

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

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Background	
Raised in Iowa	
Grinnell College	
Entered foreign service in 1963 as intern	
Geneva, Switzerland	1666-1968
Study group on Vietnam	
CIA	
USUN, New York	1968-1972
Delegate, fifth committee	
U Thant, secretary general	
Personalities	
UN finances	
Operations	
China policy	
Buenos Aires, Argentina	1972-1977
Political officer	
Ambassador John Davis Lodge	
Department of State, Washington, D.C.	1977-1979
Honduras/Nicaraguan affairs desk officer	
Somoza and the Sandinistas	
Larry Pezzullo and Robert White	

INTERVIEW

[Note: This transcript was not edited by Mr. Figgins.]

Q: .Raleigh, North Carolina November 20, 1993. I thought I would start by just asking you to say a little something about your early life and education.

FIGGINS: I went to public schools in Des Moines, Iowa and went to college at Grinnell College, a liberal arts school in Iowa. I chose to go there although I had applied to and been accepted at Harvard because I thought it had perhaps more personalizing values that somewhat related to the Foreign Service because the Foreign Service felt more like a place of sophistication and abstract values rather than concrete values.

Q: That was my next question, how did you get interested in the Foreign Service?

FIGGINS: Well, the time I was growing up was the '50s when there were choices about accepting the Cold War idea and paranoia about Communism or trying to see a larger world where it wasn't one evil side against one good side, but a world of common problems. That perception came to me in the '50s and early '60s. So I thought that that was where the real action and the real history was being made in the international sphere. There were a number of United Nations clubs and organizations. The UN Association for the UN was quite active in Iowa, farmers being related to agricultural markets worldwide, unlike you might expect, had a pretty wide view in Iowa in the '50s and '60s. So when I had a chance for an internship I competed and right after I graduated from Grinnell College I had a summer internship with the State Department and I particularly admired the person I worked for, whose name was James Wachob. Then when I went to graduate school in political science, I took the Foreign Service exam and after several delays, so that I could continue to work on my graduate studies...the State Department all the while saying, "Come right in, don't worry yourself or waste your time with studies. Come in and learn the practical world and do it the practical way." Eventually I either had to take the exam over or come in, so I came in with my class work and research done, everything but my dissertation finished, in 1966.

Q: Was there a UN club or association at Grinnell? Did you get interested in it at college?

FIGGINS: Yes. There was an International Relations Club and I was interested in that and for four different years I went to conferences in New York at the UN with the Collegiate Counsel for the UN. I was president of the International Relations Club in college and I was a National Vice President for this Collegiate Council for the UN my senior year in college.

Q: Were you politically active as a college student?

FIGGINS: I didn't join the Young Republicans or the Young Democrats and I didn't much participate in any political campaigns.

Q: You would have been in college during the 1960 Presidential campaign.

FIGGINS: Yes, Nixon against Kennedy.

Q: During your internship or when you first began to have some exposure to the UN and to the Foreign Service, did you sense or feel still the impact of the McCarthy years when you first went into the Foreign Service?

FIGGINS: Right. My first year, my first assignment in Geneva, now it is 1966, there was a study group on Vietnam and I felt like I wasn't well enough informed about it. This study group met in various homes and seriously read some very good books that are still academically quite responsible, on the arguments about whether it is a civil war, how did the French leave, what do the Vietnamese want, how about elections, the Paris Peace Accords, etc. to get the whole history of it. I was warned not to participate in it because I might find bureaucratic or political enemies in the future that would point back to that time and say that I had been dubbed. I got that advice from two or three officers. One of the officers who considered himself a good friend worked for the US Information Service said, "I will tell you what. I respect that you want to learn about that. Why don't you inform the ambassador and I will arrange for him to appoint you to be an observer at these meetings and report back." I agreed to do that, although I didn't report back. I don't think I wrote any report. I may have had a few informal chats, I really don't remember that.

But what they predicted happened because after about seven or eight weeks of meeting once a week and discussing in small groups we had a big meeting where all the small groups came back together. It was a very strongly, anti-war rally, in effect. They brought draft resisters who had left the United States and gone to England and it turned out to be not at all academic but in the end a political decision, which would have been all right, but it wasn't anything like a consensus out of the study groups.

Q: What kinds of people were going to the study groups? Were they all Foreign Service people?

FIGGINS: No, there was no other American besides myself from the Foreign Service who went. There were people from various nationalities. I recall a fair number of Canadians. I would think on balance maybe it was a fourth Americans who were in private business or academics. I think it was mostly people from the universities who had come to Geneva particularly for the School of International Affairs.

Q: Did this have a negative impact on your situation there in Geneva? Did you feel that it compromised you professionally?

FIGGINS: No. I never felt that it had any results. I never felt that anybody noticed it. Except for this little flurry not to join in. Even after I went there was no particular interest on anybody's part of what I learned and as far as I know nobody in the Mission knew anything about this final meeting.

Q: It is interesting to me that the retired Foreign Service people that I am interviewing now seem to be part of the wave of people who came in right after the McCarthy period. I am curious whether they were a different kind of people with different attitudes, than some of the folks who came in before McCarthy. You don't seem to have been intimidated by the past history of the Foreign Service. Do you feel that some other people though might have been intimidated about what the older hands had gone through in the '50s?

FIGGINS: Well, I think maybe it is casting me a bit too courageous to say I wasn't intimidated because I did agree to be an observer at the group. Nothing came of it. And there were other times when I think I was affected by that intimidation in the expectation that I would cooperate with the CIA. So I had not come into the Foreign Service with an anti-communist crusade. I had come in with the idea that in the United Nations these divisions would be overcome and the values of the West and the United States of free speech and press, elections and economic opportunities, and the things that make our system great, would spread throughout the world. Not by fighting communism but by all countries talking to each other, observing each other.

Q: Now, what was that about the CIA?

FIGGINS: Oh, have some people over to dinner that the CIA person wanted to meet. More than one mission would ask for cooperation. They would mention somebody they would like to meet and request I have that person over for dinner along with the CIA person and his wife so he could get acquainted with the person and see if he wanted to pursue that kind of relationship.

Q: What would the purpose of those meetings be?

FIGGINS: So that the CIA individual could get acquainted with a possible future contact in a neutral situation.

Q: That was a regular practice?

FIGGINS: I can think of something like that happening a couple of times a year, not very often.

Q: These would not necessarily be people in the host government, but could be anybody?

FIGGINS: They could be any nationality. I was working for fourteen years for the United Nations at many places.

Q: What were your official duties in Geneva? Was that your first assignment?

FIGGINS: That was a rotational assignment so I had three different jobs. First I worked with the officer who represented the United States to the European Economic Commission. Then I worked with the officer that dealt with political problems of all

kinds in all organizations that were in Geneva. Then I worked with the person who worked on the financial problems of all the organizations that the United States had representation to in Geneva. So I went to conferences of all kinds...international labor, world health, meteorology, telecommunications, anything that was in Geneva...and write reports on what happened. I didn't negotiate very much. I was quite disappointed in the first two years at how little negotiating responsibility I had. I would sometimes go along and listen to some negotiations, but as far as saying, "The United States wants to have a reduction in its budget share from 33 to 25 percent, please go talk to these three delegations about that," I didn't get that responsibility and thought I was quite underutilized. I just went and wrote minutes of meetings.

Q: So you were an observer.

FIGGINS: The people there thought they were teaching me by observation, but I felt that I could have learned better by doing without any harm to the United States position.

Q: Was that a typical procedure for a young Foreign Service officer in that situation?

FIGGINS: The typical first tour officer does visa work, so the first couple of years are interviewing people which although may be closely supervised still it is one person talking to another person. It is very much more independent and responsible work than I felt I had as an observer.

Q: You were in Geneva from 1966-68 and then from 1968-71 you were US delegate to the US Mission to the UN in New York.

FIGGINS: Yes, that's right.

Q: When you were at the USUN, was U Thant Secretary General when you went to New York?

FIGGINS: Yes, U Thant was Secretary General.

Q: Any impressions of him, any dealings with him?

FIGGINS: My impression is of seeing him sitting in front of the General Assembly an hour at a time without moving except for blinking his eyes. He had some kind of Buddhist peacefulness about him. The people who dealt with him said that he was concerned that the Secretariat people be contented and happy in their work.

Q: Was he popular with the Secretariat staff?

FIGGINS: I think he was. It is my understanding that in the last year or two of his tenure, which I guess was the period when you were in New York, he was in poor health and his activities were limited because of some physical problems.

Q: What did the American delegation generally think of him?

FIGGINS: I don't know. I wasn't aware that he was taking initiatives, putting himself in a position where he would be unpopular because he was trying to do something. I really don't remember a thing about his ever taking a leading position and having American diplomats or others react for or against him, which would be very, very different than say, Dag Hammarskjold who was almost run out of the UN by the Soviets who didn't like his peacekeeping initiatives.

Q: Well, U Thant had tried, I think, to get some negotiations started on the war in Vietnam earlier in the mid-60s, but that would have been before you went to New York. What about Kurt Waldheim, he followed U Thant? Was he there during your time? Help with the chronology.

FIGGINS: I'm afraid I can't, I don't know when he came in. But his reputation was that of a man who would cooperate with all sides and wouldn't offend any. It would be unlikely, for example, in the opinion of people who knew him at that time, that he would have done as Boutros-Ghali has now in Somalia and ask for retribution against those who were suspected of having killed the peacekeeping forces. Kurt Waldheim had a reputation for not defending the staff of the UN or the UN operations, but rather simply being there to not offend anyone who was inclined to take offense.

Q: Some of the secondary sources that I have read tend to be fairly critical of Waldheim, implying or accuse him of being very ambitious, very sensitive to his public image and as you say not wanting to give offense or to take risks. Do you think that is an accurate perception?

FIGGINS: That jibes with the perception of Secretariat members who worked with him, not other diplomats. My impressions come to you from other Secretariat members who felt that he did not have the interests of the Secretariat or the United Nations's mission at heart. So anything you have said about him is not inconsistent with this impression that the Secretariat people who worked under him had.

Q: Let me ask you about a couple of people who were in the Mission, I think at the same time you were. William Schaufele. Does he ring any bells?

FIGGINS: I can't remember exactly what his position was, but I think he was with the US Mission in the late '60s and early '70s.

Q: I read an interview with him and he talked about Waldheim and suggested that Waldheim would bow too easily to pressure from the Soviets and the third world, and I just wondered what you thought about that?

FIGGINS: The Secretariat sources didn't particularly see him cow-towing to the Soviets and the third world any more than he would to Western Europe and the United States. Which is different, you see, from my own motivation which was not to serve the United States versus the Soviet Union or industrialized countries versus the third world, but my point of view as a diplomat was probably closer to the typical point of view of a Secretariat member rather than a diplomat.

Q: What were your duties at the time--1968-71?

FIGGINS: In all three General Assemblies I served in the Fifth Committee, which is the appropriations committee, which is asking for explanations of how the money is being spent and working to have more money spent where the United States was interested in programs and cut the size of the budget for programs the United States was less interested in. When the General Assembly wasn't meeting, I worked on host country problems. That is, assisting delegations from all countries to solve problems that they might have living in New York. Housing problems, traffic problems, family being homesick, a whole variety of programs which we worked in cooperation with the Mayor of New York City.

Q: The United States during this period was making an effort to get its share of the total budget reduced to about 25 percent. Would that have been within the jurisdiction of the appropriations committee?

FIGGINS: Oh yes. There was a committee on contributions which reported to the Fifth Committee. The basis for the contributions has always been their capacity to pay the percentage of the world product that each country produced. It was then adjusted for population for per capita income. So that a very big country like China has a fifth of the world's population wouldn't pay a fifth of the budget because the average person in China with such a large population wasn't that well off. Then there were other adjustments too. An oil rich country wouldn't have to pay much additional each year if it got rich quick, if there were earthquakes or major disasters there might be reductions. So there were a lot of reductions in the adjusted capacity to pay. The United States, at that point, still was paying 31.2 percent and that was still more or less based on our gross national product. But the argument was that it was...it's a very hard argument to make because on the one hand the United States would say we have too much influence if we pay a third of it then we should have a third of the votes. I guess that's the argument and since there isn't any way of voting except that each country gets one vote we wanted to reduce it to 25 percent. And that was possible to do when Germany entered. Germany had not been a member of the United Nations until whatever the year was, I have forgotten. When Germany entered the United Nations then the United States went down to 25 percent and Germany basically made up the other 6.2 percent that we went down. So it was an opportune time for the US budget to be reduced without having to lay the extra cost on any of the other members.

Q: I want to make sure I get this right. Were you on the committee on contributions?

FIGGINS: No, my boss was. The main delegate to the Fifth Committee was a career person and the other person was one of the Congressmen or Senators. Every year a Congressman or Senator came up and worked on the delegation. That was started from the very beginning to avoid Congress not joining the UN as we had not joined the League. So there was this very early consultation with the Senate and that continued. So every year to this time there are two Congressional people. One was always interested in the appropriations committee plus a career person and under that duo there were four other officers. I was one of the four.

Q: I wanted to ask you what you thought about that practice of including non-career people, member of Congress and other public figures, in the American delegation? Did the career people resent that? Did you think that was a good practice? Shirley Temple Black was part of the delegation at one time.

FIGGINS: Yes, she was there while I was there. I thought that practice was a good idea. They were often American celebrities and so foreign people would be pleased to meet them and have the memory of having met them and talk about them in meetings back home. There were very few that were troublesome. Shirley Temple Black, as a matter of fact, took her responsibilities quite seriously. I would come in at 7:30 or 8:00 in the morning and she would often be coming in at that time too. She worked on a lot of speeches; took advice from professional Foreign Service officers; showed up at the meetings and made speeches. She really worked. She was good.

The few people that can be trouble are those who want to state their own opinions and don't understand that they are a spokesman for the United States. They would say something as inappropriate as, "The United States government thinks X but I think Y." Very few people would be that obstinate or stubborn.

It's the same thing with appointing ambassadors who aren't career, although one can easily resent that because for each ambassador that is appointed that is not career, there is one deputy chief of mission who isn't an ambassador and one counselor who isn't deputy chief of mission, etc. For every non-career ambassador you may block the advancement that particular year of maybe six other people. So in that general sense it is not good for taking responsibility, but if the political appointee defers to the career officers, as is usually the case, then not much harm is done to US policy. Harm is done to careers, but not to US policy.

Q: I had thought that the celebrities and the non-career people were brought on the American delegation to help firm up support for the UN in the United States and there might become domestic political value to these appointments, but it sounds like you are saying that there was also an advantage in dealing with the other nations, that they would sometimes be impressed that these prominent Americans were there participating.

FIGGINS: That's right. That was obvious but the other point of shoring up domestic support wasn't obvious.

Q: Who was your boss?

FIGGINS: Bill Ziehl. In fact, he wasn't a career Foreign Service officer. He came there from the Bureau of Management and Budget. He was at least a career federal civil servant.

Q: Did you approve the American effort to reduce the American contribution?

FIGGINS: I think I thought it was okay. I don't remember having any trouble with that.

Q: Was Charles Yost the Permanent US Representative when you went up to New York? I have Yost down serving from 1969-71.

FIGGINS: Yes I was there under Yost and then under Guy Wiggins who was there for only one year. He was a newspaper editor. Then about two weeks before I left, George Bush was appointed and arrived in New York and had a meeting with the staff about a week before I left. He made a very good impression having everybody together and stating in genuinely, effective terms that we were doing a good job and he would depend upon us and that United Nations' work was important to the United States. It was a rather masterful political performance making his staff feel valued.

Q: From what I have read he seemed to have been very well liked when he was at the UN by the other diplomats and seemed to go out of his way to cultivate good personal relationships. But you probably didn't have much contact with him since you left so soon after his arrival.

FIGGINS: No, and after that I went to the Dominican Republic and I don't even have any secondhand impressions of how he did except for that very first week when he made a good impression on the staff.

Q: Did you think that he was very sincere or did you think this was just a very smooth politician?

FIGGINS: I felt he was sincere and in that sense he WAS an excellent politician in contrast to President Nixon who came down and tried to be lighthearted and made a very bad impression.

Q: Tell me about that. I think that might be interesting. When did Nixon make the trip?

FIGGINS: I think he came down in the fall for the general debate statements made by every country. At a time like that, when the President comes down, he will also have meetings of 20-30 minutes with heads of delegations from other countries. So he will make his speech and spend one whole day of high level interviews. He made a comment, that I recall, about "I understand that the United Nations is balancing its budget and is

being effective. I like that. I would like you to introduce me to whoever is doing that, maybe we can get some advice from him." He intended to be lighthearted, but the idea about "I don't know if it is U Thant or not, don't know if he is called the Secretary General," I thought expressed no understanding of the UN or appreciation for the UN. He sort of trivialized what the UN was doing. And, of course, he is not good at being lighthearted either. He doesn't have a calm and humorous touch.

Q: It is my understanding that he did not have much faith in the UN or interest in the UN. Was that your impression?

FIGGINS: Oh, that must be true. Or the State Department either for that matter. With Kissinger as National Security Adviser publicly embarrassing Secretary Rogers by flaunting the fact that he was making foreign policy. And then when he became Secretary of State, he also, from beginning to end, belittled Foreign Service officers. He had a program called GLOP, globalization program, so that any officer who had served more than two tours in one region in the next go around would be assigned to a different region. So a Latin American specialist would spend a few years in Asia and an African specialist would get a few years in Latin America. That was Kissinger's idea that Foreign Service officers were lazy in their knowledge of one region of the world and needed to work harder at being all purpose generalists.

Q: Let me ask you about Charles Yost. He was a career diplomat and one of the few, maybe the only career person named Permanent Representative. What were your impressions of Yost?

FIGGINS: McHenry was another career Foreign Service officer who became head of the US mission some years later. Also most recently, Thomas Pickering. McHenry was also an African-American career Foreign Service officer.

Charles Yost was a real gentleman. He had a real gentle and rational atmosphere about him. I saw him only in a few staff meetings. Perhaps I only had two or three conversations where we talked about the work I was doing. So I didn't have a lot of touch with him. But he gave the impression of being quietly confident.

Q: What about Wiggins?

FIGGINS: Guy Wiggins was a very sociable person that probably left after one year because his goodwill wasn't matched by his knowledge and he couldn't learn fast enough what was going on. I don't know why he was appointed, but I have the impression that he just left it to his deputies to do the work.

Q: Was he a Nixon appointee?

FIGGINS: I expect so.

Q: I want to give you an opportunity to comment on all the people who served there while you were there.

FIGGINS: Oh, there was also the ambassador out of South Africa, Ed Perkins, who was head of the Mission to the UN also. Another African-American career Foreign Service officer. First he was Director General of the Foreign Service and then Ambassador to South Africa and then Ambassador to the UN. And then when he left, I think McHenry arrived.

Q: But that is after you left.

FIGGINS: Much after.

Q: There was one other person I wanted to ask you about and that is the person who I suppose brought continuity to the Mission and that is Christopher Phillips who served as deputy permanent representative from 1969-73. So that was pretty much the same time that you were there. Did you have much contact with him, any impressions of him?

FIGGINS: No, very, very little contact. I had two impressions. One was that he, like Yost, probably worked long hours and did his homework and read the documents and instructions and probably had wide range of contact with foreign diplomats. And was probably a careful and thorough worker. The second impression is that he had a long standing relationship, both before and after, with the United Nations Association. He was a supporter of the work of the United Nations.

Q: He was not, I guess, strictly speaking a career person, but he had been involved with the UN for a long time back to about 1948 I think.

FIGGINS: I'm not surprised. He probably was a personal friend of Eleanor Roosevelt's and had been a long time, intelligent, well-informed supporter of the United Nations.

Q: Did the US Mission suffer from this fairly rapid turnover of permanent reps?

FIGGINS: I don't think it suffered from that.

Q: The career people carried on regardless of who it was. Would it have been better for the US position at the UN, or the position of the US Mission within the Administration if more prominent people had been appointed during that period like Henry Cabot Lodge and Adlai Stevenson and some of the earlier reps who were well known? Does it make any difference?

FIGGINS: It depends on what kind of policies you would like to see. If they are like Adlai Stevenson, then they demand and get cabinet position. When Adlai Stevenson took that post he said, "I will, if I am a cabinet member equal with the Secretary of State, etc. and I attend cabinet meetings in Washington." So, if you think that Adlai Stevenson had a good

political orientation, then you would want him to be there. If you didn't like his orientation than you probably would think it would harm your policies. So it does somewhat weaken the President and somewhat weaken the Secretary of State, if he is a prominent person. If he is a career person he is not likely to have that kind of political input into the process.

So there is the triangle: the President tells the Secretary of State what to do and the President tells the head of the US Mission what to do. If the US Mission head doesn't like what the Secretary of State tells him to do, then he can go right back up the triangle to the President. He doesn't have to walk a line through the Secretary of State.

Q: While you were there did you have a sense that the UN wasn't living up to its full potential and part, because you didn't have a stronger US Ambassador?

FIGGINS: No, I thought the UN was not as effective as it could have been because the United States was simply not supporting it.

Q: Regardless who the ambassador was.

FIGGINS: Yes.

Q: Were you at the UN when the People's Republic of China was admitted?

FIGGINS: No that came after I left, but not very long afterwards because I recall Jacob Javits, the Senator from New York, came down. We had been lobbying each year to keep the People's Republic of China's credentials from being accepted as the true representative of the China whose name appeared in the Charter. And the Taiwanese had their credentials. The credential committee asked which was the real China that was mentioned in the Charter. There was a vote then. Year after year the United States had been pushing very hard to not accept the Beijing government's credentials. However, the margins were slipping year by year and it looked at the rate it was going that it would only be two or three years before we would vote. Senator Javits came down to argue that the United States ought to make some demands on China. Very much like today, do we make some demands on China in human rights, perhaps, in exchange for trade? So Javits was making arguments like that. What is it, he asked at a staff meeting, that we want China to do that we can trade for giving them membership? And the Foreign Service officers misunderstood his question, not once, not twice, about three times, repeatedly misunderstood his point saying let's change our position and allow them to come and make some demands on them. We will give you membership now and you will join the non-proliferation treaty on nuclear weapons, etc. Javits kept saying, "What is it?" And the Foreign Service officer kept answering, "We have enough votes to defeat them again."

Q: Did you have a sense that Javits was looking for a way for the United States to save some political face that he knew eventually China would come in but if he could get them to make some concessions, it would make it a little easier for Congress to live with?

FIGGINS: I think that is exactly what he was doing.

Q: What did you think of the traditional China policy of the US government?

FIGGINS: I had mixed feeling about the non-recognition. I thought Javits was right in that particular case.

Q: You had not been strongly opposed to American efforts to keep the People's Republic out, up until that time?

FIGGINS: I had made the same argue that Javits was making in 1961 when I was still in college in an interview that I had for a Rhodes scholarship. I said we ought to do that with China.

Q: Do you think that if the United States had shown some flexibility earlier, say in the mid '60s, that they might have been able to work out an agreement in which the People's Republic would be admitted but the Taiwan government could maintain its seat in the General Assembly?

FIGGINS: Yes, that was one of the arguments that I made. That would have been one of the conditions on China...the two China policy. And that might have had some importance in strategic military terms to say to other Asian nations that might be expansionists that the United States just didn't dump its allies. If you attacked Taiwan or South Korea, or any American friend, you would have the United States military to answer to.

Q: You went to Buenos Aires in 1972-73 and I want you to just comment briefly on US-Argentine relations during that period.

FIGGINS: There was a political counselor and then there was another officer, who was his deputy, a labor officer and myself. So I was the fourth ranking officer in the political section.

The ambassador was a political appointee, Henry Cabot Lodge's brother, John Davis Lodge. He was very much out of touch with Argentina. For example, the labor unions were anti-communist but he saw labor unions as being dangerous and subversive or even communist. So he was in a strangely anachronistic position. I don't know that he did any particular harm, but it did remind one of Braden who was the ambassador at the time that Juan Peron was first elected President. Braden criticized Peron as being a communist and dangerous and Peron was elected with a lot of help. The big posters were Braden verses Peron. So I had this feeling of an echo with John Davis Lodge. who was also being out of touch. Again, I don't know that he did any particular harm. I guess his deputy and the political counselor kept him in line. And the Argentines didn't take him very seriously.

Q: I was going to ask you whether Nixon or Kissinger took him very seriously, or did they tend to ignore Argentina and Latin America in general?

FIGGINS: I don't think they were very interested in the area. Kissinger was very European centered and then the world balance went to opening China. I think it is fair to say that they ignored Latin American to a large extent.

Q: I think the period that you were in Argentina was about the time that Allende was overthrown in Chile. How did that affect American influence in Argentina?

FIGGINS: I don't know that it had any effect.

Q: Anything unusual about your responsibilities as the fourth officer in the political section? What did you do?

FIGGINS: All the political officers divvied up the newspapers so I would read one or two of the main newspapers. Argentina is very literate so they have a lot of print. The people in general take a great interest in their politics. So each day I would cover one of the paper carefully. There were a number of political parties so I interviewed from one or two of them. I was given relations with the military so I made contacts with the people who taught at what would be the equivalent of our West Point and to some extent, lower ranking generals and colonels. I was also given the responsibility for the Church which meant the Catholic hierarchy, starting with the Papal Nuncio, an Argentine Cardinal, plus the third world priest movement which was anti-government, plus the Jesuits who did very careful studies. Whenever visitors came from Washington and the embassy wanted to inform them about what was going on, we would go talk to the Jesuits. So those were the different things I did and people I talked to and wrote reports about what they were all thinking.

Q: How cooperative were they with you? Did you have a sense that they were candid and wanted to talk?

FIGGINS: They were all open to share fairly frankly what they were thinking.

Q: I guess the last major topic I want to ask you about is Nicaragua. Now from 1977-79 you were the officer in charge of Honduras/Nicaraguan affairs in Washington. Was that what we called the Honduras/Nicaraguan Desk?

FIGGINS: It was actually in succession. I was the Honduras Desk officer for about two years and for about six months I was the Nicaraguan Desk officer. But, of course, Honduras, Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala are all in the same office and we would have daily staff meeting. So I knew a fair amount of what was going on in all of them.

Q: I guess the outstanding event of that period was Somoza's overthrow in Nicaragua. What did you think of the Carter Administration's policy towards Somoza? Did we stay with him too long? Could we have had a more constructive influence in Nicaragua if they had made earlier overtures to the Sandinistas?

FIGGINS: I thought that the timing was pretty good, that the United States saw his demise coming fairly early and fairly clearly. And that occurred probably because of the ambassador to Nicaragua who was Larry Pezzullo. He left the State Department shortly after that and was head of Catholic Relief Services, but you might have noticed in the press that he has just recently come back as a negotiator in Haiti.

So Larry Pezzullo was ambassador in Nicaragua and he reported back...and Bob White was the ambassador in El Salvador...they were both reporting back quite accurately about the popular disillusionment with the government, and Bob White about the government's death squads in El Salvador. Larry Pezzullo's thesis was that the Somozas had ruled for two generations, I think since 1916, and had helped the United States in United Nations votes and had been friendly to United Nations' training of Latin American military. They were just a good friend of the United States. But, after the earthquake...this is Larry Pezzullo's description of Nicaraguan history...when the aid flowed back in to rebuild, the Somoza family and the national guard and the insiders and cronies, took such a large amount of that and built on land that Somoza own and built factories that Somoza owned, that the amount of corruption and greed by Somoza and the insiders was out of proportion to even the high levels of greed that might be found acceptable in that society. So his downfall was coming. So when Larry Pezzullo came up to Washington he took me along with him and we went over to the Hill and talked to the various Congressmen who had gone to West Point with Somoza and said, "The United States is now finished supporting this ruler and we want to have a transition from the Somoza era with a combination of Sandinista rebel forces and the national guard into one army, and some real elections, and we will support that with economic aid. Tell your friend Somoza that his days are numbered and we will help him get out. It is over. We see the handwriting on the wall. If he doesn't see it yet than he is blind and he had better wake up" And then the United States provided the airplane to take him out of the country together with his family and a selected number of national guard people. Elaborate arrangements were made to have a transition made through parliament and to have the chief parliamentarian appointed as acting president until the election.

Q: Did the acting president renege on the deal? I can't remember his name.

FIGGINS: I can't remember his name either but I remember that Somoza was flown out at 9:00 at night, or something, and by three the next morning this man had said, "No, the national guard is going to hang on and we are going to keep power and not form a new coalition government with the Sandinistas."

Q: What had gone wrong? Had we misjudged the character of the interim president?

FIGGINS: The arrangements were much too closely held. Nobody knew Somoza was leaving apparently, and that included members of the national guard. So he was telling the national guard to hold on until the end. Who knows how this man might have been intimidated or how he might have misjudged. It never occurred to me until this moment, but it is possible that the national guard said, "Not on your life are we going to surrender. You had better make this statement because we are going to hang on and you can't control us." So, what seems to have been wrong was that there wasn't a public announcement and a working through with the national guard so that thousands of people were in place with their new hierarchical positions and new understanding of what was going to happen. So that just one person renegeing on the deal could cause the whole deal to fall apart. If there had been thousands of people that were in on the deal before Somoza left the country...but that apparently was part of his deal, "I won't leave unless it is kept secret that I am leaving until after I have left."

Q: That is what I was going to say, it sounds as if Somoza has to bear at least some of the responsibility for this for not informing his people as to what he intended to do.

FIGGINS: And he left with the whole treasury of the country. One of the things that was done, although it was way too late after he left when it was realized what was going on was all the code numbers to all the foreign bank accounts were changed because the national guard and the political officers and he, himself, emptied most of the government bank accounts in foreign banks leaving the Sandinistas, when they did come to power on July 19, 1979, with an empty treasury. They started out in a terrible hole.

Q: How did the Foreign Service change after Ronald Reagan became President? That must have been a dramatic change over.

FIGGINS: My answer is fairly limited to Latin America where he, through his Secretary of State, took all of the Latin American hands, particularly in Central America, who knew anything about it and transferred them out and put in, both in Washington and the field, a whole series of people, career or not career, who didn't have any judgment or experience so they could be told to carry out this policy or that policy in El Salvador or Nicaragua or Guatemala. That they would do what they were told and not know enough to make an arguable case that it was unwise.

Q: This sounds like what happened to the China hands in the late '40s and '50s.

FIGGINS: Well, here is Larry Pezzullo leaving the Foreign Service, and Bob White left the Foreign Service and you can hear him on Public Radio these days, he is head of the Institute of International Studies in Washington, DC Pezzullo and White might be considered like the two China hands, the two Central America hands that were not favored because the policy failed. Not because they failed, but because the policy failed. They were not given onward assignments worthy of their experience, so they left.

Q: Did the new Administration affect you in your position?

FIGGINS: No, I was happy to be in the field at that time. And being in the field rather than headquarters, the role is to carry out the policy. But at least half of the job is to report back to Washington about what is going on in the field. This happened to be in the UN forum, but it is the same thing. This is what the other countries say they need for their policy and this is their reaction to US policy and this is how we can adjust US policy to meet the needs and their demands and still get what we need for the American states. So, if I had been in Washington it would have been a different story. I partly chose to be in the field specifically so that I wouldn't be mouthing the policy that might not seem related to reality. Being in the field I could react to the policy rather than making it.

Q: This might be a good place to stop.

FIGGINS: Thank you.

End of interview