisconsin, in a little town called Eau Claire. Three of my four grandparents were born in this town, so we had fairly deep roots there. It's unusual, in fact, because I think it was only founded about 1850 or so.

One grandparent owned a paper mill. He died when my father was born, actually, so I never knew him. The other grandparent owned a box factory, and he was a great pal of mine. I grew up there, but when I was 13 we moved to California, where I went to school.

Q: What type of business was your father in?

DAVIS: Dad was a peripatetic businessman. He ran the first airport in town. He was an early aviator, dreamed of flying the Atlantic, but didn't get ready in time, and Lindbergh beat him out. Then the Depression came along and one business after another failed. He was in oil distribution. Then he finally went into business with his brother in California, which was the reason for our move. His brother, who was kind of an eccentric genius, invented what was known as the Davis wing, which was an airfoil that was put on the B-24's during the war. Things went along fine during the war, but then afterwards the business collapsed when the jets came in.

Q: Well, you were born, what year was it?

DAVIS: '27.

Q: 1927. Where were you in California?

DAVIS: In Los Angeles, in Westwood, near the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). I went to the University of Southern California (USC) and UCLA, graduated from the latter, worked my way through and wasn't much interested in the Foreign Service; I had never heard of it, in fact. A friend of mine with whom I had gone to prep school at Webb told me he was going to take something called the Foreign Service exam, and wouldn't I keep him company? So I agreed to do that, and he went off to Georgetown for the summer course and came back and took the exam. Of course, as fate would have it, he failed and I passed. He is now a member of the state Senate in California. We keep in touch from time to time.

Q: When did you take the exam?

DAVIS: '53.

Q: '53. So had you been in the military or anything like that?

DAVIS: I was in the military during the last year of the war, '45-'46, in the U.S. Navy.

Q: Yeah, what were you doing in the Navy?

DAVIS: Well, I was repairing radar sets. Learning to repair radar sets. So I got as far west as Treasure Island in San Francisco, but never got to sea before the war ended. We just sat around for about six months waiting to be discharged after that.

Q: Just to go back a touch to the time you were in college, at the university, first UCLA and then USC

DAVIS: No, the other way around. I went to USC until the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 (GI Bill) ran out, then I dropped out for a couple of years and drove a truck. I went back to UCLA and drove a truck nights, school during the day.

Q: While you were an undergrad, what was your major?

DAVIS: Political science, minor in economics. I started out in business then switched to political science.

Q: You have any goal in mind?

DAVIS: No, not really; except to have an interesting life, maybe see the world, if possible.

Q: Well then you took the Foreign Service exam, the written exam, in '53?

DAVIS: Right.

Q: That was the three and a half day exam.

DAVIS: Right, right. I was very encouraged, actually. I got a 100 in English, which spurred me to take a lively interest in getting in. I did very well, I think, in that. In fact later on, when I was in Personnel, looking through the records, I found Roger Kirk got a higher overall grade than I did and Roger's a friend of mine. I mentioned it to him the other day and he was very pleased. He said nobody had noticed that in many, many years.

Q: You took it in '53. I took it the same year and I always say I was averaged into the Foreign Service because I got, I think 70 was passing and I got a 69.95 or something. When did you take the oral examination?

DAVIS: I think I came back here in early '54 or late '53. I had to wait until '55 to be summoned.

Q: There was a hiatus.

DAVIS: There certainly was. I'd almost forgotten about the Foreign Service by the time I got a telephone call informing that they wanted me there the next Monday morning.

Q: Well, do you remember the oral exam at all?

DAVIS: I do, yes.

Q: Could you describe how it was conducted, some of the questions?

DAVIS: They asked me to name the Secretaries of State in reverse order, as far back as I could go. I remember I got back to Kellogg. "Who were the greatest lights of American literature?" I remember getting stuck. I finally threw out Bernard DeVoto. I got some very odd looks, but they let it pass because I insisted on defending it. Those were pretty tough. You come in a total greenhorn. I'd never even been to Washington, and I was terrified. I remember that day. Hume Horan took it the same day I did and Ed Rosenthal. I think we all passed. Hume went on to have a fine career. Ed, I lost track of Ed after about, he was in for at least twenty years.

Q: Well he was a Vietnam hand mainly. I think he's in California now.

DAVIS: Is he? Look him up one day.

Q: Yeah, San Francisco. Then, when did you come into the Foreign Service?

DAVIS: January of '55 I came in, and I was put in INR.

Q: You didn't really have an entering class then, did you?

DAVIS: Yes, we had a class. As I remember, I think I was in INR for a while before they had a junior class, and actually took the class just before we were assigned abroad.

Q: What were you doing in INR?

DAVIS: Oh, I was assigned to write the NIS (National Intelligence Survey) on the telecommunications system of Afghanistan, about which I knew nothing, and nothing was available.

Q: And probably there was none. NIS is a National Intelligence Summary, is it?

DAVIS: Survey, it was a multi-volume set of books, which were supposed to contain all of the relevant information about every country in the world.

Q: If you wanted to attack or intervene in a country or do something in a country you turned to it and all the information would be available.

DAVIS: And military attachés all over the world were out measuring railway tracks so that the information could be put into the NIS. Somewhat later, I think, it was all put in a computer and lost, the computer crashed, at no great loss to the nation. I worked, actually, for Charlton Ogburn, Jr., who was an interesting character, and he wrote a couple of marvelous books about his days with Merrill's Marauders in Burma. He got in some trouble; he was accused by some right-wing congressman of being too left wing, shuffled off to INR. He was a good boss and a brilliant writer.

Q: Well then, your class. Could you characterize it, sort of the junior class.

DAVIS: There were about thirty of us. We didn't become closely bonded, although we all had a good time in the class and a lot of socializing went on. Dick Murphy was in it, and I think Julius Walker, and a lot of people who left the service along the way. Dick Long was there and Dwight Ambach. In any case, we had a good time together, not much disharmony, and I thought it was well conducted. I don't know that it really prepared you for your first tour, but it gave you a pretty good idea of what to expect.

Q: Well now, did you have anything in mind when you came into the Foreign Service, whither John Davis?

DAVIS: Well, I was going to overthrow communism, clearly, and save the world for democracy.

Q: And it worked!

DAVIS: That's right. It turned out just that way.

Q: Were you making any requests to go to a particular part?

DAVIS: I was assigned to Hamburg. I didn't like that much. It didn't sound very exotic. I was engaged at the time to a girl whom I'd met here in Washington, and without telling her, I went around to a friend, Mike Ely, who was in Personnel at the time, and said, "Mike, I didn't join the Foreign Service to go to Hamburg. You must have something more interesting than that." He said, "We have Rangoon and Jakarta." He gave me the name of somebody who'd been in that part of the world and said, "Go talk to him, see what you think." So I went 'round and I asked him about this. He said, "Well, they're both interesting posts, with one difference. In Rangoon, the heat rash around your waist goes all the way around, meets in the back and in Jakarta it only goes to the sides." So I put in for Jakarta and we got that.

Q: So, you were in Jakarta from when to when?

DAVIS: '56 to '58.

Q: What was your position there?

DAVIS: I went out as the consul. There was just one consular position there, and I did that for a year and then did the junior economic position for a year. It was a good post. Hugh Cumming was the ambassador when I arrived. Then John Allison came and left again, mad as hell after the CIA pilot crashed up there in Borneo. At the end Howard Jones had just arrived.

Q: You missed that long episode, difficult episode. Well now, could you explain what the situation was like in Jakarta when you arrived?

DAVIS: Well, it was the heyday of Sukarno, very anti-American atmosphere, officially, at least, but the Indonesians are a very friendly people, basically, and you didn't feel much personal hostility. It was an extremely exotic and very Third World atmosphere at the time. Having gone back to Jakarta in the late Eighties, I literally couldn't find my way around the town, it had changed so much. But in those days they were, economically, very depressed and extremely nationalistic, having just recently won their revolution. Sukarno was trying very hard to establish himself as a Third World leader and a neutral. We, of course, didn't care for that, in those days, and wanted everybody to be lined up with us. So there was a certain amount of tension. But we found that living, once you got over the initial shock of being put in a prefabricated low ceilinged house the State Department had bought somewhere after the war and erected at great expense in Jakarta, totally unsuited to the climate, with rats in the toilet and lizards over the front door that fell on your head every time you opened the screen. You got used to all this after a while and got down to business.

The business was very interesting and the traveling was absolutely fascinating. It was a rare experience. I came home one night, I remember, I found that the army was having maneuvers in our driveway. I turned into the driveway and looked right down the barrel of a machine gun and three little guys with trees in their hats sitting there. They were just having maneuvers, fortunately.

The only time I felt a little bit nervous was when I got caught in an anti-Dutch riot. The Dutch were expelled, the final expulsion took place when we were there and unfortunately I looked rather Dutch. Some friendly Indonesian told me to get out of there, which I did, so no harm done.

Q: Let's talk first about the consular work. What were some of the challenges?

DAVIS: Well, the major challenge of consular work in Jakarta was that I was totally inexperienced. Fortunately, there was Mr. Chang, who'd been there since before the war. He had hidden the files before the war and resurrected them again afterward. And so on the first day, as the new vice consul I told him, "Mr. Chang, be sure, how many times do I have to tell you, mark it with an X where I sign." So he got me through the initial month or two, by which time I was able to master the rudiments of consular work. We sat out in

front of the embassy, in a windowless sort of room that had been tacked on, had iron bars but no windows. I used to get notes from applicants wrapped in small rocks hurled through the window and hitting me on the back of the head. Everybody in Indonesia, of course, wanted to go to the United States, and we had a terrible back-up all the time in the non-immigrant visa section, but most of the exciting work involved seamen. We had a call one day from the U.S.S. *President Buchanan* which had just docked in Tanjung Priok, where the communist labor union, SOBSI, ruled and they were being prevented from coming ashore by the rioting longshoremen. So the ambassador called me in and said, "Well, this is a consular matter. You better take care of it."

I had a \$15 white suit I had bought in Hong Kong. It was tailored overnight. I had to take two steps before the suit moved, it was such a good tailoring job. So I said to Mr. Chang, "Well, what do I do now, Mr. Chang?" He picked up the phone and a jeepload of machine gun-toting Indonesian police arrived at the front gate of the embassy. I hopped in. We zoomed down to Tanjung Priok. There was this great freighter with the American crew hanging over the side looking down at a bunch of rioting communist longshoremen down below. So I stepped out of the jeep and said, "Lower away, the American consul is here." So they lowered away and it all went off peacefully. Thanks, I think, to the six machine gun-toting Indonesian policemen but never mind.

Q: You didn't have a pith helmet, I assume.

DAVIS: No, a fly whisk and a helmet.

Q: Was there much in the way of students going to the United States from Indonesia at that time?

DAVIS: Yeah, we had a big Fulbright Program and we had a military exchange program that sent a lot of young officers to Fort Leavenworth and Fort Benning and so on. And we had an assistant army attaché, George Benson, who used to sit around, he was a very relaxed type and he sat around on his front porch on Sunday morning and his wife served up breakfast for all the middle grade Indonesian officers. Two years later, after we had left, it turned out that among the officers that he'd been serving up breakfast to was Nasution, the chief of staff who they had tried to assassinate, General Suharto and a few others. And so we wound up being well connected with the middle grade officers who took over

Q: And still remain in

DAVIS: That's right, to this day.

Q: Well, what was your impression of Ambassador Hugh Cumming, to begin with?

DAVIS: Well, I was in awe, of course. He was my first ambassador, but I found him a very interesting fellow and very colorful. I remember one time the two of us were walking around up in Puncak Pass, in the mountains, and we encountered with a water

buffalo with its horns painted red, which they did with the ones that were dangerous. I stopped, stared at this beast, which was staring at me. Hugh Cumming stepped forward, shouted, waved his arms, scared it off. So he was a man of action. He knew how to respond to situations, and he and his wife were very gracious to my wife and me. I think we both learned a lot about how you comport yourself as a diplomat. We learned it from a lot of people over a long period of time. He was the first we saw in operation. He was a difficult man. I know his political officers, Jack Thompson and Frank Galbraith, were both there at the time. They had their problems, but I think the working relationships were pretty good.

Q: John Allison, Japanese hand, wasn't he?

DAVIS: Yeah, he was. His wife was one of the world's great experts on Chinese porcelain and Indonesia was a treasure trove. The *tukangs* would come around every day to your front porch with their sacks full of stuff they wanted to sell you. They didn't know what they had but somebody who was a connoisseur could find treasures, Song pieces dug out from graves in the Celebes. Allison was a very able ambassador but those were the days, in fact, that never ended, when the CIA didn't tell you everything they were up to and when that pilot came down, unbeknownst to him, in the Celebes, he erupted in fury. To no avail, as far as I'm aware. Didn't make any impression on Washington, busy running their own policy.

Q: Could you explain what that incident was?

DAVIS: Well, there was kind of a quasi-revolt going on among some elements in the military in Sumatra and in the Celebes, and Sukarno was screaming, of course, that this was foreign imperialism backing, probably the Dutch, who was behind it. We were vigorously, and we thought honestly, denying that we had anything to do with it. And in the midst of this dialogue, rather heated diatribe between the two sides, a CIA pilot was shot down over the Celebes, to the considerable embarrassment of our ambassador, who, as I say, had never been informed that any such thing was going on. And I think he felt that he couldn't really continue his mission very much longer after that.

Q: What were you getting from your colleagues who were dealing more closely with Sukarno at that time?

DAVIS: Well Sukarno was, of course, an extremely colorful character and was, like all Indonesians, fond of karaoke, sort of before karaoke existed. We used to go to the balls at the presidential palace, where Sukarno had his personal aide who carried song sheets with him. His idea of a relaxed party was everybody had to get up and sing *Home on the Range* or one of his native ballads. Also, he liked the girls, apparently, to put it mildly. There was the famous incident where the Russians providing him with a hostess from an Aeroflot flight that he'd be on during a visit to Moscow and the United States didn't know how to respond to that—fortunately didn't feel compelled to—although Sukarno used to review all the embassy wives. Some of them one at a time, at palace receptions, to have a little chat and be patted on the arm. If they were lucky, the arm. My wife still tells

about being summoned up. She says she was wearing a strapless dress and it was about 110 degrees and she was perspiring and she had to walk the whole length of this marble floor and be eyeballed by everybody there.

But Sukarno, in our view, was playing footsie with the communists, of course. That's what the whole problem was, as far as we could see it. Everything was divided into the Red and the White in those days, and we had grave suspicions of his long term intentions that kept the relationship at arms length.

Q: During this period, you came in in '55, both in Washington and '58, did you find McCarthyism at all intruding into, just your general orbit, as far as stories or anything like that?

DAVIS: Well, there were of course all the stories about the victims of the earlier activities. I think McCarthyism had started to wane by then but it was in the back of everybody's mind. Everything you did and said, you were very careful just because of the general atmosphere. It took a brave man to espouse leftist views openly in those days.

Q: When you were the economic officer, were you specialized in any particular area? What about the economy?

DAVIS: We did macroeconomic studies and tried to help American businessmen. There weren't too many of them there at the time. Indonesia was perceived eventually as a considerable market and a source of a lot of raw materials. As the investors in Bre-X have just found out, some of the raw materials are imported from elsewhere, in that case. But the oil companies were present in Sumatra, and I was able to go up and visit, go up on a river tanker, up into the jungles of Sumatra to see this oil camp run by CalTex. It was an absolutely fascinating experience. We went overnight on this big air conditioned tanker going up the jungle river in central Sumatra. You woke up and here is this small American town plunked down in the middle of the jungle with a tiger gong, in the school play yard. When the tiger started, was seen coming down the street, everybody would ring the gong and go back indoors. And everybody kept a golf club behind the door to behead the cobras on the lawn. It was a strange, unreal sort of an existence and there were some who had been there for two and three generations, working these oil camps in the jungles, whole families. But consumer goods really weren't present; there wasn't enough money in the economy at the time to make it an attractive target for the consumer goods sellers, so most of the American interests at the time were extractive industries.

Q: What about corruption? Was this a problem, particularly, or wasn't there enough economic activity to make it much of a factor?

DAVIS: Well, it was a terrible problem, of course, throughout the economy because it wasn't even perceived as corruption by most, just taking care of one's family, which took precedence over anything else in the scale of virtues in that society at the time. It kind of went overboard on a number of occasions, but there was a constant anti-corruption drive, though it was rather low key and not very effective. And I think this was in the days

before American companies were forbidden by U.S. law to engage in anything that could be considered bribery. I didn't see it firsthand, but one assumed that there was a certain amount of money being spread around to ensure that contracts were made and enforced.

Q: What about the Chinese community at that time? Were they perceived by the embassy as being a potential Red Chinese tool or anything like that?

DAVIS: There were very few in the community, as I recall, that had contacts in mainland China at that time. The great bulk of them constituted essentially the business community in Indonesia and had done so for many centuries—under the Dutch and since independence the Chinese provided the capital for almost all the domestic industry and commerce. They, of course, had to take Indonesian partners with them, usually politically well connected. But they were the motor of the economy in those days, and I venture to think that they probably still play a very large role. Throughout Southeast Asia the Chinese have been the merchant class.

Q: What about travel? Did you do much traveling?

DAVIS: Yes, we did. We went to Sumatra, not all the way up to the northern tip, but we went through southern and central Sumatra several times, and down to Bali three or four times; glorious. And then we motored all around Java, Borobudur and Surakarta. Conditions were very primitive, and the food was, you'd get your breakfast, fried egg and rice prepared the night before and set on the window ledge overnight. Never mind, it was absolutely fascinating to see. At one point we went to Bali, I think our third visit, after the Dutch had just been expelled, and there were no tourists. We were, I think, the only foreigners, or maybe three or four others that stayed on the whole island, and it was absolutely unearthly. We went up to Ubud, in the center of the island, and there we were in this wholly Indonesian community. Bali, of course, is magical at all times, and then it was just remarkable to be there almost alone and wander around in this society.

Q: What about Indonesian officials? What was your impression, dealing with them?

DAVIS: Well, I found them very suspicious and reticent, but not actively hostile. I think they felt that they had to be very careful in dealing with Americans, not to be too friendly, too open, and beware that we were neo-colonialists trying to sell them a bill of goods. I don't think they felt we were their great pals, but they were correct in their dealings.

Q: Well then you left there in '58 and whither?

DAVIS: Well we came back. We sat on the air conditioner and it was time for the April Fool sheet.

Q: You might explain what the April Fool sheet is.

DAVIS: In those days you put in your preferences for your next post.

Q: Post Preference Report.

DAVIS: Yeah, that's right, preference report. Nobody took it very seriously, but what the hell. I'd heard rumors that people were actually getting some of these things they were asking for. So my wife and I sat on our air conditioner, which was the only way you could get any benefit out of it. We had both heard, and followed with great interest, what had happened in Poland in '56 and Hungary. Of course and we put in for Poland as our first choice, both because it was a fascinating prospect, and sounded very exciting, very interesting. Communism was evolving in this country, and secondly because it was a lot nicer climate than Indonesia. And we got the assignment, to my surprise. So we went off to language training and a year of area studies at Berkeley.

Q: So sort of from '58 to '59 was language and then at Berkeley. Were you getting any intimations from the faculty you were studying with about Poland at the time?

Were these displaced Poles?

DAVIS: No, they had quite a distinguished group out there. They had Yelovitch, who was an Eastern European scholar of some note and Gregory Grossman, who was an expert on East European and Soviet economies, and I found that the courses were very good, in fact, and Berkeley of course was a pleasant atmosphere and a lot of fun. It's a lovely area, northern California, one of my favorite places. And we had a very good year. Unfortunately I think it was a mistake to take the language first and then area studies because you lose quite a bit. But having steeped myself in all of the arcane details of the socialist economy and politics of course I went out and was assigned as chief of the consular section.

Q: Oh, of course! So you were in Warsaw from when to when?

DAVIS: Summer of '60 'til summer of '63.

Q: Were you in the consular section most of that time?

DAVIS: I was in the consular section a year and a half, and then was the junior economic officer. I was junior and then the senior economic officer the last six months.

Q: Again, when you arrived in 1960, what was the political and economic situation in Poland, as you saw it?

DAVIS: Well, the political situation was that Władysław Gomułka, a communist, had come in '56 on a wave of enthusiasm from the population, being perceived as having stood up to the Russians, which was always the key, in Polish thinking, to heroic behavior. The Poles were a deeply disappointed people, having been on the winning side in the war and found themselves displaced westward at the whim of Stalin and betrayed,

in their view, by the Western powers. Since the Poles considered themselves to be the initial cause of World War II, they felt that they should have been among the winners, but that was not to be. So when '56 came along and they had a chance to assert some independence, there was a great deal of popular enthusiasm, and the Church took some of the credit, under Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński and Gomułka took the lion's share for having emerged from jail and faced down Khrushchev, as they saw it. The disappointment was starting to creep in by 1960, because it had become apparent that Gomułka was not much of a reformer, really. He was as much an autocrat as anybody else, and believed in strengthening the party's discipline. The cultural freedoms that had erupted in '56 were being gradually reduced, but by and large the situation was still much better there than in most of the neighboring countries and more open. So one was able to make a lot of friends among the Poles.

Q: You didn't feel you were jeopardizing them?

DAVIS: You never discussed one Pole with another or spoke about a Pole's views in any area that might be bugged. One assumed that everything was bugged so you just kept quiet and let yourself be guided by them. They tended to be much less cautious than we were about their own security. This eventually emerged in the Seventies, the philosophy of Solidarity, to live as if you were in a free country. But even then you could see that the Poles worried much less about themselves than they should. We found that the most productive and most interesting group, for us, was in the cultural field: music, the arts, writing, and journalism. These were the people who tended to be dedicated to excellence and not willing to put up with a shoddy product or compromise in the way most people had to. I guess it's the nature of the artist that has to strive for excellence. And some of the friends we made then are friends still, today.

Q: Your work, for a year and a half in the consular section, the Poles in America constitute one of, what is it, there are more Poles, Chicago is the second largest Polish city, I've heard this. You must have, was there free flow or relatively free travel back and forth, or how did things work at that time?

DAVIS: Well, it was very difficult because, of course, everybody wanted to go to the States and the Polish government made it difficult to get a passport. People went through a lot of expense and difficulty at the local officialdom and the police to get a passport, and then they'd get a passport, but then they couldn't get a visa because in many cases they were obviously not going to return and were asking for visitors visas. This caused great heartache. When I was running the section I insisted that we keep the refusal rate very low. It was a great difficulty for each of the consuls. There were six or seven of us, and while we were happy to issue immigrant visas and did, a lot, the great bulk were non-immigrants. In each instance, all day long the consular officer has to evaluate the people who come before him as to whether they're telling the truth, and are they really going to come back, and is there any color of excuse for issuing a non-immigrant visa to this person? And it's a bit of a strain. There's no satisfactory answer to this, really.

Q: Did you have anything in the way of protection and welfare problems?

DAVIS: We had a few, not wildly serious. Once in a while some American would get in jail, some trumped-up charge and we'd have to [get involved]. We had one who was hooked by the secret police and accused of spying, and he was of Polish origin. It was an interesting case because it was the one case I saw where the man really became enamored of his interrogator, the colonel who had been talking to him really had him on a string, got him into court, and he would look over at the colonel every time before he answered the question. We finally got him out but it was interesting to see how grateful he was to his interrogator, not to us, for anything that happened to him. And then, of course, we had our famous spy case of Doc Scarbeck, the GSO.

Q: GSO stands for general services officer.

DAVIS: Which instilled in me the highest respect for the Polish secret police, or at least some of them. That was one of the smoothest operations I've ever seen run and most unlikely. Doc was married to a very charming, lovely German girl, and somehow got himself involved with quite an ugly and unprepossessing Polish girl whom you wouldn't look at twice. But the secret police managed to find out that he was having this liaison, and they burst in on him one night and threatened not him but the girl, they said they were going to put her in an army brothel if he didn't do what they asked, which he then did. However, if he did do what they asked, they'd let her out, and he could take her to the United States. True to their word, they let the girlfriend go. I don't think they ever had any intention to do anything else and she went off with Doc to Frankfurt and he set her up in an apartment that belonged to the consulate in Frankfurt. And eventually our security officer was out there on some other business and somebody asked him, "What was going on with this girl?" Of course he tumbled to the whole thing. But they had, Doc was arrested and so on. The girl who had escaped from this terrible fate subsequently sued the U.S. government for passage back to Poland and wanted the furniture, the things that Doc had bought her, shipped back also. But the point that I found so impressive was that the Polish secret police had figured out that somehow in Doc's marriage, his wife, although she was very charming and lovely, was on to him, saw his limitations whereas this girl just thought he was a white knight. And they were able to play on this necessity he felt to be the protector, the hero, of this other girl. Anyway, ever since then I watched carefully when the SB was involved.

Q: SB being the

DAVIS: Polish Secret Police.

Q: Polish Secret Police. Well they were really, for the whole time of the communist regime, they and the Czechs were considered and I guess the East Germans were considered, really top rate as far as ability to do what they wanted, to get things done.

DAVIS: I think the East Germans were considered the best, the most efficient and thorough. The Romanians had a reputation for being pervasive, the Securitate in Romania. But I looked into it carefully when I got there. This comes much later, but I had

a long debate with our intelligence people about this, and I concluded that the Securitate managed to do it mainly on bluff. There were a lot fewer of them than people thought, but they had persuaded everybody that they were everywhere. But I gather also that the Hungarians, before '56, were very, terribly brutal, but none of them were very pleasant people. The Poles were a little more subtle.

Q: Did you feel, let's say prior to the Scarbeck case, were there concerns about what the Polish secret police were trying to do to set you up or anything like that?

DAVIS: No. I think we all figured that if you stayed straight on money and sex they wouldn't deliberately, they might try it but it would be obviously a failure, obviously a fraud, unless they really had something on you. The only people that had to worry were the ones that had something to hide.

Q: Your ambassador, while you were there

DAVIS: Jake Beam was there when we got there and then Jack Cabot came while we were there.

Q: How did Jake Beam operate?

DAVIS: Jake was wonderful. Of course he was the star of the Foreign Service, in every sense. Close mouthed man, famously close mouthed. Art Olsen was at that time the New York Times correspondent. Art's interviewing technique was to come in, sit down and wait for the long silence to embarrass the other party into talking. Jake had exactly the same technique. There was one famous instance where Art asked to see him to interview him. He came in and sat down, said hello, they said hello, they sat there a minute, two minutes. Jake got up, went over, opened up the office safe, the combination, carefully turned the handle, opened the safe, reached in, came out with a package of Fig Newtons. Closed the safe, twirled the dial, went back to his desk and ate one of the Fig Newtons. Another three minutes went by and Art Olsen said, "Thank you very much" and left. Probably apocryphal, but sounds absolutely true.

Jake was extremely able and very much on top of the whole scene in Poland and Peggy, his wife, was wonderful. The two of them made a great team. We were very fond of them. They were very kind to us. My wife, Helen, is a great gal, and I don't think I would have been noticed anywhere in my career if she hadn't been along there. She was the wife that drives us socially and later on, during the Solidarity years in Poland, she was the one who created a salon for Solidarity that made a big difference. In any case, they were very kind to us and Jake did a fine job under difficult circumstances there. We were trying to help the Poles and at the same time keep them from sliding back into greater totalitarianism. And we had provided PL 480 aid and continued to do so, as a reward for the degree of independence that the Poles were showing, that they had de-collectivized the farms, and we were urging them to allow greater cultural and political freedoms and at the same time to maintain their independent foreign policy course. The Rapacki Plan emerged during this period and probably should have been considered more seriously

than it was. But at the same time, after the Israeli-Arab War of '56, there was a period of anti-Semitism in Poland. There was a fair-sized Jewish element in the Polish communist government, who were targeted, and there were some nationalists headed by General Moczar. Moczar himself was a target, although he didn't realize it at the time.

Q: He had a Jewish wife, didn't he?

DAVIS: Yeah, he did. But the result was what amounted to a purge in the Communist Party ranks of Jewish members, and an exodus after '68, but that was later. During the time I was there, in the early Sixties, it seemed that every Israeli cabinet minister had a cousin who was in the Polish government, and the Israeli embassy is where you went if you wanted to find out what was really happening.

Q: Well, did you have any feel for the relationship between Beam and Gomulka? Was there much connection at all there?

DAVIS: I don't think there was a close personal relationship of any kind. Gomulka was not a very warm individual. He was a very flinty sort, but on an official basis they got along extremely well. I think Jake always laid it out for him without a mark on when it came time to object to something they were doing, but at the same time they appreciated that we were trying to be helpful. While they realized, I assume, that we were essentially trying to undermine communism *per se*, that we were prepared to support any liberal tendencies that they were willing to allow. Jack Cabot came along of course afterward, and Jake went on to Moscow where he had a distinguished career.

And the Cabots, too, were delightful people. Mrs. Cabot was completely charming. He'd been ambassador in a number of places already. I don't know that he found Poland the most congenial of his posts, but did a good job. He was busy. He never published a book, although he spent a lot of time writing in his journals, I noticed. Found that discouraging.

Q: You were there during the Cuban missile crisis. Particularly those, I was in Yugoslavia at the time, and I think it grabbed our attention. We thought we had had missiles going over us, both ways and maybe some might fall short. You notice any effect where you were?

DAVIS: There was a tremendous amount of gallows humor. I remember having a dinner party with Polish friends, officials, including one guy who was then at the foreign office named Rurarz, who became, later, Polish ambassador to Japan and defected after martial law and was flown to my living room on Christmas Day in Washington. Anyway, Rurarz was a lot younger then, and we were toasting something that was coming up the next week "if any of us are here." There was a real feeling that we were right on the edge, and I guess history has shown that we in fact were closer to the edge than we knew. It was a very tense time and one felt that, "too bad that the whole world was going to come to an end over this issue." It looked like it was going to happen, nothing could be done about it.

Q: In your dealings with the Poles, was the anti-Russian sentiment pretty evident?

DAVIS: Oh, yes, very strong. Of course in the party friendship with the great Soviet Union was *de rigueur*, but nobody believed it for a minute. By '56, by '60, '63 there were only a very few true believers left. There were a fair number of people who felt that the Polish road to socialism, whatever that might prove to be, might be viable, but nobody believed in Leninism *per se*, very few, maybe a few here and there. It just didn't fit with the Polish character. It had been a foreign imposition and it was resented all the more because it was Russian. The hatred for the Russians, not hatred so much, kind of fear and contempt, at the same time, a nasty combination, very strong, ingrained in the Polish character. Every Polish mother taught her children about the terrible Russian deeds of the past and recent history just emphasized all this.

Q: When you moved to the economic section, what was your take on the economy of Indonesia? Did you find any comparison to that of Poland, in a way, or not?

DAVIS: Well, Poland was pretty thoroughly industrialized. It was inefficient, but we were hoping, that period, early Sixties, that some help from the West in the form of new investments would enable Poles to raise their standard of living and do better. And we hoped that the privatization of the agricultural sector would increase efficiency. It did to some extent. It increased the welfare of the farmers but all the distribution and processing was kept in state hands, so there was a limit to how much improvement could be achieved. The World Bank and IMF had provided some funds and our PL 480 had been an indication of our willingness to be helpful. We tried to urge the Poles not to concentrate so much on these big white elephants, but in that period everybody wanted to have a steel mill, everybody had to have a copper smelter, and bigger was better. We weren't sure that they were wrong; it didn't seem that they were being very efficient. Because the statistics were so skewed you couldn't tell what the real efficiency of the economy was, how much fuel was being used, and how much raw material was being used to produce what was being produced. Nor could you tell the real value of what was being produced. Later on, it proved that everybody, including all of our statistical analysts at CIA, were completely off on the GNP of these countries.

But it looked as if they were gradually improving, just based on the standard of living of the average Pole during this period. It was slowly getting better. It took a bigger jump after 1970 for a brief period. But in the early Sixties the Poles felt that they, by and large, had some hopes that things would get better, slowly get better. And of course the Russians were still in a phase where they felt that they were going to catch up with the West—that was the official line the Poles were being told that they, too, would benefit from the glorious socialist achievements in years ahead.

Q: Just to try to capture the spirit of the time, Khrushchev was saying, around this time, this was Khrushchev's period, "We will buy you" referring to the West. Which really meant we'll live longer, we'll be around long after you're gone. Was there any feeling within the embassy, can you say, that we really were on a competitive course and maybe the Soviets were on to something?

DAVIS: Well, I think there were two Soviet achievements that impressed everybody. One was the speed with which they got the hydrogen bomb, and the second was Sputnik. Apart from that, anybody could look at your surroundings. There was the old story about the Russians who started for Paris and the Parisians who started for Moscow and they both wound up in?

Q: Which is in Poland.

DAVIS: And they both thought they had arrived. But going from Poland to Moscow on the train, okay, you could see satellite dishes on the horizon, well that was later, in the Seventies, but you looked down and you saw the sea of mud and people up to their armpits in there, and it was evident that the Soviet economy was never going to catch up with the United States or even anything like it and the same thing's true of the Poles. At least evident to me.

Q: I'm sure you had American businessmen, particularly those of Polish extraction, coming to visit you and all. Did you find that you were having to deal with any true believers, feeling that, boy, this thing is working, the system's working or not?

DAVIS: I can't remember anybody in that period who felt that. There were a few who were tentatively considering coming back to retire because the Social Security payments went a long way in Poland. There was one building, a meat packing plant, but that was a contract. But people who were genuinely enthusiastic about the future of socialist Poland, really I don't remember them. There may have been some, but I didn't encounter them.

Q: We didn't have the equivalent of the left wingers of the British Labour Party who would go to Moscow and somehow or another they would always come away with a great uplifted feeling or something like that, which seems incredible.

DAVIS: Well, it's the idealism of communism: an idealistic philosophy which has never worked very long anywhere, even in the early 19th century communist communities in the U.S. that all fell apart after a few years. And in Moscow, that communism, I guess it only lasted two–three years before Lenin cracked the whip and realized that it had to be enforced, and from then on it was entirely something different. But people refused to see anything but the benefits. There were a few benefits to enumerate now, in retrospect, in Poland. Class society in Poland was smashed. I think the general level of education was much higher than it would have been otherwise. But that's about it. The economy would be much further ahead than it is today, and politically, what can you say?

Q: Did you and others in the embassy have much contact with the Catholic Church at that time and how did that work?

DAVIS: Yeah, sure. I happen to be Catholic, and a number of people were, and we all knew Cardinal Wyszyński and the bishops, and of course every Sunday you'd go to church. Now you didn't want to embarrass the priests unduly by palling around too much, but we all had priest friends and went to Częstochowa and the shrines. Wyszyński was a

towering figure and an enormous character. And the ambassadors, of course, called frequently on the primate and on the bishops council. And our support for the church, because of the church's fight for human rights, was quite clear. And there was a very close association in Poland between the church, and the patriotic traditions of the church were quite strong, and never stronger than in adversity. When things are going well the church doesn't do so well. When things are tough the church does very well. People rally around. It was, after all, in a country where the whole nation has disappeared for a 125 years from the map, the culture, the language and the religion become the carriers of the national heritage, which has no geography. So when the Poles came back together by miracle there in 1918, all the three occupying powers collapsed and they were able to reemerge as an independent nation, the church and the culture were seen as having preserved them through 125 dark years. And since they had quite a positive history before that, they were a great power in Europe for centuries, they don't suffer from any inferiority complexes. That makes them more pleasant to deal with than the Indonesians, for example, that tended in the Fifties to have inferiority complexes and be hostile and resentful because of that. Whereas the Poles, no Pole ever feels inferior. Kind of goes overboard in the other direction.

Q: The embassy, did we ever use the traditional Polish-Russian lack of affection, doing things like mentioning the Katyn massacre of the Polish officer corps during World War II and any things of this nature?

DAVIS: Well officially, we tended to conduct our official business government-to-government. Then RFE, under Jan Novak,

Q: Radio Free Europe.

DAVIS: Never let the memory of Russian sins die. Katyn and Yalta, all of the catalogue of heinous crimes committed against Poland were rehearsed daily on RFE and all of the sins of commission and omission of the government were examined in minute detail with biting commentary. A brilliant performance over many, many years. Novak, during his reign, in particular was perceived as kind of the "prime minister in exile" of Poland, and highly respected. A very affecting moment for me, since he's an old friend, was when he came back for the first time in 1990 after all those years and saw his native land again. So RFE was the instrument, our Cold War instrument and a very effective one. So effective that sometimes the embassy would have to object that they were going overboard a little bit.

Q: Was there ever any talk, at that time, '60-'63, if the Soviet army moves into the Fulda Gap and all that, whither the Polish army or did we feel?

DAVIS: Well, the Polish army had the assigned responsibility of driving across northern Germany to Denmark, and everybody assumed that they would do it as long as there were no check or reverse of the Russian advance. The first sign of real resistance from the West, the Poles would turn on the Russians. That was just a guess. Who knows? An army obeys orders, and whatever the sympathies of the privates and the corporals might be, it

takes a very brave man to suddenly say, “No, I’m not going any further,” or “Thanks, you go and I’ll leave.”

Q: Well, you left there in '63. Did you feel like a Polish hand by this time?

DAVIS: Up to a point. I didn’t realize I was going to spend so much time in that country, but we certainly enjoyed our first three years, and made a lot of friends. And we left, my wife was pregnant. My greatest achievement, she broke both her legs skiing in Zakopane in February ’63, and spent a couple weeks down there, pretty primitive. They were fed PL 480 beans; that’s all they had. I and others in the embassy would go down in relays with bottles of whiskey and care packages. I found a famous orthopedic surgeon in Warsaw who had a mountain cabin down there and he agreed to come over. He was a little gnome: appeared in a snowstorm wearing a wool hat pulled down over his eyes. He walked into this hospital, about five feet tall, and all of the doctors and nurses started bowing and scraping. I thought, “Oh, my. What have I got here?” So he reduced the fracture on both legs by hand. Took one look at the x-rays and manipulated the bones. Helen was yelling her head off. They put her in a cast, and we came back to Warsaw, and when we got to Washington much later she went to see Howard Rusk in New York, a famous orthopedist. He took one look at the x-rays and said, “Who did this?” And she said, “Some little old man named Doctor Rutza.” He said, “Oh, well, he’s my mentor.” The guy had set this fracture, 22 fragments, by hand.

Anyway, somehow during the period that Helen was in a wheelchair she managed to get pregnant. We’d been trying to get pregnant for years, and we were very pleased. That was the first of our three children, who appeared *seriatim* thereafter. So that was a very high note on leaving Poland.

Q: Something I’m trying to capture, because I was a little bit part of this movement. When you went to Poland, with your group, did you feel you were part of, you might say, a special group of Eastern European hands and that sort of thing? Could you talk a little about that?

DAVIS: I suppose everybody in the Foreign Service thinks that he’s part of an elite group. Somehow we felt that, the white knights of Eastern Europe, this was really the cutting edge of foreign policy. It was very Eurocentric, of course, but the Cold War was perhaps the most pressing and urgent problem. And all of us felt, in places like Poland and Hungary and Yugoslavia, you were dealing with the big issue and looking for the solution to it. How do you manage to get these countries out from under communism without provoking the Russians to the point where they’d do what they did in Hungary and later in Czechoslovakia? And it was a very delicate and dangerous game. It’s all very easy to be one hundred percent Cold Warrior, but you go over the top and the tanks come in, and then you’re exposed as not willing to do a damned thing about it. So all the time you have to play this game of trying to pull them away from the Russians and at the same time keep the Russians from jumping them. How to do it in a non-threatening way? After all, the party people all had made their compromises and felt that their own lives were at risk if anything went wrong.

That was the trick in Poland. How to get the party to agree to give up power and persuade them they weren't going to be swung from lamp posts.

Q: In '63 you left and whither?

DAVIS: We came back here to Washington. '63 I went to Personnel for a year, and I went to Harvard for a year, '64 to '65 and came back and was economic officer for Eastern Europe, for Czechoslovakia, Poland and Hungary for two years, from '65 to '67.

Q: Well, in Personnel, what were you doing at that time?

DAVIS: I was Bob Gordon's deputy. I sat on panels for Eastern Europe. We installed the cone system, to our eternal shame, I guess.

Q: Could you explain what the cone system was?

DAVIS: The cone system was the latest version of how to structure peoples' careers so that they made some sense. The idea was to be separate cones for economic, political, consular and administrative and other functions and somehow ensure that in each of these cones one could reach the top of the service. Patently impossible, because of the nature of the distribution of the jobs in the Foreign Service. The bulk of consular jobs are at the lower grades and very few in high grades, and political was almost the reverse. However, I think in the long run the cone system has been modified sufficiently, and over the experience of years has come to be seen as working moderately well. There isn't any perfect system, obviously, in any organization, but I was very impressed in the time I was in Personnel at the amount of thought and effort that was given, really, to try to fit people to jobs where they would be able to do well. I was encouraged by that.

Q: I think our personnel system, with all the suits and screams and all, probably we spend more time trying to fit people than anyone else. A lot of very good minds have been working on this. Did you find, in this first year, '63 to '64, that you were able to get a pretty good pick for Eastern Europe?

DAVIS: Very much so. Of course you had a lot of applicants for every job. The higher level jobs tended to come back to people who had the language or some previous associated language, a Slavic language but at the lower, entry levels in Eastern Europe, a mob of people was trying to get in. We could be very selective, and I think that, by and large, most of the people who went there tended to enjoy it and tended to do pretty well. That's not universally true, but there was a high motivation factor.

Q: Did you get any feel for the clientele of some of the other areas, the Western European, African, Far East, Latin American?

DAVIS: Latin American tended to, seemed to be a closed group. They rotated around and around. Same thing was true of Arabists, because of the difficulty of the language and the

fact that there were a number of posts you could go to that spoke Arabic. So people tended to circulate round and round. Western Europe, they considered themselves the elite, of course, but they were considered the effete elite by those who were in the hardship posts in Eastern Europe because in Western Europe you had to back up to the pay window to get your check. Why would you pay anybody to go to London or Paris? I couldn't resist trying a bit of it on my next assignment, and indeed it was like a paid vacation.

Q: You went to Harvard for a year. What was that?

DAVIS: I became totally useless, a great expert in socialist economics. Studied with Abram Bergson and Galbraith and others. I wonder who's got any use for socialist economics now? All these shelves of books. But it was interesting. It was a great time, and I enjoyed it very much.

Q: Could you give me a little feel about, when one talks about socialist economics, particularly today, in '97, it sort of almost elicits a giggle, but at the time, what were you absorbing from Harvard? Was this something, looking at a strange culture that you had to deal with but obviously didn't work, or were you talking about maybe more closer to people saying this is an alternate system and here are the good things about it, or what were you getting?

DAVIS: Well, it's clearly an alternate system. The problem is, Oscar Lang, a Polish economist, proved mathematically that in theory you can have a functioning socialist state-owned economy that is efficient. So then, the question becomes, "Has anybody even approached this in practice?" and Bergson, of course, did monumental work on the real gross national product of the Soviet Union, to the point that after '89 the Soviets came over to compare notes. Even before they used to come over all the time and say, "What is really happening in our economy?" Galbraith

Q: John Kenneth Galbraith.

DAVIS: I was studying developmental economics, what systems were being applied in the Third World, the various countries, and with what success. Bergson was trying to show that, basically what his figures showed, was that the Soviet economy was doing a lot less well than people thought and that the inefficiencies were very great. So studying socialist economics was basically studying what makes these people tick, how they make their decisions. Are their decisions likely to be helpful or hurtful? And do they have any justification for insisting on things like socialized agriculture? And what are the differences between economies? I found that extremely stimulating, and of course Harvard is a feast anyway, there's so much else going on there. Dip in Henry Kissinger's classes or whomever, everybody comes through, so I had a great year.

Q: Then, when you returned, about '65 I guess, about this time, in '65 to '67, you put all this to great use.

DAVIS: That's right, struggling with the Poles, the Hungarians, and the Czechs, and trying to get them to straighten up and fly right. We were still trying to help the Poles, and by that time they had built up a mountain of zloty debt, debt in local currency, to pay for PL 480 shipments. Then it was money available to us. Of course Congress thought that this way you could spend the money twice. You had to persuade them that you couldn't use the same resources twice, but what you could do is steer how the Poles allocated their own resources by saying, "We want to spend these zlotys over here," which means that they have to put that in their budget somewhere. So we tried to use these for useful purposes. Not only exchanges and U.S. government expenses but a whole range of culture and agricultural activities, helping private farmers in various ways. And then we got involved in rescheduling some of these when it became obvious they couldn't meet their repayment schedules and extracting concessions in return.

And then with the Hungarians and the Czechs, the Czechs were in a rather difficult stage. They were building up to the '68 events, and things were opening up, and you were beginning to get socialism with a human face in Prague. So we were trying to do what we could to help them along the path. Unfortunately, events moved so fast that by the time the U.S. government had got cranked up to do anything very effective the Russians had already clamped down.

Q: We're talking about, was it August of '68 when they moved in?

DAVIS: That was tragic and set a great pall over

Q: Called the Prague Spring, yeah.

DAVIS: Glorious hopes aroused and then crushed, and at the same time a great disappointment throughout the rest of Eastern Europe, because it coincided with the Suez crisis, and as I said earlier, the Suez crisis led to an outbreak of anti-Semitism within the ranks of the Polish party.

Q: Now, let's see, the Suez crisis, at least, '56 was the Suez crisis and then it was the '67 Six Day War.

DAVIS: Yeah, that's what led to the uproar in Poland.

Q: Why did that, was this something that was caused really, was Soviet instigation, this anti-Semitism, or was this?

DAVIS: Not really, I suppose the Soviets looked on approvingly, but it was caused by the fact that the Soviet Union and, allegedly, all of the socialist camp was supporting the Arabs. And within the Polish government many of the fairly high-ranking Polish officials of Jewish origin were cheering openly for Israel. And one faction, this Moczar faction, in Poland saw this as an opportunity to enhance its own prospects and get rid of these people and get at Gomulka at the same time, and so they initiated this, with which Gomulka foolishly went along and paid the price himself eventually.

Q: Of the time you were there, both in Poland and then dealing with it later on and then also as it pertained to other parts of Eastern Europe you were dealing with, Stalin pretty well destroyed the farming system in the Soviet Union, the killing of the kulaks and all and they're still trying to recover, what was the farming situation in Poland when you were there and then also these other countries in Eastern Europe?

DAVIS: Well, by the time I got there, '58, all but a few of the state collective farms had been dissolved by Gomułka. That was his great gesture upon taking power in '56, which did a lot to enhance his popularity. So that you had almost all the land back in private hands, except for a few state farms that were kind of model farms for developing new techniques and so on. The average peasant lived in considerable poverty, but lived as he had lived for centuries, the difference being now distribution and processing were in the hands of the state and not individual merchants in the city. You began to see some signs of some modest buildings going up on farms. By the Seventies it was very evident. The Sixties, the countryside was pretty bleak but people were happy to have their land back. The church was very strong.

Q: What about in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and other parts of Eastern Europe? How was farming being dealt with?

DAVIS: The Czechs were very heavily socialized, as were the Hungarians. They remained so right up until 1989. Czech farming was a little more mechanized than Polish. The Poles hadn't built the tractor plant yet in 1963. It was all horse agriculture. We saw tractors in the newsreels but never in the fields. Whereas, I think in Czechoslovakia, their industry had survived the war better, and they had more tractors and more efficient farming. Hungarians, I can't remember in this period, later in the 1970s and 1980s Hungarian agriculture did very well. In fact, it was probably the most effective socialized agriculture. They experimented repeatedly with various reforms and incentives with some good effect. Even before the 1989 revolution, the Hungarians were living very well. In terms of food availability they were exporting. So each country tried different techniques. It varied according to the resistance of the peasants to the collectivization. The efficiency of the system that was installed. Whether there were incentives and rewards for the individual within the collectivized economy. The traditions of the country had a lot to do with the response of the individuals, the changes that were made.

Q: Okay, well why don't we stop at this point. We're up to 1967. In 1967 where did you go?

DAVIS: I went off to Rome.

Q: All right. So that was where you were sent.

DAVIS: Eastern Europe.

Q: You were sent as an outcast. To the provincial capital of Rome.

DAVIS: Six long years of exile in Italy. (laughter)

End of interview