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

AMBASSADOR EDWARD E. ELSON

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy
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Interview completed by Mark Tauber in 2017

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1960s: Met Herman Talmadge, a member of a Georgia political dynasty.

- Talmadge served as governor of Georgia and senator from Georgia.
- The two began joint projects in real estate. Also very successful.

1960s: Georgia still very segregated, including against Jews.

- Elson becomes active in promoting civil rights, first as Chairman of the Georgia Advisory Committee to U.S. Civil Rights Commission.
- Through this position he becomes acquainted with several African Americans who would rise to top positions in politics and international affairs such as Vernon Jordan, Julian Bond, John Lewis, and Andrew Young.

1966-70: Served on the President's Commission on Obscenity. The most important findings were:

- That there was "no evidence to date that exposure to explicit sexual materials plays a significant role in the causation of delinquent or criminal behavior among youths or adults."
- That "a majority of American adults believe that adults should be allowed to read or see any sexual materials they wish."
- That "there is no reason to suppose that elimination of governmental prohibitions upon the sexual materials which may be made available to adults would adversely affect the availability to the public of other books, magazines, or films."
- That there was no "evidence that exposure to explicit sexual materials adversely affects character or moral attitudes regarding sex and sexual conduct."
- That "Federal, State, and Local legislation prohibiting the sale, exhibition, or distribution of sexual materials to consenting adults should be repealed."

1977-80: Served as Chairman of National Public Radio.

- NPR Award is named for him.

1980s-early 1990s: Rector of University of Virginia

- Student Health Center is named for him.

1993 Appointment as U.S. Ambassador to Denmark; arrived Denmark in November 1993
1998 Completed tenure as U.S. Ambassador

INTERVIEW

Q: Today is the 18th of April, 2012. We are beginning our interview with Ambassador Edward — is it Edward?

ELSON: Edward, right, E-D-W-A-R-D, E middle initial, E-L-S-O-N.

Q: Elson.

ELSON: Is my last name.

Q: And you go by Ed?

ELSON: Ed; fine.

Q: OK.

ELSON: Let me tell you, that's the nicest thing people call me.

Q: (laughs) All right, well —

ELSON: You can use Excellency too, if you like.

Q: All right, I'll —

ELSON: No, no, I'm —

Q: Or potential Excellency.

ELSON: I'll accept anything.

Q: (laughs) Okay, all right. And this is being done on behalf of the Association for Diplomatic Studies, and I am Charles Stuart Kennedy. And this is — Ed, let's start at the beginning. Ed, when and where were you born?

ELSON: Well, I was born in New York, but actually I — I grew up in Norfolk, Virginia. My father and mother moved there when I was an infant, so my whole life was spent in Norfolk until they moved when I was 19 years of age. My family moved to Atlanta, Georgia.

Q: Okay...

ELSON: We lived in Atlanta until I went to Denmark, and now we live in Palm Beach.

Q: All right, well, let's work on your early thing. Can you tell me something about — what do you know on your father's side? The background of the family and what were they up to?

ELSON: Well, my father was a brilliant man, extraordinarily perceptive, wise and erudite. He went to law school in New York, and that is where I was born. It was the height of the Depression and he went into business in Norfolk, Virginia. Norfolk is where I lived until I went to Andover Phillips Academy when I was 14. I finished Andover and I came south again to the University of Virginia in 1952.

Q: Well, I'm going to take it back here. First, do you know where your family, the Elsons came from?

ELSON: Well, actually, it's very difficult because they came from many different places. The Elson part of the family was actually a Germanic name, Alshvang, anglicized to Elson. My grandfather came from what is now Lithuania. In those days it was a country going back and forth between Germany and Russia, so he spoke a number of languages as a result. He came to the United States about the end of the 19th century and married my grandmother, whose family was named Lincoln, like Abraham Lincoln. She originally came to the United States around 1871.

Q: Well, then when your father came to the — it was your grandfather who first came to the States, is that right?

ELSON: Yes.

Q: What was he doing? Where did he settle?

ELSON: He was a shoemaker.

Q: Where was he doing his work?

ELSON: In Albany, New York, where my father was born, upstate New York, capitol of the state of New York.

Q: And then your father grew up in Albany.

ELSON: That's right, my father grew up in Albany, went to school in New York City, and then attained a position in Norfolk, Virginia, where he moved to manage a magazine and book distribution company.

Q: Well, did your father get a college education?

ELSON: Yes, my father was, was not only in college, but also law school.

Q: Where did he go to college?

ELSON: At St. John's University in New York.

Q: And then he got a law degree too?

ELSON: Actually, I don't know if he ever got the degree, to be candid with you.

Q: Well, how about, let's say, on your mother side?

ELSON: My mother's side was not dissimilar. She was also from Albany, New York, and her family came from — I've never been quite sure, but I think Poland.

Q: And were you sort of aware of your European roots or not or?

ELSON: Not really. It's very interesting. During my stay in Denmark, Susie and I were and still are very close to the Royal Family. The queen had small dinners and invited us – by the way, everybody knows Susie as Susie, from prime ministers to princes to plumbers; everyone calls her Susie. We were invited to the palace for a dinner with the Lithuanian President. The Lithuanian President, when he was introduced to me said, "Ah, you must have a soft spot in your heart for Lithuania — I understand that your family was from Lithuania."

I said, "Well, my father's father was."

He then said, "Well, you must have a soft spot in your heart for Lithuania."

I said, "Sir, I think my grandfather thought of Lithuania exactly the same way that Lithuania of him." And he was somewhat taken aback by that, and later invited me to find my family roots in Lithuania as his guest. It was very difficult, because I never really knew where my grandfather was from. I found historically, people with whom I've spoken, if you ask them about their ancestors, very few, including those who came at the time of Jamestown or on the Mayflower can actually trace roots back. Because most people coming to America chose to disassociate from their European experiences and rarely talked about it. And I was either innocent, naive, or stupid by not questioning more.

Q: Well, I know myself, with the internet I was Googling around and I discovered that my great-grandfather was born in Germany, but came in the States to get involved in politics in Illinois and ended up as Consul General in Vienna.

ELSON: *(laughs)*

Q: And here I've been Consul General four times, I'd written a history of the consular service, and I didn't know that this rather obscure title had already been in the family.

ELSON: That's a wonderful story. But it confirms what I'm saying. I just I had an email, someone who discovered me on the internet. Turned out to be a cousin of — a rather close cousin of whom I had never heard. And when the first Lincoln came over, he arrived at the time of the Civil War. And the anglicized name — whatever it was before, I don't know — became Lincoln, Abraham Lincoln. I have a clipping from an old Albany newspaper that says Albany's Abraham Lincoln has died.

Q: Oh, my God.

ELSON: I think that's America.

Q: How old were you when your family moved to — oh, on your mother, did your mother go to college, or not?

ELSON: No, my mother didn't. My mother was an exceptionally talented woman. As a young woman, she worked for Franklin Roosevelt when he was Governor of the State of New York. She was a secretary. She entered a contest as a student and won. Her reward was working as a secretary to Franklin Roosevelt.

Q: My God. Did she ever talk about it?

ELSON: No. Rarely. But that's one of the tragedies of life. You don't ask the right questions until it's too late. And that's why oral histories are important.

Q: Well, I make a point of any time I'm called upon to talk to a group I say, number one, get one of these little tape recorders — or not tape recorders —

ELSON: Yes.

Q: — they're digital recorders now. Interview your parents. And if they're not around, I interview anybody in the family and find out, because you'll regret it if you don't.

ELSON: Well, I regret it. I'm now 83 years old, and I can't find any family members who know more about the family than I do.

Q: Oh yeah. Yeah, I'm 84 and it — well anyway, we're doing this now.

ELSON: Okay.

Q: Okay, the interesting thing is, you know, when I'm interviewing people, so many people, their parents, or certainly one of them, is almost always not a college graduate. This wouldn't be true today.

ELSON: No.

Q: But I mean it was a different era. And I, you know I have the greatest appreciation for self-learning. I mean my parents didn't go to college, but they read a hell of a lot more than I suspect most college graduates do.

ELSON: That's true. In fact, I can confirm that.

Q: All right. Well, let's talk about, what do you know about your father as far as his business goes and all?

ELSON: Well, I know all about his business. He was a manager of a periodical and book distribution company in Norfolk, Virginia, then bought a similar business in Atlanta,

Georgia. After I finished law school, I came to work with him, and I was very unhappy. I felt it was an excruciatingly boring job. Within six months, he left the company, moved to Paris, where he and my mother lived, and at that time turned the business over to me. I was 25 years old. And I took it from there from a very small family business and built it into a major national company, which I sold in 1985.

Q: What's the name of the company?

ELSON: It was the Atlanta News Agency. And then it became Elson's, my name. And any time you went into a major airport or hotel anywhere in America and bought something, you probably bought it from me.

Q: Ah-ha. Oh yes.

ELSON: It later became W.H. Smith. I was the chairman of W.H. Smith USA. It was an English company that purchased my company. And then I served as chairman for a short while. It has been sold twice since then, and you see most of it under the name of Hudson News. Some still have Smith's name.

Q: What was there about this business that you liked and didn't like?

ELSON: Well, what I didn't like about the original business was that you merely received products in one door and then sent them out the other door. Your profit was based on the difference between buying and selling, and the expenses that went into doing the handling. It didn't require very much intellectual acumen; it wasn't intellectually stimulating. That's when I decided to go into the retail business opening bookstores. The bookstores were quite successful, and one day I bid on an airport location, indeed, the Atlanta Georgia Airport, and that began a career in the travel related retailing industry. I created the whole idea of airport gift shops and newsstand stores, and then I did similarly in hotels.

Q: Yeah.

ELSON: I was the first person to have that idea.

Q: Yeah, well I mean I must say that the bookstores and the airports are a Godsend when you're waiting around, and also a good place to pick up books.

ELSON: Well, it was not only bookstores; we sold everything. We sold gifts, we sold novelties, we sold cookies, we sold clothing. I had all types of stores in the airports. And again, I sold those companies in 1985. But I had another career. While I was in business developing this rather large company, at the same time I was involved in governmental activity. My first government position was under President Lyndon Johnson — appointed by him to be a member of the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography. I served the entire life of the commission, which was from 1967 to 1971. So I served both under Johnson and Nixon. Then during the Ford administration, I was chairman of the Georgia

Advisory Committee to the U.S. Civil Rights Commission. Then they created a Southeastern Civil Rights Commission which I chaired. In 1975, '76, I was the founding chairman, the first chairman of National Public Radio. I served in that capacity for several years as its chairman. During this period, I also served in state and local positions. I was the vice chairman of the Stadium Authority overseeing the Stadiums where professional athletics were being played in Georgia. I served on over 10 university boards, including Spellman College, Brown University, Phillips Academy — which is not a university — I can go on and on and give you —

Q: Well, I do want to pick up this some of this, but I want to take you way back.

ELSON: All right, go ahead.

Q: Let's say, how old were you when you moved to Norfolk?

ELSON: I was not quite two years old.

Q: Okay, so we're not going to get much out of that.

ELSON: No.

Q: So let's talk about Norfolk. As a kid, how did you see Norfolk?

ELSON: Well, Norfolk was a navy town. During the Second World War, which began when I was seven years old, the population of Norfolk would expand two or three times on a weekend when the fleet came in.

It was a town totally geared to the U.S. Navy and the war effort. It was an interesting experience to grow up in that atmosphere, especially for a young boy who was thrilled with airplanes and ships and guns as all kids are. Kids were always playing soldier or sailor.

Q: Yeah, I was a teenager and little younger in Annapolis.

ELSON: Well, it's very similar.

Q: And I imagine you, like I — other kids learned which cars were configured which way. I knew the tonnage of almost every warship.

ELSON: Well, you and I had a similar background *(laughs).* **We** knew the names of the ships, usually our home was filled with people who were coming through Norfolk in the military who were either friends of the family or friends of friends of the family, using our home as a hostel, a home away from home.

Q: Yes.

ELSON: In fact, many quite well-known individuals came to our home at that time. I remember as a child meeting them — my parents introducing them to me. My father was exempted from the military. For one, he had a physical disability, a hearing disability, which caused his rejection from service. Also, he was in with what was referred to as an essential position helping the war effort. Most of the supplies and reading materials for the ships coming in and before they went out again, back to sea, were distributed by my father's company.

Q: Well, l now, concentrating on you. As a kid, were you much of a reader?

ELSON: Yes. Voluminously.

Q: Do you recall any books or series of books that particularly grabbed you at the time?

ELSON: Oh, I do remember, because I've tried to get my children and grandchildren to read the same books. They all have been totally uninterested. And they were books by Howard Pease.

Q: Oh, yes.

ELSON: Who wrote about the sea.

Q: Yes. Pirates.

ELSON: I read the books he put out as fast as he published them, and now they hardly exist, but I tried to find them. I bought an entire set for my sons and they had absolutely no interest at all.

Q: Yeah. For one thing, I imagine that one, you had the war, two, you were right in a place that was involved in the fleet sailing out, and your reading interest and things. I take it you got a pretty good geographic education at a fairly early age.

ELSON: That's right. It was an interesting time and place in which to grow. I had doting parents. I'm an only child, and I think their life was centered around me. But they were very active in the community. I came from a family with a high involvement in public service. Albeit, for my parents, it was local. With me, it became not only local, but also state and national, and indeed, international.

Q: Well, how about as a kid? What'd you do in the afternoons?

ELSON: I played like every kid did, and especially around the water. Our home in Norfolk was on the water. Norfolk is a series of, I can't say canals, but inlets of rivers. We lived on a branch of the Lafayette River. Our house was directly on the water, and most of my time was spent in a boat.

Q: Let's take elementary school first. How did you find it? I mean were you —

ELSON: I was a star student.

Q: Huh?

ELSON: I was a teacher's pet.

Q: Oh God, you're the kind of kid I hated.

ELSON: *(laughs)*

Q: Yeah!

ELSON: Well, I was always the cleverest kid in class. And I had an affinity with teachers and I could bond very quickly.

Q: Do you recall any teachers that particularly were significant?

ELSON: Oh yes, and I use this woman's name all the time. Her name was Elizabeth Green, Lizzie Green. She taught me for two years in sixth and seventh grades. And I thought she was, to this day, I recall her the most fondly of any teacher I ever had. But she was a woman whose family were descendants of Nathanial Green, a great Revolutionary War hero.

Q: Oh yes, sure.

ELSON: And her father was a very well-known lawyer in Norfolk. She and I became closely attached.

Q: How southern was Norfolk at the time, you know, looking back at it in retrospect?

ELSON: Well, my first public school was J-E-B Stewart School, the Jeb Stewart School. And I recall vividly that we learned to sing "Dixie" before we learned "The Star Spangled Banner."

Q: Oh my God. I take it, I mean you were a product of segregated school, is that —

ELSON: Totally.

Q: Did race relations touch you at all, or?

ELSON: The idea of race relations did not exist at all. I never, never thought about it. I grew up in a society where there was total segregation, and I recall one incident very interestingly. I had a very light colored woman who took care of me. And she would take me to the movies, and she could do it because she was so light complexioned, she didn't look black. And I never thought much about it, but in later years, I remember my mother

describing, telling me about it. You know, the fact that she was going to a segregated theater with a young white child in the white section.

Q: Oh my God. Yeah, it's so hard to go back to that era.

ELSON: I was Chairman of the Civil Rights Commission in Georgia for eight years. And I was also at the same time chairman of Commentary Magazine, which is an intellectual monthly, which became very neo-conservative in later years under Norman Podhoretz, the editor. And my kids used to ask me about my childhood and segregation. It was very difficult to explain. And I would say, "You have to understand, it was the law and it was the moré and it was accepted. You never thought differently about it." But my father was involved early on; I'm talking about the late '30s and early '40s by taking a stand against lynching. He was very active in trying to stop lynching in the state of Virginia, which is so interesting because at that time that was considered a very liberal position.

Q: Yes. I mean some of the things that I — Annapolis was also segregated. And you know, different drinking fountains and all that.

ELSON: Sure, certainly. Well, I'll tell you what happened eventually. Before — I was deeply involved in the Civil Rights Movement. I served on the Executive Committee of the Southern Regional Council. I served as Chairman of Georgia Civil Rights commission, I served as a trustee of Talladega College, Hampton University, Spellman College, Clark College, all historically black colleges. So I was deeply involved in the movement. I ran John Lewis' first campaign for Congress. He is now the Democratic whip in the house, who has been in there for years and who was one of the great civil rights icons. Julian Bond was my partner in a television station. I gave Vernon Jordan his second job as the Head of the Voter Education Project, whose board I was on. So I was really involved in the Civil Rights Movement. But interestingly, just prior to that period when my father bought the business in Atlanta, Georgia, and I moved to Atlanta with him, the bathrooms in our building were segregated. My father was very upset by that, so I went out and I took the signs off the door and put Men/Women. Which is still segregation, I suppose *(laughs).* And nothing happened. You know, the people accepted it.

Q: Yeah.

ELSON: During that time we were distributing Sports Illustrated. And it was the first magazine to have a black American on its cover, Roy Campanella, the Brooklyn Dodger catcher. I remember distributing the magazine to the retailers in Atlanta, Georgia, and having many retailers reject it. They wouldn't put it on sale.

Q: Oh my God.

ELSON: Because it had a black man on the cover. Indeed, when I was the Chair of the Civil Rights Commission, my major accomplishment was to integrate the state government of the state of Georgia.

Q: Well, we'll come to that. Again, as a kid, I mean how about after school, was there often sort of an informal mixing of the kids together? Or did that happen in your area?

ELSON: Not in Norfolk, no black and white together. There were no black kids anywhere in our neighborhood. I mean, you had to drive miles to meet a young black youngster.

Q: In politics, where did the family fall?

ELSON: Democrat, they were all Democrats.

Q: This is sort of during the Byrd administration, I mean —

ELSON: My father fought the Byrd machine, because Byrd was anti-immigration and the Byrd machine was very, very strong. And my father was one of his staunchest opponents.

Q: Did —

ELSON: Later, I became the Head of the University of Virginia. I was Rector of the University of Virginia, which is the Chairman. Thomas Jefferson established the title for himself, and I was the 32nd person to hold it. I ran into a lot of the Byrds during that period.

Q: Well, as a young boy, did any of your teachers raise civil rights, or was it even known by that?

ELSON: It was something I never even thought of. And my father never used the term "civil rights." It was always lynching or the Byrd machine or things of that sort, including immigration. Senator Harry Byrd was very anti-immigration.

Q: How about religion? Was religion important? Where did —

ELSON: Yes, religion was very important in my family.

Q: What denomination?

ELSON: We were Jewish. And I was both confirmed and bar mitzvahed. That is unusual because we were what we call Reform Jews, the most liberal sect of Judaism. But I wanted to go further. so I was also bar mitzvahed, which is now normal. But in those days, Jews in the South were highly assimilated; or at least they tried to be, and had confirmations rather than bar mitzvahs.

Q: You know, from what I gather from reading and all that, you know, in New York there was very distinct divisions. But the South, I mean often there were Jewish families were some of the most prominent families.

ELSON: That's true. There was still discrimination, social club discrimination, and there was executive suite discrimination. But on the other hand, you really didn't notice it, because the towns were so small it made no difference. For example, I was a director of the largest bank in the South, which was unique. It was the Citizens & Southern Bank. It's now Bank of America.

Q: Well, as a kid, were you aware of being Jewish —

ELSON: Only —

Q: — separated you —

ELSON: I wasn't aware of being Jewish in a segregated sense. I was aware of being Jewish because we participated constantly in Jewish activities. But I didn't feel any different from anyone else. Albeit during Christmastime it was always difficult to sing the hymns. And I was so happy years and years later, of course, when religion was removed from the schools. Christmas and Easter were always a difficult time at school and provided great discomfort to me.

Q: Did you attend a synagogue?

ELSON: Oh yes.

Q: I mean was it the three sort of branches of Judaism?

ELSON: Well the most fundamental, of course, is Orthodoxy. Then there is the Conservative movement, but we were Reform Jews, which is the liberal sect of Judaism. And my father was one of the early members of the American Jewish Committee, which is the oldest and first inter-religious defense organization to promote Jewish interest and eliminate discrimination against Jews. And he founded the chapter in Norfolk, Virginia. I later became the chairman of its board of trustees nationally.

Q: Did you have — you were still pretty young — but support for the creation of Israel?

ELSON: Oh yes, very much so. In fact, I'll tell you a marvelous anecdote. You've heard of the ship Exodus?

Q: The what?

ELSON: You've heard the story of this ship.

Q: Oh yeah.

ELSON: All right. Well, the Exodus was an old Bay Line steamer going between Baltimore, Maryland and Norfolk, Virginia, an overnight trip, and that's how in those

days you went from Norfolk to Baltimore, Baltimore to Norfolk. The Haganah came to my father in 1946 or '07, and needed ships to take Jews where were coming out of the camps to Israel, most of them illegally. And they came to my father to get a boat, and my father participated in the purchase of President Warfield, an old Bay Line steamer that was renamed "The Exodus" when it became involved in the famous incident off the coast of Israel when the British attacked the ship.

Q: Oh yeah.

ELSON: And the crew of the Exodus — now, this is really an interesting historical story. They came to Norfolk, Virginia. The crew gathered in Norfolk to join this dilapidated old Bay Line steamer for its journey across the Atlantic, and they met in our house. My father had organized a group in Norfolk to refurbish and to supply the food and whatever was necessary for the trip on the boat. And the crew of the boat came to my bar mitzvah - the crew of the original Exodus, on March 15, 1947. They left two days later. I remember the day they left because my bar mitzvah was on March 15, and they left on March 17, from Norfolk. They were actually at our home.

Q: My God.

ELSON: There's a little, little spot of history. But a footnote, but still interesting.

Q: no, it's very interesting. Sort of the American connection.

ELSON: Yes.

Q: In high school —

ELSON: I went to Andover.

Q: OK, you went to Andover. How did you find Andover?

ELSON: Well, one of my father's friends in Norfolk, Virginia had gone to Andover and suggested that's where I should go. I was there for four years. I later became a charter trustee, and now my son is a charter trustee, and our two granddaughters and a grandson have gone there. Between my wife's family and mine, she's the fifth generation in our family to be at Andover. Actually, I have grandchild still there. Two of them have graduated; one then graduated from Harvard, the second is today at Princeton. and she'll either go to Harvard or Princeton.

Q: Well, I touched — I spent a summer at Andover.

ELSON: Really? What year?

Q: This would be 1945.

ELSON: I started in ’48.

Q: I was a rising — well; I was getting ready for my last year of prep school. I was going to Kent in Connecticut.

ELSON: Oh, Kent’s a great school. In fact, I went to college with an alumnus. His wife's father was Director of Admissions or Head Master of Kent. His name was Michael McWhinney; I can’t remember her name. Great school, Kent.

Q: Yeah. I mean I recall it because I roomed in I think it was Day Hall.

ELSON: Day Hall, that’s where I roomed in my senior year!

Q: Ah!

ELSON: We’re brothers.

Q: (laughs) And it was — I remember V-J (Victory Over Japan) Day happened there, and I wrote on the Andover fire hook and ladder up and down the main street of Andover and all.

ELSON: Really?

Q: I enjoyed it very much.

ELSON: Well, I went to Andover, my three sons went to Andover, and so far we have three grandchildren there.

Q: Did you find there, again —

ELSON: I’m sorry, this call interrupt keeps coming in and every once in a while it blocks your voice. Did I find what, I’m sorry? I couldn’t hear —

Q: Did you find any discrimination against Jews at Andover?

ELSON: Interestingly, I’m the subject of a book — Howard Simon, the managing editor at the time of Watergate at The Washington Post, later became the Head of the Nieman Fellows at Harvard. And he wrote a book called Jewish Times and he put a chapter in there about me. And no, I found no discrimination at all. But I did find no one gave a damn. That is to say, the Jewish students were there at the school sufferance. It wasn’t a question of discrimination against us; we were non-entities. Let me give you a vivid illustration. We had an elective course called Social Problems. It was called by the school minister, A. Graham Baldwin. And one day in class I raised my hand and I said, “Mr. Baldwin, I don’t understand something.”

And he said, “What’s that?”

I said, “We’re reading Laura Hobson’s ‘Gentlemen’s Agreement.’ Well, what’s so extraordinary about that? We have a quota system in this school.”

And he said, “What are you talking about?”

And I said, “Well, we have 72 Jewish students and 720 boys in the school. Last year there were 73 Jews out of 730,” whatever.

And he said, “That’s ridiculous,” and got off the subject.

Then I raised my hand a few days later: “I have another question, sir.” I said, “I don’t understand. You obviously feel that religion is a signal and significant part, or should be a signal and significant part of our life. You feel that a religious background is important in the development of our character. Indeed, we go to chapel five days a week, and on Sunday to church. It is mandatory that we take a religion course, and the school offers a social problems course. We celebrate all the holidays of Christianity. So you feel that it’s imperative for us. if we are to be useful citizens, that we have an inherent involvement with religion and theology.” I then said, “Why is it that the only day my religion enjoins me to worship, on Saturday; we have no classes and are not given a place to worship? And on the High Holy Days that I am enjoined to worship, I go to class at school and am not excused for Passover, Yom Kippur, or Rosh Hashanah? Why is it that you have no facilities for Jewish students at all?”

He looked at me, got very angry, and I figured, I’ve got to get to graduate; I better shut up, so I did.

Twenty years later I went back for a reunion and no one remembered me at school; I wasn’t that involved a student. The only fellow who knew me was at the Andover shop, a clothing store. Because I was always a clotheshorse, I spent a lot of time in the store. But no one at the school recognized me. And I went to the chapel with my wife, and I was showing Susie around this beautiful building, and suddenly an aged man at the end of the chapel hobbled up to me. And I recognized him as the former school minister, A. Graham Baldwin. I said, “Reverend Baldwin, I’d like you to meet,”. . .

And before I could introduce Susie, he said, “Ed Elson. Let me show you where the Jewish students worship.” And so the school had totally changed its policy by that time. He had been instrumental in it, and obviously my conversations and my interruption in class had been on his mind for 20 years.

Q: Boy.

ELSON: And now Andover has a Jewish chapel and a Catholic chapel and a Protestant chapel. I mean, it’s totally tolerant to everyone.

Q: Yeah, I think one of the things that struck me when I went to Kent, which was at that time run by Episcopalian monks.

ELSON: Right. Oh, I didn't know that.

Q: This is during the 'SC, during World War II.

ELSON: Right.

Q: That you know, I picked — there were stories about Jews and, you know, I mean it was a — I don't know, you could tell there was a class thing, I'm thinking social class thing, about oh, some places were Jewish and some weren't and all that.

ELSON: Right.

Q: And I came sort of from a Navy, living in Annapolis. And this didn't mean anything to me. So I was observing this, saying, "What the hell is this all about?"

ELSON: *(chuckles)* I think you reflect the views of a lot of people.

Q: Yeah, I mean, you know, I think it was certain places and all. But it was there. I mean it —

ELSON: It was. Because it was with the teachers. It was their background.

Q: Yeah. Sort of on the academic side at Andover, what courses particularly grabbed you?

ELSON: History and English. I had a marvelous history teacher who really inspired me, and my English teacher was a great old New England aristocrat. His name was Frederick Peterson. He'd gone to Oxford, had his oar from rowing at Oxford when he was on the — when he was an Oxford Blue. And he was a great inspiration to me. And I learned more from him in my year with him than I did for my next ten years at Andover, at university, and even at law school. But it was very interesting because when my first son went to Andover, I suggested to him that he take a course from this man. When Mr. Peterson was calling the roll, "Smith Jones, Elson," — said, "Elson, haven't you been in my class before?"

And Charles, our son, said, "No, sir."

And he said, "Well, hm." And he kept going. and later, in class, he asked a question, and my son raised his hand to answer, and Peterson said, "Ed?"

And my son said, "Sir, Ed is my father. I'm Charles," *(laughs).*

Q: (laughs)

ELSON: So it was a real Mr. Chip's story. When Fred Peterson retired from teaching at Andover, our youngest son, Harry, was in his class. And Peterson said, “You know, the first day I came to Andover to teach, there was an Elson in my class. And the last day I’m teaching here, there’s an Elson in my class.” I thought that was marvelous.

Q: Oh yes. Well, when I was there, I went there for — it was right just before they dropped the bomb.

ELSON: Yes.

Q: And I was getting ready to enlist in the Navy and it was felt that I really should have some physics. And so I was taking a physics course from a rather elderly gentleman with a great paunch. I can’t think of his name. But —

ELSON: Was it Weaver, Elbert Weaver?

Q: It well could have been.

ELSON: Yes.

Q: He’d been doing it for years, and — but no, it was a very pleasant experience, I must say for me.

ELSON: It’s a great school. Of course I’ve been deeply involved for 40 years, serving as a trustee and having several buildings built in our name. In fact, my granddaughter was being interviewed by somebody from Harvard after she had made application. And he asked, "How did you choose Andover, being from England?" She said, “My father, my grandfather, my uncle, my — you know, my three uncles, my great-uncle, my second cousin, all went to Andover.”

He said, “Well, there must be a building named after you, huh?”

She said, “Yes, as a matter of fact, sir, the building we’re sitting in right now.”

Q: (laughs)

ELSON: And then she went to the head of the school, who’s a great friend of mine, and said, “That man wasn’t very nice to ask questions like that.” But she got into Harvard anyway, so it was all right.

Q: Uh-huh. Well now, as you’re getting out of Andover, what were you pointed towards?

ELSON: Law. I always was going to be a lawyer. I loved politics. I went to the University of Virginia from Andover. I didn’t like the north, I didn’t like the cold, I didn’t like the snow. I never knew I could hate an inanimate object, but I hated snow.

Q: (laughs)

ELSON: So I came to UVA (University of Virginia) and I went into the honors program, and there were only five people in the university in this program. The program was no classes, no grades, no exams. You took a PhD examination for your final. Instead of going to classes, you studied with a tutor. It was the English tutorial system as opposed to the American credit system. It was a special program for selected students at the university. It was an honors program in political science.

Q: Now, in political science, first place, what did political science mean at that point?

ELSON: It's the study of government, of political theory, economic theory related to politics, forms of government, philosophies of government. You spent eight weeks in each department of the university to find how they affected government, whether it be foreign affairs or whether it be the History Department or whether it be the Economics Department. And you had tutors from each of those departments, but you were led by a single tutor. Mine was Robert Kent Gooch, who was one of the great professors at the university. An all-American football player at the time of the First World War, indeed one of the great figures of the University. He'd gone to Oxford. I remember his shingle in his office said, "Robertum Kentum Goochum," you know, the Latinization of his name.

Q: Yeah. Well, were you — you went to University of Virginia from when to when?

ELSON: From 1952 to 1956, class of '56.

Q: Did the Korean War have any effects in those days, or not?

ELSON: Yes. Most of the kids at school were affected in some way, either had been in Korea or were anticipating having to fight there at some time. Later, of course, we knew that the end of the Korean War was coming. We had the draft, of course, and I enlisted in the Army ROTC (Reserve Officers' Training Corps), because if you had to go, you wanted to go as an officer. Then after about three or four days I learned that if you had high grades you were deferred and you were deferred from the draft. And I knew I'd be at the top of my class, so, after looking around, I decided to get out of the ROTC, which I did, and just went through the normal course of life at the University. But it was because many of my classmates were returning from the Korean War, and they were visibly affected by it. I remember one friend screaming at night, in the middle of the night, with nightmares. I do recall it vividly.

Q: Well, how about your politics at that time?

ELSON: Very liberal. I was — I voted for Adlai Stevenson.

Q: What was Virginia like?

ELSON: Highly conservative, extraordinarily conservative. Virginia was a very aristocratic school. Albeit it was a public university, most people thought it was a private university.

Q: Did —

ELSON: But it received public funds.

Q: One of the things that I've known people who talk about those days, that Virginia was a problem in that it was such a party school.

ELSON: That's true. And in fact, if I try to describe to you the adventures I had to you as a student partying, it would, it would, it would run off the pages and not be printable probably *(chuckles).* The school had, had that reputation and reserved that reputation.

Q: It wasn't coed in those days, was it?

ELSON: No, it wasn't at all. There were a lot of women's colleges nearby, and that's how I met my wife. At the moment in time that I met Susie, I was a BMOC.

Q: Big Man on the Camps.

ELSON: Yes. So I was in a secret society, and the members of the society marched publicly at the Winter Dance. I needed a date, and I was introduced to a young woman at Randolph-Macon Women's College, and now we've been married for 60 years.

Q: Ah! Well, I had sort of a glancing touch at the University of Virginia. When I graduated from Kent, just as I was getting ready to graduate —

ELSON: Yes

Q: — things had changed so much. I really didn't think about much of where I was going. And I applied only two schools, one was University of Virginia, which was right after the war, and I got turned down and rightly so. I mean they weren't taking people from outside.

ELSON: That's true.

Q: Vets coming in.

ELSON: That's right.

Q: And the other was Williams, which took me.

ELSON: Oh, Williams is a much better school.

Q: Well, I mean, I don't know. As I've done these interviews I've over the years come to the conclusion that so much more is put in by the person than by the school.

ELSON: You know, you're very perceptive and it's a very wise statement. People come — since I've served on 10 university boards, I was also on the Board of the Association of Governing Boards and universities and schools. And I've been deeply involved in education. People come to me to ask me where their kids should go to school. And I say, there are two things you know/ One, wherever they go, they're going to be happy. They will like any school to which they go. Two, the most important thing is that the top kids at any school are as bright as the top kids at any other school. It's when you get below that percentage that the schools change. But if you're a top student, you're going to get more out of — as much out of UVA, out of Williams, out of Harvard. It's the same thing.

Q: Well, this is it. I mean the people I'm interviewing of course are, you know, gotten into the diplomatic business one or way or another. And they're obviously to almost the smallest degree very bright or —

ELSON: Right.

Q: — or they've got something that makes them stand out, or they wouldn't be in this trade.

ELSON: Right.

Q: And so I have one story about a man who I think was the illegitimate son of a — as he said, his mother was sort of a party girl. And he ended up — he dropped out of high school to work with his stepfather on repairing vacuum cleaners. And then he enlisted in the Marines, was a Marine — this is sort of between wars so he's in the Fleet Marines, and heard about — he was in Japan for a while and saw the embassy and thought, "Gee, that looks interesting," and asked somebody.

And said, "Oh yes, you have to be a Foreign Service Officer."

Then goes to a community college. I think it was Bakersfield Community College in California and they — there was a Career Counselor, said, "What would you like to be?"

And he said, "I'd like to be a Foreign Service Officer."

And so whoever the clerk was thumbed through this huge thing of occupations and said, "Oh, for Foreign Service Officer," read the qualifications. Anyway, he went from Bakersfield to Berkeley to the graduate program at Indiana, which has a Slavic studies. And was an ambassador to a couple of the Stans later on.

ELSON: Wonderful, that's interesting, yes.

Q: But you know, you get this. But anyway, but Virginia does give you something.

ELSON: Oh, Virginia was — it's a great school. I later became head of the school, which was a remarkable transition *(laughs).*

Q: Well, I'd like to pick that up as we get to it. But how would you describe the student body? I mean was —

ELSON: Very aristocratic. Southern, mostly Southern; a small contingent of New Englanders. Prep school fellows who didn't get into other colleges came down to UVA. They had their own little groups. But most of the kids were southerners. And I think many could have been out of a Truman Capote novel, or a Faulkner novel. In fact, Faulkner taught there. But they were mostly aristocrats from Richmond, Virginia, or very old landed families from throughout the South. And it was a very important experience for me, because it taught me how to deal with people from that background. I learned about dealing with aristocratic New Englanders at Andover. And then I learned about how to deal with landed Southerners at the university.

Q: Well, how was the war treated?

ELSON: My wife's great-great-grandfather was a captain in the Confederate Army and her grandmother used to drape his bust — which we have in our home now — with Confederate flags on Confederate Memorial Day. And so University of Virginia was very proud that its students had participated in the, in the war between the States.

Q: Yeah. Is that the war you meant, or the second war?

ELSON: Absolutely.

Q: Yeah. There was only one war.

ELSON: I still remember.

Q: This is interesting because today this is gone.

ELSON: Yes, gone, totally.

Q: It's not gone totally —

ELSON: Nobody even knows about it.

Q: — but it's still not quite — I remember Annapolis was a very southern town.

ELSON: Sure.

Q: And I remember sitting in a corner while my mother was giving tea to some of the ladies of Annapolis, Annapolitans. We'd just arrived. And they were going on about the glories of the South and all this. And my mother in a very sweet little voice said, "Oh yes, my father used to talk about how beautiful the South was."

And they said, "Oh?"

And she said, "Oh yes, he traveled extensively through the South. He was an officer with Sherman," (laughs).

ELSON: *(laughs)* He was in Atlanta as well.

Q: Oh yeah. Yeah, I've been to Atlanta and I remember whoever I think the first black mayor there, Barnes was it or —

ELSON: No, Mayor Jackson.

Q: Mayor Jackson. I went there with —

ELSON: I ran a campaign against him, as a matter of fact.

Q: Yeah. Well, I think I said, "I think I probably owe you an apology for my grandfather burned your place down."

ELSON: He would have loved it, no.

Q: He laughed and said, "Good for him," (laughs).

ELSON: That's funny. I knew the mayor very well.

Q: Yeah.

ELSON: I ran the campaign against him, and he won. I lost. Sam Massell, who was the last white mayor, was running against him, and I was a great friend of Sam's, so I was one of the leaders of his campaign.

Q: Yeah. Well, did you get involved in campus politics at UVA?

ELSON: Very much.

Q: What sort of things?

ELSON: Well, I ran the humor magazine, which was The Spectator, which is like The Harvard Lampoon. I was involved politically just running people for office. I just was exceedingly active. Being in the honors program gave me a special stature in the school. I was looked up to as an intellectual, and they did respect intellectuals.

Q: Really? Because, you know, you mentioned you voted for Adlai Stevenson. And I remember so many people were knocking him for being an egghead, you know.

ELSON: Yes, well that was OK with me, because I liked to consider myself as having been an egghead in those days. That was a sign of stature at the university.

Q: Did the university break down into social classes or anything, or —

ELSON: Yes, yes. Well, Jewish students were historically barred from the fraternities, so they had to form their own. And I'll tell you an anecdote about that. Later, years later of course, when I became rector, I called the officers of the last fraternity to have barriers to my office. And I was sitting in the office of the rector. And I said, "You know, one of these days, one of you two fellows will sit in my chair, Mr. Jefferson's chair, as rector of the university. But do you realize that I could never sit in your chair?" And they changed the policy at that fraternity.

Q: What fraternity was it, do you remember?

ELSON: St. Anthony's Hall.

Q: Yeah. Because even at Williams they had discrimination. I was in Si-U and they —

ELSON: Yep.

Q: A member of my class I think was actually in a fraternity with Stephen Sondheim, the —

ELSON: Oh yes, the songwriter, yes.

Q: Yeah.

ELSON: Well, a lot of — I was in a fraternity. It just — it was an all-Jewish fraternity, that was all. Nowadays, that doesn't exist. I'll tell you another anecdote. When I was ambassador to Denmark, the ambassador from Spain was married to Beatrice Lodge, John Davis Lodge's daughter.

Q: Oh yes.

ELSON: And she came to me and said, "My son would like to go to the University of Virginia. Can you help?"

And I said I had just come out as rector, and I said, "Don't worry, he's in." He could have gone to Harvard if he chose with the rest of his family.

But he wanted to go to the UVA. one day and said, “He’s so excited, he’s joined a fraternity.”

I said, “That’s wonderful. What fraternity has he joined?”

She said, “ZBT.” I said — she said, “Your fraternity!”

I said, “Oh, my God,” and I laughed, because when I was a student, I used to say we were pariahs, because we were excluded from other fraternities. But here a Lodge comes to UVA and he chooses to join. Times certainly have changed.

Q: (laughs)

ELSON: But it’s no longer, but today there are no longer any restrictions in any way.
Q: Did you find that there was any problems that you were observant of or involved in or anything of the drinking business and all that?

ELSON: Oh yes, yes, big. I mean you’ve never seen so much drinking. In fact, one day my mother and father came to visit and I was lying on the floor of the fraternity *(laughs).*

Q: (laughs)

ELSON: And my father said, “Get up off the floor.”

I said, “Dad, if I could, I would,” *(laughs).*

Q: Oh God.

ELSON: And he walked out; he and my mother walked out, they were so angry. But yes, it was an extraordinarily amount of drinking. Beyond that which I can really describe.

Q: Well, this is, this is it. I’ve talked to people — my daughter’s husband, one of my daughter’s husbands went to UVA and quit and moved to Oberlin.

ELSON: Yes

Q: Because he found that the social life was just not what he was interested in.

ELSON: Well, it was overwhelmingly socially oriented. Very much so, every weekend. And then there were several large dances during the year, which became — what did they used to call — orgies!

Q: Yeah!

ELSON: Not talking about sexual orgies, I’m talking about drinking.

Q: Well, this is — just curious, I'm trying to pick up social things. And of course every hot blooded American boy was thinking sex, but —

ELSON: Oh, of course.

Q: — it wasn't an awful lot of sex

ELSON: No, it wasn't... In fact, I've often said that when people ask how Susie and I have been married for so many years and Susie was so young and I was so young when we married, I said, "Well, in those days there was limited sexual activity. And so therefore, you were married at a younger age."

Q: Absolutely. I mean this was — you know, it's so hard to recreate these situations because things have changed —

ELSON: Oh, so dramatically. It's phenomenal.

Q: I mean it really is, is something. And —

ELSON: My granddaughter, this weekend, was staying with her boyfriend's family. And I thought to myself, "My God, that never would have ever occurred in my youth at her age." *(laughs)* —

Q: Yeah. Did you go out for any sports or anything?

ELSON: No. I had a problem with one of my legs caused by an injury at birth. Yes, I was active in sports, but I was never accomplished because of this. So I never played any varsity or junior varsity sports; just fraternity sports or club sports, so to speak.

Q: I'll ask the question just to drill home the point. I assume that there were no blacks going to the University of Virginia when you were there.

ELSON: No. None. Zero.

Q: Were there sort of the equivalent of campus Marxists or anything? Roaming around talking about the evils of this and —

ELSON: No. No, but I'll tell you an interesting incident. A very great American diplomat by the name of Joe Twinam who later was an ambassador to several Middle Eastern countries, and the Head of the Foreign Service Institute in Washington, was my classmate and great, great friend. There were three of us in the honors program in political science. There were five in the honors program total, three in political science. The other student was Henry Fraser, who later became a judge in Washington. And I remember the three of us sitting having a sandwich the day Brown versus Board of Education was announced, when the Supreme Court ended segregation in education in schools. And I remember vividly where we were sitting and what we were eating at the restaurant. And Henry and

Joe, Joe the diplomat, Henry later the judge, and I were discussing the decision. And Henry and I were saying what a marvelous decision it was. And Joe said, "I don't like it."

And I said, "Why not?"

He said, "Well, I can't justify segregation intellectually, morally, culturally, philosophically, psychologically; I just want it."

And I never forgot that. It really came home to me how strongly he felt and how others like him felt about it. It wasn't anything they could explain in any way that would be compensated by their religion or their ethics or their history or their education. They just wanted it. And it made a deep impression upon me. And interestingly, later Joe became one of our great diplomats.

Q: Yeah. Well now, were you in Virginia when sort of the mass — I can't remember, massive resistance took place there with the schools?

ELSON: Well, that massive resistance was really in the public school system and was a little afterwards. After I left the university in the late '50s, early '60s, massive resistance became a popular southern credo.

Q: Oh no.

ELSON: It didn't end until the late '60s.

Q: Yeah.

ELSON: Until after the Civil Rights Act. The massive resistance came later.

Q: Was there sort of a reaction to sort of the student body and the faculty with this, or this —

ELSON: No.

Q: Well, I suppose in a way that —

ELSON: It was accepted with equanimity.

Q: Yeah. Well then you went to the law school there too.

ELSON: I went to law school for a year at UVA. Then I left because I decided not to be a lawyer.

Q: What was there about law that didn't —?

ELSON: Well, I felt that I neither had the discipline nor the patience to be a lawyer. It was a bore. So I switched to Emory University Law School and I graduated from Emory, took the bar before I graduated, passed the bar, but never practiced law. In fact, I was named the distinguished alumnus of Emory Law School about five years ago. I was given the award although I never practiced.

Q: Well, I find, you know, as I talk to young people — we have a lot of interns that come here and work with us. And I always — many of them say, "Well, I think I'll go to law school."

And I say, "Well, you've got to remember, law is awfully boring for the most part."

ELSON: *(laughs)* Right.

Q: I mean it really is boring. And particularly the more lucrative it is, the more boring it is.

ELSON: *(laughs)* It's true.

Q: And of course I'm playing up diplomacy.

ELSON: Right.

Q: But and I do point to the fact that I've been doing these oral histories now for over 25 years and I have a relatively low level of patience. And I don't get bored. Because people's lives — I mean people who have been diplomats one way or another and other things have usually had very interesting lives.

ELSON: At dinner parties, people always ask, "How can you have done so many things? Public radio. Obscenity Commission. University Rector. Diplomat, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera."

And I always say, "Well, I can't hold a job. That's my problem."

Q: Yeah, well (laughs). But George H.W. Bush was the guy who couldn't hold a job.

ELSON: That's right. He went to Andover. And by the way, when I was elected to the Board of Andover I took his place. Andover trustees in those places were elected for life. But life ended up at 75 for a trustee. And when George Bush went off the board, I went on the board and I literally sat in his chair during board meetings.

Q: Huh.

ELSON: It's a very small board, it's 14 people. And on the back of the chairs, it has the people who sat in those chairs. And I sat in the George H.W. Bush's chair.

Q: Oh my God. We've now got you into law school. Is this where you — when you met, got married, or not?

ELSON: We were married just before my second year in law school.

Q: Okay. Can you tell me the background of your wife?

ELSON: Certainly. My wife is from one of the oldest southern families in Memphis, Tennessee. Her family was one of the original people to come to Memphis. Her great-great-grandfather was Captain of the Confederate Army, and others in her family were in the Union Army, interestingly enough. Her grandfather was the great entrepreneur of Memphis who found Boss Crump and made him the mayor. Her grandfather owned a textile mile, the bank, real estate, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. And he was a formidable man, I'd say one of the robber barons at the turn of the century. And he had three sons whom he educated superbly. One of them became Head of Protocol for the military under President Roosevelt during the Second World War. He was decorated by every nation, never left the country, of course *(laughs).* The youngest son was her father who went to Dartmouth and Harvard Business School, and then third was an uncle who was sort of a ne'er-do-well, but lived probably the happiest of the three of them. That son had gone to Washington Lee and dropped out of school and never did much. They were highly regarded citizens in Memphis, albeit, they were Jewish. And in the South that was a distinction. It wasn't as notable in their case because of the influence of the family. Susie is perhaps — and I'm not exaggerating, this isn't hyperbolic — the most brilliant woman I've ever met. She's a super genius, an off-the-chart genius. Her mother was a Phi Beta Kappa in her junior year at Wellesley College, and from Kansas City, Missouri. Her mother's family were the tobacco distributors for all the tobacco west of the Mississippi. Her mother wanted her to go to Wellesley and sent her to Dana Hall School. And Susie hated it and didn't want to go to Wellesley.

Q: What did she hate about Dana Hall?

ELSON: Just that she was a southern girl. She said she couldn't even eat. By the time she was halfway through her meal they were already back in classes.

Q: Oh.

ELSON: And she just wasn't comfortable. So her mother called her roommate at Wellesley, who was the Dean of Randolph-Macon, and said, "I'd like my daughter to go to your school." She was taken in immediately. At Randolph-Macon, she was the only Jewish girl.

Q: That's pretty surprising because obviously Randolph-Macon is one of the top women schools in the South and, you know, as we've said before, the Jewish upper class is well accepted within the southern society.

ELSON: But not at the girls' schools. The schools were always that way. And that's where Susie and I met. Susie later became a Trustee of Randolph-Macon. She later received the Distinguished Alumna Award from Randolph-Macon. Susie's been a trustee of many universities. In fact, she was a regent of the state of Georgia, whose Board ran all the university systems in Georgia. She was also the Chairman of the National Mental Health Association. She was also Chairman of the American Craft Council, the American Craft Museum, which is now Museum of Art and Design. She has held major positions all over America. But we met when she was at Randolph-Macon, and within a year we were married. She then went to Agnes Scott College, where she finished, graduating with honors.

Q: You know, any time as we're talking about this, and you will I'm sure, bring in her side of the story and all that.

Well then, you sort of played around with law. How did your father feel about this?

ELSON: He didn't care. He was very happy — I went into business with him, he was delighted. And after six months he and my mother — he left, he said, "You're going to do a terrific job here." He said, "I, I have total confidence in you," and he left and moved to Paris with my mother.

Q: Would you consider yourself in the book business or is it distribution business or what?

ELSON: It was both.

Q: Both?

ELSON: Yeah. In fact, we were the distributors in The New York Herald Tribune out of Paris worldwide.

Q: Oh yeah.

ELSON: We were — that was another business we had called APO, American Publications Overseas, and we distributed the Herald Tribune.

Q: That was really such an excellent paper.

ELSON: It still is.

Q: Particularly being in the Foreign Service, you know. We can live off that.

ELSON: Where were you when you were in the Foreign Service? What consular post?

Q: I came in 1955 after four years in the Air Force. And then I went to Frankfurt —

ELSON: Yes.

Q: — then to Dhahran, Saudi Arabia.

ELSON: Yes.

Q: Then back to Washington with INR.

ELSON: Yes.

Q: And then I took Serbian. I took it with Larry Eagleburger and a few others and —

ELSON: Well, he was at the University of Virginia, you know.

Q: Uh-huh.

ELSON: He ended his career at UVA.

Q: Yeah. And then I went to Belgrade where I was Chief of the Consular Section for five years. I had a wonderful time there. And then —

ELSON: My tenure in Denmark was during the Bosnian Conflict, and the Embassy was very involved —

Q: Yeah.

ELSON: The Danish Military were down in Tuzla.

Q: And then I came back to Washington and personnel and then I ended up as Consul General in Saigon in the middle of a war.

ELSON: Oh! You were there with Holbrooke.

Q: I guess I may — I'm not sure if I was — I was there 18 months, '69, '70. But there are an awful lot of bright young officers wandering around at the time. And then from there I went to Athens. I ran the Consular Section there for four years.

ELSON: That was before I was involved, I'm sure.

Q: Yeah.

ELSON: And my secretary was the secretary to Nick Burns, the ambassador there.

Q: Yeah. Well, I've been interviewing — Nick, I have trouble catching him, but I catch him from time to time. And then I went to Seoul, Korea.

ELSON: Oh, that's a great post.

Q And then from Seoul I was Consul General in Naples.

ELSON: In Naples?

Q: Yeah.

ELSON: That's really — you had —

Q: See, I was a Consular Officer.

ELSON: Yes.

Q: And so I wasn't particularly attached to any particular area, which has been extremely useful as a, as I move into this history.

ELSON: You were literally in every corner of the world.

Q: Well, I didn't get to Africa or Latin America.

ELSON: Well, you're —

Q: I tell people as a 10-years-old I went to Tijuana and decided that Latin America was not for me.

ELSON: *(laughs)*

Q: I spent a day there.

ELSON: That's funny.

Q: But no, well we've got you now —

ELSON: Through college into my business career.

Q: In the business career, did you have trouble adjusting to business?

ELSON: No. I was very good at it. I had a bifurcated career. I was government and business at the same time. I found my businesses were boring to me, so I liked to exercise my not-for-profit interest, so to speak, and my pleasure was government. So I was doing those two jobs at once. In business, I ran these companies, as I told you, I took over a small family business, distribution in books, and I created a retail empire out of it. At the same time, I bought a small bank. And I developed a bank and became one of the largest shareholders in major banks around the country.

Q: Tell me something. I look at the proliferation of banks around here. At the time when you went into banking —

ELSON: Yeah.

Q: — what were sort of the money opportunities? Obviously you're handling money and taking, you know, taking something off the top. But what was there about banking that was particularly interesting during when you started that and at that era?

ELSON: Why I went into it was banking — banking insurance and finance are all the same. I mean a man a man who owns a furniture store is financing people who buy his furniture. And what it is, it's a source of funds that you can use to build other, other businesses with. People are giving you their money and you can use their money as long as you keep it safe and give them a return, to do what you want to do. And that is the essence of banking, the bottom line of banking.

Q: Well, did you find bankers or the banking world a different world? I mean who are these people who were —

ELSON: In those days, no. Today, yes. They're now more entrepreneurial. In those days, people who chose to go in banking were rather lacking in imagination. They were technocrats. Today, they're entrepreneurs.

Q: Yeah. In fact, they sort of scare me. I mean —

ELSON: Yes, I don't disagree. I must tell you I think banking has turned into a disaster. The worst thing that President Clinton did was getting rid of the Glass-Steagall Act. I think that was a — without question, the most egregious act of his administration. I was a great friend of Clinton and a great supporter. But that was terrible.

Q: Yeah. Well, I suppose the pressures were such that, you know, people have seen a way to make a quick buck. And —

ELSON: They do. It's horrible. Horrible.

Q: Things really have gotten — well, I mean it's a scary world.

ELSON: It's terrible. You don't know what to do. And especially, as a person on a fixed income, you don't know what to do.

Q: Yeah. Well, did you find that you could sort of run the book business or distribution business on one hand and turn to banking? Or was banking just a small part of your —

ELSON: A small part at that time. It grew into a major part. But at the same time, I was doing my government work.

Q: OK, let's talk about the government work.

ELSON: All right.

Q: To begin with, how did you get into it?

ELSON: Well, I was in the South and I was Jewish. And in southern cities Jews were not really an integral part of the not-for-profit world. They were leaders in the economic community. So I migrated into the Civil Rights Movement and I became very active — this is the early '60s — and very successful at being deeply involved and knowing all the players. At about that time, I met Senator Herman Talmadge, the senator from Georgia, a former governor from Georgia, and now a great historical figure.

Q: With the red suspenders?

ELSON: That was his father, Gene, also a governor. Indeed with Herman, his son, the Talmadges were either governors or senators from Georgia for over 50 years. And Herman took a liking to me. And we became partners. We were investing in real estate together and we became exceedingly close friends. Interestingly, I was much his junior. During that period I learned that he knew everyone, but had few friends. I became his confidant because we were so different. We had different backgrounds, different religions, different involvements, different histories, different political philosophies We had one thing in common — our friendship.

Q: What was it about him that you found appealing?

ELSON: He's a brilliant man, prescient, perceptive and wise. He was erudite, had read everything. But yet, he spoke in the jingo of a yokel, if you understand what I mean. He gave the impression that he was "country," a farmer, but beneath that exterior, agricultural, bucolic exterior, he was a brilliant man. And he loved me and he loved Susie. There was nothing he wouldn't do for us.

Q: Did you have any connection or was he alive, the father, Gene?

ELSON: No, he used — Herman — the senator used to say, *(with a southern accent),* "Gee, mah daddy would-a loved you, Eddy."

And I thought to myself, "He would be rolling in his grave if he knew you and I were partners."

Q: (laughs) Well, what were you doing? I mean what was the situation when you started getting involved in Civil Rights?

ELSON: Well, we had a young lawyer representing us in Georgia. His name was Morris Abram. And Morris and my father became like brothers. And Morris was a Rhodes Scholar. He later became the U.S. Ambassador to the U/N in Geneva. He was President

of Brandeis University, and a very famous lawyer who did the One Man-One Vote Case before the Supreme Court. And Morris was a friend of Talmadge's, and that's how I met Talmadge. They held steady the platform which I used to gain national recognition. And I become chairman of the Georgia Civil Rights Commission, and my partner was Herman Talmadge. It was so antithetical, one to the other; an anomaly. But we got along terrifically and it didn't hurt me on either side. Through the Civil Rights Movement I became involved with voter campaigns and in historically black colleges. As I said earlier, I served on the boards of these colleges.

Q: When you took on this job, what was the civil rights situation in Georgia?

ELSON: Segregation. It was still segregated. The movement was just beginning. The Southern Regional Council was the first interracial agency in the South, and they had no businessman in the South who would associate with them. They asked me to be on the board and I said fine. And I was the first and only white businessman for a while. The SRC created the Voter Education Project, which was the organization that oversaw the movement to encourage blacks to vote in the South. And first director was Vernon Jordan. And after Vernon it was John Lewis.

Q: How about your white business colleagues and social colleagues?

ELSON: Well, they thought I was a lunatic, but they loved me. And they put me on the boards of the banks and I was on the board of an insurance company. You know, I was on a number of their boards. But I was their liberal friend, so to speak. But they didn't resent it, which I thought was amazing.

Q: That really is amazing, because I would think that, you know, you'd sit on the board of these things and people would glower at you and —

ELSON: No, actually, you know, it's a question of friendship. I found friendship can override politics. If a person likes you, if they think you're honest and sincere and have a logical reason for your feelings and actions, they respect you.

Q: Well, in a way I would think — and again, I'm not part of that society — but on segregation, I mean there is absolutely no justification for this.

ELSON: No.

Q: I mean this isn't like abortion, where you can quite legitimately stand one side of the other on the thing.

ELSON: I understand that.

Q: And so in a way the more unjustifiable a stand is, if you have made a stand, the more almost vehement you get —

ELSON: To justify it? I told you that story about my friend, Ambassador Joe Twinam.

Q: Yeah.

ELSON: We remained very close friends. He died several years ago. There was never any rancor. He felt one way and I felt another, and so be it. Because I don't think it really involved us personally. We weren't being segregated. If he was white and I was black, it would have been something different. But this way we were just two people with opposite opinions on a particular subject.

And I'll give you another anecdote. When I became very involved in operating these stores in airports around the country in the '70s, when the electorates in major cities became predominantly black, the black mayors would require vendors to have black partners if you were going into an airport operation. And I had a black partner who was a very famous lawyer from Atlanta; his name is David Franklin. His wife later became Mayor of Atlanta, Shirley Franklin. David was my minority partner, as we were required in certain cities. I trusted him completely. Indeed, he was my minority partner, literally and figuratively. We often traveled together. We were sitting together in a hotel in Houston, Texas, on one of our tours, and he said to me, after a few drinks, "You know, we hate you."

And I looked at him and I said, "I understand what you're saying."

He said, "Not you."

I said, "I know what you mean."

He said, "Not individually, but collectively." He was talking about whites. He was the Svengali who created Mayor Jackson, the first black mayor, by the way. And the mayor had appointed him to the Stadium Authority in Atlanta, on which I served, and we became very close.

Anyway, when he said that to me that evening, I understood it all. There's just this deep hatred of whites by blacks. But as I say, it's collective, not individual. And I appreciated that. And I see that when people were accusing President Obama similarly, I can understand his feelings. Resentment. And I don't think it's ill-formed, either.

Q: Well, what about say going back to you. I think of the politics, particularly in the South and all, part of this thing is country club. Could you get into a country club?

ELSON: No, not in Atlanta. I started a large campaign to integrate the country clubs in Atlanta. And my campaign was successful, albeit, after I left Atlanta. But I was very active in club discrimination.

Q: How about being Jewish in clubs?

ELSON: That's what I'm talking about.

Q: Yeah, so —

ELSON: Oh, there were no blacks in clubs.

Q: Yeah.

ELSON: I always felt that the Civil Rights Movement would help the Jews because the blacks would be accepted before the Jews were. And that would pave the way for Jews.

Q: What do you see as —?

ELSON: The blacks forced the issue.

Q: You know, I've had trouble because it's not part of my makeup or something of understanding the prejudice against Jews. What do you think causes, say, particularly in the United States?

ELSON: If I can answer your question, I'd be elevated to the pantheon of philosophers of psychologists. I don't know. I've never been able to figure it out.

Q: I mean you —

ELSON: And I was deeply involved. I was Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the American Jewish Committee, which was the signal organization fighting discrimination against Jews. I've never understood it.

Q: I mean I can understand up to a certain point money lending and all that.

ELSON: But that, that —

Q: But think of —

ELSON: — that's 400, 500 years ago. That's because the Pope would not allow Catholics to lend money and Muslims could not lend money. So the only thing left was the poor Jews sitting in their ghettos who could *(laughs).*

Q: Yeah. And you know, I mean that's just sort of a historical footnote. But I mean — but whatever it is, it's there. I mean it's almost as though OK, everybody say you are the designated people to dump on or something like that.

ELSON: That's the only explanation I could give. I once said to somebody who was asking about a particular club that excluded Jews, "Well, if you spill drinks on the rug or you insult other people's wives or you don't pay your dues, you should be excluded. The rules of admissions of this particular club I was describing, the only qualification for

admission is that you can't be Jewish. Why? I can't say." Now, my sons went to Harvard. And one of them was in the Fly Club. He was President of the Fly Club, in fact; one of the most exclusive clubs at Harvard.

Q: That was the Roosevelts, was it?

ELSON: That's right. And my son went to New York after Harvard, and he was taken into the Brook Club and the Links Club, two of the most exclusive clubs in New York. And it was a very natural thing, because his friends at the Fly Club had also gone to New York, and they were members of the Brook and the Links. So they introduced him into these two clubs, because they were his friends and that's what clubs are about. Now, if I had gone to Harvard I wouldn't have been in the Fly Club and I wouldn't have been able to join the Brook or the Links, because the people wouldn't have known me. If they had known me, yes, I would be taken in. For example, in London, the most exclusive club, the Club of the Duke of Edinburgh and the Prince of Wales and the noble families is White's Club. And it is the acme of social distinction in England. And I'm a member. . Nobody questioned religion or reason, they just took me in. So it's an anomaly. It doesn't happen as much now because the people know one another. They're in the same schools together, they grow up together, they intermarry. My son's former wife is a direct descendent of Light Horse Harry Lee, who signed the Declaration of Independence, and is a descendant of Robert E. Lee, the great Confederate General who was Light Horse Harry Lee's son. She is a fourth generation Princetonian. The barriers are gone.

Q: I spent five years in Yugoslavia and, you know, talk about prejudice, Serbs versus Croats.

ELSON: Yes, well that's —

Q: And you know, particularly after World War II, I just couldn't believe that these very nice people that I lived among, the Serbs, could produce the Miloševićes and his likes, you know, beyond the pale.

ELSON: Well, these ancient hatreds, you know. Usually when people see inferior in others and have a superiority complex, generally it stems from a feeling of deep inferiority.

Q: Yeah. But you know, in the United States to have that strain. I mean because all of us, you know, are coming from all sorts of backgrounds and everyone is sort of pushing to get ahead and all that. So why should there be that? But say, when I went to prep school, and even in college, I mean it was there. And sometimes it was almost imbedded as it was in college.

ELSON: Well, it was. In fact, when I became Rector, the Rector of the University of Virginia, I was the first Jew to be on the board of the university and therefore the first Jew, obviously, since I was the only one on the board, to be elected as its rector. I think that if people get to know people, and they know them as individuals, they lose the sense

of classification. I think it's a question of not knowing people. And all of this really began in the end of the 19th century with the Seligmans and the Guggenheims being rejected in Saratoga, New York, in a particular incident in a hotel. And it was because people who had suddenly attained great riches during the Industrial Revolution had to show their importance by using the only tool they could, and that was the ability to keep people out.

Q: Yeah.

ELSON: And that was their only way of saying. you see, I'm better than you. I have one advantage over you; I can keep you out. Nowadays, when you look at universities, they are 15% black Americans, they are 20% Asians, they are 5% Hispanics. So it's no longer — it's not, it's not a question any longer.

Q: No.

ELSON: And you look at the university presidents from Harvard to Princeton, and they're all Jewish.

Q: As a matter of fact, the President of Williams is Jewish.

ELSON: I don't know who it is.

Q: I can't remember his name, but it was — made a point of saying, you know, this was the first Jewish president we've had.

ELSON: Well, I've spent my life being the first Jewish something or other. And it gets tiring *(laughs)* after a while.

Q: Well, things are changing. But how successful was your — during the time you were on this civil rights board?

ELSON: Very successful. The greatest visible success was the desegregation of the government of the State of Georgia. And it was done very quietly.

I'll tell you a funny story that happened. We had a very large home in Atlanta, one of the Candler homes, built by one of the founders of the Coca-Cola Company. We bought the house in 1969 and lived there until we returned from Denmark in 1999. Our kids grew up there. I came home during the middle of this whole desegregation process, and I saw a huge cross on my front yard. I was just horrified and petrified of what I'd brought on my family. I called the police, I spoke to the chief of police, Herbert Jenkins. I said, "Chief Jenkins, you better get out here right away. I've got a major problem." So all these squad cars pulled up in front of our house. And the Chief looked up at this giant cross and he started laughing. And I said, "What's so funny?"

And he said, “Look at it.” What it was — it was a telephone pole that had broken in two, and it was hanging by its wires, giving the illusion of a cross!

Q: (laughs)

ELSON: And me with my hypersensitivity, I thought the Klan had come out and put a cross up in my yard! And the chief laughed. I had a laugh too. It was all so funny.

Q: Involved in Georgia politics, I’m reaching back in the recesses of my memory. Who was the guy who was governor who passed out ax handles?

ELSON: Lester Maddox.

Q: OK. You had to run across him. What was your —

ELSON: Yes, he was an ignorant man. Ignorant. Bigoted. Limited. But intelligent. He had a native shrewdness about him. He was very sincere in his hatred. He actually hated. You knew that he wasn’t a phony *(laughs).* He really hated. And how I became involved with him is a very funny story. Our state had an Obscenity Commissioner, and I was a bookseller. Maddox appointed a man to be head of the Obscenity Commission who was a chiropractor from Moultrie, Georgia. And I met him, the chiropractor. And we became friends. I gave him a suggestion. I said, “Rather than have the governor banning books, why don’t you start a reading program encouraging kids to read paperback books and classics and give them a reward from the governor if they read so many books.”

He said, “Great idea.” We started the program. We were down at the State Capitol. The governor was initiating the program on the steps of the State Capitol. He was going to give a speech and I was to follow with a speech.

And the governor got up, Maddox, this ignorant man. He said, *(in southern accent)* “You know, these terrible books, we ought to just pile ‘em up and burn ‘em. Just burn those books.”

And my speech was going to be, “We in Georgia are lighting the flame of knowledge and we are going to use that flame so people can see the value of books.”

Q: (laughs)

ELSON: And he took it just the opposite and used the flame to burn books!

Q: (laughs) Oh God.

ELSON: It was really a funny time.

Q: Well, could you explain just for somebody reading this a little of the background with Lester Maddox?

ELSON: Lester Maddox owned a restaurant called the Pickrick Restaurant. It was a dive. It was a restaurant where you went to get southern food. Fried chicken was the specialty. It had a long counter. You went into the restaurant, you sat at a counter like a hamburger joint, just like an old-fashioned diner, as people my age remember them.

Q: Yeah.

ELSON: And he had an ad in the Saturday evening paper, which was the least expensive ad you could run because nobody read the Saturday evening paper. And the ad was always a diatribe against integration, against blacks and against the system of integration. The ads became cult ads, and people turned to them as they would turn to a gossip columnist, to read exposé articles. He became quite well known and decided to run for governor. Just prior to that, a group of blacks in Atlanta tried to integrate his restaurant and he came running outside with an ax handle to try to drive them away. He received not only local, but national and international publicity. He didn't actually hit anyone, just threatened with his ax handle. Subsequently he decided to run for governor, and he did, and he won. It was bizarre. I'll never forget, I was driving with Herman Talmadge in a car when they announced that he had won. And I couldn't believe it. I turned to Talmadge and he said *(with southern accent)*, "Don't worry about it. He's an ignorant man, but we have a strooong independent legislator and a strooong independent judiciary; we'll take care of it." And then the legislature quietly put Zell Miller, who later became governor, and then United States senator — and was my man, by the way — as the Governor's chief of staff. And Zell kept him in line.

Q: Of course southern politics have always been in transition, particularly — Huey, the saga of Huey Long, anybody who's interested in government I mean is just — I've read most of the things on him and seen the movies and all.

ELSON: Right.

Q: But Georgia. Did you find that you were up against the Daughters of the Confederacy and that sort of thing or?

ELSON: Georgia — Atlanta had become a rather sophisticated city by that time. And we always said in Atlanta that the only color we cared about was green, and that was the color of money. So we had to keep Atlanta desegregated and safe, and Atlanta was a beacon for the rest of the South. And they used to call Talmadge's reactions the Talmadge Two-Step. He was always just ahead of the population. But I want to tell you a cute anecdote about Talmadge. One day I was in his office with Gordon Roberts, his press secretary. And Talmadge says, "Gordon," he says, "they're having this busing problem in Augusta, Georgia. Get me the superintendent of Schools in Augusta on the telephone."

So I'm sitting there listening, and Gordon gets the superintendent on the telephone. He says to Talmadge, "It's Superintendent Thurmond."

And so Talmadge says, “Thurmond? We must be related.” He says, “My mother was Mrs. Mitt Thurmond, and she was from Aiken, and that’s right outside of Augusta and Strom, Old Strom, he’s from Aiken and he’s a Thurmond. All the Thurmonds are related in that part of the country."

And the superintendent keeps saying, “No sir, no, no, I’m — we’re not related, we’re not related, no.”

And Talmadge keeps insisting and finally Gordon Roberts figures out that Superintendent Thurmond is black.

Q: (laughs)

ELSON: And Gordon put his finger across his throat like, “Cut it, Senator, you know, stop the conversation.” And I’m sitting there.

And finally Superintendent Thurmond says, “You know, Senator, we probably are related.”

Q: (laughs)

ELSON: I’ll never forget that.

Q: Let’s turn your experience with regard to Talmadge and the regulation of pornography.

ELSON: It all began in 1966. Senator Mundt of North Dakota sponsored legislation creating a presidential commission during the presidency of Lyndon Johnson. That legislation created the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography and authorized Lyndon Johnson to appoint its members. At that point in history, the issue of erotica was for the first time prominent in public discourse. There was a radical change in the habits of America regarding sexual mores. There was an influx of erotic material being sold and being displayed and shown in motion pictures and so forth. When I read about the formation of the Commission, I called Talmadge. I said, “You know, I’m a bookseller." I was 32 years old. “It would be terrific if I can – I believe I could be of some help on this, and indeed, I’d like to be on a national commission.”

So the Senator called the President and the President at that moment was making appointments on the Commission, and that was President Johnson. As a result of Talmadge's intervention, I was asked by the White House to serve on the Commission. The Commission was made up at that time by an extraordinarily distinguished group. The President of the American Library Association, the President of the American Psychological Association, the Head of the Menninger Clinic, the Head of the Clinical Psychiatric organization. The Chief Judge of the Juvenile Courts in America, Tom Gill; the senator from New York State, Kenneth Keating; the General Council of the Motion Pictures Association; the Attorney General of California. The chairman of the

Commission was the Dean of the University of Minnesota Law School, and also, the Commission included, the leading criminologist in America, Marvin Wolfgang, University of Pennsylvania. There was a priest, a rabbi, and a minister. There was a rabbi from Miami, Lehrman; a Jesuit priest from New York, Father Morton Hill; and Winfrid Link was a Methodist minister from Nashville, Tennessee. There also was a lovely woman, Catherine Speltz who was a constituent of Senator Mundt's. You can see it was a prestigious blue ribbon group.

I had a call from The White House informing me that I had been selected for the Commission. I served for four years, the entire duration of the Commission. The Commission extended beyond the administration of Lyndon Johnson and into the administration of Richard Nixon, at which time we reached our conclusions and made our report. Our mandate was to determine whether there was a causal relationship between erotica and antisocial behavior. The second mandate of the Commission was to determine the size and nature of the erotica industry. And the third was to come up with a legal definition for pornography. After four years of the Commission's life, we determined that there was no causal relationship between erotic pornography and antisocial behavior. We found that erotica existed because it fulfilled a need. People wanted to find out more about themselves. And since there wasn't legitimate information available, they turned to the clandestine and covert. And they satisfied their informational needs, not through sexual education in schools – which we later recommended - but rather through pictures of erotica that already existed and which were labeled as "pornography." We never chose to use the word pornography because we thought the word itself was pejorative. We chose to use erotica instead. We didn't talk about child pornography because this was way out of our realm, and it was in those days not considered to be a signal problem. Since we were trying to establish empirical evidence, we thought it would be improper in any way to use children in the studies. After four years, we came to our conclusions. We felt that eventually the clandestine, covert nature would disappear and people would become bored with it. We felt the best way of handling it was to make sure that there was no involuntary exposure to people of erotica, that is to say billboards, or anything they could not avoid. One can always turn off a television set and could always not go to a motion picture, or one could not buy a book if it was so labeled to identify it as erotica. It was a tremendous experience for me at 32 years of age.

Q: Yeah. Well, you —

ELSON: What happened during at the very end of the Commission was an interesting and significant experience for me – and indeed, it would have been for anyone. I stayed with the Talmadges when I was in Washington. They had an apartment on New Mexico Avenue in a building called the Colonnade. The meetings were quite frequent. We met in a federal office building across from the White House. Indeed, we held meetings all over the country; we were in San Francisco and Los Angeles. We were at the Kinsey Sex Institute located at the University of Indiana. We held our first meeting there. Our study was singularly intensive, involving a detailed examination of the entire issue. When published, the report filled over 10 volumes. When we completed our study and announced our conclusions, the President of the United States, who was then Richard

Nixon, condemned the Commission as “morally bankrupt.” Our conclusions were just the opposite of what he desired.

Something happened to me during that period which was very interesting. I was living with the Talmadges, and I asked the Senator, “How do you behave on a federal commission? What should I do?”

He said, “Keep your mouth shut. Do more homework than anyone else. And when the time to make a decision comes, you’ll notice everyone will turn to you.” And that’s what happened.

The next thing I know, I get a call from one of the members of the Commission to have dinner with him, we went out for dinner. After dinner, he suggested we go to the steps of the U.S. Capitol where the Marine Corps band was playing. We listened for a while. I turned to him — his name was Winfrid Link — and I said, “Win, this is all very nice, but why did you have me here tonight?”

He said, “Well, I just came from The White House, and there are two people in the White House who talked to me about you. One was a man by the name of Buchanan,” which was I later learned was Patrick Buchanan, who is well known to everyone today, And the other was Ehrlichman, who later achieved national notoriety. But at that time I didn’t know who they were. And he said that they asked him to talk to me because they felt I was going to be the swing vote on the Commission who will bring enough people along with me to determine the direction of the Commission. They wanted our conclusions to be “anti-porn.”

I was shocked and flattered, and I said, “It’s a little premature. We haven’t even reached the stage where we’ll be making decisions, and I don’t know why they should be that interested in me.”

He replied, “They think you’re the man who can make the difference, and they want you to be on their side.”

I said, “Well, I’m not on anyone’s side.”

He said, “They also told me to tell you that if you have a problem deciding, you should remember that you’re the only businessman on the Commission, and you could be hurt," which was, of course, a threat.

Q: Oh, of course.

ELSON: And I was stunned. I remember I went back to the hotel where I was staying on that trip, and I called my father and my wife. And I called Senator Talmadge and Morris Abram, another partner, and told them what had occurred.

And they all said, “Forget it, just vote your conscience and forget about the conversation,” which I did. But it was quite an episode, quite a story, and it received some publicity subsequently. That’s the story of the commission.

Q: Well, one thing that does interest me is that — speaking from the layman’s view of this thing, I would think of all the places where pornography — for the most part, you know, I don’t read a dirty story and then run off and rape. But it seems to be some sort of a causal connection between pornography and what we call pedophilia

ELSON: I don't know the relationship between erotica and pedophilia because we didn't study it. The evidence didn't show a relationship between erotica and other antisocial behavior.

Q: Okay Well —

ELSON: We spent four years and millions of dollars and ten volumes of study and concluded that there is no evidence of such a relationship.

Q: Well, then you were involved in several other government projects, weren’t you?

ELSON: Well, the next big one was I was asked to head the Civil Rights Commission for Georgia. And the reason I think I was asked was because they couldn’t another white businessmen in the South who would participate in that area. I was the Chair for some eight or nine years, and during that period I became very close to most people in the movement, that is to say, everyone from Julian Bond and John Lewis to Vernon Jordan and Andy Young. And I was the person who desegregated the state government in Georgia. Later I was asked by the Ford administration to assume a similar role for the entire Southeast. And I accepted. But it never became a reality, as they were unable to secure funding to create that office.

Q: Well, why was it — you were mentioning the people you were working with in Georgia of the African American side, and these seem to be almost all the leaders of the southern movement. Yet, black Americans were spread all over the country, of course. But particularly in the South, why did Georgia have so many?

ELSON: Well, Atlanta was the hub in the Southeast. It had the second largest airport in the United States. It was easily accessible. Obviously, most of the Civil Rights Movement took place in the southern states, and at the center of it all was Atlanta, where there were five historically black universities. It was a magnet for people in the movement. Martin Luther King had a congregation there, and the city became the headquarters of the various civil rights organizations. There were very bright young people who were activists in those days. And most of them were located in Atlanta. Now, I was a young fellow, about their age, and they took a liking to me, had confidence in me, and asked me to serve with them.

Q: Well, tell me about sort of some of the atmosphere there. Was there a threat over you? I mean how was the federal government responding and all?

ELSON: The courts had already decided the Brown versus Board of Education in the '50s. And Lyndon Johnson passed the Voting Rights Act in the '60s. The federal government felt they were involved, but the issue was really too big for them to have any real effect in the communities until the FBI became involved with the Emmitt Till killings in Mississippi, and the rise of the Klan and the White Citizens Councils. That's another story. I was the head of the Lucius Quintus Cincinnatus Lamar Society, created by the Southern governors at the end of the Johnson administration to continue the civil rights momentum in the South. But the federal government didn't seem to have that much of a real interest. And at that point in time, it was up to the black community to aggressively agitate for their rights, and they needed a white spokesman, and I was deemed appropriate.

Q: Well now, were you in business at this time?

ELSON: Oh yes, I was in business. I went into business in 1959.

Q: Well now —

ELSON: So now I'm in the late '60s, early '70s.

Q: Well, how was this affecting business? Because the whites had the money and particularly down in the South, I mean you were certainly up against a lot of people who passed for the establishment in those days.

ELSON: Of course Herman Talmadge was my partner, and he loved me. And people felt that I was an honest broker, — if I can use that expression. I was on the board of the largest bank in the South. At the same time I was Chairman of the Civil Rights Commission, and no one minded because they liked me. They felt I had integrity, and I was acting because I thought what I was doing was the right thing to do. I also headed up the Stadium Authority in Atlanta, which ran professional athletics in Georgia at that time. At the same time, I was chair of the L.Q.C. Lamar Society, and I never felt any personal animosity towards me because of my stands.

Q: Well, I would have thought — you know —

ELSON: Atlanta was a very liberal town. And the only color that the city of Atlanta cared about was green, the color of money. And they didn't want to do anything that could hurt the reputation of Atlanta.

Q: Well, up to a certain point, but when you're talking about really desegregating a society there's an awful lot of people whose ox is being gored or prejudices are being gored. And I would think that this would put you on the wrong side of an awful lot of powerful people.

ELSON: No, not really. I have to go back and reconstruct how people thought during that period. Too many stories about that period in the South are apocryphal. And there weren't a lot of haters running around in pickup trucks with shotguns in Atlanta, Georgia. Perhaps they were that way in Mississippi or Alabama. But they weren't in Georgia. And you didn't have that type of pushback. You had Lester Maddox pushback, you had the white segregationists trying to take over the public school system pushback. But I never felt any personal antagonism at all.

Q: Well, what about to desegregate a state such as Georgia.

ELSON: Yes, I desegregated the state government.

Q: You must have had an awful lot of people who owed their political appointments and all to their connections to the white establishment and all. And to make room for blacks you'd have to get people out.

ELSON: Well, they didn't make much room *(laughs).* It wasn't a question of overnight that 50% of the state government became black. It was very gradual. When it started out there were really only two or three people involved. And then by that time you started having elections where blacks themselves were voting and were being elected to the state legislatures. And the Georgia county unit system, giving power to the smaller counties and controlled the state government had been overturned by the Supreme Court. I never considered it a "profile in courage" in any way. I just considered it to be the natural evolution of society.

Q: Well then, you served on these boards. This must have given you a pretty high profile, didn't it?

ELSON: Very high profile.

Q: So what did you do with it?

ELSON: Well, I served on more boards *(laughs).*

Q: Well, I'm interested in what sort of boards. And let's talk about this for a bit.

ELSON: Well, I was the founding chairman of National Public Radio in the United States.

Q: Okay, well let's — I'm a public radio consumer. What did you do? I mean what was the situation —

ELSON: There were a lot of public radio stations all around the United States. Some were owned by cities, some were owned by universities, some were owned by school systems. And they were an ineffectual group generally. I was on the one in Atlanta, the

local Atlanta station, which was a PBS and NPR station — well, it wasn't NPR in those days. The system had a public radio station and a public television station. One day I received a call from a man who introduced himself as being a representative of the APRS and asked if I would serve on their board. And I said, "Well, I don't know what APRS is. I know what VSOP is and I know what SPQR is, but I don't know what APRS is."

He says, "The Association of Public Radio Stations.
And I said, "Well, I'm delighted to serve on the board."

He said, "Well, not so fast. We'd like to interview you before we actually appoint you." I said, sure. And a fellow named Clyde Robinson came down from Washington, where he was in the office of ARPS, and he talked to me and then offered me a position as one of their directors. About two to three months later I got a notice from them that they were having a meeting in Phoenix, Arizona. But I said no, I didn't feel like going to Phoenix. In those days it was a two-day trip from Atlanta, even by airplane. You had to change planes.

My wife said, "Look, you accepted a position on the board. That means you took someone else's place, and that means if you don't show up they'll have one person who isn't there. You accepted the position; you go."

So I said, "You're right."

So I flew to Phoenix, and I arrived and found myself in the middle of a conference of all the public radio entities in the United States. They were attempting to form a single organization to represent all the public radio facilities. And they were all mostly academics. And they were fighting and arguing with each other. I was one of the few businesspeople involved, and I said in a very simple statement, "Look, in order to have a merger, and that's what you want to do, you have to give up more than you thought you were willing to give, and you have to accept less than you really want. And if you can do that, we can all get together." Well, it turned out they did just what I suggested, and they got together. Later, I received a phone call asking if I would be on the executive committee forming the new organization. I said sure. Then the next thing, I received a phone call, would I be on the committee drawing up the bylaws for the new organization, the constitution for it. I said sure. Then the organization was formed, they asked if I would be interested in being chairman. I asked, "How can I be Chairman? I don't even know the lingo of your industry. I've only been in this thing a couple of months. I don't know even what the problems are, so it'd be very difficult for me to come up with solutions." And I said, "And I don't understand what you're doing, really."

And they said, "Yeah, but you're the only person we can all agree on." So I became the first chairman. And we created the first public radio entity. We had to come up with a name. We thought of American Public Radio and we thought of U.S. Public Radio. And finally, I said, "You know, we've got this production facility called NPR; we ought to just use the name of our own production facility and create the whole organization and

use that as the umbrella name for the entire industry." And that's what we did, and that's how NPR got started.

Q: Well, I would think that getting these groups together is a little bit like herding kittens. I mean particularly these are people, particularly the academics and all, who can argue for hours over nothing practically.

ELSON: Well, you're absolutely right *(laughs).* That's precisely what the problem was. And I think it was my practicality that attracted them.

Q: I can see where this would — but it's interesting that they would defer to you because there's nothing more almost unyielding than an academic with an opinion.

ELSON: Well, I also ran a university, so I've had a lot of experience in that field.

Q: Well, how did it go? I mean what were the big issues that you had to —

ELSON: There were several major issues. One was funding. And there was an entity called the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, and they were the ones who disbursed the funds from the US government to the public radio and public television stations. They used a specific formula which allocated 16 percent of the revenues, which they disbursed to public radio, and the other 84 percent to public television. The only way I could get money for public radio was by taking it away from public television. So I went around the country giving speeches and talking about the advantages of public radio. And finally, I was called to testify before a congressional hearing on that subject. At the congressional hearing —and that is a very long story, but it's quite funny — I was called upon to speak to what I found was a very hostile audience because the chair of the committee was a congressman by the name of Collins from Dallas, Texas. And the head of public television was from Dallas and the chairman was doing all he could do, the chairman, to protect the funding for his friend, the Chairman of PBS.

When they called on me to speak, I said, "We just heard from the Ford Foundation, who told us they gave so many millions to public television. If PBS didn't get more money from the federal government, the foundation wouldn't be able to provide them with grants large enough for the stations to continue to operate." I responded, "Well, you just heard from the man from the Ford Foundation." I said, "But he didn't tell you how much he gives to public radio, which is *nothing." T*hen I said, "You heard from the PBS that it requires a quarter of a million dollars an hour to put on a PBS program. But what you didn't hear was the fact that a public radio station costs on average $150,000 for an entire year."

Q: Yeah.

ELSON: So I said, "You're getting more bang for your buck. It's" — and I said, "You know, you heard from the Chairman of the Corporation of Public Broadcasting. But he doesn't talk about radio. He only talks about television. And when they invite public

radio into one of their meetings, we're merely the waiter at the table, we are not even sitting at the table." As a result of my testimony, Congress changed the formula so that public radio would have no less than 25% from no more than 16%. And I was a great hero to public radio.

Q: Again, I speak as a complete amateur in this, but public radio's main outlet, what I think would be car radios.

ELSON: Yes.

Q: And I mean this is in a way sort of before intimate and connected to the public than television.

ELSON: Well, everybody watched public television; it was a more romantic vehicle.

Q: But —

ELSON: Most people, when they listen to public radio, they listen during drive time. And on drive time there were two programs. One program, was called "All Things Considered," and I was present at the creation of a second program, "Morning Edition," which became the early morning news program of NPR.

Q: Well now, were you — Were you having problems with sort of your — particularly on the political side. There is something —

ELSON: Oh yes, major problems. PBS had a much stronger lobby, and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting didn't like us at all, because we were the stepchildren, only getting 16% of the budget and causing 50% of the problems. Oh, there were many political problems. I hired Frank Mankiewicz as our first president. He was the son of the great film producer. He was a journalist who ran Robert Kennedy's campaign for President and McGovern's campaign for President. He was an experienced politician. He was also a lawyer and he's run — he'd been involved in a human rights organization, and he was a journalist of note. So he was the perfect man for me and he really carried the water.

Q: Well, I would have thought that — the fact is that much of public radio exposes things that are not covered elsewhere. And particularly from the left. I mean not the extreme left at all, but what you might call the liberal side of the political — exposés and all this. And this cannot sit very well with many of the politicians.

ELSON: Well, it didn't. And as a result, President Nixon, President Reagan, and President Bush all tried to cut the funding for public telecommunications. All the Republican administrations tried to cut the funding for public broadcasting.

Q: Well, who keeps the funding going?

ELSON: Well, that was the second thing I did. What happened was that I left public radio 1980, and in 1990 I received a telephone call from the then chairman of Public Radio and from the president of Public Radio. They came to visit me in Atlanta and they said, "We have a problem. The government keeps cutting down our funding and they keep threatening to cut us off completely. We need to create a vehicle for independence. Can you help us?" So I suggested they create a foundation, which they did, and I became its first chairman, the National Public Radio Foundation. And since then the foundation has grown to many hundreds of millions of dollars, and it's a vehicle by which public radio receives a great deal of its funding.

Q: Now, the non-expert, which is me, what are the strengths for public radio of a foundation?

ELSON: Well, it's a funding source.

Q: Yeah, but —

ELSON: A foundation — if a foundation has three or four hundred million dollars, five hundred million dollars, and earned 5% a year, that means they're getting 25 million dollars a year.

Q: Now, I assume there's a board that doles out the money.

ELSON: Oh, yes. I haven't had anything to do with it in 20 years, but there's a Public Foundation Board and there's a Public Radio Board.

Q: Well, have you found — the time you were dealing with it, were there strong attacks from the right or from the left on —

ELSON: Oh, there were always attacks. There were so many attacks, they were so often, and the volume and velocity were so strong that you really didn't give a damn *(laughs).* That was something you lived with. It's like if you had some disease, you're just forced to live with it, that's all.

Q: Well, they cancel each other off to a certain extent.

ELSON: Well, to the extent that if you listen to all the criticism you were receiving you wouldn't have time to do anything else.

Q: Did you have early on strong supporters of public radio? You know, individuals with money and all?

ELSON: No, no. Not to start with.

Q: So where did you get the money?

ELSON: Eventually we did a superb public relations job and recruited people of affluence who understood our message and wanted to support it.

Q: It's certainly a great — you take great pleasure in a number of things, including the desegregation, but also in this public radio thing.

ELSON: I gave greater visibility resulting in the success of the public radio system. Public radio established a distinguished service award to give to a person each year whose actions signally rendered service to the public radio system and had an extraordinary effect in encouraging the public radio system. I received first Distinguished Service Award. Subsequently, the award was named after me. It is the Edward Elson Award, and it is given every year.

Q: That's quite a distinction.

ELSON: Well, it's — I don't hear from them very much anymore, but I'm glad it all still exists.

Q: When you were doing this, were any other countries having — you know, you think of the BBC and other ones. Were you looking at other —

ELSON: We did look at Canada. They had the CBC, the Canadian Broadcasting. There government was much more supportive than our government. The CBC was well accepted throughout Canada by the government itself, whereas our public radio has never been. Public telecommunications has always been a stepchild to our government. In fact, most Republican administrations were anti-public radio.

Q: Yeah. Well, of course there's great suspicion and elements of the government — elements of the people about the role of government and very suspicious of anything that —

ELSON: Well, actually, the reason public radio was established was to offer an inducement to commercial radio, to give a spur to commercial radio, showing them that good programming could be productive and could be profitable. That's why public radio was started. It was really to interest the commercial side into doing what public radio was doing. I must say that public radio was a failure if it is judged for its success in doing so. And if that is the standard by which public radio is to be judged as commercial radio picked up but few parts of how public radio fulfilled its mandate, the idea has been a failure. Now, with cable television and with Internet radio, Sirius radio stations, they seem to have now decided that public radio is a worthwhile vehicle, as they often copy public radio's programs.

Q: Yeah.

ELSON: But as far as public radio being a spur to commercial radio, no, it never was. So we really failed in our mission, but we created a very valuable tool of communication for the American people.

Q: How did you —

ELSON: I don't know if I'm articulating this clearly for you.

Q: Oh, you are. How about early elections? Elections are always open to tremendous bias and all that, national elections. Were these a challenge for public radio?

ELSON: We kept clear of taking positions during elections.

Q: Well then, let's see. We've covered quite a few things before we move to your foreign affairs career. Were there any other things that you were — oh, you were dean of a — president of a university, was that?

ELSON: Rector. It's an unusual form of governance. I served on many university boards. I was a trustee of Brown University; I'm a trustee emeritus now. I was a trustee of Talladega College, of Hampton University. I was a trustee of Spellman College. I was trustee of, of Brenau University; I was a trustee of Hebrew Union College. I was a trustee of Phillips Academy; I'm now trustee emeritus. I — which quite involved an education historically. I was appointed to the board of the University of Virginia by the Governor of Virginia. The board of the university elects its own leader, and that person is elected by secret ballot without nomination. That is the way it was. It's been changed subsequently with Sunshine Laws. And I was elected the rector of the university. Thomas Jefferson was the first rector, James Monroe was a rector, Edward Stettinius was a rector. It was quite a noble lineage. Although I must say, they all must be rolling in their graves that I achieved the same position they held. The University of Virginia was founded by Thomas Jefferson. He was a great egalitarian, and he mandated there be no titles in the university, that there be no doctors except medical doctors. And teachers would be called Mister as opposed to Professor, or whatever. But he gave one title, and that was Rector, and that was to himself, which is the European terminology for the leader of a university. At the University of Virginia, all powers in the university are vested in the rector. And in 1907 they decided to go to a presidential system. Any powers held by a president subsequently - and there have been many presidents - are devolved powers from the rector, which could be removed at any time and returned to the rector. If you are hit by a truck that says University of Virginia on the side, you can't sue the University of Virginia. There's actually no entity. Whom you sue is the rector and the board of visitors. So I was elected by the board and later served as the rector - which is really a super president's job.

Q: Well OK, you were doing this from when to when?

ELSON: With what, I'm sorry?

Q: You were the rector from when to when?

ELSON: Oh, I was rector in the late ‘80s to early ‘90s. That was when I left — when I finished my rectorship and went to Denmark as the ambassador.

Q: All right, well let’s talk about the rectorship.

ELSON: All right.

Q: Talk about the relationship of the University of Virginia with the Virginia legislature.

ELSON: Well, the University of Virginia is the pride of the Commonwealth of Virginia. It is — it probably ranks about number 15, 16 of all universities of America, and it historically has been the number one public university in America. But it’s never really been considered to be public by the people of Virginia, and it’s never been considered public generally by the people who apply to it, to attend the school or teach there. Because it has always been run quite like a private institution. Only 7% of its funding comes from the Commonwealth. The people of Virginia have great affection for the university and the finest appointment, the most important appointment a Governor of Virginia can make is to the Board of the University. Everyone begs the Governor to be a member of the board of visitors of the university. Each member has at maximum two four-year terms. Well, you have one four-year term, and you can be reelected to a second by a subsequent governor. That doesn’t mean you are going to be reappointed; usually there’s a subsequent governor who has to make an appointment, and he can appoint anyone whom he chooses. It’s difficult to have two governors in a row who like you. So appointment by the Governor is a treasured position to anybody who receives such an appointment. I was appointed first by Chuck Robb, then reappointed by Jerry Baliles, the governor who followed. I served into the term of Douglas Wilder, who was the next governor. And he became a very close friend of mine, as had been Chuck and Linda Robb. Wilder became especially close because he was a black governor living alone, divorced, in Richmond in the governor’s mansion. It quite a lonely life for him. And he took a liking to me, and he used to invite me in to spend weekends with him at the mansion. We became very close, and I was able to influence the Governor to be an advocate for the university, and I was able to advise him as to his legislative decisions concerning the university.

Q: Well, when you took over the rectorship, what were the major problems at the time?

ELSON: Oh, there was one single and significant problem. The board of visitors, who ran the university, had just fired its president, the provost, and the vice president, the three top officials. The university community had become confused by the board’s actions, as all the firings occurred at about the same time. That is not to say that people didn’t deserve to be released, but it was unique, I think, for any university to fire its three major officials within the same year period.

Q: What was the cause or?

ELSON: Well, I'd have to go into details and discuss personal matters concerning each of the three, but in short, they just didn't like them. They didn't think they were doing a competent job. The board formed a search committee. I was on the search committee and I was also a member of the finance committee as well. The search committee did not come up with a candidate for the presidency for over six months after a plethora of interviews. The search committee had a search firm; we had input from our alumni, students and faculty. But the committee couldn't come up with a president. And suddenly, both the term of the rector who was my predecessor and his term on the board expired. The man who was supposed to succeed him was Charlie Brown, the Chairman of AT&T at the time. The governor, the new governor did not reappoint Charlie Brown, so they ended up with the search committee with no one in charge of the search and no candidate for the presidency. I received a telephone a call asking if I serve as an interim rector pro tem, and I would take over the search. The reason given to me was that the Chairman of the Finance Committee - which I was not - would have to succeed as the pro tem rector. But the Chairman of the Finance Committee, Charlie Brown, had not been reappointed to the board. And I was the only member of the search committee who was also on the finance committee. They asked me if I would do the job on a temporary basis, which is the pro tem part of the situation. And I said yes, and I did it. And not only did I do it, but within two or three weeks I had found a new president, and he was accepted by the board. The members of the board were so astounded that anybody could do in two or three weeks what the entire search committee had not been able to do in six months, they elected me rector.

Q: Well, did you find the faculty easy or difficult to deal with or?

ELSON: Well, when I first got into office, the faculty was upset, for they had been very much opposed at first to the man whom I picked to be the president. And it turned out that he became the most successful president serving longer than any other president in the history of the university.

Q: Who was that?

ELSON: John Casteen. He was in office for over 20 years.

Q: Well, what was his background?

ELSON: He had gone to university as a graduate student, gotten his PhD at the university, as well as his MA and BA. He then went to California and then came back to the University of Virginia to teach and became the Director of Admissions. Subsequently, he became the Head of the State of Virginia Department of Education, then became the President of the University of Connecticut. I brought him back to the University of Virginia as president He later became Head of the LSATs, and he became one of the most significant figures in American education. Anyway, I put him in office and the faculty was very much opposed. So the next thing I know, the faculty calls me to a Faculty Senate Meeting. It is unheard to summon the rector anywhere. It's like summoning the President of the United States into court, so to speak. Sitting in front of

the faculty and being questioned, I was asked, "What are you going to do about more classrooms? We need more classrooms?"

I said, "Well, I can solve that problem with a stroke of a pen."

They said, "What do you mean?"

I said, "Instead of teaching six hours a week, why don't you all teach 10 hours a week? We'd have more faculty and wouldn't need as many classes." They had also asked me about increasing the size of the faculty. About the classrooms, I said, "Well, instead of teaching from nine to twelve, why don't we teach from eight to four. Then we don't need as many classes because we'll have the same amount of students going to class all day long." They were stunned that anyone would not be petrified to be coming before them and could answer the questions in a manner which challenged their –

Q: Prerogatives.

ELSON: Yeah, their prerogatives. They certainly didn't want to teach more hours, so they came over to my side. And also, I changed the concept that meetings of our board had to be held in the boardroom, and instead held meetings throughout the university. I invited faculty members to all of our functions, whether they be lunches, dinners, or breakfasts, whether they be parties or public ceremonies. I always included the faculty, and they had never been included before. So I became a great hero to the faculty. In fact, when I finished my term as rector, I became the first rector in the history of the university going back to 1819 who was ever asked to be on the faculty. They gave me an appointment to the faculty in the Government Department.

Q: Well, that's really something. How integrated was the university by the time you were at the university?

ELSON: Oh, it was fully integrated. But one thing wasn't. We still had predominantly black fraternities. In fact, those particular fraternities were all black. There was no white integration into black fraternities and very little black integration into white fraternities. I tried to stop that. I found out the biggest opponents that I had were the black students. They wanted their own fraternities. I lost that one. I also tried to stop big time athletics, and I was like a flattened possum on the highway. And then I also tried to get rid of the fraternities by instituting a college system, such as Yale and Harvard. I took all the members of the board up to Yale and Harvard and exposed them to their college systems, where you have individual colleges within the university. That is to say, for living in and for dining purposes. And I was — I was run over again. I never could get the idea accepted; however, today, there are several colleges within the University.

Q: It's interesting, because I know my little college, I went to Williams, after I left got rid of fraternities.

ELSON: Yes.

Q: Without any, you know, life went on. It wasn't a do or die —

ELSON: No, but I was just up against Richmond, which was probably the most conservative town in the United States. And they just ran me into the ground on those issues. It was not a personal basis; they just didn't want it. They wanted to continue the way they had run the University for years. In fact, Richmond was hyper-conservative. Once I was attacked by the Richmond newspapers for something involving a change I proposed. And the reporter said, "Does it bother you you're being attacked by the Richmond paper?"

I said, "No, the last thing the Richmond paper was for was slavery."

Q: (laughs)

ELSON: I said, "No, I don't think it was anything against me personally."

Q: What about the faculty of reaching out, say beyond the foreign students coming in, both foreign being non-Virginian and actually non-Americans coming in? Was this —?

ELSON: Foreign students were not an issue. There was an issue about out-of-state students coming to the university, as the legislature, of course, supported the university in those days with about 25, 35% of the budget. It's down to about 7% now. But at that time, the legislature provided about 36% of the University's budget. They mandated that no more than 35% of the students could be from out of state. And only three members of the board could be from out of state as well, and I was the first non-resident of the Commonwealth of Virginia to be the rector of the university.

Q: What about, was there an effort to reach out to get students from other countries?

ELSON: Well, as a matter of fact I started it. What I did was I created a foundation for the Director of Admissions to travel to Europe to recruit students.

Q: How did that work?

ELSON: It worked very well. In fact, many students are from around the world now. In fact, I've personally selected three or four from Denmark, where I was posted, as you know, who then came to the university. Now, the university has nine percent non-U.S. students. They need to do that today in order to make it an international university.

Q: Well, one of the biggest suppliers of students has been China.

ELSON: Well, that's a new phenomena, brand-new phenomena. And many universities who are recruiting from China are doing it as a way to secure more full tuition-paid students.

Q: Well, I know my little prep school up in Connecticut has used the China side almost as a cash cow.

ELSON: Precisely. My son is a professor at the University of Delaware. He says he's very much opposed to the bringing in of some of these non-English-literate Chinese students. And I don't say that as a negative in a pejorative sense. Most of them can't speak English; they do not have the same ethic regarding honesty and integrity. A significant number of them find it difficult to acclimate to our system of education. But the universities love them because these students are paying full tuition.

Q: Speaking of honesty and all, Virginia has a code of giving or receiving aid in this examination.

ELSON: Right, that's the honor system code, right.

Q: Huh?

ELSON: Yes.

Q: This is a fairly — I know my college had it too. Did this cause any particular problems?

ELSON: Well, the University of Virginia was probably the first and most successful honor code in the United States. And it continues today. However, today, and for the last 20, or30 years, there has been a problem. And that's the students no longer will accept the single sanction. In other words, the single sanction said that if you lied, cheated, or stole, you were dismissed from the university immediately. Or if you saw someone else lying, cheating, or stealing. and didn't report them, you as well were dismissed from the university. But today, there are many students who do not think it is that serious a crime and they think there should be a choice of sanctions. You can be put on probation or you can be out for six months and come back rather than the total dismissal and disgrace. It's a real problem.

Q: What about another side of — we've talked about this before, I believe, but drinking?

ELSON: Drinking was terrific. I loved it. *(laughs)* It was a great party school. It was a four-year party, and I must say, I enjoyed myself every minute of it.

Q: But it does have consequences.

ELSON: Ah, yes. There weren't that many people who could not handle it. I don't know of anyone specifically who became so alcoholically maimed that it affected their student life.

Q: Well, the University of Virginia, were you involved with any other schools in the Virginia university system?

ELSON: Yes, but the University of Virginia was the still, of course, is the lynchpin of Virginia education. It's, it, it, it is the apex of all educational institutions within the state. And it has a special position. It's really in a league of its own.

Q: Yeah. My son is a graduate of Mary Washington College, which he — or now, The University of Mary Washington.

ELSON: Right. It was a woman's college of the state of Virginia. And now, of course, it's a general university.

Q: Yeah. I remember he used to bring one beautiful southern belle after another.

ELSON: Well, they all went to school in Virginia. I did the same thing.

Q: Yeah.

ELSON: My wife went to Randolph-Macon and that's where we met and married.

Q: Well, this used to kill me, because I was the product of an all-male college and seeing my son exposed to this —

ELSON: I was the product of an all-male prep school and an all-male college too.

Q: (laughs)

ELSON: But today everything is different.

Q: Yeah.

ELSON: My granddaughter was just accepted in Harvard and Princeton, and now they share dorms, men and women together.

Q: Yeah. Were you sort of keeping a finger on foreign affairs and all during all this time you were doing these things?

ELSON: Yeah. Well, my first real experience in foreign affairs was when Jimmy Carter was president I was asked to be part of the delegation that returned the Crown of St. Stephen to Hungary.

Q: Oh yes, I talked to Phil Kaiser.

ELSON: Yes, Phil Kaiser was the Ambassador to Hungary at that time.

Q: Well, that must have been — I want to talk about it, because you know, that was a bone of contention for so long and thank God it was done.

ELSON: I thought what Jimmy Carter did was brilliant. Cyrus Vance was the Secretary of State. What he thought was that the crown was the symbol of Hungarian nationalism. It was not unlike our Declaration of Independence or Constitution. And he felt if we returned that crown, which was been kept at Fort Knox since the end of the Second World War, when the fascists had turned it over to the Americans in Austria to keep it from falling into the hands of the communists. He felt that if we were to send it back, we would be returning the symbol of Hungarian nationalism, which had served to unite the country and possibly draw it from the Communist orbit, the Soviet orbit. The decision to return it was objected to by the Hungarian American community.

Q: Oh yes.

ELSON: That was the objection to returning it. And it was a phenomenal experience for me to be on Air Force II, I guess, because it was Vice President's plane. We landed in Budapest at midnight. I'll never forget it. There were one million people at the airport. Stepping off the airplane and looking back, seeing the United States America painted across the fuselage was one of the great moments of my life, a moment of extraordinary pride. And signal excitement!

Q: What sort of festivities went with that?

ELSON: Oh, there were all sorts of things. The most interesting thing that happened to me was a visit to Cardinal Mindszenty. There were two Catholic priests on the plane coming over. And they liked to drink and I liked to drink. During the entire trip the three of us sat up drinking and talking. We arrived in Budapest and left the airport in a motorcade, taken to our hotel. We stayed in the Hilton Hotel. It was by that time about two or three in the morning and the adrenaline was pumping through us all. I was just going to try to get a few hours sleep, when the phone rang. It was the two priests. One was a bishop, one was a monseigneur. I do not remember what their names were... They said, "Eddie, how would you," — now we're buddies so I'm Eddie to them - "how would you like to meet the Cardinal who replaced Mindszenty."

I said, "Fabulous." So I put my clothes back on. We leave the hotel; it's still dark. We get into a big black car, the two priests and myself. And we go to see the Cardinal. They were talking with the Cardinal, and I wanted to get in on the conversation. So I said, "How can you explain being, your Eminence, being a Catholic prelate in a communist country?"

And he said, "Eddie," (I was so shocked to be called Eddie by him) we swim in the same pool, but to different strokes." He said, "And when we wake up in the morning we don't eat Catholic bread and we don't eat communist bread, we eat Hungarian bread." I thought that was the most brilliant answer and explanation.

Q: Oh yes.

ELSON: Of how it worked.

Q: Yeah.

ELSON: Anyway, it was an extraordinary adventure for me.

Q: Well, then did this lead to other things or?

ELSON: Well, then I became Chairman of the Board of Trustees, the American Jewish Committee. And we were quite interested in Soviet Jewry and the issue of freedom to leave. I also became involved in Germany. when the government in Bonn, in trying to get Germans out of Kazakhstan where there are still a lot of ethnic Germans. They thought if they could get together with the American Jewish Committee and create a right to leave, combining the Soviet Jewry issue with the ethnic German issue, it would have a greater impact. I became quite involved with that issue, a foreign affairs experience.

Also, when Jimmy Carter was President. I went to a meeting in Vienna between Prime Minister Vorster of South Africa and Vice President Mondale. But it was Bert Lance who asked Carter to let me go to those meetings.

Q: I think it was Stalin had forced the Volga Germans, the Deutsch, to move to Kazakhstan.

ELSON: That's right. That's exactly — and those were the people we were trying to get out.

Q: Yeah. After you left the University of Virginia, where did you go?

ELSON: To Denmark.

Q: It was right from there. Who was the President?

ELSON: Bill Clinton.

Q: Had you had any contact with Clinton?

ELSON: Yes. I first met President Clinton at the Renaissance Weekend. I'll tell you the story, what happened. Susie and I were in the first class at Renaissance that Phil Lader put together at Sea Pines in 1981 on Hilton Head Island. I was deeply involved in Georgia politics. And my closest friend after Senator Talmadge was Governor Zell Miller, who later became Senator. And Susie and I were significant supporters of Zell Miller, both financially and also politically. It turned out that my wife Susie is an extraordinarily brilliant woman whose has a genius IQ. As a very young woman she served as the Chairman of the Georgia Mental Health Association, and then the National Mental Health Association. She was very close to Zell, who was quite interested in that subject. He once defended her when she was being attacked by the Speaker of the

Georgia House, accusing the Mental Health Association who had sponsored a bill to decriminalize alcoholism. She was being attacked as the president of the organization who suggested the Decriminalization Bill. Zell, then a state senator, came to her defense. We were so enthralled with this young state senator who was willing to stand up to the speaker that we started supporting him and we became very close to him. and he was very close to Clinton, when Zell was Governor. He asked me to become active in Clinton's campaign, and I was. Later, Clinton won the election.

At the same time, we were very close with the Gore family, as my wife's closest friend in college was Jane Holmes Dixon, who was the Bishop of the National Cathedral in Washington. And Jane, being very close to the Gore family, had roomed with Al Gore's sister in college and had dated Frank Unger, who had married Gore's sister and who later became Deputy Attorney General. And Jane was very close to us. When Susie was Head of the Mental Health Association, Gore's wife, Tipper Gore, was on her board. As a result of these connections, I ran Gore's campaign in Georgia in 1988, which he won in Georgia. Later he dropped out of the race for President. So we had a close connection with Gore. And by the time when Clinton becomes President and chooses Gore as Vice President, I had two people who nominated me for a position in government. So I was on two lists. Now, it was Zell, who really quarterbacked my interest in becoming Ambassador. He was my advocate. At any time when one shows an interest in participating in government, one always needs an advocate. And Zell Miller was a very strong advocate for me. I don't know if I oversimplified it all.

Q: No, no, no, but you are giving — had you had any idea what you wanted to do?

ELSON: Yes, I thought I'd like to be an ambassador.

Q: Why?

ELSON: I'd always wanted to be an ambassador. I thought it was a great job to be a salesman for your country, and I thought I could take all the skills that I had gained during my life in commerce and had been in industry, I had been in academe, I had been in the academy, I had been in cultural causes, I had been in public relations, I had been in government, I had been in politics, and I could focus all of these experiences representing my country.

Q: Did you pick Denmark or —

ELSON: No. What happened was soon after Clinton's inauguration I had a telephone call from Zell Miller. He was then the Governor of Georgia. And he said, "The President has just called me and he wants to know if Edward Elson would like to go to the UK (United Kingdom) as ambassador, to Spain or to Austria."

And I said, "Governor, tell the President yes, yes, yes." I didn't hear anything for a couple weeks.

One day I'm at home and the telephone rings. And it's the President on the other end of the phone. And I was stunned. And he said, "Eddie," this is exactly what he said. He said, "Eddie, I'd like you to be my Ambassador to Denmark."

Well, I was stunned for two reasons. One, to be called on the telephone by the President without a secretary intervening, just picking up the phone and there's the President. And two, that I was stunned because I was thinking in terms of UK, Spain, or Austria. And suddenly he says Denmark. And he gives me his reason for wanting me to go to Denmark and he says essentially that, "Denmark is an ally, but not a friend. And your brief is to make them into a friend. And we have been taking them for granted for too long and we have to show more attentiveness to them."

And I said, "Yes sir, thank you very much, sir," and hung up the phone.

I told Susie we're going to Denmark. She said, "Where's Denmark?" Well, of course we knew where it was, we'd been there several times.

But the fact was, we were going to Denmark. The next morning I picked up The New York Times. And there in The New York Times was a picture of the Prime Minister of Denmark, who was then President of the EU (European Union). And he was in the Oval Office welcoming the new American President on behalf of the EU. And I looked at that picture and I said, "Ah-ha, there has to be a connection."

When I got to Denmark later, I was meeting with the Prime Minister and he said, "Do you know how you got here?" And I looked at him quizzically. He said, "Well, I was sitting with your President, and I said, 'How come American Presidents don't send friends of theirs to be Ambassador to Denmark?' and he said, 'I'll send you a friend,' and he picked up the phone and called you when I was sitting there.'"

Q: Ha!

ELSON: And that's how I got to be Ambassador to Denmark.

Q: What had been your judgment of Clinton before he ran for President?

ELSON: Well, I knew him very well. And I remembered him as an articulate, brilliant young governor. I thought he was one of the most charismatic people I'd ever met, and I thought he would be a terrific President. He also had spearheaded the DLC — the Democratic Leadership Council, of which I was a supporter. And I knew of his stands on the issues of the times and I knew of his extraordinary intellect. I knew of his signal personality. And I thought he'd be a perfect man to be President of the United States. And I knew of his enthusiasm and youthfulness, which we didn't have with either Ronald Reagan or George Bush.

Q: How about Hillary?

ELSON: Hillary is a fabulous woman. She stayed with us a number of times, and Susie gives her highest accolade, low maintenance as a guest. She's the type of person who folds her own towels and hangs them up and makes her own bed.

Q: So now you're in Denmark.

ELSON: When I arrived in Denmark, the embassy staff greeted us at the airport. I previously told you the story of how I got to Denmark and the conversations with the President and with the Prime Minister. I told you all of that, didn't I?

Q: Yeah.

ELSON: All right. I arrived in Denmark, and a few hours later, on my first day, I wanted to see my office. We flew in from Atlanta, Georgia, an overnight flight. We arrived at either 10 or 11 in the morning. We were greeted by the embassy staff at the airport, which was very, very gracious of them. We went to our residence, which was the home of the Nazi Dr. Werner Best, the German Governor of Denmark, an S.S. Colonel who ran Denmark, and he was known as the Beast of Copenhagen. Werner Best was tried as a war criminal, sentenced to death, went to prison, and in about 1995 - earlier than that, about 1980's, came out of prison and had a very successful legal career in Germany.

After arriving, the first thing I wanted to do was go and see my office. I was quite excited about it. Sitting at my desk I noticed a stack of position papers sitting before me. There must have been 12 or 15 of them. The stack was perhaps three or four inches high. They all had little stamps that said agree, disagree, discuss. And my new DCM (Deputy Chief of Mission), whom I had met earlier, was sitting across from me. And I looked at him and he looked at me, I looked at the papers, and I took each paper and I checked "disagree". And after it was all finished, I picked them up and handed them to him, who was stunned at what I had done. He said, "Well, what am I going to do? You disagreed with everything."

I said, "Yes, I haven't even read any of them. And you had these on my desk really to show me who was boss." And I said, "There was no reason to do this in my first hour in the office. There was no reason to give me the papers without an explanation." So I rejected them.

He said, "What do we do now?"

I said, "Now you bring them in one by one, and we sit down and we talk about them."

And it was a good lesson for me. I learned that there is a certain element of control by the State Department over new non-career diplomats, or attempts to control. I felt the best thing for me to do on the onset was to get it straight. And we did and we became very good friends subsequently. We arrived in December and it was dark, damp, and wet, raw. Not cold, but extremely unpleasant because of the continuing darkness. Usually in Denmark at that time of year, the sun will come up about 10 in the morning and go down

about 2:30, which creates an exceedingly depressing environment. Susie and I took a while to adjust to this and to acclimate to this new environmental situation. So we lazed around a bit, going to visit the Chief of Protocol for the Danish government to arrange the presentation of my credentials to the queen. The Chief said, “Well, when do you want to do it?" He offered me the opportunity to do it immediately on an informal basis at the Queen's holiday home in Jutland, and then we could go to the Christmas parties at the other embassies in Copenhagen, or we could wait and have a formal presentation at the Palace, arriving in a coach and six.

And I said, “Well, when do you think would be appropriate for the Ambassador of the United States?”

He said, “Well, you have two choices. You can wait until after Christmas when the Queen returns to Amalienborg Palace and be received at Christiansborg Palace,” where I would be meeting her. Amalienborg is where she lived; Christiansborg was the seat of government. “And we will bring you my coach and carriage to the Queen in white tie, and it’ll be a very formal presentation. Or you can do it at her private home, where she is right now, which is out in the country, and it will be a very informal presentation.” And feeling that this would be the only opportunity I would probably ever have to present credentials to a queen, I said would rather wait and do the more formal one. And he said, “Well, you know, you won’t be included in the Christmas parties.”

I said, “Well, that isn’t my purpose of being in Denmark, and I think I can get over that.”

So we waited until after Christmas to present credentials. Although I was in Denmark, I was not officially representing the United States government to the government of Denmark. I was representing the U.S. head of state to the Danish head of state. However, I did use the opportunity to make my calls on the senior ambassadors who were in residence and the introductory courtesy calls to members of the government. I spent a lot of time doing that and handling very minor embassy work. I did have an appointment with Mærsk Mc-Kinney Møller, who owned the A.P. Moller company, the great shipping line in Denmark, which did about 25% of its business with the United States Department of Defense. I listened to him as he complained about the Jones Act. Well, I thought I had some new and important information. I came right back to the embassy, told the DCM and the chief political officer about it, and they both laughed. They said, “They’ve been complaining about that for years.” So I learned at that point that it was very important — it was a very early lesson — it was very important for me to sift through what people were talking about, and to be more experienced in my conversations. That is to say, to be more informed and erudite about the subjects in which I would be getting into with these people. It was a very valuable and quick lesson for me.

Subsequent to that, I decided I would visit government officials and important business and cultural associates in Denmark by myself and not with a member of the staff. I found that was efficacious for two reasons. One, when I was by myself, they were more open with me. And two, they could learn that I was totally informed about all the subjects about which I was conversing. And I thought that would have more impact. They,

perhaps, would have with them a scribe. When I returned to the embassy I would dictate detailed reports of my conversations as verbatim as I was able. It was an exceedingly effective ploy. Immediately the word got around the government that I knew what I was doing and I was taken very seriously.

No one before, or anyone subsequently, had such a good reception among government officials. The most important reason for the success of my initial experience in Denmark, was that I had spent six weeks at the Foreign Affairs School in Washington taking an in-depth course on Scandinavia and Denmark. So by the time I arrive, I was highly knowledgeable about their systems, the welfare system, the culture, the traditions, the political situation in not only Denmark, but all of Scandinavia. Doing that got me off to a jump start. Had I not had that course, I wouldn't have been as, as knowledgeable as I was, nor would I have been as effective immediately as I was. The Danes respected that and, and were extraordinarily receptive.

Also, shortly after I arrived, went to the National History Museum, and spent four days walking around it. The museum is located in Frederiksborg Castle outside of Copenhagen, where each room, or several rooms, represented a different period in Danish history through the use of pictures and the decorative arts, furniture, porcelain, all sorts of objets d'art, which provided an impression of various points of their history. After I left the museum, after spending many days, I sat down and wrote an article for one of the many papers in which I said, "I can't understand the Danish people. They have such extraordinary pride in their country. But yet, they celebrate their history by showing great military defeats." All the pictures I saw in the museum were Danish defeats. I said, "How can you teach your children to love their country, to have pride in their country, with such a negative view of their past?" And I said, "Why don't you have pictures of your brave troops in ex-Yugoslavia?" The Danes had a lot of troops in Tuzla, and they were really great warriors and peacemakers as well. During the Bosnian conflict, they were the only foreign country who really conducted themselves and comported themselves in a manner which the United States military thought was extremely professional. So I suggested, "Why don't you have a picture of these young men on the walls of your history museum?"

The next day I received a telephone call from the director of the museum. She said, "That was a silly idea."

And I said, "Lady, look, fine, if you don't like it, forget about it. It was just an idea that I had." I hung up the telephone thinking I'm not going to be bothered with this. About two months later I was at a dinner party, and I was seated next to the Queen. And she turned to me and said, "I read your article."

I said, "Yes, ma'am. What did you think of it?"

She said, "You're right on."

So I said, "Why don't you and I do something about it?"

And the Queen and I commissioned a painting for the Natural History Museum, which was the first new painting in the museum in 100 years. The Queen deputized me, my wife Susie, and General Lyng, who was the Chief of Defense, to work on the picture. My job was to choose the artist. Susie and the Queen would oversee the project. And the General was to give military information — to assure military accuracy in the picture. It was a picture that was about six feet by six feet. And it's now in the Danish National History Museum. The occasion of its installation into the museum turned out to be one of the most extraordinary events in contemporary Danish history. Military bands played, speeches by the Queen and myself, and all of the pomp that one could ever hope to see. This recognition of the courage and commitment of Danish soldiers was an event of unusual significance in a country that had its military disparaged for a great number of years. I certainly put me in great stead with the Queen and certainly with the military. It was massively publicized throughout the country.

Q: Oh, yes.

ELSON: So that provided a nice project, but I was getting bored. "What kind of life is this going to be for the next four years?" So I sat down and I wrote a paper. And non-career diplomats were not supposed to have the imagination or the competency to write white papers for the State Department, but I did. And what I said was this: "The Nordic-Baltics are lemmings. If you choose a leader they will follow that leader — if they can choose — if they're given a leader," I should put it that way. "They will follow that leader off a cliff if the leader so marches." I said, "What we ought to do, what the United States of America ought to do is recreate the Hanseatic League where we draw all these nations into a unit and we designate who is to be the head of the unit. And whomever we choose someone to lead will be our surrogate. And having done that, we will gain the eight votes of Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, Finland, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, and Iceland. We will gain eight votes in every international forum, whether it be the OECD, the OSCE, whether it be NATO, the EU, whether it be the UN, we will have an assured eight votes. And I think that Denmark should be the nation so designated as the leader."

I wrote this to Richard Holbrooke. He read it, called me up and said, "Do it." So I flew back to Washington and I went to every agency in the United States government that I could who was not represented in our embassy, such as the FBI, the INS, such as the EPA (Environmental Protection Agency), and said, "Why don't you locate — why don't you locate an office in Embassy Copenhagen, which can cover the entire Nordic-Baltic area?" And I got them all and they all came to Copenhagen. In a sense I created a fiefdom. Because Embassy Copenhagen then made a decision for all the other embassies and the Danes, I made sure the Danes knew about it. And the Danes suddenly after 400 years in a secondary position in Scandinavia, became the premiere nation because everything was happening in their capital. And the Danes reciprocated, as I thought they would. And they became America's closest friends in Europe. Not in Scandinavia, but Europe. And I'll tell you some stories about that.

Eventually, President Clinton came to Denmark, the first sitting American President ever to come to Scandinavia, let alone Denmark. And he came and the Danish press said, "Why is he coming?"

I said, "He's coming to say thank you." And the press scoffed at that.

Two days later he arrived and he stood up and he spoke and he said, "Tak Denmark," which is Danish for thank you, Denmark. He said, "Denmark and the United States often stand together, and many times we stand together alone," which is the highest compliment the Danes could ever receive. And they thought, of course, that the USA hung the moon, and they thought I did too. It worked out very well. And the policy became extremely, *exceedingly* effective. The Danes became our partners. They became our voice. They represented us at the table at the EU. And whatever we needed from the EU or the Nordic Council, we could get. Indeed, I'll tell you some of the stories of what this accomplished.

This was probably the most important thing that I did when I was in Denmark. And it was merely a fluke that I had the thought that I needed to give myself something to do. And it was also a fluke that Dick Holbrooke, whom I knew quite well, was heading European Affairs at State. And it was a fluke that I was able to come to Washington and convince all these agencies to locate in Embassy Copenhagen, and it worked very well.

Q: Well -

ELSON: Now — sorry?

Q: No, I was just wondering what was Denmark's role in Europe at that time?

ELSON: You have to understand the relationship that Denmark had with the United States at that time. If you remember, they were the only country who wouldn't accept offensive weapons when we were putting rockets all around Europe to threaten the Soviet Union. They would never allow American military in uniform in Denmark. Denmark has always been a very respected nation in Europe because no one fears them. The Danes have the ability to insinuate themselves anywhere — and indeed everywhere — worldwide because they never threatened anyone. But they are the fourth wealthiest nation per capita in the world. They have the third freest economy — I'm trying to remember my statistics. I'm sort of taken off guard. They are the number one in incorruptibility. They have no natural resources, no real manufacturing. They're traders. For years they've learned how to create consensus and to avoid disagreements with and antagonism from their neighbors. Their role in Europe was minor in the sense that they had no real military influence or any real economic influence. But the fact is they are superb negotiators and had opted themselves out of many commitments to the EU Treaty. The Danes were able to control their own military foreign policy and their currency. All the rest of the other nations ceded their foreign policy and currency to the EU. To this day, the Danes to this day are not part of the euro. They are extraordinarily independent of what's going on in Europe. As you know, the former Danish foreign minister is the

Head of NATO. The Danes have always punched above their weight, so to speak. I don't know if that answers your question or not.

Q: Well, they were part of the Eurozone, weren't they?

ELSON: Yes, but they're not in the euro.

Q: I was just going to say that Norway and Denmark aren't in the euro.

ELSON: That's right. Denmark is in NATO and Sweden is not. Norway is in NATO, but not in the EU. Norway is not in the EU, but Sweden is. Denmark is in NATO and the EU.

Q: Well, right now the euro's going through some difficulty. But was that considered a problem at the time you were there?

ELSON: Not at all. In fact, the Danes reveled in their independence. Albeit, they were closely tied to the Deutschmark, which became the euro. But they were totally independent of the euro.

Q: How about with Norway and Sweden particularly? Did these nations — I mean they're all Scandinavian, but were they close to each other in policy or moving in different directions?

ELSON: No, they're very close to each other in policy, very involved in aid to developing nation, low defense budgets, very high aid budgets. But they're very jealous of one another and they're very competitive. The Swedes had been, prior to my coming to Denmark, had been the leader in this lock of three, so to speak. And when Denmark took over from them because of the great advantage they had with the United States of America, the Swedes and Norwegians felt left out and were quite upset. In fact, there were editorials in the Swedish paper that said, "When is Elson leaving?" and the Norwegian papers said, "Who is Elson? How did he do this?" and literally, I have copies of the editorials.

Q: How did you find the Danish press, the TV, radio?

ELSON: I was exceptionally close to the media. I had several incidents that will illustrate this. The leading newspaper editor in Denmark was Jorn Eibol. I went to see him at his office in Jutland. I visited his editorial board, and I spoke with them for about three hours. They asked me to write some articles, which I did. I used to send them articles perhaps once every two months. Many years later I asked Eibol, who became an exceedingly close good friend of mine, I said, "How come you printed all of my articles, but you didn't do it for most of the other embassies?"

He said, "Because we knew you wrote your own," which was true. We learned that when we talked to you at our editorial meeting, that you knew what you were talking about, and

that's why we relied on what you had to say." As far as television, I had been the founding chairman of National Public Radio in the United States. So the Danish telecommunications industry had heard about me and they were very receptive and unusually friendly.

At one point I did something quite unusual, and it brought me a great deal of respect. I went into a studio to be interviewed. I was interviewed at least once a week. But on this particular interview, I asked the interviewer to tell me some of the questions he was going to ask. I want to be prepared with my answers."

He started asking me very anti-American questions. As we were going into the studio for the broadcast and before the cameras, I said, "I'm not going to be on your program. Thank you very much, goodbye."

He said, "What do you mean?"

I said, "I'm not going to stand there and let you attempt to embarrass my country or me. All your questions are pejorative, they're unanswerable, and I don't think this is productive for the United States of America."

He said, "What am I going to do?"

I said, "That's your problem, sir," and I walked out of the studio.

And the news spread around Denmark that I wouldn't take any type of bullying, which was marvelously helpful to me subsequently when I went in for these types of interviews.

In fact, there was another instance that occurred that was rather humorous, and it also got all around Denmark, which helped my reputation. The Danes are very witty people and their wit is rather caustic at times. And cruel at times. I was at a dinner at the Swiss Ambassador's home about three weeks after we arrived in Copenhagen. I was sitting across the table from a woman who was a Princess of Luxembourg and whose family lived in Denmark. They were nobility in Denmark. And she leaned across the table and looked at me and said, "I understand American Ambassadors buy their position."

And I said, "Ma'am, you're absolutely right, but I didn't pay enough. Had I paid a little bit more, I wouldn't have to suffer dealing with you." And everybody at the table stood up and started clapping. And I became an icon in the social circles because of that.

Q: Huh. Well done.

ELSON: I learned that you have to give it back to them. You can't just accept it. I used to have this situation in speeches. I was speaking at Roskilde University and I was speaking on NATO. One of the students started interrupting me and shouting, "I do not like the United States' position on Nicaragua."

I figured could not figure what was going on. I didn't know anything about Nicaragua at that time and I didn't know what our position at that time. So I looked up at him and I said, "Sir, you're obviously quite knowledgeable about Nicaragua." And when I did this, I didn't know the answer to the question I was going to put to him, and I conjectured if I didn't know, he probably didn't know. And I asked, "Tell me, sir. Who is now the President of Nicaragua?"

And he stood silently, and suddenly he looked at me and said, "Are you trying to embarrass me?"

And I said, "Yes sir. The same way you were trying to embarrass me and trying to embarrass my country," and everybody in the audience applauded and he sat down. I said, "I'm trying to show your colleagues not only how rude you are, but how ignorant you are." And he sat down, and everybody applauded. I had similar occasions.

I was giving a speech at the University at Aalborg, and a young woman said, "You know, we have more democracy in our country than you have in yours."

And I said, "That could be. I don't know as much about your country as I do about mine, but I do know this. I have this granddaughter who's beautiful and brilliant and talented, and she's three-years-old." I said, "One day she's going to grow up and she will be President of the United States of America." I said, "Do you think you will be the Queen?"

And the — afterwards the Rector of the University, who by the way, put me on his faculty. I'm still a faculty member at the University of Aalborg. "Oh, that wasn't fair."

I said, "Of course it wasn't. But I made my point." I had a number of these incidents, which gave a great boost to my reputation.

Q: Were you still picking up you might say the intellectual's assault on the United States? Which creeps up every once in a while.

ELSON: Especially at Danish universities, because the Danes are historically very liberal. And they're very much pacifist. All the Scandinavians saw themselves as neutral and wouldn't become involved in any offensive military affairs. When I first came, I remembered what the President said to me, "I might have told you this story in the last interview. He said, "The Danes are allies, but they're not friends. Your job is to make them friends." And that's what I did, gaining a lot of publicity, being in the newspaper, on the radio or on television all the time, and all of that was seen in a positive manner. I never said anything negative about Denmark.

Q: Well, who were the predominant parties there?

ELSON: The Social Democrats had come into office just before I arrived. The liberal party (who are conservative) had been leading the government for 10 years before that. I'll tell you another story about my relationship with the Social Democrats.

Q: I was wondering, where did they stand sort of in the left/right spectrum?

ELSON: They were left of center.

Q: Yeah, but were they sort of far to the left or —

ELSON: I'd say they were much more left than you would consider to be in this country to be left, to be center. In Denmark, they were closer to the left than they were to the center. I became very close to the government and very involved in their government. Every party in Denmark's political scene was opposite of the political philosophy they represented. For example, the conservative party is liberal. The liberal party is conservative. The social democrats are not socialists. The progressive party is reactionary. But the names are historic, and the roles of the parties today are based on missions far removed from what they originally were when they were founded. There's a history to that. But my relationship with the Prime Minister started out well because he had been with the President when the President telephoned me to offer me the ambassadorship.

Then after I arrived, I met his Deputy, whose name was Ulrich Federspiel. He was the top civil servant in Denmark. And he was the chief of staff to the prime minister. He had been chief of the foreign ministry, and he had served ministers in several governments. He was a young man from a very prominent and historic Danish family. One afternoon I went to see him on some particular issue that I do not recall. On this occasion, I did go with people on my staff. As we sat with him, I found he was very sharp with me. I was shocked that any minister would be that aggressive in confronting an American ambassador. Afterwards, I went back to my office, called him and asked if I could see him alone. It was about 5:00 in the evening, and we sat and shared a bottle of Scotch together. He became my closest friend and confidant in Denmark. If I needed anything from any of the other ministries, I did not have to go to them directly. I would call him and he would take care of it for me.

For example, once we had a problem with Americans in the Danish school system. I did not have to go to the ministry; a telephone call to him took care of it all for me. Instead of going to the minister, I called Ulrich. He called me back within an hour and said, "It's taken care of." That was the relationship I had with him. And I still have it today. In fact, he's coming to visit me in New York in just a few days. Having such a man on the inside, indeed the most plugged-in public servant in Denmark, was a significant advantage. My other great friend was the Baron Henrik Wedell-Wedellsborg, a very white shoe lawyer who was also of noble birth. We met early in my tenure at a party given by the "Queen of Jutland" who was next to the Queen as the social leader of Denmark, the Countess Wedell, who was Henrik's cousin – and the social doyenne of Copenhagen. Henrik asked me, "What do you want to do in Denmark?"

And my answer, about which he wrote to me many years later and he remembered vividly, was, "I want to make a difference.'" And he said, "And you did." We became

great friends. And he was not only a distinguished lawyer, but also he was the Queen's lawyer and the lawyer to the royal family. He was also their closest advisor. And at the same time, he was the Chairman of the Royal Life Guards Association, the military group assigned to guarding the Queen. They are the most elite unit in the Danish Military. They have an "alumni" association of which he was the chairman. The first moment I could, despite opposition from our State Department, I changed the law firm we had been using at the American Embassy and appointed him our lawyer and gave him the American Embassy account. It really wasn't a lot of business, but the prestige that went with it was important. He became, of course, my bosom buddy. Through him I had total access at any time to the court — meaning the Queen, the consort, the princesses, the Crown Prince, and the family. That access brought me close to everyone who worked with the royal family, the Lord Chamberlain, the various chamberlains for the lesser-known royals, which was very important because it provided me with anything that the United States needed from the royal family and their court.

I'll give you some examples of how close I was. When the President came to visit Copenhagen, he was invited by the Queen to stay at the palace. And the Queen called me and said, "I'd like you and Susie to stay, too." So we were going to move into the palace with the President.

Subsequently I received a call from The White House, and they said to me, "Ambassador, you can't stay at the palace. We need the rooms that you're going to be taking for certain members of the President's party."

I said, "Well, fine. I'm happy not to go, but you didn't invite me, the Queen invited us. If she calls me and tells me don't come, I certainly won't go." But of course she never did, and we stayed with the Queen and the President, which was unusual, as you can well imagine. But my relationship with the Queen was and is very, very close.

Q: Well, what was the role of the Queen and the royal family in the body politic of Denmark?

ELSON: Similar to that of the British Queen, but the Danish Queen is in a small country, 5.7 million people. And the Queen is exceedingly popular. I think she has a 97% approval rating. And the remainder of the Royal Family is as popular. She sees the Prime Minister at least once a week. It is a constitutional monarchy, so her role is limited, but her influence is great. And she has been very effective on how she's used that influence. She doesn't abuse it at all. Her husband, Prince Henrik, has come and stayed with us in the United States. Her sister, Princess Benedikte has stayed with us in the United States. Her son, the Crown Prince, has stayed with us in the United States. They are all close friends. If I ever needed anything with the court, all I had to do, and to this day, all I have to do is ask.

It was the same with the Prime Minister. In fact, I'll tell you a little interesting anecdote of how that worked. The Prime Minister was of course the leader of the party. His best friend and most important minister was Mogens Lykketoft, who was the Finance

Minister, and who physically looked like Trotsky. And he was to the left of the Prime Minister, the far left, almost as far left Trotsky was in his day, I suppose. And his wife was the Minister of Culture. One day I'm in Washington, and I'm sitting with Holbrooke and Dick Holbrooke was a brilliant diplomat, a great guy, and a dear friend. Dick was on the telephone when I entered his office. He had a habit of dropping names all the time. As I sat in his office, he was talking on the phone. With the telephone close to his ear, and he leaned over, put his hand over the speaker and he said to me, "It's Jack Valenti, MPA, Motion Pictures Association." I nodded. With me sitting there, he said to Valenti, he said, "Who? You want to see him? He's sitting with me at this moment!" Valenti had a problem in Denmark. In a bizarre coincidence, I was sitting in Holbrooke's office, and Valenti was calling Holbrooke to find out who the American Ambassador to Denmark was. He wanted to speak to me. I went over to Valenti's office in Washington and he said, "We have a major problem. The Motion Picture Industry has a beef with Denmark, and if we don't cure it, it's going to get us in trouble with the entire EU."

I asked, "What is the problem?"

He said, "Denmark is passing what they call a 'blank tape tax,' and that is where every time someone buys a blank videotape to record a program, they are paying a tax. That tax is put into a fund, and that fund is distributed by a complicated formula to help producers, directors, actors, writers throughout the world to receive compensation for their efforts." Now, this tax would be turned over to any country whose films were being recorded who had a similar tax. That country would act reciprocally if they had a similar tax. For example, if the U.S. had a film showing in Denmark, the U.S. would be given certain receipts from that blank tape tax, and the U.S. would act similarly with any taxes we collected. It turns out very few countries have a blank tape tax. What the Danes were doing cleverly is they were getting all the money, keeping it themselves, not having to rebate it to anyone. Since we didn't collect any such tax, we weren't giving them any money in exchange, and they were very happy to keep the money that should have gone to us. American television programs made up about 90% of Danish television. American films were about 90, 95% of Danish television.

Q: Oh, yeah.

ELSON: If the Danes had succeeded in implementing their tax, it might have been a signal for the rest of the EU to do likewise. I returned to Denmark, and I called the Minister of Culture. I made an appointment with her, and she cancelled it. She is the wife of the Finance Minister, the second most powerful man in Denmark. I make another appointment, she breaks it. I make a third appointment, she breaks it. So I said to myself, "No more of this." I got into my car, I went to her office, and I sat down outside her office. Finally she opened her door and saw me sitting there.

She says, "Oh Ambassador, I was going to call you."

I said "No need to, ma'am, I'm here."

Her name was Jytte Hilden. I went into her office, and she asked, “What’s the problem?”

I said, “Ma’am, the United States has a real problem with you, and it’s about your blank tape tax. What do you think is America’s most important export?”

She said, “I don’t know.”

I said, “Airplanes.” I said, “What do you think the second most important export is?”

She said, “I don’t know.”

I said, “Films. Who do you think would have the most powerful lobby in Washington? No one has a lobby that is stronger than the film industry's. Do you know what’s going to happen if you implement this tax? The film industry is going to tell you no more films for your television, and every time your people wake up in the morning, they’ll see a test pattern on their TV screens. And that test pattern will be on 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 52 weeks a year because you won't have any American programs. And who are the people going to blame for not having anything on their televisions? You and your party, but you have to get rid of the tax.” And she did. Valenti had been afraid that if the tax was successful in Denmark it’d be adopted all over Europe and it would push the American film industry out of Europe. So I called Valenti and said, “Problem solved.” He was stunned.

He said, “What can I do for you?”

I said, “You can invite you Jytte Hilden to the United States, take her to Hollywood, take her to Disneyland, bring her to New York. I think that would be the best thank you you could ever do, and she’d be delighted to accept.” And she did, she went to Hollywood, New York, and Disneyland and as a guest of Jack Valenti and the Motion Pictures Association. She came back to Denmark, and about a year after that the French introduced in the EU a film quota that would have cut significantly the role of the American film in Europe. And who do you think vetoed it? Jytte Hilden and Denmark.

Q: Ha! Well done.

ELSON: I have to tell you what happened next. I invited Jytte Hilden to our residence for dinner, She was sitting next to me, of course, and she looks around the room and says, “Everyone at your table is bourgeois.”

And I said, “Ms. Minister, you don’t know your own people.” I said, “None of them are bourgeois. They’re all nobles.”

She said, “Well, you wouldn’t find any nobles at my table.”

I said, “Ma’am, I wouldn’t know, because you never ask me to your table.”

And the next thing, she has a big party at her home for Susie and me. And we become friendly with all the very left elements in the Danish government. She and her husband, the Finance Minister, were the leaders of the left-left of the party. Suddenly we were now in with the other side of the political spectrum. The head of the liberal party, which is very conservative, was the former Foreign Minister, Uffe Ellemann Jensen. Anyhow, he was still a very powerful political figure in Denmark. At that moment, the Secretary General of NATO died and the U.S. was looking for someone to put into that now vacant position. I came up with his name and called Warren Christopher. Warren Christopher had him fly to Washington, he interviewed him walked out of his office with his arm around Uffe and said, "He's our man." Christopher put him forward to be the Secretary General of NATO. Denmark was thrilled. Sadly, Uffe did not get the job. The French and the Germans vetoed him. The reason for the French veto was that the Danes had opposed the French nuclear test in the Pacific, which we also opposed.

Q: I recall.

ELSON: But I was the hero in Denmark with the center right. The leader of the progressive party was a woman. And she was on the reactionary right. She had a 40th birthday party, and she invited all the ambassadors. My staff said, "We don't think you should go because she's too far to the right." I answered, "It's her birthday, it's not a political event, I'm going. I went to her birthday party, and after that I could do no wrong. Now, what I had done was ingratiate myself with the center, the right, and the left of the government and had access to and the ability to influence every side of the legislature It became quite well known in the White House, and with Dan Fried, who was the National Security council member staff member with whom we dealt. Everyone was ecstatic. Leon Firth, who was the Head of National Security Team for the Vice President, also learned about all of this and I put me on a pedestal, an icon to all of them for having been so successful in all aspects of foreign policy in Denmark.

Q: Sort of like a coup.

ELSON: Yes, it was. It was bizarre that I was so effective. Now, to give you an idea about how effective I was, I received a call from Madeleine Albright. The Secretary said, "We'd like Denmark to introduce a resolution to the United Nations condemning Red China for its human rights abuses."

And I asked, "Well, why are you calling me, Madame Secretary?" I said, "Why don't you call your friends in Great Britain or Brazil or Australia? I mean, we're just a microcosm, this little country."

She responded, "Well, I have called every other country, but nobody will do it."

So I asked, "How much time do I have?"

She said, "Three days." Well, I had the Prime Minister's cell phone. I called and reached him in Poland. Now, there was no advantage to the Danes for doing this. They did us

only to help the United States. It certainly would do no good for them at all with the Chinese; indeed, it would hurt them.

He said, “We’ll do it.”

Three hours later, I called the State Department back and asked for the Secretary. She got on the telephone, and I said to her, “It’s done.”

She says, “Only three hours?”

I said, “That’s all it took.” And a few days later, Denmark introduced a resolution in the United Nations condemning Red China for its human rights abuses. The same day, just to show how our government works, the very same day that they introduced a resolution, China, that cut off three billion dollars in trade with Denmark. The same day. And on that same day, the United States of America denied the importation of Denmark’s greatest export, ham.

Q: Good God.

ELSON: The same day! The Danes took a three billion dollar hit from China for us! They were like the Secret Service; they threw themselves in front of a bullet. And we cut off all trade with Denmark for their largest product. Of course I immediately called The Secretary of State’s office. She said, “You had better call The White House.”

I called the White House. They said, “It’s not in our hands. Call the Secretary of Agriculture.

So I called the Secretary of Agriculture, who was then Dan Glickman.

Q: Yeah.

ELSON: I get Glickman on the phone. I said, “Do you realize what you have just done?”

He said, “Yes, I know what we did.” He said, “Deliberately.” He said, “You know, the Europeans won’t import our beef because of the hormones, so what we decided to do was to retaliate by saying we would not import any meat until it had been inspected. There are 16 countries involved, and we only have two inspectors. So it’ll take years to inspect them all. Ha, ha, ha.”

So I said, “Yes, but let me tell you what happened.” I told him and he was aghast.

He said, “What can I do?”

I said, “You have two inspectors, put them on a plane tomorrow morning and send them to Denmark. Let them inspect the Danish meat and let’s reverse this,” and they did.

Q: That takes somebody like you to be able to pull the strings. I mean this is, you know, when they talk about the use of an ambassador on the ground, it's terribly important.

ELSON: It's very important. And that's why non-career diplomats can have a very important role in our diplomacy. Because they have access.

Q: Oh yes. You're preaching to the choir. I know that. I mean sometimes non-career ambassadors get off the ranch by not understanding the issues, but other times they really know the issues far better than the career people.

ELSON: Well, it depends on your background. I have been head of a university, I have been head of a civil rights commission, I have been head of a human rights organization, I have been chairman of several worldwide companies. So these are things I did every day in my other life. It wasn't anything new to me to solve problems such as these, understanding the nature of the problems. There were a lot of other instances like that. We had the MICA missile crises. That's when we came out with the AMRAAM missile. And we could not get anybody in Europe to buy it because the French were selling the MICA missile. I went around Denmark making speeches. I would be speaking before a hall full of people, and I would ask, "Anybody here have any family in the military?" And maybe 30% of the people raise their hands. Then I'd say, "Does anybody have any family in the Air Force?" And maybe three or four people would raise their hands. Then I would say, "Anybody flying F-16s in your Air Force?" And I'd have maybe one or two would reply. And I'd turn to them and I'd say, "Look, if I gave your son or daughter or father or uncle a 98% chance of surviving a mission as opposed to a 72% chance, which would you take?"

They would reply, "Of course, it's a silly question."

I said, "Well, answer me."

They would then respond, "Of course, 98%."

I would say in response to their affirmation, "That's the difference between the American AMRAAM and the French MICA. We have a 98% kill rate, they have a 72% kill rate." Subsequently, Denmark took the AMRAAM missile, and so did everybody else in Europe after that.

Q: How did you find relations with Denmark and Germany?

ELSON: Very close today. However, the Danes had a signal distrust of Germany. The Germans had occupied Denmark; indeed, Hitler called them the "model protectorate," and Churchill called Denmark "Hitler's breadbasket." Obviously, the war had caused a terrible fracture between Denmark and Germany. In the 19th century, the Danes had a similar problem with Germany because of Schleswig-Holstein, historically a part of Denmark and ceded to the Germans in 1848. Over a drink, I was having a conversation with a high-ranking Danish philosopher who was in their Department of Foreign Affairs.

I asked him, “Tell me, how can you explain the difference between the character of the Danish people and that of the German people when just a thin invisible line separates the two countries?”

He said, “Sir, we are a seafaring people. We look outward. They look inward,” which I thought was a remarkably perceptive and pithy way of describing the difference between them. However, the Danish economy is closely tied to the German economy, and because of that, they have to live in friendship. When I say friendship, I mean intimately. And historically, the Danish currency has been tied to the German currency.

Q: Ed, I’m looking at the clock. I told you about an hour and so it’s about it. We’ll pick this up — we’ll mention here so we can pick it up, what other points should we be talking about in continuing on?

ELSON: Well, I have too many stories for you, so I’ll be keeping you on the phone for long time.

Q: Okay, well why don’t you make note of those.

ELSON: All right.

Q: By the way, I think you’d be interested, this morning I was interviewing a young African American woman named Robin Sanders.
ELSON: Yes

Q: Robin was Ambassador to the Congo and to Nigeria.

ELSON: Ah!

Q: She’s a graduate and a very proud graduate of the Hampton Institute.

ELSON: Well, I was a trustee.

Q: Yeah, she mentioned a classmate of hers is very close — Vanessa Gilmore?

ELSON: Yes, I know Vanessa.

Q: Yeah.

ELSON: Know her very well.

Q: She said she was on the board and —

ELSON: Vanessa’s from Texas; she is a federal judge.

Q: She’s a judge in Houston.

ELSON: Yes. She's a nice person. Now, I'll tell you about Hampton Institute. This is a funny story. Have you got a minute?

Q: Yeah.

ELSON: Well, it's not about foreign affairs. I had been on the board of Hampton for years. I resigned when I went to Denmark. When I returned, the President of Hampton called me and said, "I want you to come back on the board."

And I replied, "Well, I don't want to. I'm out of the business."

And he said, "Yeah, but I need you."

I said, "Look, I'm not going to give you any money. If you think you need me because of my wallet, forget it. There's no way I'm giving you anything."

He said, "I still want you, because I want your gray hair."

I said, "Okay." I went back on the board. Since I'd returned from Denmark, which was a number of years ago. I've been on the board; I've only been to a few meetings. But I went to those two meetings after the President called me and begged me to come. I was Chairman of the Nominating Committee, and he called whenever he had a serious problem. He had a chairman-elect whom he did not want to become chairman. I had to fly to Hampton and tell the Chairman-elect, you're out. And that type of hatchet work became my role at the university at Hampton.

Q: (laughs)

ELSON: *(laughs)* It was really sort of silly because I'm past the age where I was supposed to be off the board, but he wouldn't let me go. It's a great school. What William Harvey, the President, has done is phenomenal. He had been offered several ambassadorships, but he didn't take them because he had several Pepsi-Cola franchises given to him by the Chairman of Pepsi-Cola, who was a member of our board. Pepsi-Cola needed African-American franchise holders, so Bill Harvey had to oversee the Pepsi franchises and did not want to have to leave the university to be an ambassador as well.

Q: Let's return to Denmark since I'm not sure you've quite finished the description of your tenure there.

ELSON: Yes, I thought you might be interested in knowing how I became friendly with the royal family.

Q: Oh, absolutely, that's very unique.

ELSON: And, how it developed into a close relationship. Indeed, at our party, the Tuesday night before I left Denmark, the Queen asked us to come to the palace for lunch. I arrived and it was just Susie and I, and the Queen and her consort, Prince Henrik. I was a little surprised at that because I thought it was going to be a large group leaving situation, but I walked in, and she handed me a little box and said, "This is for you, Ambassador." I looked at it; it was a little box, and I figured it must be some sort of decoration, though I'd been at the Portuguese ambassador's leaving party a month before that and he had a huge big box in which he had a decoration from the Queen and he was not a very involved nor important diplomat, and I was quite taken aback when she hands me a little box. She said, "Can you wear it?" knowing Americans don't wear their decorations or give many decorations. And I said, "I suppose I can put it in my bathrobe or on my pajamas," and I laughed and she looked at me like I was out of my mind. And then I put it on the table and we went to lunch. It was a three-hour lunch, which is quite a bit of time to have with the Queen alone.

Q: Yes, now, basically what you're saying here is this is not a typical thing for a departing ambassador.

ELSON: Well, yes and no, and I'm going to tell you about that. If your country awards a decoration to the Danish ambassador, then you give one to their departing ambassador. And it is not usual, but the difference in this one was that it was at a luncheon for three hours, and during that period, the Queen said, "You know when you and Susie leave, we're not only losing the American ambassador to Denmark, we're losing our ambassador to the United States," which was an extraordinary compliment coming from the monarch meaning that you had become such an integral part of our country and our activities, that we look at you as one of us, so to speak. Well, then as I was leaving, she said, "You forgot your box, your decoration," so I said, "Oh yes, ma'am, thank you." I got into the car and our driver who had been with us for four and a half years, said, "What did the Queen give you, sir?" And I opened it up, and he said, "That's the Grand Cross," which is the highest decoration that can be given in Denmark other than the Order of the Elephant which is only given to heads of state. And I was stunned. I felt so embarrassed and humiliated, for having taken this so cavalierly, so casually that I sat down and wrote her a very long letter telling her, obviously, how very much I appreciated it. But to get to that position with the Queen was rather an interesting story.

Before we went to Denmark, my wife Susie had a call from a great friend of ours, who is an Austrian countess who lived in Atlanta, Georgia, our home. And she said, "Susie, when you get to Denmark you're going to need a secretary." And Susie responded, "I thought that was all part of the State Department." And she said, "No, you're going to need someone yourself to handle your own involvement in Copenhagen." And Susie said, "Well, if you can help, I'd appreciate it." So she called Susie one day and told her that a friend of her cousin, who is a princess in one of the European countries, had suggested a cousin of hers who was a Danish noblewoman and she thought she'd be a perfect secretary for Susie. When Susie got to Denmark, she called her, Baroness Anne Rosenhorn-Lehrn, who was the youngest daughter of the one of the oldest noble families in Denmark, and as such, she was not impoverished but lived a very simple life. In

Denmark, they have primogeniture, which leaves everything to the eldest child, and she, being the youngest, didn't have anything, yet came from a very old and wealthy family.

It turned out that she lived just up the street from our residence, and she and Susie, after speaking with each other, not only stepped into the job as Susie's "social secretary," but they became the best of friends. They were very close friends. In fact, I would describe them as sisters. She was from, as I said, one of the noblest families, the Juhl family. Shortly after our coming there, and having presented credentials to the Queen, she called and said her sister was married to one of the top generals in Denmark and wanted to have a dinner for us. And we said, "Delighted." So, she gave us the address, and we arrived a little late, and we walked up to the door, and it was a very tiny apartment, furnished very modestly, and her sister, whose name was Pulla Hellingsoe, General Hellingsoe's wife. We walked in the door and there sitting there was the Queen!

Q: Oh my.

ELSON: Now there were only eight people at this dinner party, Anne and her husband, Pulla and her husband, the General, Susie and me, and the Queen and Uffe Elleman Jensen, the former Foreign Minister who was very popular in the country and very close to the royal family. Of course, the Queen arrived before us, and you supposed to arrive before the Queen, and here we were, sitting with the Queen in this little apartment at the dinner table in a totally family social affair.

Q: My goodness.

ELSON: We were sitting there, and the Queen said to me, "Would you like to use your lighter again?" and I laughed, and I said, "Certainly, your Majesty." What had happened was that I had called Susie prior to our presenting credentials and asked her to bring me (this is when we first arrived) from the United States, a cigarette lighter, because I knew the Queen was a smoker. The Queen had visited the University of Virginia when I was the Rector (Chairman of the University), and she and Prince Henrik had a big fight in front of me about whether she could smoke (she was a chain smoker) in the rotunda, which is Mr. Jefferson's sanctum at the University. I said, "Go ahead and smoke." I remembered at the time there was nobody there that had a match to light her cigarette, and smoking was not allowed. I called for some matches and lit her cigarette. So when I got to the palace to present my credentials, the Queen pulled out a cigarette and I whipped out the lighter that Susie had brought me when she arrived in Copenhagen. I was very disturbed, because it was extraordinarily expensive lighter that she had bought for me and brought with her. So I pulled it out, and I said, "Your Majesty, I'm going to light your cigarette with the world's most expensive lighter per light because yours is the only cigarette that it has ever lit." So I flipped it open, lit her cigarette, and she smoked it. At the dinner at the General's house, she turned to me and said, "Would you like to lessen the price of the lighter by lighting my cigarette again?" So, I said, "Thank you very much," and I did. And when that occurred everybody laughed and she was a good sport about it. and we formed a closer friendship.

Subsequently, we were invited to the home of the woman they called the Queen of Jutland, who was the Countess Wedell, and she had an enormous palace in Copenhagen as well as a huge castle in the country, in Jutland. We had gone to dinner with her at her palace in Copenhagen. The serving people literally wore livery. I'm talking about the high stockings and the britches; it was crazy, anyway, and with white gloves, of course, and she had me sitting on her left and the Russian ambassador on her right. In Denmark, the guest of honor is the person sitting on the hostess' left, and she was playing a game. She was the wall that was bringing us together after the wall in Berlin had fallen. That was her way of making a social statement as well, not a political statement, more of a social statement, and then being very amused by it. After dinner, it was nine o'clock, ten o'clock, eleven o'clock, twelve o'clock, one o'clock, one- thirty in the morning – it was on a Tuesday evening – I can't forget, and so I said, "Countess, thank you very much, it has been a lovely evening, but we really have to go." So we leave and I get in the car and I said to the driver, "What kind of country do you all have where people stay until one-thirty in the morning on a Tuesday night?" and he said, "Sir, they were waiting for you to leave. You were the guest of honor." I said, "Oh, what a blunder." I thought Susie and I were ruined after only a few weeks in Denmark; we would be social outcasts. But it turned out the Countess loved it because she thought we were having such a great time, we didn't want to leave. We were having a great time!

Subsequent to that, we get invited to the Countess' estate in Jutland and she invites the English ambassador and his wife as well. The English Ambassador was asked because the Countess' sister was married to one of the great noblemen in England, so she had an affinity for the English, of course. The British Ambassador was rather pedantic and a know-it-all – how unusual – and he kept going around the estate and pointing out the flora or the fauna and describing them by their Latin names. Later in the evening, the first evening there, the English ambassador said, "Oh, it's time for me to go to bed," and the Countess turned to Susie and me, and said, "Would you like to stay up and have a drink with me?" and we said, "Sure." And we did and we became fast friends.

A few months later the Countess invited Susie and me to her great Christmas shoot, and at the Christmas shoot, all the great noble families are invited and it is the highlight of the Christmas social season in Denmark. The Queen and Prince Consort and the Crown Prince and his brother always come for that shoot. So staying at the castle were Susie and me, the Queen and the Prince Consort, and the two young princes, and that was it.

Q: Wow.

ELSON: But all the noble families at the shoot were saying, "Who is this couple? Who is this American that the Queen has hooked up with?" so to speak, "and is invited for the Christmas shoot?" While at the shoot, our relationship with the Queen and the Prince Consort strengthened. On the day of the shoot, I'm placed behind the Crown Prince, and he's shooting all the birds, and I am not getting many shots. I'm shooting next to another Great Count, as they call them in Denmark, who is quite elderly, and his gun breaks in the middle of the shoot and I said, "Excuse me, Sir, why don't you take my gun and finish the shoot?" And he says, "What do you mean?" I said, "Well, I'll be out shooting a

lot more than you will in the future, so go ahead and take my gun," and he does, and the next thing I get a call from his son who later became the Count. The Count had told his son what had happened, and the son said to me, "I have to meet you. Anyone who would give up his gun at the Countess Alexandra's Christmas shoot at Frijsenborg Castle is a good guy." I then became friendly with his son, and that led from A to B to C to D to F to G and so forth.

Q: Ambassador, let me just ask you a very quick question. Given all of your social contacts with the royals, didn't you have a protocol assistant who could advise you on what to expect and how to act?

ELSON: The State Department is very weak on that and I must tell you that no, I had no assistance. I had to learn by observing. A particular example: At the pudding portion, at a Danish noble's home, they always put a spoon and a fork above your plate signifying it's for the dessert. But I noted looking around the room that the people there only used the fork. So I turned one evening to my favorite snob, who was the Countess Hella Knuth, and I said, "Hella, I don't understand. Why do you only use a fork for dessert?" and she said, "Because the spoon is the peasant's instrument." I laughed and I said, "Well, why do you put them both out?" and she said, "It's a social test. We want to see what you do." (Laughter) But of course she said it half-jokingly, but it was. Anyway, that was way that we were able to learn Danish mores. One way was through Susie's sister-secretary, and the second through observing. Now, one of the problems I had in Denmark - I am digressing a moment - was that during our tenure, the Inspector General came to our embassy. And his crew was there for a week with three former ambassadors and a former DCM. And when it was all finished, I think I received the highest mark in Europe for any Ambassador, but they had one criticism. They said, "You don't include your staff in your entertaining." And I said, "That's correct." They said, "Why not?" I said, "Have you ever had dinner with them? Their table manners are appalling. They dress inappropriately and it's embarrassing." So they said to me, "Well, that's your job to train them."

Q: Wait, now when you said staff, do you mean American staff?

ELSON: Yes.

Q: Oh my.

ELSON: So they said, "That's your job." I didn't know what to do, so I went to a country team meeting and I said, "Mrs. Elson and I would like to learn more about the mores of Denmark and dining. I'm hiring an etiquette specialist. Would any of you like to join us?" Everybody said, "Yes," and I said, "Wonderful." But I wasn't doing it for us, I was doing it for them. I thought this was a way to solve my problem. And I had a woman by the name of Inga Correll, who was sort the Emily Post of Denmark, come to the Embassy and give a series of eating and dining lessons to our staff, and that solved my problem.

Now I told you about the leaving and the decoration. I told you about the Russian ambassador. Alright, this is an incredible story that someday could be made into a movie.

The Russian ambassador and his wife, Olga, his name was Obukhov, became great friends of ours. He had been the former deputy foreign minister and also had been arms negotiator in Geneva for 19 years, and he was a very important diplomat. But he had bet on Gorbachev when Yeltsin won, so he was exiled, so to speak, as ambassador to Denmark. His wife, Olga, who was with him, was as wide as she was tall. She was a KGB colonel, which I knew through our chief of station. They had an extraordinary art collection of turn-of-the-century Russian Cubism, and Susie and I were avid art aficionados. That brought us together as friends. Obukhov had been sent in the 1960s to the University of Chicago to study with Hans Morgenthau. So you can see he was considered as part of the hierarchy of the Russian State Department, Soviet before that. He had two sons. One of his sons, Fedor, was in Copenhagen, and he was about 15. The other son, Platon, I think he was head of the American desk at the Russian Foreign Ministry. One day I said to Alexei, "Why don't you send your son to school in the United States? "And he asked, "How would I be able to do that?" I said, "I'm a trustee of Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts, and I think I can help get him in there." I knew I could just put him in, which I did. And so he went to Andover. The school gave him a scholarship. The kid was a difficult kid, but he was a nice, hard-working boy. Sadly, he had emotional problems and he was somewhat, more than somewhat, a total introvert. During the holidays, they would farm out-of-country boys out to local homes. Whenever they sent Fedor, the family would send him back, so I had to bring him with us at Christmas with our family in England.

Anyway, he was at Andover about three years. At the end of his first year, we were having dinner with Alexei and Olga, Ambassador Obukhov and his wife, and Olga says to me, "Alexei has been called back to Moscow. He's going to be made the Foreign Minister of Russia." And I'm thinking, "Oh wow. I'll be the star of the State Department. My best friend is going to be the Foreign Minister of Russia." And I said, "Alexei, how come you didn't tell me." He puffs his chest out like a peacock, and he laughs, "Ho, ho, ho." So he and I shared his big secret. The next thing is that about a week passes and I get a telephone call at the residence. Alexei has returned and he says, "Can you come over to my residence right away?" And I said, "Well, Susie and I are going out for dinner this evening, and we will stop by on our way." He said, "No, no, not Susie, you, now." So, I thought to myself, it must be important. I then get in the car and my driver takes me over to the Obukhovs. I walk to the front door, ring the bell, the door opens, and Alexei is blanched; his face is white. And I said, "Alexei, what's wrong?" and he puts his finger over his mouth to indicate, "Don't say anything." I looked behind him, and there's Olga, and she is bawling, crying her eyes out. We go into the house, and he sits me down across from them and I start to say, "What's going on?" and he puts his finger up to his mouth again to say, "Keep quiet." He takes out a pad of paper, writes on the paper, "We are ruined. Our son is a scoundrel. He has betrayed us." And it turns out that his eldest son in the foreign ministry has been arrested as a British spy. Alexei was brought back to Moscow, not to be offered the foreign minister's job, but to be put under investigation. He returned to Copenhagen and consequently prepared to leave. But before he leaves, he takes me out for a walk, and we walk along the Oresund, which is the water separating Sweden from Denmark, near our residence, where there is probably nobody listening. He

says, “You’re going to have to keep my son in the United States. He can never return to Russia.”

Q: Oh my, wow.

ELSON: He said, “They will kill him.” I said, “Kill him?” He said, “Yes, they will send him to Chechnya and they’ll shoot him. He’ll be killed, and they will say he was fighting in Chechnya.” So I just said, “Okay.” I go back to the residence and I call the Queen’s lawyer, who is our lawyer as well and the embassy’s lawyer as well, Baron Henrik Wedell-Wedellsborg, and I said, “Henrik, can you come over to the house. I need some help.” I said, “Henrik, I want you to draw me up papers through which I will become the guardian of Fedor Obukhov." About three or four days later, Olga Obukhov, a KGB colonel, comes to our residence, knocks on the door and comes into our house. I’m standing in the entrance hall with her, and she takes a white envelope and hands it to me. She says, “This is for Fedor” (the son in the U.S.), and it is $50,000 in one hundred dollar bills. Can you imagine the American ambassador in his residence receiving an envelope from a KGB colonel with $50,000 in it?

Q: You are right. This is a subject of a movie.

ELSON: I scream, “Everybody come in this room immediately.” All the help comes, and Susie comes downstairs and I say to everyone in the room, in front of Mrs. Obukhov, “Mrs. Obukhov has just given me this envelope with $50,000 U.S. dollars in one-hundred dollar bills for her son Fedor,” and I took the envelope and I handed it to one of the people in the residence. Then I went to the telephone. Again I called Baron Henrik Wedell-Wedellsborg, and said, “Henrik, get out here immediately. I have a major problem here.” He arrives, and I say, still in front of everyone, “Now, I want you to set up a trust.” I handed him the envelope, which I took from the person holding it, and handed it to him, the envelope with the $50,000 in it for Fedor Obukhov. “You will be the trustee. The money will remain in Denmark From this moment, I will have nothing to do with this.” Subsequently, the Obukhovs leave, and I’ve got the kid, albeit in the United States. He is still at Andover, and he graduates and he has to go to college. Well, I had to figure out that one; as I was the former Rector, which is chairman of the University of Virginia, I had him admitted to the University of Virginia, which is an excellent school, by the way. Again, he is an introvert, isolated. We have to have him on vacation, take care of him during the summers, and he becomes… Well, we’re his guardians, and he becomes a child of ours, a very difficult child. Finally, it comes time for him to graduate. He calls me and tells me, “I’ve got a job, it’s really fantastic.” He went to one of these placement agencies at the university. I said, “Where is it?” and he said, “Texas – Houston. And I said, “Terrific. What’s the name of the company?” And he tells me it’s Enron. Nine months later, Enron goes out of business and I’ve got the kid back. Enron was then out of business. Obukhov has the money his mother had given to me for him, but no job. So I called a friend of mine in Houston, and I said, “Do me a favor. Can you give this kid a job?” which he does. A year and a half later, he calls me and says, “As a friend of yours, I’ve taken care of the kid, but enough is enough.” I said, “Thank you. I understand.” Then I said to Fedor, “Now what you have to do is get

yourself a job." But he does nothing. He sits at home in his apartment. He had enough money because Henrik had sent him a check, closing the trust, when he graduated. I said to Fedor, "Do something." And he said, "I'll tell you what I'd like to do. I'd like to go to business school, and I'm taking courses at the University of Phoenix, you know, the online for-profit university." I said, "Okay. That's not very effective, but go ahead." Then he called me and he said, "I've found a business school in Canada that will accept me so I'd like to go to Canada." I said, "Well, fine, I think it's a great idea." Anything to get him out of my hair. He heads to Canada. He gets to the border, and they turn him back because his student visa has expired. He had never done anything about renewing it. So he goes back to Houston. I said, "Look, you're in trouble. Flip hamburgers, I don't care what you do, get yourself a job." In the meanwhile, I called everyone I know in Washington, and every division of the United States government – senators, governors - and I couldn't help him. You know how tough they are on those things. Obviously, I tried. I wasn't at all effective, which says something very good or very bad about State Department that they couldn't be of any help.

Q: Well, let me just ask you a very quick question here. Okay, his student visa had lapsed. Did he have any other status in the U.S.?

ELSON: No. So he called me again many weeks later. He said, "I've decided I'm going to go immigrate to Israel." I said, "Fedor, you cannot get into Canada. How are you going to get into to Israel?" He said, "By the law of return." I said, "Fedor, that's for Jews and you aren't Jewish." And he said, "Yes, I am." I said, "Well, wait a minute. Your mother is a KGB colonel, and your father is one of the leading diplomats, deputy foreign minister, there's no way you could be Jewish. Explain that one to me." He replied, "Well, my mother's father or grandfather," I can't remember which one he told me that this man was a leading scientist, and they wanted to keep him off the Stalin purge list, so they changed his passport from Jewish to Russian. Fedor then said, "That's how it came about." Well, I thought to myself, "What am I arguing with him for? I want to get him out of the country anyway. If he goes to Israel, I will be free at last. Thank God Almighty, I'll be free at last." I write letters to the Israeli embassy saying, "This kid is the best thing since sliced bread," to help facilitate his immigration. Now he is in Israel; I don't know whether he has a job or not, but the next thing I hear from him is that his mother and his brother are there with him. His brother had been in jail in Russia and shown on Russian television, drooling with a dunce cap on his head, an emotional wreck, probably high and drugged. Now, suddenly, he and his mother are in Israel with Fedor. I tried to make inquiries to see how this happened. What I learned was that he had been put in a mental institution. His parents had spent all of their fortune, which wasn't large, but they sold their pictures and their furniture in order to use these monies to get him into a private medical facility, and from there he was allowed to go to Israel. The Russians wanted to get rid of him too. He was a manic-depressive, the leading spy novel author in Russia, and would write an entire book over a weekend, which, of course, is probably possible because he was a manic. How he got out of the hospital, I do not know. But, I have inquired of friends in the agency, and they did not know as well. That's the last I've heard from them, save for a book I received from his father about the history of Danish-

Russian relations, sent from Denmark without a return address, and a yearly Christmas card from Fedor.

Q: My goodness. That is a very unusual story.

ELSON: Now, I kept in touch with various people in Denmark and with my chief of station and I asked, "What happened? Was he a spy?" And they said, "Well, yes and no. The kid was a fantasist. He was also the leading spy novelist in Russia. And he was a manic and he thought he was one of his own characters and so he did approach the various intelligence services offering his services and everyone turned him down except the English. But he had nothing to say to them. He didn't have any high or secret position so the whole thing was a bizarre episode and we still get Christmas cards once a year from Fedor. Nothing from his mother or father.

Q: Remarkable.

ELSON: That's the Obukhov story. Now, the President's visit. No sitting American President had ever been to Scandinavia. The President was supposed to go to Sweden, but something occurred and he decided to come to Denmark. Subsequent to that decision, he broke his leg playing golf in Florida. He fell down a flight of stairs.

Q: Yes, yes. He famously appeared later with the cast and the cane…

ELSON: Three months later they rescheduled the visit. Again, the President was coming to Denmark. Now, I had an extraordinary USIS head of station, whatever you called his position.

Q: Agency Director.

ELSON: Agency Director. And he was black, and he'd been in USIA for some time, and he was brilliant. With the President was coming, I had determined who would head up the team that handled his visit, and I did not choose my DCM who wanted to be chosen because I didn't think he was as effective as the USIS Director, Stephen Strain. I had Strain plan the visit, and it turned out to be fabulous – extraordinary. The President arrives, and Susie and I of course meet him at the airport. Air Force One lands. and all the dignitaries are at the airport to greet the American President. He emerges from Air Force One; it was a moment of great pride for me to see Air Force One, with the "United States of America" emblazoned on its fuselage, and Susie and I are at the bottom of the stairs waiting for our President to emerge.

Q: Yes, that's a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

ELSON: That's right. It was an extraordinary experience. And so he comes to Denmark. He was there but for one day; he did spend the night. and the Danes never forgot it. It became perhaps the most significant and signal experience for the Danes since the Second World War.

Q: About how large was the traveling party for the president?

ELSON: It was enormous. I'd say there probably were 1500 people.

Q: That's quite a group to manage.

ELSON: Two Air Force Ones. They had to bring the cars in from Germany. It was maybe not quite that many, maybe 1200, but I believe it was over 1000 people.

Q: Wow. Okay.

ELSON: And they had the security people and the press.

Q: Yes, sure.

ELSON: A lot of press.

Q: Sure.

ELSON: Prior to his coming, I had a call from the Queen: "Would you and Susie like to spend the night in the palace with your President?" And we said, "Certainly." Then later I get a phone call from the White House. They need the room in the palace that the Queen is giving to Susie and me to put an assistant to the President in. I think it was his physician or someone similar. I said, "That means I don't stay there," and they said, "Well, yes sir. I said, "The problem is you didn't invite me. The Queen invited me to stay there. I certainly will change my arrangements and not stay, but I'll wait for the Queen to disinvite me." Which of course, she didn't do. So we stayed in the palace with the Queen and the President. I thought there was no way they could get the best of me on that.

I had some very interesting experiences around his visit. Prior to his coming, they sent an advance team, with which procedure I'm sure you're familiar. During their stay, I get a call from the advance team. They are at the Amalienborg Palace, which is the home of the government, and I am told there is a problem with the Prime Minister; he will not introduce the President. I said, "I'll be right over." I go to the palace - they call it the palace - into the Prime Minister's conference room. Sitting around a table are the advance team, the prime minister, his chief of staff, and me. I said, "Okay, very slowly, tell me the problem." They said, "We were going to have an open-air event in Altdorf Square…" I said, "Yes." "And there will be a large stage" and I said, "Yes." And the Prime Minister was to go on the stage. the dais, and introduce the President, and the Prime Minister refuses. I said, "Well, tell me… (and this is all happening in front of the Prime Minister) tell me who else will be on the stage with the Prime Minister." They said, "No one. He will just call the President, and the President will come up, with ruffles and flourishes, to speak." And I said, "Well, you can't do that." And they said, "What do you mean?" I said, "You're going to have to have at least the mayor, some cabinet officials and chief justice with the Prime Minister on the stage." And they said, "Why? We just want the prime

minister." And I said, "*Jante Law*," which is a Danish expression. And they said, "What are you talking about?" I replied, "Well, the prime minister cannot be up there alone. The *Jante Law* says, 'Who do you think you are? You're no better than we are. You're not a big shot. The nail that stands up too high, we hammer down.'' I said, "The prime minister cannot be up there alone. He has to have others with him." And the prime minister turns to me and says, "You have the soul of a Dane." And that's how it was settled. (For a full description of *Jante Law*, see this url: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Law_of_Jante)

Another interesting moment - and we had so many of them, of course - I received a call from the Lord Chamberlain who is the head of the Queen's court and he says, "Your Secret Service wants the palace guards to take the bolts out of their rifles, and they don't want to do it." The advance team tells me, "Yes, they have to; we will have sharpshooters all over, so they needn't worry. You know we can't have people with rifles too near to the President." I said, "Well, let me ask you a question. Who does the Secret Service guard?" "The President." I said, "Who guards the Queen?" "The palace guards." "Well, how can I ask them to take their bolts out of their rifles and allow the Secret Service to have theirs in?" And so they said, "You're right." And that ended that issue.

Another two funny things that happened. There were two editorials, one in the leading Swedish newspaper and the other in a Norwegian newspaper. One said, "How did Elson get to Denmark?" and the other said, "When is Elson leaving Denmark?" because they were furious that the President was coming to Denmark instead of Sweden or Norway. Another issue came up. I was in a meeting with the President and Sandy Berger, who was then the National Security Advisor. And they were discussing the conversations they were going to have with the Prime Minister. They said something to which I retorted, "No, that's a mistake. I think what you should be saying is such and such and such." And Berger turned to me angrily and said, "Listen, that's my job, not yours." I replied, "Okay." I figured it was his problem. Later, when the President was speaking, Berger came up to Susie in this huge town square, with 100,000 people present — literally 100,000 people – and that's not hyperbolic at all.

Q: That's pretty historic.

ELSON: And he says to Susie, "Your husband was right. I made a mistake." He said, "I should have listened to him. He knew better," which I considered to be an extraordinary compliment, especially from Sandy Berger.

Q: Sure, absolutely.

ELSON: Bill Clinton is still one of the most charming men alive, and the Queen was like a teenager with him. He was flirting and laughing, you know, it was extraordinary to see how she dissolved, the great stately Queen with the royal presence acted as though she was a teenage girl. After the President's visit, another other interesting event took place. I want to tell you about Thule Air Force Base and an extraordinary incident that occurred during my tenure. The United States has a significant multi-use facility created during the Second World War and used during the Cold War as a base for our SAC bombers. It's

still there and used for other purposes today. I used to have to go several times a year as part of my job to visit the base. The Ambassador always makes a visit. I had developed a friendship with the Greenlandic Prime Minister. Greenland is a self-ruled colony of Denmark. The first time I met the Prime Minister of Greenland was in his office in Copenhagen. He was an Inuit, what we call an Eskimo, and he looked like a little Buddha. He spoke English, but poorly. I went to his office to discuss Thule with him. He opened a drawer – it was ten in the morning. He said to me, "Do you like cognac?" and I said "Yes," and he opened a drawer and took out a bottle of cognac and two glasses, tumblers, and he asked, "Would you like some?" and I said, "Yes." Of course, I thought that was what he wanted me to say. He fills up one glass for himself and fills a glass for me. So at ten in the morning we're drinking cognac in the Inuit Prime Minister's office and he starts telling me what he wants us to do at Thule. I thought to myself, "How do I negotiate with a Prime Minister?" And then I thought. "Greenland has 57,000 people. I'm really talking to the Mayor of Augusta, Georgia." So I said, "Mr. Prime Minister, what do you really want?" And he said, "You know what I want," in a very thick, heavy accent. And I said, "Yes, I think you want to get re-elected." He answered, "Yeah." I said, "I think we can make a deal." We had an excellent conversation. We left his office, and the press was outside with cameras. The first thing he says, "Best American ambassador ever, but…" and he goes into a diatribe, "He didn't give me this; he didn't give me that," which were things about which we had never spoken. So I started laughing, and I turned to him and said, "Okay, you got me. But this is the only time you'll ever have that opportunity because I learn very quickly."

Later an issue came up regarding Thule which almost brought down the Danish government. The Danes found that in 1953, against the Danish constitution, the then government had allowed atomic weapons on their territory at the Thule Air Force base. It had been a secret from the public for over 50 years. The press learns about it during my watch, and it becomes a major issue, highly publicized and frightening to the government, who were accused of lying to the people for over 50 years, no matter who was Prime Minister. The government was threatened and feared it would fall. The press came to me and asked, "Do you know anything about this? Were there atomic weapons in Thule? Does the U.S. have them at their base?" I wanted to say, "Look, fellows, figure it out. We had bombers circumnavigating the globe out of Thule, and what do you think they had on them?" But I didn't say that, of course. I said truthfully, "I'll be very candid…" (and I did not know for sure, so I was telling the truth) "I know more about General Custer and Little Big Horn than I do about atomic weapons at Thule."

Subsequently, the Secretary of Defense, Bill Perry, a great man who became a very close friend, arrived in Denmark, and he asked, "What questions am I liable to be asked?" And I replied, "The big question they are going to ask you about is Thule Air Force Base and atomic weapons You have to be very cautious because the Danes are deeply concerned about this." His Deputy, who was his press secretary, had gone to Exeter, I had gone to Andover, brother schools, so we had something in common.(Andover was founded by a nephew first, and Exeter by his uncle later). His Deputy replied, "The Secretary of Defense will never say he doesn't know." Then I said, "Then he's on his own." The press asked him the question, and he said, "I don't know, but I will find out." He found out that

there were atomic weapons on Thule, and it almost caused the fall of the Danish government. Everyone was blaming the current government for continuing the cover-up, not that they allowed the weapons to be there (at this point there weren't any), but for continuing the lie They had a white paper done by a special commission, and it became a significant scandal in Denmark.

As a result, the Prime Minister's office called me asking me how to handle this. They're frightened, they're afraid of being thrown out of office because of this issue. I also received a call from the U.S. government, the Department of Defense. and I said, "Look, let me handle it." I suggested to the Danish government that they should just ride it out. They believed me when I said I think nothing will happen. And that ended that. Months later, I received a call that the Greenlandic government wanted the U.S. to return land that is outside of Thule Air Force Base, contiguous to it, that had been a burial ground for their ancestors, and we were leasing it for a thousand years, or whatever. The Danish government called me and said they wanted us to give it back to Greenland. And I said, "No." They said, "Why not?" and I said, "The reason is the Greenlandic government could build an Iranian consulate there. They can do anything they want with it and they will do anything to make life difficult for the Danish government, and Thule Air Force Base has no defenses. It's open space at the top of the world. There is no need for fences or guards or whatever. We can't allow them to jeopardize the security of our base." Well, the Danish relationship with Greenland is historically similar to the American relationship with the African-American community. The government was embarrassed by their treatment of the Greenlanders. They will do anything the Greenlanders ask. They have this great sense of guilt and also the Scandinavian standard of egalitarianism. They allow the Greenlanders to continually accuse them of mistreatment. Well, the Danes were really delighted that I said, "No," They could say the Americans refused.

Q: It took it off their shoulders.

ELSON: Exactly. Subsequently, the Danish government, under great pressure from Greenland, instructed their ambassador in Washington to talk to the new Deputy Secretary, Tom Pickering, who knew the Danish ambassador from another post they both shared. Pickering says he will fulfill the request and he sends me a cable instructing me to accept the Greenlandic proposal. I had access to most everyone in the State Department hierarchy, and if I called directly, they would answer my calls. His predecessors, Deputy Secretaries of State, were all friends of mine. If I called, I would and get an immediate reception. I called Pickering twice; he didn't answer either call. I called a third time; he still didn't answer the call. On my fourth try, one of his assistants said, "Ambassador, he's not going to answer your call. What he instructed you is what he wants." I was disconcerted and discomfited by it all, so I decided to do it the State Department way. I sat down and wrote a cable saying, "I'm going to do what you instructed me to do; however, you should know the last time these issues came up, the Danish government almost fell by the Department's response." I explained exactly what had happened. "If you insist on reversing what I have said, you are going to run the risk of a terrible problem within Denmark itself, so it's your call." And he reversed his decision. What I

suggested was, “Buddy, you want me to be the fall guy? You’re going to be the fall guy.” And that solved the problem. We did not give it back.

Now, at one point, the Danes tried to make a show for the Greenlanders that they were really trying and asked me for a meeting in Greenland with the Greenlandic government over this issue. I called Boulder, Colorado, and asked particular SAC officers to fly from Boulder, all generals and meet me in Greenland. We all arrived in Greenland, and as we arrived, and the Greenlandic Prime Minister was, at the same moment at the airport, leaving the country. He left the day we were coming because he did not want to be the cause of a continuing problem. Yet, he wanted to give the appearance that he was trying to get this land back for the Greenlanders. So he sent his housing minister to negotiate with us, which was ridiculous. The Danes sent two of their diplomats. My staff had found "where the Danish foreign ministry had once said that the Americans are allies but not friends and we don’t have to do everything they ask." I read that back to the Danes who were present, and they said, “Where did you get that?” and I replied, “From you." At that moment, they announced to me, “Greenlandic Television is outside the meeting room. They want to interview you about this.” So I said, “Fine.” What they were doing was trying to force me to embarrass myself as opposed to the Danish government being embarrassed. I went outside the meeting room, and before me was a young woman reporter from Greenlandic Television. She asked me, “Why won’t the United States of America return this little piece of land to Greenland?” And I replied, “Well, who said we wouldn’t?” And she said, “What do you mean?” I said, “We will return it if the Danish government provides the security for the base.” She asked, “How much would that cost?” I said, “I don’t know, 30, 40, 50 million a year?” The Danish diplomats were watching, pulled me aside and said, “You blindsided us with that.” I said, “Now wait a minute; I didn’t ask for this interview. You set it up because you were blindsiding me. Now you have to explain it.” The Danish newspapers the next day headlined, “U.S. will return the land outside of Thule for $50 million a year,” and that ended the affair immediately, as the Danish government did not want that obligation.

When I arrived in Copenhagen, the Bosnian conflict was just beginning, and one day I was at a medal presentation to a friend of mine at the German embassy. The German ambassador came up to me and said, “Why haven’t you sent troops to Yugoslavia?” Before I responded to his question, I turned around, looked over my shoulder, and said, “Are you talking to me?” Of course, he and I were the only people in the room. I did that for effect. I then replied, “Well, sir, your vacationers are lying on the beach within the sound of cannon from ex-Yugoslavia. They can even smell the cordite from the cannon. Why haven’t you sent your troops?” Later, the Danes did send troops, not the Germans, and the Danes were especially proud of their commitment. Their troops proved to be brave, courageous and committed. The Danish contingent in Tuzla became the subject of the painting which the Queen and I commissioned and now hangs in the Natural History Museum.

Now, another story. Denmark celebrates our Fourth of July.

Q: That sounds interesting.

ELSON: They are the only country we know outside of the United States to celebrate our Fourth of July. There is an open-air theater in Rebild, which is in Jutland, established about 50 years ago by Danish immigrants in the United States who wanted to show their loyalty to Denmark and their great love and affection for the United States. On our Fourth of July, they have an annual celebration where anywhere from 20 to 50,000 people attend. It is open air, and each 4th they have an American speaker and a Danish speaker... They've had everyone from Bob Hope to Ronald Reagan. The Danish speaker is usually the Prime Minister or the Foreign Minister or another prominent Dane. Twice, I was asked to give the American speech. I am the only person to have been asked twice. But the first time I gave it, I used my granddaughter as a foil to give them an idea of what I felt the United States of America was about. The first thing that happens when you're in Europe, the first question you are always asked is where is your family from? They want to know where your roots in Europe lie. It gets annoying to be asked that question over and over. My granddaughter is now a senior at Harvard, but in those days, I started the speech by saying, "I have a granddaughter. She's brilliant, she's beautiful, she's talented and she's three years old." And she was. And then I would say, "In her veins flows the blood of a signer of our Declaration of Independence who came from England, a captain in the Confederate Army, who came from Germany, and a private in the Tsar's Army, who came from Russia." And I continued, "She cannot answer the question, where your family from" because she is from a new people, a new ethnicity, a new country, she's an American." I've used that speech many times subsequently. But on that occasion, when I was giving the speech for the first time, a man suddenly stood up with a pistol about 30 yards from where I stood and took five shots at me. The security people who were with me were all Arnold Schwarzeneggers. They immediately pushed me down and put themselves on top of me. Shocked, I said, "Let me up." They said, "Sir, you're under attack. We're saving your life." And I said, "You're killing me. I can't breathe." They let me up immediately, and the police by that time had apprehended the shooter and were hauling him away. By the way, there weren't any bullets in the gun, which we later found out were blanks, but nevertheless it was a shocking experience.

Q: Oh, absolutely, if somebody points a gun at you…

ELSON: My wife thought I was dead because when the man stood up with a pistol and fired, and seeing me go down, the only thing she could surmise was that I had been hit. As they hauled the shooter off, the 30,000 people present fell silent. They had witnessed what they thought was an assassination attempt. I didn't know what to do at first. Then I leaned across the podium and pointed at him as they carried him off, and I said, "Okay, buddy, you think you're a tough guy? Well, my granddaughter's really tough. If she thought you were treating her 'Far Far' (which is Danish for grandfather), this way she'd come here and she'd take care of you. She really is a tough cookie," and everybody started cheering and it saved the day.

Q: My goodness and you wrote this speech.

ELSON: Yes, I wrote it. In fact, I wrote all my speeches.

Q: Wow, that's not all that usual. You know, some ambassadors write them, some provide outlines to others, but for you to write all of them…

ELSON: In fact, the reason I was so popular with the Danish newspapers, was every time I wrote an article, which was often, I wrote it.

Q: That's remarkable.

ELSON: One day I was visiting with the editor of the Jyllands-Posten, which was the largest-selling newspaper in Denmark. (He became a great friend of mine.) I asked him, "How come you publish all my articles?" He replied, "Well, we know you write them. We know they are not just things handed to you to give to us from the State Department."

One day I came out of my embassy, the chancery building on a sunny day – unusual in Denmark at that time of year In Denmark, it is very dark in the winter and the sun is rarely seen. I was standing outside of the embassy, and a man with an ax came running up, saying he wanted to kill the ambassador. A crazed individual. As he ran past, he came within inches of me. "Where's the ambassador?" he shouted. I pointed toward the embassy. He ran to the chancery wall and started hacking on the building. The Danish security contingent grabbed him and took him away.

We were firebombed twice, and we had men on the roof of our embassy twice – masked men. Subsequently – and this is another State Department issue — we asked for a protective fence around the embassy.

Q: Oh, there hadn't been one when you arrived?

ELSON: No. So I asked for one. Although we had received a price of something like $12,000 to construct one, They kept replying, "Too expensive; we can't do it. No money available for it." We were getting threats all the time because Denmark was the home to a number of terrorists. They had a concordat with the terrorists – if you don't do anything here, we will tolerate you. We will not be happy, but we tolerate you. The United States of America accepted this arrangement because we could keep our eye on them and had the opportunity to monitor them.

Q: I see. Let me just ask a quick question. Who was denying the fence? The Danes or the State Department?

ELSON: The State Department. We had continuing problems. Indeed, the Mexican Ambassador at a dinner party said to me, "Every night I go to sleep thanking the United States of America." I said, "Really? I'm very proud of my country. But why do you thank us especially?" And he said, "Anytime there's a demonstration in Copenhagen, it's in front of your embassy. Even people demonstrating against Mexico, they demonstrate in front of your embassy." I laughed because it was true. I made arrangements to return to Washington and I bring with me the head of the Danish CIA, which is called PET, and

the head of the police in Denmark, as well as the cabinet head of both agencies, to tell the State Department that the embassy needed security. They came with me to the State Department, and we saw the fellow who was then in charge of embassy security. I don't remember his name, but I remember I thought he looked like Cordell Hull's cousin in the State Department in 1940 because he was wearing a seersucker suit, a little bowtie, and white bucks, and I thought this man must have been at Princeton, class of '38. He said to the group, "We protect our embassies," and I said, "Bull (expletive)!" All of this transpired in front of these other people. I said further, "That's not true. You're putting our people in jeopardy, and I brought these people to explain to you the problem," and the three Danes explained to him what the problem was. We got the fence.

Q: Wow, that's… I've never heard a story quite like that where literally the host country has to make the argument.

ELSON: That's what happened.

Q: They were frightened.

ELSON: As the former head of the University, I was invited to many Danish universities. I was the founding chairman of National Public Radio (NPR). So I was invited to be on television and radio many, many times. Once I was to be interviewed on Danish television, and immediately before the interview, I asked the host of the show, to give me some of the questions he was going to ask so I can prepare answers before we get on the air." He started with a lot of anti-American questions, so I said, "You're going to ask me that?" and he said, "Yes." I said, "Well, goodbye." He said, "What do you mean goodbye?" and I said, "I'm leaving." He said, "Well, you're not going to be on the program?" and I said, "No, you're trying to embarrass me, you're trying to embarrass my country, and I'm not going to allow it" and I walked out of the station just after he said, "What am I going to do?" as he ran after me, and I said, "That's your problem." I just walked out, and there were no repercussions. After that, I had most favorable treatment from other interviewers.

Q: You know, that's actually a very good point. Many times people think diplomats only soothe and say nice things but there are times like this one where you speak very frankly and very strongly, that you are not going to be placed in that kind of position and it worked.

ELSON: Yes. I was very independent. One DCM - I had two of them - turned to me and said, "How are you going to cover your behind, Ambassador, on this one?" I said, "Let me tell you something. A guy named Bill put me here. And he's going to be the only one to ask me to go home, so don't worry about it."

Q: Wow. It's hard to imagine a DCM asking an ambassador that question but I guess anything can happen.

ELSON: Well, I didn't think much of that DCM, to be frank with you. But anyway, I spoke about him in the earlier parts of the initial interview. But I don't want to say anything negative and I won't identify him for that reason.

Q: There is a question I do want to ask you… Denmark is a small country and generally known for being relatively tolerant and not having a great deal of crime, and so on. But, on the other hand, it also has a fairly large right wing and perhaps a far right wing nationalistic element. Did that play at all while you were there? Did it create concerns?

ELSON: Let me explain to you: When I was posted in Denmark, it was a miniscule part of the voting public. There was a woman named Pia Kjærsgaard, who then headed the far right party and commanded about one or two percent of the vote. She's now up to 19 percent due to the immigration issue. I'll tell you how I handled her. She had a 40th birthday party. and I believe she invited all the diplomats. The people in my embassy advised me, "Don't go, Ambassador, because she's in the far-right wing party and it will be embarrassing to the United States." I replied, "First of all, this is her birthday. It isn't a political event. I'm going to go. I'm just going to go and say, "Happy Birthday." I was a round birthday as they call birthdays ending in a zero in Denmark. I went to the birthday party, said "Happy Birthday," and left. She never forgot it because I was the only Ambassador to show up. After that, I could do no wrong with her. I thought it was a common courtesy. I didn't look at it as a political statement, and neither did she nor any other members of the government. I was iconoclastic as an ambassador, and that's why the Queen loved us so much because we got things done. I say we, because I mean Susie and me.

Q: Were there memorable events that your wife attended as well that stand out in your mind?

ELSON: Well, I have to tell you how much she was adored. Susie had a 60th birthday while we were there. We gave a party at one of their great museums. The museum had never had a private party in the museum, but they loved Susie for all she had done, and they allowed us to have the party there. The prime minister attended. Susie had said, "No speeches." And Denmark is renowned for their after-dinner speeches. They go on for literally three or four hours, but Susie had said no speeches. The prime minister was sitting to Susie's right and he stood, demanded a microphone (which Susie had forbidden), and said, "The ambassador said no speeches, but this is my country, and I'm the Prime Minister, and I want to make a speech." Well, we had had a terrible time trying to find a microphone. He continued, "The Ambassador says that Susie is his secret weapon. It is no secret," which I think explains the great affection everyone had for Susie. Prior to the dinner, early in the morning, a massive group of noblewomen from all over Denmark decided to come to our residence at seven in the morning to begin her birthday celebration, singing to Susie, announcing her birthday, a tradition among the nobles. Susie was loved by everyone. Susie was head of the American Craft Council and its museum in the United States. and she developed very close relationships with the museums in Denmark. She brought the Whitney Biennial to Denmark, and curated a craft show for the Danish Craft Museum, which was extraordinarily successful as Denmark is

a society priding itself in its design history. All these occasions enhanced Susie's reputation as an unusually cultivated person, making her an icon in Denmark, the subject of many stories in prominent Danish magazines and newspapers. Susie is an exceedingly modest person, and modesty is celebrated in Denmark. Of course, everyone liked that as well. The Danes covet modesty.

Another State Department story. Susie was curating an exhibit of American crafts for the Danish Craft Museum. There is another museum about six hours from Copenhagen, Ebeltoft that has a collection of American crafts. Susie was curating the show for the USIS office and had to go to Ebeltoft to secure pieces of glass at the suggestion of USIS. It was winter. There was snow on the ground and ice on the roads. Under State Department rules, the wife doesn't use the ambassador's car, but I said, "Susie, there is no way you're driving in a USIS mission on these icy roads by yourself." So I told her to use my car and driver to go. It was a State Department-supported exhibit. A couple of weeks later, my DCM hands me a piece of paper from the administrative officer which said we had illegally used the embassy car for Mrs. Elson. I said to the DCM, "First of all, this is ridiculous, it wasn't illegal," and I explained to him how it had occurred. He replied, "Well, I know, but it was handed to me by the administrative officer." I said, "Yes, but you're supposed to be overseeing all of the memos reaching me. Why did you give it to me? Why didn't you stop it? Why didn't you say to the admin officer, this is ridiculous, this was something the USIS was sponsoring? I'll be very candid; I don't have any confidence in you any longer. You exposed me to this type of accusation. It was an official trip." It bothered me, and subsequently inhibited my relationship with him.

And one time we had a situation where Susie said, "If we get an ice cream machine, we can make our own ice cream which will save us buying ice cream for our dinner parties." By the way, I brought my own wine, so there was no charge to the State Department for that. As I was chairman of a large wine company, I had an extraordinary collection.

Q: And that does help in an important way because typically for official dining or official receptions, the alcohol cost is typically one of the highest.

ELSON: Well, that was a cost I absorbed myself, and that was only one of many. Well, Susie says, "I think we need an ice cream machine; it would help us in our entertaining and it would be much less expensive for the residence." So I told the administrative officer, "Look, we're going to need an ice cream machine." I think they cost $325, but they said, no, not until they received permission from Washington. First of all, it took about six months for them to write back and forth to get the permission to do that, and they never came to a decision. So I went out and bought one myself and paid for it myself. They objected to my buying it, even though I paid for it.

Q: Yeah, I'm acquainted with these regulations.

ELSON: Then I said, "That's ridiculous. When I leave, I'll take it with me (which I did not.)" It's probably still in the residence.

Q: I understand. It can get very, very punctilious when it comes to individual costing and so on.

ELSON: Well, it was silly, and I was spending so much of my own money anyway.

Q: Yes, you had mentioned that you had went around to the universities; you had a great deal of experience with university management and so on. When you want, what were your impressions of the students there? Did they know much about the U.S.? Did they have preconceptions?

ELSON: Well, I was at Aalborg University where I later became a professor. A young woman said to me, “We have more democracy in our country than you have in yours.” I replied, "Well, perhaps you’re right. I don’t really know enough about your country to make an accurate comparison but I know this." Then I went spoke about my granddaughter again. “I have this three-year-old granddaughter, beautiful, talented, and brilliant, and one day she will be President of the United States. And do you think you’ll ever be the Queen?” And the rector of the university said, “That wasn’t fair.” And I said, “You’re right. and neither was the question.”

Q: But the students themselves?

ELSON: They were very bright. The Danes have a superb educational system. In fact, they have free education all through college and graduate school, and they attract very bright students. I found them all to be superbly prepared and well-informed.

Q: Well, sir, this really has been a wonderful summing up episode because in the earlier part of your oral history, you did talk quite a bit about relations between the U.S. and Denmark and now you’ve explained more of the details, the things that stand out in your mind and the major events that occurred. How would you like to sum up?

ELSON: I’ll tell you another, summing it all up. When we left Denmark, the Prime Minister said to Susie and me, “If you’d like to buy a residence in Denmark, we will see that you will be able do it.” Denmark does not allow the sale of private property to anyone who is not a Danish citizen, but they - again I say this with no modesty at all - they wanted to do this with a special act in Parliament for Susie and me. And I said, “No.” Because I’ve always believed when you leave a post, you do not go back except as a visitor.

Q: Yes, I understand that very much. That is a good practice to follow.

ELSON: It’s not good for your successor to have their predecessor sitting there.

Q: Yes, I think you’re right. I have only been head of a section but even as a head of section, there are great temptations to stay in touch and it’s not a good idea.

ELSON: We did go back a lot for shooting, but that was only for visiting the noble families. Moreover, the Queen invited us to stay with her every year.

Q: Oh, that's lovely.

ELSON: And we stayed in the palace with her and with Prince Henrik. And they have been in the United States visiting us. And whenever we went back to Denmark, I would tell the sitting ambassador that I was coming. Usually, the ambassador would be gracious would invite us to lunch or dinner, but most of the time we did not accept their offer.

Q: Sure, that is absolutely in keeping with the best practice.

ELSON: What countries did you serve in?

Q: Jamaica, Costa Rica, Austria, Armenia, Romania, and Hungary.

ELSON: How did you get from Jamaica and Costa Rica to Armenia?

Q: Well, with the end of the Cold War, there were many more jobs opening in the former Soviet Union and the former Warsaw Pact. That's where the needs were and I was happy to go.

ELSON: It must have been very exciting in Armenia, wow.

Q: Absolutely. It was quite exciting.

ELSON: With their Turkish problem, oh, my goodness.

Q: Oh yes, it's still there; the Turkish problem is still there.

ELSON: The Turkish ambassador to Washington, had been the Turkish ambassador in Denmark, and he used to tell me all about it.

Q: Yes, it's still very touchy. So then I ended with Romania, Hungary and the last tour in Costa Rica in public affairs.

ELSON: In Hungary, was Donald Blinken there when you were there? Who was the Ambassador?

Q: I had two. One was, his last name was Walker, a cousin of President Bush.

ELSON: I know who you are talking about. I knew him. I met him, yes.

Q: And then the second ambassador was a Member of the Board of EXIM Bank, April Foley.

ELSON: Yes, I knew her too.

Q: Those were my two ambassadors.

ELSON: Well, they were very good ambassadors.

Q: Oh yes, absolutely. And each in their own way. Obviously Walker was very interested in higher education given his connection to Washington University in St. Louis, and he did quite a bit of work to promote connections between U.S. and Hungarian institutions of higher learning. His successor, April Foley continued that. But under her tenure we also negotiated the return to Hungary of some historic properties in the heights, on the Buda side of the city. One of these housed the Marine Security Guards for the Embassy. We also erected a memorial to Carl Lutz, the Swiss diplomat who, as caretaker of the U.S. embassy building during WWII, used it to help some 62,000 Jews escape the Holocaust. Although Wallenberg and Schindler are more famous, Lutz was the most successful of any one person in saving Jews during that time.

ELSON: I can imagine that must have taken some work. But the return of a historic building that served as the Marine House, they must have loved it.

Q: Yes, but let's return to Denmark because I think you have more to relate about your time there.

ELSON: The Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) officials, who were not favorably looked upon by the State Department, were located in our embassy and they were a very good crew, I must say, very effective and talented people. They would disappear from the embassy for days at a time and suddenly reappear. On my desk I would find a bottle of vodka; one day it would be Estonian vodka, one day it would be Ukrainian vodka. That was the way they announced that their missions had been successful.

Q: Wonderful, okay.

ELSON: Once I had a visit in my office from the DEA agent who was most involved with Latvia and he said, "Ambassador, I've got a problem, I need your help." I said, "What's that?" He said, "Well, I'm teaching a course to instruct new Latvian DEA agents as to how they perform their duties. And looking through the list of people in my class, I noticed they were all former border guards. So, I asked why would you want to switch from a position of border guard to being a DEA agent, which is much more dangerous? And they said, oh, sir, that's very simple. The bribes are larger." I said, "I don't think I can give you a solution to that problem."

Q: But there's more?

ELSON: And the other story also involved the Baltic States. Their governments Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania were very close to the Danish government. Their current

governments are free from Soviet influence because of Denmark's involvement in their leaving the Soviet orbit.

Q: Right.

ELSON: One day I received a telephone call from one of the three Baltic ambassadors, who said he and his colleagues would like to come to my office to discuss a very important matter. I, of course, said, "Certainly; I'm at your disposal." The three arrived, the ambassadors of Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia, and sat down in my office and said, right off the bat, "We would like you to use your personal relationship with President Clinton to ask for our admission into NATO." And I said, "Now, you're asking me as a personal friend of the president's, not as the Ambassador to Denmark?" They said, "That's right." I said, "Then my answer is no." And they said. "What do you mean, no? No means I won't do it." They said, "Well, why not?" I said, "To be very candid with you, you are not producers of defense; you are consumers of defense. You're not offering to do anything to help the United States of America; you're asking me for help to protect you.

"Now, just a few weeks ago, the Danish government introduced an amendment into the United Nations at the request of the United States to condemn Red China for its human rights abuses. And Denmark did that at the request of the United States, and for the United States and what did you do? You voted against the Danish resolution. You voted against Denmark. Now, it was Denmark who not only encouraged you to leave the Soviet Union but also supplied you with the funds to do so, rebuilt your military, rebuilt your civil service, rebuilt your trade unions, created contemporary Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania. And what did you do? You voted against them. You're not a very good friend." And they said, "Well, of course. It was a pocketbook issue, an economic issue for us." I said, "That's the point. You were more interested in your pocketbooks than you were in your friend. You were willing to put them into jeopardy because you were afraid of being harmed by Red China economically." And they said, "Yes, that's right." I said, "Well, that's the problem, don't you understand? You're asking me to send my sons to the Baltics to defend you but you aren't willing to open your pocketbooks for the people who created your contemporary societies. With friends like you no one needs enemies."

Q: Wow.

ELSON: And it was over, they left the office. I was frightened that perhaps I had overdone it, so I called Dick Holbrooke and I said, "Let me tell you what I did today. I'm a little concerned." He replied, "Don't worry; it's about time someone told them."

Q: That's a really remarkable story. Did anything come of it?

ELSON: No. Well, the United States did not - rather the Clinton Administration I should say — did not offer to help them get into NATO. But later the Bush 43 Administration did.

Q: Yes, that's true.

ELSON: Now, another incredible story. The Argentine ambassador to Denmark had a wife who spoke neither Danish nor English. She only spoke Spanish. She was a lovely lady and a dear friend. It would have been impossible to converse with her if you weren't fluent in Spanish. The Argentine ambassador became a friend of mine. Well, all ambassadors try to be friends with the American ambassador.

Q: Sure.

ELSON: And that is part of their jobs, of course. And one day the Argentine ambassador came to my office; his name was Carlos Amar. He sat down and he said to me, "I can offer you the cellular telephone rights for southern South America." I said, "Stop. You're offering to me personally?" And he said, "Oh. yes." I immediately replied, "Stop." I called my secretary into the room. I said, "Ambassador Amar has just made an offer to me, personally, that is, in my judgment, illegal, improper and I'm going to ask him to leave immediately. I want you to be present to hear this." And I told Amar, "Don't you realize what you're doing by coming to my office and making such a proposition? That is unconscionable. Unforgivable. Now, leave." And he left.

I think I used stronger words than that to tell him not only of my displeasure but also my being astounded that he would even have such an idea. Then later I saw him and I asked him about it; how could you have done that? And he tells me that he is very close to President, Menem of Argentina, and they own a bank together in Florida. And it appeared to me that he was really a bag man for Menem.

Q: Ah.

ELSON: That is not what frightened me off; I learned that afterwards. What frightened me off was his blatantly illegal offer.

Q: Right.

ELSON: Later it turned out that the Argentine foreign minister returning, from a trip to Moscow, changed planes in Copenhagen and called his ambassador, Amar, to come to the airport. And Amar answered the telephone, said, "I can't, I'm in Madrid." To which the foreign minister replied, "Well what are you doing in Madrid?" And Amar answered, "I'm more comfortable here because of my wife and her lack of being able to communicate." What Amar had done was change the telephone in his office, which was in the office of the embassy of Argentina in Denmark, so when the phone rang in Denmark, it was picked up in Madrid.

Q: Wow.

ELSON: The foreign minister was livid. He returned to Argentina, saw Menem, and said to Menem, "You made me make your friend the Ambassador to Denmark, and he's living

in Madrid." Menem replied, "He likes Spain? I'm going to make him Ambassador to Spain."

Q: Holy cow.

ELSON: Now, whether the story is apocryphal or true I'm not sure. The first part I know about, that was me. The second part I only heard about.

Q: These are wonderful behind-the-scenes stories that, you know, you could never learn without doing an oral history.

ELSON: Now, there was another interesting little incident. I was, with less modesty than I should have, extraordinarily effective in Denmark. And the French, who had been very close to the Danish government, were very upset over that, especially because they lost the MICA (Missile d'interception, de combat et d'autodéfense) sale. They lost their attempt to put MICAs in the EU; there were too many issues that they had lost to the United States because of my friendship and involvement with the Danish government and my success in countering the French.

The Swiss Ambassador told me that the French Ambassador was sent to Denmark as their ambassador because he was a great friend and former colleague and former classmate of Prince Henrik, the Prince Consort (who had been a French diplomat at one point). The French ambassador was recalled after a year or two. When I say recalled, he went home.

Q: Right, right.

ELSON: And the Swiss ambassador, Andre Von Graffenried, who was a great friend of mine and a great friend of his, came to see me. He said, "You know why he was taken home." I said no. I laughed and I said, "No, of course not." He said, "Well, because he failed to change the attitude" –

Q: The attitude or the position?

ELSON: — to change the attitude of the Danish government towards the United States that I had created. He failed in his mission, and he was brought home. I'm trying to be more articulate about it, but I think you've got my drift of what I had to say.

Q: Yes, absolutely. I mean, part of an ambassador's duty is to favorably dispose a government towards his authorities, his- the people in his capital who want certain things. And despite this French ambassador's efforts he did not succeed in changing the Danish views on some of the key things that France wanted.

ELSON: Precisely. And I was the one they blamed. They felt he could not overcome my influence with the Danish court and with the Danish government.

Q: That's fantastic. And of course I remember so many of your stories of meeting with the Danish royals.

ELSON: Well, I want to give you a story that's not going to be very favorable to the State Department or to a former Secretary of State.

Q: That's fine. Not every story is a positive one.

ELSON: I had a call from Secretary Albright, and she told me that she was planning a trip to Denmark. And I was overwhelmed with joy because there's nothing more beneficial to an ambassador than have a visit by a Secretary of State.

Q: Absolutely.

ELSON: And I said, "Yes, ma'am, I'm delighted." She told me that she would need — I'm not quite sure of the number — something like 50 automobiles and 120 hotel rooms.

Q: For Denmark?

ELSON: I replied, "What? We've had the attorney general, we've had the vice president, we've had the secretary of defense, we've had the director of the Central Intelligence Agency; we've had so many visitors and they usually come with a retinue of two or three, or five at the most. Why do we need so many rooms and automobiles?" She said, "Well, that's what I need for my trip." I asked, "How long do you intend to stay?" She said, "Just overnight."

Q: Wow.

ELSON: I said, "Overnight? You have that retinue for an overnight visit?" "Yes, I need them." I said, "Madam Secretary. We have been turned down for security funds, for burglar alarm systems in the homes of many of our people; we have been told we've turned down because of a lack of funds. Yet, you're going to spend an amount of money that is probably equal to a large percentage of my annual budget just to come for one day?

Q: Wow.

ELSON: And I asked, How will I ever explain this to my people?" And she replied, "Well, you don't want me to come?" I said, "I'd rather you not come with those circumstances surrounding your trip."

Q: Wow. That's breathtaking. I don't know of an ambassador who's ever done that. What happened?

ELSON: Well, that's why I guess I'm no longer an ambassador. Of course I was there a long time after that.

Q: Yes, absolutely.

ELSON: Nevertheless, that's what happened.

Q: And in the end she did not come?

ELSON: Did not come.

Q: Wow. That's astonishing. Honestly, I've never heard of a story quite like it that the secretary wouldn't even perhaps just go back to her security people or her communications people and say well look, Denmark after all, it is a very small country; couldn't we do with a little bit less since we're just staying overnight. You know, and then additional staff could meet with us for a subsequent trip. It's just astonishing.

ELSON: Well, I thought so, too. But I'll never forget it. That incident is indelible in my memory. This is what occurred. I'm not sure of my numbers, perhaps I've exaggerated them through the years, the 20 years that have passed since the incident, and the figures are hyperbolic. But whatever the exact number it was enough to be an extraordinary figure.

Q: Even if it's half that for Denmark that's still significant, that's still quite a large number. Unless what you're talking about is a huge, maybe a huge press corps.

ELSON: Well, I don't know what it was. This never came up in the conversation. All I know is that when Mrs. Clinton was the wife of the President, she came to Denmark, stayed with us, she had a retinue of about three or four. And when Janet Reno, the Attorney General, came over, she brought, I think, one or two people with her. And I know that when Secretary Perry came, often he would have three or four people at the most. Most of the times, two. Still, she didn't come after my conversation.

Note: Ambassador Elson completed his tenure in Denmark in June 1998, a total of 4 years and six months.

End of interview.