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

CHARLES (CHUCK) HUNTER

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Washington, DC—FOIA Surge Coordinator, Bureau of European Affairs 2017-2018

Washington, DC—Assessor, Board of Examiners 2018-2019

Washington, DC—Senior Advisor, Office of the Special Presidential Envoy for Hostage Affairs 2019-2020

Retirement November 2020

No additional employment to date (as of April 2021)

INTERVIEW

INTERN: Hi.

HUNTER: Hi!

INTERN: How are you doing?

HUNTER: All right. And you?

INTERN: I'm doing well.

HUNTER: Good.

INTERN: We're just going to be waiting for Stu to join in a couple minutes. If you have any questions, just let me know.

HUNTER: No, I'll just stand by.

INTERN: Good.

HUNTER: Tell me your name?

INTERN: My name is Derek.

HUNTER: Nice to meet you virtually!

INTERN: Nice to meet you, too.

HUNTER: And what do you do for ADST?

INTERN: I'm an intern and I do some of these interviews where I help record. Then at the end we transcribe these and after we do the transcriptions, we read them. We call them oral histories. Then we write little moments of history, like mini articles based on your histories, so like episodes. That's the main part of the internship, but aside from that, I do like other special projects. I help with the podcast series that ADST has, which I think is probably the more exciting part of the internship. Is this your first interview?

HUNTER: Yes, it is. Although I know of ADST. Once upon a time I was thinking of bidding on the director job.

INTERN: Oh, okay.

HUNTER: Fifteen or so years ago. Are you in school someplace?

INTERN: I'm doing online classes, but I attend Syracuse University. We finished our semester of classes last week. Now I'm in finals week, but I don't have anything until next Wednesday. [So I'm] just focusing on the internship for now.

HUNTER: Got it. I walk by the Syracuse DC Center fairly often on Calvert Street. I live not far from there.

INTERN: Oh, okay. How long were you in the Foreign Service?

HUNTER: Just shy of thirty-one years. It would have been thirty-one years at the beginning of January.

INTERN: Cool! What brought your interests into the Foreign Service?

HUNTER: It was something that a couple of my high school teachers suggested to me. [Are] you considering it as a career?

INTERN: Yeah. I've always wanted to do something that allowed me to travel and the Foreign Service obviously has that. And I've always had interest in languages. My parents are from Central America so I grew up learning Spanish and I've always been raised to travel the world. The Foreign Service is just the mix of learning other cultures and then my love for history, so there is no other job for me that I've seen that's probably more compatible.

HUNTER: Good. When do you plan to take the Foreign Service Officer Test?

INTERN: [I'm] not sure. Not for a few more years. I'm in my junior year of college. I want to go abroad for a couple years. I'm not sure if you're aware of these two programs, a Boren Scholarship and Fulbright?

HUNTER: Yep, I know them both.

INTERN: I'm actually applying for a Boren right now, and I hope the following year to do Fulbright. I've been in contact with a lot of people who've actually participated and people at my school who help with the application process. Then I've also been interested in probably joining the Peace Corps. Maybe after the Peace Corps I'll take the Foreign Service exam. So not for another four or five years, but I definitely want to get as much international experience as possible.

HUNTER: When I was a senior in college, my advisor encouraged me to join the Peace Corps before applying to the Foreign Service. I considered it, but ultimately didn't. Did you grow up in the DC area?

INTERN: No, I live on Long Island, but I've been to DC twice. I grew up reading about the founding fathers and then all the history in DC, so I've always been drawn to it even though I have little experience being there.

HUNTER: That will change. What country did your parents come from?

INTERN: My mom is from Honduras and my father is from Guatemala. So it's a journey. But they always tell me to take advantage of everything—international experience, probably the best experience, something that they've always wanted to do and something that they hope I can do.

HUNTER: How often do you get a chance to see relatives in either of those countries?

INTERN: I've never been to Guatemala. That's actually something that I want to do. But at least people on the Guatemalan side, like my grandparents, live here. I'm actually currently in their home right now. But I only knew pretty much them and maybe an uncle and a couple cousins on that side. Honduras, I've been there twice. The last time I was there [was] two summers ago. That's my mom's side. [She] has a ton of family; really hard to keep track of! _____ going back there and definitely Guatemala's a goal.

HUNTER: What are you majoring in at Syracuse?

INTERN: International relations.

HUNTER: Makes sense.

INTERN: Yeah, I have a focus in diplomacy and security.

HUNTER: Wow.

INTERN: Going in there I didn't know if I wanted to go to the DoD (Department of Defense) or the State Department, but now I think I want to go more with State Department.

HUNTER: Good.

INTERN: Let me contact Stu and see where he's at. While we wait, I'm going to ask, what countries have you been to?

HUNTER: I was almost exclusively in the Arab world. My first posting was in Egypt, then I went to Algeria, and then I was in language school in Tunisia. After that my next post was in Oman. I was in Jerusalem. I went twice to Iraq, [and] to Syria. My last overseas posting was in Turkey, in Istanbul.

INTERN: Wow. Definitely in that region. Did you go to the Foreign Service interested specifically in that region, or was it something that they just told you to go here and…

HUNTER: Nope, it was an accident, and from the first when I encountered the Arab world, I loved it and wanted to stay. I put in a lot of effort learning Arabic, so I wanted to get a return out of that investment, too.

INTERN: Sounds great. So if you had to originally pick where you wanted to go, would it have been the Arab world, or…?

HUNTER: Honestly, I didn't come in with any preconceived idea of wanting to go to a specific region. One thing I did know, having spent my junior year of college in France, was that I wasn't interested in going to France. My interest was to find and get to know new places. Francophone Africa would have been okay, to use that language, but I was also very open to learning more languages, which I got the chance to do twice, with Arabic and Turkish.

INTERN: So do you still know a little bit of French or was that…?

HUNTER: Oh yeah. No, I started studying that when I was 11 and completed a PhD in it before I joined the Foreign Service.

INTERN: Wow! Too bad you couldn't have used that language a lot more.

HUNTER: Well, I did wind up using it pretty regularly. Historically, as you probably know, French was the language of diplomacy before English took over at a certain point. I wound up serving in several places that had been French colonies or protectorates—Algeria, Tunisia, Syria. Even in Jerusalem some of the educated elites among the Palestinians—they were the ones that I was dealing with at the consulate, rather than Israelis—had gone to French-speaking schools. So, in those settings, and then with some of my fellow diplomats, I used French pretty regularly through my career.

INTERN: Oh, okay. I forgot Syria was with France.

HUNTER: Yup, that became a protectorate as a result of the Treaty of Versailles after World War I until it became independent from France during the Second World War.

INTERN: Wow, I learned something new today! Here's Stu. It was nice talking to you.

HUNTER: Same here!

Q: Hi, I'm on!

INTERN: Hello, Stu.

HUNTER: And I'm on too. This is Chuck Hunter.

Q: Okay. Well, shall we begin?

HUNTER: Ready when you are!

Q: Okay. Well, Chuck, this is our first meeting, isn't it?

HUNTER: Yes, it is.

Q: First of all I'd like to get something for people to understand who you are and where you're coming from. When and where were you born?

HUNTER: I was born in March of 1961 in Appleton, Wisconsin.

Q: Ah, a real son of the Midwest!

HUNTER: Yes, my father's side of the family had been there in Wisconsin since the 1850s. My mother's parents were more recent transplants from New York State, coming only in the 1930s, but my mom also was born and raised in Appleton.

Q: Where's your father's family from in the old country?

HUNTER: Well, from the name Hunter you can guess that it's English stock. The Hunters that I'm descended from came to downstate New York in the late 1720s, from what I know, then, as I said, moved to Wisconsin shortly after it had become a state, in the middle of the 1850s. But in terms of the broader family mix, I'm sort of a northern European mutt: English, Irish, Scottish, German, [and] Swedish.

Q: Oh, a real mix! Where did you go to school?

HUNTER: I went to kindergarten in Wisconsin before we moved to northern California. We came to San Jose, California, when I was six years old, so from that point on through high school I was in the Bay Area of California. While I was in high school in Cupertino, California, Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak were about a mile away in a garage inventing the Apple computer, though I never got to meet them. I had plenty of classmates who went into the computer industry. That never interested me. I went back to Wisconsin for

my undergraduate education at Lawrence University, from which I'm a third-generation graduate. Both my father and grandfather went there, and we just had a fourth generation in my family graduate. [I] majored in French there and then came back to California to do graduate studies at Stanford.

Q: What was your father's profession?

HUNTER: He was a teacher, a lifelong teacher. [He] spent the bulk of his career, about 40 years, as a reading instructor at San Jose City College, a junior college. So his students primarily were adult learners who had gotten through the school system without really having a very high functional level of literacy.

Q: Was your mother a teacher, too?

HUNTER: No, she was a homemaker for a long time. I'm the oldest of four kids. So once my youngest brother was either in junior high school or high school she went to work for a few years for our family dentist as a receptionist and back office assistant. But apart from that [she] didn't have a professional career.

Q: When did you graduate from graduate school?

HUNTER: I finished at Stanford in 1989, just before I joined the Foreign Service.

Q: Where did you serve in the Foreign Service?

HUNTER: I was telling Derek about this, all though the Middle East primarily, beginning in Cairo in 1991, and then going to…

Q: Whoa! Wait! Your first post was Cairo. Your introductory course, what was the composition of the people you were studying with?

HUNTER: Sure. I joined the Foreign Service, not with the State Department, but with the U.S. Information Agency (USIA) when that was still an independent agency. There were twenty of us who came in in January 1990. With my retirement, I think there are only three who are still on active duty as Foreign Service officers. A good mix of people. I think we were split about sixty-forty [percent] male and female, and the average age of the class was early thirties. I was slightly younger than the average. For a couple of people it was a second career. A number of us have stayed in touch over the years, and the classmates who are still working have risen to fairly high levels. I retired as a minister counselor (MC) and I think two of the three who are still working are MCs. One is the principal deputy assistant secretary in the bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs. One is DCM (deputy chief of mission) in Manila, and one is the public affairs officer in Riyadh.

Q: In your class did the women feel that they were coming up against a glass ceiling there? Or were things pretty open by that time?

HUNTER: It was getting more open, certainly. I'm not qualified to speak on their behalf, but during my time in USIA there certainly were women who were named to high-ranking positions, not as director or deputy director, but the third-ranking job in the agency for a time was filled by Donna Oglesby as counselor of USIA and a number of women I knew from USIA went on to become ambassadors. Following the merger in particular that possibility was open to us. In fact, the prevailing wisdom at the time of that consolidation was that we public diplomacy (PD) officers in some ways had a bit of an advantage for advancing into front-office jobs compared with State colleagues in the political or economic track. We especially had more experience managing people and programs and money than those folks did. And even before consolidation, I had the good fortune of working in my very first job with a PAO who in his next position was named ambassador—Kenton (W.) Keith. So it was clear that someone who's an excellent PD officer had that possibility of becoming a chief of mission, even before consolidation.

Q: What was your first post? Cairo, you say?

HUNTER: Cairo, yup. That's where Kenton was public affairs officer.

Q: What was your particular job?

HUNTER: Well, USIA officers went out to their first assignments with the title JOT, junior officer trainee. And that really was what we remained until we moved into a follow-on position. As JOTs we were expected both to gain some experience within the public affairs section, both on the cultural and the information or press side of the house, and also to do some rotations through other embassy sections. That was something that State officers didn't get to do on their first tour. And it was a best practice we hoped would survive consolidation, but unfortunately it did not. I had a chance to work in the political/economic section of the embassy and in the consular section for a time, but the bulk of my time was in public affairs section. I worked on different cultural programs. I remember in particular a visit by the Apple Hill Chamber Players, who did some concerts at the opera house in Cairo. I worked on exchange programs, different things like that, and then the—Go ahead.

Q: No, I was impressed—I was in the Foreign Service from 1955 to 1985—that the USIA officers seemed to have more responsibility much sooner than the State Department officers. You have programs.

HUNTER: Exactly. So with the exception of people working in management or in consular sections who did have local staff to manage and some financial responsibility as well, as I said we did have a bit of a leg up. Just to complete the picture on my Cairo posting, the last few months I spent as the acting assistant information officer and the main focus of that job was getting a spotlight on some of the USAID programs in Egypt. At that time Cairo was our largest embassy on the strength of the huge AID program that we had there. So there was a lot going on, and a lot of good stories to tell.

Q: You're trying to run a cultural program in an Arab culture. Egyptians of course are all a bit off the center of the Arab culture side of things, but did you find much of a fit, or much interest in what you were up to?

HUNTER: Yeah, there was always at least a segment of the population that was interested in and intrigued by the United States, even if they didn't necessarily agree with our policies and actions. There's always a pull toward what we do and what we represent. So I found that it was never difficult to connect with people. To be honest, that kind of work, trying to find common ground through the arts, music, that sort of thing, is always the thing I've been extremely interested in. A hobby of mine is music, and I wound up directing a number of choral groups in different places that I was posted. We can talk about that later if you like. But that, too, was a way to connect with people.

Q: Yes, let's talk about some of the programs you were working on and how you felt they were going over and accomplishing what we wanted to accomplish in Cairo.

HUNTER: In Cairo I was a very small cog in a big operation where the public affairs section there was probably one of the largest we had in the world at the time. We had a separate American Center in a beautiful old house in Garden City that had programs going all the time. There were different performers who came through, speaker programs, exhibitions that were going on, and I was really there in a support role. Even with the Apple Hill Chamber Players, that wasn't something that was fully mine to take and run with because I was still learning the ropes, but I had some great officers to observe and learn from while I was there, and it prepared me pretty well for my first PAOship, which I got a few years later in Oman. But before that, I was the assistant PAO in Algeria, which I moved to in 1992 after a year in—Go ahead.

Q: I want to ask you, when did you get, were you married, or…

HUNTER: As of the day after Christmas, it will be six years ago I got married to a Turkish fellow I met in Istanbul, but prior to that time I had never been married.

Q: What were some of the feelings in Egypt towards the United States during the time you were there?

HUNTER: I'd say it's true throughout the Arab world, but certainly in Egypt, there's a good deal of ambivalence. I mentioned a few minutes ago a certain pull that we attract and I think for people around the world, the founding principles of this country are ones that people who want to live in freedom find themselves drawn to. But at the same time, some of what people attribute, rightly or wrongly, to our policies means that the embrace can be only a tentative one. Egypt was the first country that signed a peace treaty with Israel—something that happened, in fact, on my eighteenth birthday! March 26, 1979 is when the Camp David Accords were signed. Maybe that was a sign to me of what lay ahead, and in fact, as I mentioned to Derek, even by that time I knew that I wanted to be in the Foreign Service, from the time I was sixteen.

But to come back to your question, there's always that—ambivalence, the word I've used before, is the right one to qualify the views people had and it could be true even for ones who'd spent considerable time in the United States and gotten to know it firsthand. I remember quite vividly in Algeria someone saying to me at one point—and just to set the scene, I was there in the early 1990s, which as you probably remember, was a time of growing violence in Algeria, at the start of their civil war—.

Q: Yes _____

HUNTER: A number of the people who were leading the Islamist opposition had studied in the West, including a number who had studied in the United States. I remember someone saying to me at one point, "Why is it that we send you our best minds and they come back as radicals, wanting to undermine what we have?" It was a question I think we still wrestle with; to know what it is that triggers that kind of mindset, which is not unique to Islam by any stretch of the imagination, but throughout the world. It's definitely had a long-lasting and unfortunately very harmful effect in a bunch of places, including a lot of the ones I've served in.

Q: Yeah, sometimes I think maybe we recruit—I'm not sure I'd want to change it, but we, there's a tendency for people who want to go to the United States are looking for something other than the government they have, and once they catch the methods of protest in the United States, they take that back home with them.

HUNTER: Yeah, one way of explaining it—not the only way—is that for certain people who are used to a fixed sense of identity, the encounter with the level of freedom that we have in the West generally, and in the United States particularly, can be disorienting to the point where turning back to a really rigid system of belief represents a lifeline that gives them again the structure they need not to feel at sea.

Q: While you were in Cairo did you run across problems of the strict Islamists?

HUNTER: Not that I experienced firsthand, but I do remember that very shortly before I finished my year there, an activist, someone who was outspoken in calling for a more liberal democracy in what by that time had been a little over a decade of rule by Hosni Mubarak, but since going back to the time of Nasser, a not very liberal democracy, an activist by the name of Farag Foda who was a contact of the embassy's was assassinated. I remember being on the fringes of the crowds who were going to his funeral and sensing the energy and passion that that was unleashing and wondering where it might all go.

Q: As you were sampling the work of USIA, what area particularly attracted you? You mentioned music.

HUNTER: Yeah, that actually was a question that I thought about even before joining the Foreign Service. Because at the time that I came in, when you took the written exam you were scored on aptitude for all of the State Department cones as well as for USIA and conceivably could get job offers in any of them. So I made up my mind early on that the

kind of work that USIA did, trying to encourage mutual understanding and in particular on the cultural affairs side of the house, with programs in music and the performing arts and so on, was what really drew me. I've sung all my life. My parents actually met in a church choir, so music was a part of what we'd been as a family and the thought of getting to do at least some of that professionally was a real strong pull for me.

Q: You were in Cairo for only a year, is that it?

HUNTER: Right. It was kind of surprising that at the world's largest embassy there wasn't a follow-on job for me to go to. The normal pattern was that an officer would spend a year or so as a JOT and then be [assigned] to a formally designated position for another year or two at that same post. But at that particular moment there wasn't a job for me to take in Cairo, so from the beginning my assignment was structured as one year in Cairo and then two years in Algeria as assistant PAO. As it turns out, over the course of that time in Algeria we added another American officer so I became the information officer when my colleague arrived. I unfortunately didn't get to complete that posting because as violence escalated in Algeria our ambassador made the decision to draw down the embassy and it was the more junior officers who were evacuated. So I spent only about a year and a half of what was supposed to be two years there.

Q: So you were in Algeria from when to when?

HUNTER: From the summer of 1992 until late December 1993.

Q: Did you know you were going into a really hot spot, a violence-prone situation or did it develop while you were there?

HUNTER: It developed. The year before I arrived, so in 1991, the elections had taken place in which the *Front Islamique du Salut* (FIS, Islamic Salvation Front) had been allowed to run—unconstitutionally, because according to the Algerian constitution there were not supposed to be parties based on religion. But they did run and were poised to take control of the legislature and government. Once those elections were canceled, the opposition began undertaking acts of violence. It was unclear at the time whether the government would wind up having trouble, keeping it under control, or stamping it out. But a month before I arrived, the president of the country was assassinated, so that was an indication that the FIS was not going to quietly accept their having this victory snatched away from them.

When I first arrived the situation was reasonably normal for us. It was really Algerians targeting one another, so for the first almost one year that I was there, we Western diplomats were able to move around the country easily. I went into the Kabylie region where the Berbers are concentrated. I went out to Oran where we had just closed a consulate. Didn't make it, unfortunately, to some other parts of the country I would have liked to see, but it was in the spring of 1993 when some employees of the French embassy were kidnapped that things began to change. From that point we were on a path toward the eventual drawdown of the embassy. Over the summer, families were sent

away, so it was officers only. In the fall, a German diplomat was killed when he encountered a checkpoint that had been set up in an unexpected place. I still don't know if it was a government one or one that the FIS had set up, but he was shot and so our movement was gradually restricted as well. We could no longer go down to the old city. Our travel from home to the office and back had to be with RSO (regional security officer) escorts. By late in the year, Ambassador (Mary Ann) Casey made what probably was a wise decision to both reduce the number of people working at the embassy and then, with our departure, to bring those who remained onto the embassy compound rather than having them live out in the residences where they'd been before.

Q: Given the violence of the situation and the fact that foreign diplomats were being singled out, I would think that you'd be—particularly your type of work—would mean you'd be without a job. Just to get the hell out of there!

HUNTER: Well, to all intents and purposes it was that way. I think that was part of the calculus for not having the cultural affairs officer or the information officer remain. The PAO did stay on. There was still press work in particular that needed to happen. The U.S. government definitely had views on what was taking place in the country, and it was the PAO's job to communicate those. There was actually a very vibrant media scene in Algeria at the time. The number went up and down, but there were frequently about a dozen independent newspapers just in Algiers, and others in large provincial cities. So the PAO was kept busy even when there weren't cultural programs going on.

Q: I would think you'd been sort of working on, I mean, in a way, this is the wrong term, but two enemies, or two opposition forces. One would be—Algiers and the French have always been very close, sometimes too damn close! But also the United States not being a Muslim state, our stories would—you'd find a lot of opposition to you for not being French or not being Muslim!

HUNTER: Well, in some respects our advantage was in not being French. The French ruled Algeria for 130 years and gave it up only after an extremely bloody civil war. I worked for a public affairs officer who had spent time in Algeria as a teacher before joining the Foreign Service and had really valuable perspectives on how much things had changed from when she was there in the (Houari) Boumediene days. There was a lot more leeriness toward the United States than there was by the time I arrived. That's not to say that everyone thought that the United States was going to be their country's savior or anything like that, but compared to the time that Janet (Wilgus), my boss, had been there earlier, there was much more willingness to come to the American Center, to participate in programs, to engage with the embassy. So I found that quite encouraging, both as a PAO when I was primarily doing the cultural work and then when my job became the press function. I never had any trouble finding people who were interested in talking with us, debating with us, and I really enjoyed that posting and have always felt a little bit of regret at not being able to stay there the whole time I was supposed to.

Q: On the cultural side, do you have any insights on what attracted Algerians to it, and what programs really worked there?

HUNTER: Well, obviously, not surprisingly our exchange programs always were very popular. Who wouldn't jump at the chance to spend weeks, in the case of the International Visitor (IV) program, or months if not years in the case of Fulbright fellowships, or other longer-term professional exchanges, in the United States? It was never difficult to find people interested in applying for those. A difference in our approach compared to the French, and not just in Algeria, is that, notwithstanding the overall aim of USIA of telling America's story to the world, as the slogan was, the way we went about that was tangibly different, I think, than the *mission civilisatrice* (civilizing mission) with which the French approached their colonial enterprise, of wanting to produce, in effect, Frenchmen in these other places. Our aim was to provide information and to let people make up their own minds. It was fine if at the end of the day they didn't agree with us. We just wanted that disagreement to be based on good information and not on rumor or misperception. I think open-minded people anywhere value that kind of an approach to intellectual engagement.

Q: Did you find that your work and the work of the other parts of the embassy were on the same wavelength or were they somewhat disparate?

HUNTER: I think we were pretty well synced up. I always made it a practice in every post where I served to try to be a good colleague to all my other American officers, to encourage them to nominate contacts for exchange programs. I invited them to the representational events that I would host so that they could meet my contacts and add to their own. It was a little bit more challenging in the days before consolidation when public affairs officers would create their own country plans for the things that they wanted to work on. That was always, or frequently, something that we were reproached for: not being in close enough sync with the so-called real work the embassy was focused on. But even before that happened—so the times when I had program responsibility in Algeria and then particularly in Oman, where I was PAO in a one-officer shop—I went out of my way to make sure I had a solid grasp of what the chief of mission's priorities were and aligned our activities with those, so that we were always pulling in the same direction, and not working at cross purposes.

Q: What about the people who came back from the (International) Visitors' program? Did you find, in particular with Algeria, they were effective? Or were they coming back more radical and maybe opposed to the States, or how did you find it?

HUNTER: It's a bit hard to track because of course public diplomacy by its nature is long-term work. And given that I was there only about eighteen months—maybe not quite that—I didn't have a chance to interact with very many people who had gone and come back on my watch. But in terms of people who had been on programs in prior years and come back and remained contacts of the embassy, my recollection is that the ones who went on U.S. government-sponsored programs tended not to be the ones who wound up being radicalized. We had had a good look at them. There was always a rigorous selection process for picking the people who would go on Fulbright or Humphrey or IV grants. It was more people who had gotten scholarships, let's say, independently, or were

paying their own way, or their families were, to study at American universities, who wound up in the ranks of the radical opposition.

So I don't think we have too much that we would need to apologize for, if there's any at all, for the impact of U.S. government-sponsored programs. But as we were discussing earlier, I think it is undeniable that time spent in the United States did in some cases certainly further the radicalization of some people who've done great harm subsequently, both in their home nations and, in a few cases, here in the United States and elsewhere.

Q: How did you find working in Arabic, because Algeria was really a very dangerous place for Algerians as well as foreigners when you were there, wasn't it?

HUNTER: For most of the time it was not. As I mentioned, up until those French embassy employees were kidnapped, there hadn't really been a sense that Westerners were being targeted, and therefore we were free to move around, to go meet contacts in different places in and out of the capital. But once that kidnaping happened, then our ability to carry out programming really was scaled back, and by the time the drawdown was effected it was essentially nil. The American Center, which was in a separate facility about one mile or so from the embassy, closed at that point and it wasn't until many years later that an active schedule of programs resumed in Algeria.

Q: What happened to the French employees who were kidnaped?

HUNTER: They were released unharmed. So it was only that one German individual I mentioned who died during the time that I was there. But the kidnapping was a strong enough signal that Western interests writ large paid close attention. The biggest short-term impact was that all of the Western oil firms immediately pulled their people out. I had actually been scheduled to go on a trip down to the far south of the country, to Djanet and Tamanrasset, with a trip that had been organized by Anadarko (Petroleum), one of the oil companies. Of course they canceled that immediately when the kidnaping happened, and that was the reason I never did get to see the Algerian desert. It's unfortunately still a somewhat dangerous place to go.

Q: I always think of Fort Zinderneuf in <u>Beau Geste</u>. (Laughter.) But there was a place called Zinder, wasn't there, in Algeria?

HUNTER: I believe so. I never got there myself, I'm afraid.

Q: What kind of things were you doing as a press officer? You say they had a lively press, but how did a press officer work in those days for USIA?

HUNTER: Right. We were looking to encourage that trend of free media and so we brought over speakers to do training on media ethics. I would go meet with journalists regularly, just to talk with them about current events, see what questions they had about U.S. policy. [I'd] try to tamp down as much conspiracy-theory thinking as I could. We were looking for candidates for media-focused International Visitor programs, so I

always had an eye out for who might be a good nominee for those programs. It was that kind of work. Of course monitoring the Algerian press and trying to judge when something went over the line that would require a response from us. Another thing that we were fairly active in doing at that point was trying to place in Algerian media outlets stories that were generated by media services like the program office that was based in Paris (Africa Regional Services) and would write news articles like human interest stories, not partisan policy pieces. We would shop those around and see if anyone was interested in printing those. This was also the pre-digital age so the Wireless File—you probably remember that—was a USIA product that we were very actively distributing and looking for people who wanted to be put on distribution for that so that we could get directly into people's hands articles that we thought were important on a variety of subjects. There was really no end to the work. I spent lots of weekends in the office in Algeria, but really thrived on it.

Q: You mention dealing with conspiracy theories. Today we're awash with conspiracy theories in every country and the United States is probably preeminent! What sort of conspiracy things would you encounter?

HUNTER: Well, all kinds of things. Even then the Soviet Union was fairly active in trying to plant stories to tarnish the image of the United States. One story line I remember very clearly from that time in Algeria was a rumor that the United States was helping traffic in baby parts.

Q: Oh god!

HUNTER: Yeah. You probably ran across those stories yourself.

Q: Oh yeah!

HUNTER: But there were lots and lots of people willing to believe the worst about foreign powers. There had been, as you know, a fairly close relationship between Algeria and the Soviet Union for several decades. A lot of people had been trained in the USSR or in Iron Curtain countries, so a part of the media establishment was very sympathetic to the Communist Party view and very happy to print stories that painted the United States in the worst possible light. Then more generally, a kind of thinking that says that the U.S. is always on Israel's side in the conflict with the Arabs, and is unremittingly hostile toward the Palestinian cause or any kind of justice for the Arab peoples has been a constant throughout my whole career. And that was true in—

Q: Unfortunately, that's some of my impressions, that we're not particularly—People make noises, but we don't really put much pressure on Israel to straighten up and treat the people under its sway dispassionately. How did you feel?

HUNTER: It's gone in cycles. In my first post, in Cairo, that was at a time when James Baker was secretary and where the Madrid Process was just getting underway at the conclusion of the first Gulf War. Secretary Baker was a frequent visitor to Cairo, and I

got to be control officer for his wife on one of those visits. But as you'll remember, Secretary Baker and the first President Bush were very firm with the Israelis, and Baker memorably told them at one point, in response to what he saw as excessive settlement activity that was going to be unhelpful to any peace process, that the Israelis knew our phone number and when they were ready to behave appropriately, they could call us! That kind of frank talk is, to me, what should happen between friends and allies. It's true, like I said, that things have gone cyclically and some administrations have been more open than others to Israeli actions that many in the international community felt have been unhelpful to a resolution of the conflict. But my hope was always to contribute in some small way to having the United States be an honest broker and try to bring about that goal of peace.

I happened to be in Jerusalem at the time that the second Bush administration was developing the so-called "road map." I had long conversations with the leadership in the consulate general, which back then was independent of the embassy in Tel Aviv, about the need to have that road map include very clear expectations that the leadership on both sides, Israeli and Palestinian, would be up front with their peoples about the need to compromise, and that neither side would get all of what it was looking for, but that getting to agreement through compromise was going to be the only way that the conflict between them could be settled once and for all. I've unfortunately gotten less and less optimistic that we can reach that goal. But that would be another and much longer conversation!

Q: We'll have that later when we talk about moving our embassy to Jerusalem and all. You were only in Algeria for a relatively short time.

HUNTER: Yes.

Q: And then where?

HUNTER: Then, because of the drawdown I came back to Washington. Ironically among all the people who had to leave before the end of their tours, I was the only one that the embassy didn't have to make evacuation arrangements for, at least as far as the plane flight was concerned, because I had already scheduled leave to come to the United States for Christmas with my family. So my plane reservations were made. I just didn't wind up returning.

Then, right after the new year, I came to Washington and reported to USIA's office and said, "Here I am. What do you have for me?" It was very fortunate that at that very moment a job opened up on the Gulf desk. So for about the next seven months or so, I was the desk officer for posts on the Arabian peninsula. And during that time I secured my next assignment, which was to become the public affairs officer in Oman via my second year of language training. I'd done a year at FSI (the Foreign Service Institute) before going to Cairo and then in the summer of 1994 I went to Tunis for a second year of Arabic, and then to Oman in the summer of 1995.

Q: Okay, let's talk a little bit about that relatively short period you were dealing with USIA posts in Arabia. I spent 2 ½ years in Dhahran. What were some of the challenges of our dealing with public affairs for those posts at that time?

HUNTER: There were numerous challenges. One, as you'll probably recall, was one of resources. In the mid-1990s following the end of the Cold War, there was a view that many held—(Senator) Jesse Helms among them—that USIA was a Cold War relic that no longer deserved to be around. So we were starved for resources. There was one full year when USIA brought in no new officers. And in terms of post resources, those were lean times as well. That was one struggle. The programming was just limping along because we didn't have a lot of budget resources.

Another challenge was that almost all of those posts were pretty small. Our posts in Oman, Bahrain, and Qatar were all one-officer posts with just a handful of local staff. If I remember correctly, we had two [Americans] in the UAE, two in Yemen, and then a larger operation in Saudi Arabia. All the same, there weren't a lot of people on the ground to do the work. That was also a time when for female officers it was especially challenging to be out representing the United States in very conservative societies. It's changed somewhat in the intervening years, but all of those things were challenges that people wrestled with. This was also—Go ahead.

Q: You mentioned female officers at that time. I know when I was in Saudi Arabia they said that if you want to look at where the real political power rests, go to the wives of the leaders in Saudi Arabia. In other words, were our women able to make inroads into influencing these very sort of—within the family—powerful people?

HUNTER: Yes, that often could happen. In fact, the clearest example to me was in Oman when I worked for the first female ambassador to a Gulf country, Frances (D.) Cook, who had been a USIA officer at the beginning of her career but converted to State. She frequently would say that she had the best of all worlds because as U.S. ambassador and the personal representative of the president, she was of course included in all the events with the sultan, with government ministers, with prominent businessmen and so on. But as a woman she was also able to be in environments where her male counterparts, male ambassadors, were not able to go. So she definitely got insights that were not as readily available to other diplomats. I think that was probably true at less senior levels as well.

Q: Yeah, it's one of the misunderstood things that a woman ambassador, in all of these countries, all over the world—I come from an era when there were very few—they would comment in our oral histories that they became honorary men, so they can always…

HUNTER: Ambassador Cook used exactly that term!

Q: Yeah and they could hit both sides, because there's no doubt about it, the women are serious opinion makers and they could reach out to them. Of course the women they reached out to were delighted to see American women holding positions of power!

HUNTER: Yes. Ambassador Cook was fortunate to be posted to a country whose ruler was very open-minded compared to his counterparts around the peninsula at the tail end of my time there. Sultan Qaboos (bin Said Al Said) named the first female minister. Oman for many years now had a female ambassador here in Washington who was a friend of mine when I was PAO back there. She was the head of the Oman Investment Agency, and her husband, who went on to become their permanent representative to the UN, was also a contact. We had a play-reading group together, in fact.

Q: When you went to Oman you were there from when to when?

HUNTER: From 1995 to 1998.

Q: Could you talk about what the situation was there at the time and then we'll talk a little bit about relations?

HUNTER: Sure. I arrived in the year of the silver jubilee of Sultan Qaboos. He overthrew his father in 1970. The relationship with the United States was a very warm one, but of course arguably not quite as close as Oman's relationship with the British. Oman was never a British colony, a fact of which it was very proud, but the sultan had been sent to Sandhurst in England for his education and the British had a long and strong relationship not just with Oman but with all the countries in the region and one that they had some strong economic interests in, especially from the time that oil was discovered. But the Omanis are wonderful, warm people and open to the world. That's one of the distinguishing features of Oman in comparison to the rest of the peninsula, through its history as an empire. It had very wide contacts across the Indian Ocean and with Africa.

Q: They had lots of trade with Africa going way back.

HUNTER: Exactly. So the idea of being open to people from other places is deeply rooted, at least with the people along the coast. It could be a little different when you got inland and encountered people who were less accustomed to outsiders. I had an absolutely wonderful three years in Oman, and I have extremely fond memories of the place. I have been back numerous times to see friends there, and still keep in touch with some of my contacts. A few I wish I were still in contact with—the current minister of information and culture, I was in touch with for a while but he eventually changed his email and I unfortunately don't have the current one.

Q: My consul general in Dhahran, Walter (K.) Schwinn—this would have been in the 1950s—had signed a new treaty with Oman. Our first one went back to the 1850s or something like that?

HUNTER: In the late 1830s we signed a treaty of amity and commerce with Oman, and after that a ship called the *Sultana* visited the United States. While I was PAO in Oman I put together an exhibit on U.S.-Omani relations. I did some research at the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts, which has a number of artifacts that go back to that time. A little-known fact is that the very first artifacts in the Smithsonian Institution's

collections are gifts from the then-sultan of Oman to the United States. The visit of the *Sultana* created something of a quandary for President Van Buren because no one really knew what to do with the gifts that were offered. There was a lot of debate about it and ultimately Congress decided that he could accept the gifts on behalf of the United States, but not keep them himself. Because that was just at the time that James Smithson was establishing the Smithsonian, the logical thing to do with those gifts—a shawl and some other things—was to donate them. So in the Smithsonian catalog, the very first items are gifts that came over on the *Sultana*.

Q: Oh! What sort of role does Oman play in the Gulf world and the broader world?

HUNTER: It's a very important ally of ours. We said at the time that I was there, and I wouldn't be surprised if people still do say, that it's the best kept secret among the countries of the Gulf because a lot of people don't really know about it. If they hear "Oman" they probably think *Amman*, the capital of Jordan. But its long relationship with the United States and—particularly under the rule of Sultan Qaboos—the military cooperation that developed with the Omanis has made it a key partner of ours. At the time of the first Gulf War in 1990-1991, the prepositioning of materiel in Oman thanks to our military agreements with them saved months in the buildup to that war. So, as I say, it's been a very strong partner of ours in that way.

The Omani approach to foreign policy has also made it an important partner for us. Oman's approach under Sultan Qaboos—and that continues under the new sultan, Haitham (bin Tariq Al Said)—has been to have no enemies, to get along with everyone. That's been quite useful for us, particularly where relations with countries that we don't get along with well are concerned. For example, the Omanis have been a channel to Iran for us that has paid off in ways ranging from the freeing of three hikers who you might remember wandered across the border from Iraq into Iran years ago, to hosting what initially were secret talks that led to the nuclear agreement with Iran. That all began in Oman and through Omani mediation, as it were.

They are also a channel for trying to resolve the conflict between Saudi Arabia and Yemen currently. They helped broker the freeing of a couple of American citizens just in the last month or so. That's something that the last office that I was working for in the State Department was doing. I retired from the office of the special presidential envoy for hostage affairs. But that's a long way of saying that although Oman is deliberately not a high-profile ally of ours, they're a very important friend of ours in that part of the world.

Q: During your time there, how did they get along with, say, the United Arab Emirates?

HUNTER: When I was there, Sheikh Zayed (bin Sultan Al Nahyan), the founding president of the UAE, was still alive. As I'd said a moment ago, Oman's approach was always to get along with its neighbors. Sultan Qaboos, I think, felt a good deal of personal affection for Sheikh Zayed. If I remember correctly, during the time I was there, Oman delimited its land border with the UAE and subsequently with Saudi Arabia. There was always a little bit of contention over the Musandam peninsula, which Oman controls.

[It's] the little tip of the finger that sticks into the Arabian or Persian Gulf—the part closest to Iran. If they could, no doubt the Emiratis would like to control that, but the discussions are civil on that point. Oman has been careful not to insert itself into some of the pricklier things that have divided members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). For example, in the rift that developed a few years ago between Qatar, the Emiratis, Bahrainis, and Saudis, Oman kept itself to the side of that and I wouldn't be surprised if it's offered its good offices to try to resolve it and would like to see things get back to normal in the GCC. I'd say that they were a good neighbor to the Emiratis and to everyone else.

Q: I remember when I was in Dhahran that we covered the Persian Gulf except for Kuwait. We had the whole thing, Bahrain, Qatar and all that. We would get involved sort of on the side, because we were close to Saudi Arabia, in Saudi Arabia actually, that the Buraimi oasis was…

HUNTER: Yes.

Q: A big deal. Was it solved?

HUNTER: It's never come to blows. Let's say both countries view it rightfully as their own. That's where things are.

Q: Yeah. Well, some of these things—I think the British at one point had an officer oftentimes going up to caravans going through and say, "Whom does this palm tree belong to?" And try and come up with some sort of conclusion. I don't think he got anywhere, but—You came back and you really were studying Arabic.

HUNTER: Right. I did a year in Washington before I went to Cairo, 1990 to 1991, and then a second year in Tunis, 1994 to 1995. I used it a lot in Oman, so when I returned to the United States in 1998, I went to FSI to be tested and got a 4/4 in Arabic.

Q: Oh boy! You must have been one of the top Arabic speakers in the Department!

HUNTER: Yeah, at one point it was pretty good. It's gotten rusty, but I still can open up BBC Arabic and read an article. I don't speak that much anymore and when I do it's a bit of a hodgepodge because of having served all over and remembering words from different dialects and not having them as well ordered in my mind as I should.

Q: That can be a problem. I intensively studied Russian and Serbian, and oh my god! I keep tripping over, I'm not quite sure what language I'm speaking! And there is a considerable difference!

HUNTER: Yes.

Q: After you left Oman, where did you go?

HUNTER: I came back to Washington and was again a desk officer in the Near East—it was a combined Near East and South Asian office at USIA headquarters. At that point I was the officer for the posts of the Levant, so Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, Damascus, Amman, and Beirut. I did that for two years up to and past the time of USIA's consolidation with the Department of State.

Q: Let's talk about in the—there must have been some conflict in your answers when you're talking about Tel Aviv and the Arab posts. I mean the Israeli issue; how did you deal with that when you were there?

HUNTER: Well, it was always central to work that officers out in the field were engaged in, most obviously the ones in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, but for all of the neighboring countries as well. This was after the time that the peace treaty with Jordan had been signed. That was in 1994, so the relationship there was a little bit more comfortable, but it was a cold peace between Jordan and Israel. For the officers in both Beirut and Damascus, there was still pretty much unremitting hostility toward Israel. That could make for some touchy moments, but the PAOs at all of the posts always wanted to engage on questions related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to make sure their contacts heard both from U.S. officials and from speakers from the private sector, academia, and so on, who would give a variety of views about what the appropriate way forward would be. We were doing our best, as the term was, to be an honest broker. It wasn't the exclusive focus of programs or public diplomacy work, but unquestionably it was always there implicitly if not explicitly.

Q: Were we involved much in trying to do something about the Palestinians?

HUNTER: I guess I'd need a little more definition about what "doing something about the Palestinians" means, but certainly we were very much engaged in program activities with the Palestinians. This was also at the conclusion of the Clinton administration, a time when we were making very strong efforts to get to direct negotiations between the Israelis and Palestinians. There were meetings, as you will probably recall, at Wye Plantation out on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. As those concluded, there was programming money found for an increased level of exchange activities between Israelis and Palestinians, and that definitely was something that I was very active in working on while on the desk. We had a lot of grant money to try to bring together Israeli and Palestinian non-governmental organizations. It was an exciting time. A hopeful time.

Q: From your perspective, how did these organizations, Israeli and Palestinians, work together, or did they?

HUNTER: A lot of them did. It depended to some extent on how explicitly political the aims of those organizations were. It was much easier, for example, for organizations that were focused on, say, the environment to find common ground than it was to reach agreement among people who were talking about more political topics. As an example—and this continued to be an issue during the time that I was public affairs officer in Jerusalem a few years later—the question of the content of school curricula was always a

hot topic in Washington as well as out in the field. Not surprisingly the Palestinians and Israelis frequently had differences of opinion about the actions and motives of different figures throughout their history. Deciding what an appropriate way was to codify events in history into a school curriculum could be very contentious. There were people of very, very good will, professional educators, curriculum developers, and so on, on both sides, who were willing to work together, but in some cases it's really difficult to get to one version of events that everyone would be in 100 percent agreement about, and in some cases it was flat-out impossible to do. There was always a risk of people throwing around accusations—and these accusations frequently came from parties in the United States—of moral equivalence, of the U.S. government's wanting to have so much balance between the two sides that we would overlook something that someone on one side or the other of an issue found to be a red line. So that was always a delicate area to work in.

But to try to answer concisely your question, there always were, and I think continue to be, people on both sides who sincerely recognize the humanity of their counterparts on the other side and want to work together toward common understanding. But by the same token, there are lots of people—and unfortunately in many cases they're the ones who speak louder—who see themselves as being in the right, and don't want to brook any compromise because of thinking that that will take away from their view of events and the history that's taken place to date.

Q: Did you deal with the various embassies in Washington on these?

HUNTER: From time to time we would. Sometimes it was just trying to ensure that visas were taken care of for someone on a particular program, that sort of thing. I'm trying to summon to mind a particular interaction I might have had with an embassy back in those days.

Q: With the Israelis, were you seeing a gradual—one way or the other—either "Palestine is our land and we're taking it over" or "This is a hot potato and we've got to get rid of it"?

HUNTER: That's a very difficult question to answer. During the time that I was at USIA as desk officer, there still was a clear division of labor, with the State Department offices that dealt with the Middle East focused more on those political kinds of questions. The people at the embassy that I dealt with in cultural sections tended to recognize the value of programs, even if for the Israelis it was a delicate matter dealing with the Palestinian territories. Where I got to see it a bit more up close was when I was on the ground in Jerusalem a few years later.

Q: Dealing with Syria, it was during the Assad period, I guess.

HUNTER: We're still in the Assad period. It was during the time Hafez al-Assad was still alive. He passed away in June of 2000, which was just about the time I left the desk.

Q: Did you see any change in attitude there, or did Syria play any particular role in the area you were dealing with, in the cultural role?

HUNTER: Because of the separation between USIA and State, the more explicitly political issues were ones that we weren't dealing with a lot on the public diplomacy side of the house. We did have some very active public affairs officers and the second of the two I worked with, Steve (Stephen A.) Seche, went on to become both chargé (d'affaires) in Damascus some years later and ambassador to Yemen years after that. But the father Assad was known for playing his cards very close to the chest and I don't think anyone was under any illusions that a cultural program was going to wind up being the key that unlocked the possibility of peace between Damascus and Israel. That was all bound up in getting back the Golan, which has not happened and in fact we're farther away from it now with this administration's recognition of Israeli sovereignty over the Golan.

Q: Where did you go after this assignment?

HUNTER: After those two years on the desk covering Levant posts in Washington, I remained in Washington for two more years. This was just after USIA was consolidated with State, so by that time I was a State Department officer. The first year I became the head of the press office at the Department, so I was working for Richard (A.) Boucher when he was the spokesman. The main job of that office was to prepare the daily briefing book that he used for his press briefings, and in doing that we oversaw the tasking and collection of press guidance from all the bureaus of the department.

Q: How did you find that particular job? It must have been taken a great deal of your time, having to be there very early, didn't you?

HUNTER: Yeah, I got in usually by 7:15 or so. We had people working even earlier there to look at what was happening in the media and figure out which stories we were going to need to have guidance prepared on. It was long hours and pressure every day because those were the days when there were press briefings almost every day. Occasionally there weren't briefings from the podium, usually when the secretary—

Q: That's right, there aren't any more, are there!

HUNTER: There have not been for some time now, unfortunately, during this administration. But back then, Richard was in every meeting that the secretary had. He traveled with the secretary, so when Richard was on the road, typically we would not brief from Washington, but we still did guidance collection. So the hours were long, and on days when there were going to be briefings, which were most days, we had a deadline to get the book ready by so that Richard would have in hand everything he needed when he walked out to that podium. It was a great experience because on any given day there could be a story about any bureau in the department or a story from any of our posts from around the world. That meant having contact all the way across the department. It was a very enriching experience for me, as someone brand new to this much larger organization, to figure out how those parts fit together and to make contacts with a wider

range of officers than I might have been in touch with had my focus been a narrower one, like the desk job I had had just before that.

Q: What was your impression of the press, particularly representing the hot spots?

HUNTER: It's changed even more now because of COVID-19, but in those days where we were still pretty new to the 24-hour news cycle and there was still a much larger staffing by both newspapers and print organizations, or media organizations. We had a really busy bullpen where the journalists sat. In those days there were still some legendary journalists covering the State Department. Barry Schweid was the dean of the press corps and always got the first question from Richard, and he worked with a fellow named George Gedda. They represented the Associated Press and there were others—the current dean, Matt Lee, who at that time worked for AFP, was on the ground then. The journalists that I got to know—Andrea Koppel from CNN, Martha Raddatz from ABC, and all kinds of excellent journalists who really knew their stuff—I had enormous respect for them; always felt that they were not out to do "gotcha" stories, but sincerely wanted to have straight talk from the department about what our policies were and the reasoning behind them so that they could provide, for either their wire services or for the locations they wrote for, good and balanced stories. And that, to me, was an embodiment of what I'd been talking about as a PAO out in the field when interacting with journalists from foreign countries and playing up the independence and the honesty of media in the United States. For me that year was a very validating experience. It's been painful in subsequent years to see how different phenomena—social media, the withering away of a lot of respected newspapers—has contributed to a climate where I think there's paradoxically a lot more information available but, at the same time, a lot less thoughtful and informed discussion than there was in the past.

Q: This was a great experience—you understood sort of what warmed the cockles of journalists' hearts.

HUNTER: (Laughter.) Yup, which—

Q: That served you well in later times.

HUNTER: I'd like to think so, but fundamentally they wanted the same things we wanted, which was to have a good and respectful relationship, not an adversarial one, and to be straight with one another. Obviously it wasn't always possible for us as government officials to tell them everything that we knew or to answer every single one of their questions. One of the valuable lessons that I learned from Richard was that journalists are entitled to ask any question that they want; we, as spokespeople of the U.S. government, were there to answer the questions we wanted to get out information on. So we needed always to be clear on what the topline points were we wanted to convey and find ways to get back to and reinforce those points at every turn. That definitely did serve me well later on. Richard was an officer I had enormous respect for. He was the spokesman twice and in fact at two transitions of administration. That's how well he was thought of. He was asked to come back at the time I worked for him, because he had had experience at a

previous transition being spokesman for the department. He went on to become an ambassador (to Cyprus)—long retired now—and also assistant secretary. So a tremendous example and he also shared with me insights that he had gained from mentors through the years.

Q: You talked about the meshing of State and USIA. From your perspective, how did this work out? Was it a plus or a minus?

HUNTER: Oh wow, we could talk for hours about this! Speaking of which, I want to be respectful of your time. We've been going for about an hour and forty-five minutes now. All things being equal, and if it had been entirely up to me, I would have been happy to have USIA continue as an independent organization. There was a nice *esprit de corps* in it, and it was of a size where you found it much easier to know more people and to be known by the leadership than it was in a place the size of the State Department. I think its independence also gave it a certain amount of flexibility and nimbleness that the public diplomacy enterprise lost some of after consolidation. It also was a much more field-driven place than the department was or could be. That said, public diplomacy obviously has continued up to the present day. The flagships of our programming are largely still intact: the International Visitor Leadership Program, Fulbright fellowships, and so on, those are all still there. There's never the funding level that you would like to see, and some of the things that I particularly enjoyed in the past, like having traveling exhibitions, really don't happen anymore, which is a shame. On the other hand, the advent of the information age has made possible all kinds of programming that we couldn't have imagined twenty-five or thirty years ago. There have been some ways to make up for that and to have contacts happen across the miles in ways that weren't possible years ago.

I do have to say that despite feeling that it would have been nice to have USIA continue, once the decision was made that consolidation was going to happen, in my view the best approach was to accept that decision and move on. Work to ensure that public diplomacy was carried out as effectively as possible within the new environment. On that point, two things that I've frequently said over the years: First, in the embassy context the consolidation really had happened years before and the PAO was always a member of the country team. So there was always collaboration going on in the field in a qualitatively different way than what happened in Washington. That was a good thing, I think.

On the other hand, where DC was concerned, I think to some degree the creation of the "R" family, the under secretary for public diplomacy and public affairs, has never been a fully successful thing ever since it took place over twenty years ago, in part because the under secretaries have tended not to stay for a long time. There's not yet been an under secretary drawn from the ranks of career officers. I think that would be a useful thing to have happened at some point. And there's always been debate about whether the public diplomacy desks should be separate from or integrated with the regional desks of the geographic bureaus. That's always been a point of contention. It's also true that some of the best practices of USIA that were supposed to have been carried over in the so-called "crosswalk" didn't wind up sticking. I made reference to one of them early on: the way

that junior officers got to do rotations through embassies. That was supposed to continue happening and perhaps even be a model for how first-tour State officers would work overseas, but that's a thing of the past and something not likely to be brought back.

Q: Maybe this would be a good place to stop.

HUNTER: Okay.

Q: So we'll pick this up the next time, where?

HUNTER: We left off really at the time that I was in the press office, which was from 2000 to 2001. I finished that assignment ten days before September 11. Maybe that's the point to pick up on, what I was doing on September 11 and the impact that that's had.

Q: Okay. I don't know if Heather's listening to this but I'll have her check with you and set up another time.

HUNTER: That sounds good. I've really enjoyed our first chat and look forward to the next one.

Q: I've enjoyed this too. How fun! Take care.

HUNTER: You too.

INTERN: Have a good day everyone.

Q: Yup, thank you!

Q: Hi! Well.

HUNTER: Good morning.

Q: Today is what date?

HUNTER: The ninth of December.

Q: Okay. Well, shall we have at it?

HUNTER: Sure! Where do you want to pick up?

Q: Do you remember where you were?

HUNTER: We'd gotten through my time at the press office, if I remember correctly. Then I spent some months in the American Political Science Association (APSA) congressional fellowship program, which was right at the—

Q: What were you doing there?

HUNTER: I'm sure you know there are two flavors of congressional fellowship that the State Department takes part in. The better known one is the Pearson program with the full year on the Hill, but every year a smaller number of State officers take part in the APSA program, which begins with coursework at SAIS (the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies), the campus on Massachusetts Avenue. It's a non-degree program and I happened to be in the last year that a fellow named Fred Holborn, who had run the program for many years, was overseeing it. Days after our first meeting, 9/11 happened, so that cast a pall over the remaining months of the coursework and led to a lot of discussion in class about what the reaction was going to be. As you remember, this was when there was a scramble to set up what became the Department of Homeland Security, so we did a lot of talking about that.

Then APSA fellows, as the fall continues, line up their affiliation on the Hill, either a member's office or with committee staff. I wound up working for Senator Dick Durbin of Illinois. I don't have a particular Illinois affiliation but respect very much the work that he did and continues to do. I spent about six months, roughly, on his Government Oversight Committee staff. The main thing I remember from the time was working on the reauthorization of the Food for Peace program, and setting up a hearing at which George McGovern, who was a founder of the program, testified.

Q: In general, how did you find the State Department responded to queries from Congress?

HUNTER: I got to see that closer up a few years later when I wound up as the director of the liaison office during the time that I was there. To be honest I didn't have a great deal of regular contact with people at the department during the time that I was working for Senator Durbin, but I would say that as a rule people at State are cognizant of the importance of our partnership with Congress and want to be responsive to them while at the same time hoping that there's not too intrusive an approach on the part of any given member or committee regarding their oversight role.

Q: Okay, we'll pick this up more when you're in your liaison job.

HUNTER: All right.

Q: Let's just continue then.

HUNTER: So, when I finished that time on the Hill, it was then time for me to head overseas again. I became the public affairs officer at Consulate General Jerusalem. That was a job that I had been selected for several years earlier—in fact unusually early. In the

run-up to consolidation between USIA and State the then-director of the Near East/South Asia office, David Good, who had himself been PAO in Jerusalem, decided that I would be a good fit for that job. I was working for him at the time as the Levant desk officer, which we've already talked about. So in 1999, three years before the job was due to come open again, I was paneled to that position and headed off in late summer of 2002, working at what was then known as Post Two. If you've been to Jerusalem you know that in the days of the then-independent consulate general, the main building on Agron Road was where the consul general lived, where the political/ economic sections, the management section, and so on were, and then in East Jerusalem on Nablus Road was a smaller building that housed the public affairs section and the consular section.

So I led the public affairs team for those three years. This was during the second Intifada, so when I arrived, I wasn't able to have a meeting with my entire local staff present until several months after I got to Jerusalem, and this was because we had one staff member who lived in Ramallah and another one who lived near Bethlehem, in opposite directions into the West Bank. Because of closures that were happening, they were not both able on the same day to get through the Israeli checkpoints and into work. It was probably October before the full staff was able to get together.

It was a very active program of working with the Palestinians. At that time, the PD section in Jerusalem covered only the West Bank. Subsequent to my time there, after 2005 and the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza, what was formerly the Gaza program office located in Tel Aviv moved to Jerusalem and that section then handled all of the public affairs efforts with the Palestinians. But in my time it was the West Bank only.

It was a real challenge to work there, I can't deny that, and not just because of the Intifada. Even in more normal times, it's an unusual situation to have the target group that you're working with not be present where you physically are. So for any of our programs, or to interview candidates, assuming that they couldn't get into the consulate, which always required a permit, we would need to go to them, which in turn required a procedure that didn't always guarantee that you could go when you wanted to. There was always more demand for travel into the West Bank than we had resources to support. Between USAID, reporting trips by political or economic officers, occasionally a need from the consular section as well, whenever we wanted to travel, we put in a request with the front office and at the end of the day the consul general and deputy principal officer looked over the requests, prioritized them, and let people know whether they would or would not be able to go.

When I arrived, Ron (Ronald L.) Schlicher was the consul general and Jeff (Jeffrey D.) Feltman was the deputy principal officer. That soon changed because in December Ron left the post for what turned out to be for good, long before the scheduled end of his tour. He eventually wound up becoming an ambassador, but at the time he left, we were honestly surprised—at least I was—that he wasn't staying on. But what that meant for us was that Jeff then moved up to become the acting principal officer and, because I was the next most senior officer at the post, I was the acting deputy principal officer—an

opportunity for me. It was the first time that I wound up working in a front office and that, as it turned out, laid the groundwork for some opportunities for me later on.

Starting in December and through until the next summer when David (D.) Pearce arrived as consul general and Jeff departed, I was the acting deputy. That time period, early 2003, was of course the period in which we prepared to launch the invasion of Iraq. So I was the deputy in Jerusalem as we went first to authorized and then to ordered departure and sent out all of the family members and a number of officers from the consulate to draw us down, fearing that there could be some instability in reaction to our going into Iraq. About a month before the launch, Pat Kennedy, who was then under secretary for management, and Bill Eaton, who was the assistant secretary for administration, gathered together all of the management officers and the DCMs, or in my case deputy principal officers, from across the NEA region in Cairo to preview for us what was going to be coming—basically to let us know that it was going to be necessary to draw down most if not all of our posts for a time and give us a while to prepare for doing that. We were able to accomplish it in an orderly fashion and made every effort while people were away to try to keep everyone connected. At the time, we had at the time in Jerusalem a fantastic community liaison officer who worked very hard to ensure that people stayed connected until we could start bringing families back in the late spring, I guess, or early summer of 2003. At which point I went back to being PAO, [and] Maura Connelly arrived as the deputy principal officer. I had other opportunities in the following two years to serve again for shorter stints as acting DPO, and it wound, up all told, being about a third of my tour that I was working in the front office. I was double-hatted, basically, as PAO and deputy principal officer during our drawdown. By that time we were three American officers in the public affairs section. It's grown significantly since then. But both other officers departed, so it was only me and the local staff.

I need to open a parenthesis here to note that, not just in Jerusalem but everywhere I've served, it's been the local staff who really have been not just the backbone, but the heart and soul of our operations, but especially during those months in Jerusalem when I was mostly over at Post One and they were on their own in Post Two. To all intents and purposes they served as officers. They didn't have commissions like we did and with one exception they weren't American citizens carrying out the public diplomacy of the U.S. government, but they stepped up and kept our programs going, even in the most difficult times—and working with the West Bank at that time was extremely difficult. We had frequent situations where our program grantees at the last minute couldn't get permits to get to Ben Gurion Airport, or weren't allowed over the border into Jordan, to fly to programs in United States. So there often was scrambling to try to figure out what we could do, delay their travel, and so on. But the local staff that I worked with exerted heroic efforts. I've remained in contact with a number of them and consider them friends, and realize that without them, we American officers really would have a great deal of difficulty functioning. Around the world, but especially in environments like that.

I should probably pause and take a breath and see if you have any questions, because I've been doing stream-of-consciousness for a while!

Q: You had a job of great sensitivity that you were getting a lot of pressure from Jewish groups in the United States on one matter or another.

HUNTER: Not a great deal, actually. This was still the time when our embassy to Israel was located in Tel Aviv, so for the most part, American Jewish groups would work through the embassy rather than going directly to the consulate about any matters. Because, with the exception of truly consular work—that is, adjudicating visas and providing American citizen services—the focus of the consulate general was on the Palestinians. All of our economic and political reporting and activity, our USAID program, all of our public diplomacy programs, were focused on the Palestinians. So while there might be complaints about those programs, and we would hear those occasionally, anything else having to do with U.S. policy, I'd say, tended to go more to the embassy. They obviously had their own public affairs shop. The press officer in Tel Aviv during my time was a fellow named Paul Patin who was a very capable officer and was kept very, very busy—not surprisingly—with press queries.

It was a little bit less busy on the press front for me in Jerusalem. There were three major Palestinian papers with which we had regular contact. I had a monthly lunch with their lead diplomatic reporters. But I'd say that as far as policy matters were concerned, we were shielded to some degree because during that period, the discussion of U.S. policy and questions from media outlets, at least U.S. and major Western media outlets, tended to be directed more to the department spokesman back in Washington than to us in the field. Reporters knew that those of us at the consulate and the embassy weren't shaping or making policy. We were implementing it, we reflected it, but the decision makers were all back in Washington. So if a journalist wanted a question answered or wanted to have a debate about a particular policy matter, they were much closer to the actual decision makers if they turned their attention to DC rather than to the field. That was both an advantage and a disadvantage. We could feel a little bit distant, if you will, since we could only echo the talking points that we got from Washington, but since these were and remain extremely sensitive matters, in a way it was advantageous to have things concentrated in fewer hands and minds during that period.

This was also the time that the Bush administration was preparing what came to be known as the "road map" for trying to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict that was rolled out during 2003. One of the policy-related discussions that I did try to contribute to from out in the field had to do with what I perceived as a significant lack in the road map. In my view, one of the shortcomings of peace efforts over the years has been that U.S. officials have tended not to have really frank conversations with leaders on both sides, Israeli and Palestinian, about the need for those leaders in turn to have frank conversations with their publics about the need for compromise. I said to Jeff Feltman that I felt that to be credible and effective, the road map needed to speak to that point—needed to be up front about an expectation from Washington that leaders in Tel Aviv/Jerusalem and in Ramallah would speak publicly and not evasively about difficult choices that lay ahead. We never really have laid out that expectation. What I was advocating for didn't make it into the road map. I fell short, but I felt obligated to raise the point and I think it remains true today, at

a time where, alas, I think we're farther than ever from seeing a satisfactory resolution of the conflict, at least between Israel and the Palestinians.

I have been heartened to see warmer relations with some other Arab countries, but that doesn't yet get to the core of the matter, and to get to that core, there will need to be compromise and solutions that don't give either side the whole pie. We'll see down the road. That will remain a challenge for the Biden administration when it takes office and I wish them well, but will now be looking in from the outside rather than being part of efforts of an administration to try to achieve that elusive goal.

Q: During this time, how were relations between the United States and the inhabitants of the West Bank?

HUNTER: (Laugher.) Well, by that time we were able to say the word "Palestinians!"

Q: Oh, okay!

HUNTER: There was a long time we couldn't, and I'm sure you remember those days.

Q: Oh yes!

HUNTER: I'm trying to remember if it was at the end of the Clinton administration or the beginning of the second Bush administration, that what had long been known as the office of Israeli and Arab-Israeli Affairs in the Near Eastern Affairs bureau was renamed the office of Israeli and Palestinian Affairs. That was a major step forward.

Q: Oh yes!

HUNTER: Just as the explicit recognition by President Bush in a Rose Garden speech in the summer of 2002 that the goal of the United States was a two-state solution, was a major step forward. That had long been, maybe assumed, largely rumored, but it wasn't until 2002 that an American president came right out and said that we believe that a two-state solution is the way to resolve that conflict.

Relations with the Palestinians were not easy. These were the waning days of Yasser Arafat. In fact, one of my distinct memories of my time in Jerusalem was being the consulate duty officer at the time that Arafat died. I got a call at probably two or three o'clock in the morning from Washington saying that they were seeing wire reports that Arafat had passed away. So I got on the phone with our lead political local national staff who lived in Ramallah, and he was able to go to the Muqataa where Arafat had his office and residence. He went down there and was able to confirm that he had passed away. So I was able to call back to the Ops (Operations) Center and let them know that indeed we had on-the-ground confirmation of those news reports.

Arafat was a brilliant politician—irascible, exasperating much of the time—someone who got frequent visits from high-ranking people in Washington and would seem to

make the right noises to—I don't really want to say string them along, but—keep things going in an era where, as you'll probably remember the phrase, a lot of people criticized what was happening as a process without any peace: seemingly endless talk without concrete accomplishment. To a large extent it's hard to argue with that. There still is not a Palestinian state. Many of the same issues continue, of an embrace of violence or outright rejection of Israel's right to exist by a significant proportion of the Palestinian population. All of these things were around then. We were dealing with textbooks on both sides, actually, that contained some objectionable material. There was no one step, seemingly, that anyone could take in a way that would resolve the conflict. Another cliché, but it does have much truth in it, is that "if it had been easy it would have been done a long time ago." I certainly found that to be true.

I do have to say with a great deal of regret that with each progressive year I spent in Jerusalem and with the passing years since, I've gotten less optimistic that we'll see a satisfactory solution to that situation. But it was my obligation to try to contribute toward trying to reach that goal, and my team and I did so in good faith—Go ahead.

Q: Who are some of the personalities you had to deal with? Arafat was still in control during part of the time.

HUNTER: During almost all of the time, since I was primarily the public affairs officer during my tour, and as deputy principal officer, I was more focused really on internal management as opposed to any of the policy discussions with the Palestinians. That was the purview of the consul general and also of the political section. I should note that during my three years there, my colleague, as head of the political section, was the late Chris (J. Christopher) Stevens. We got to know each other quite well during that time and Chris had a lot of dealings with the Palestinians. Then during his time in Libya and elsewhere, he was a very effective and dedicated diplomat.

Q: He was killed in Benghazi, wasn't he?

HUNTER: That's correct, on September 11, 2012. But your question was about figures that I dealt with. I got to see a good number of them, particularly when we had visits by the secretary of state and meetings in Ramallah or in Jericho. I saw the late Saeb Erekat frequently, Yasser Abed Rabbo, and others in the Palestinian leadership, and some of the security people as well. The person I best remember dealing with was the Palestinian minister of education (Dr. Naim Abu Hommos), with whom I've remained in occasional touch, who very much understood the concern we had about the content of Palestinian textbooks, which many people rightly saw as inciting violence or at least having the potential to incite violence or a very skewed view of Israel and Jews. He sincerely wanted to work with us, but that was not universally true of his bureaucracy, I would say. While there was some progress, in part through some of the grants that I referred to when I was talking about the period immediately after the Wye negotiations in the late 1990s—grants to some nongovernmental organizations that brought people together from both sides to come up with alternative textbooks—I think the problem still persists to some

degree. Admittedly I've not been as focused on it as I was some years ago. But those are tough nuts to crack.

Q: What was your impression of Israeli rule in the area?

HUNTER: I had limited exposure, limited ability to understand at a deeply personal level what it would be like day to day for the Palestinians who lived in the West Bank, but as I mentioned, I did have members of my staff who were living in the West Bank and experienced that. It could be extremely challenging. People around the world essentially want the same things, and among those demands or expectations is to be treated with dignity, and a lot of what Palestinians had to go through did not much lend itself to the feeling of being treated with dignity. Having to wait in long lines to get through border crossings where basically you were automatically viewed with suspicion just because of who you were. Or another way of seeing it is, who you weren't, what faith you happened to practice or not practice. So that was definitely a challenging time.

This was also a period where we wrestled, as administrations have for decades, with how to respond to things like Israeli settlement activity. During the time that I was in Jerusalem, there were rumors of some secret letters being exchanged between Washington and Tel Aviv on that subject. I never saw them myself, but think that the understanding that the Israeli government came to have, which at the time was headed by Ariel Sharon, was that there was sympathy in Washington for continuing or at least not halting the settlement enterprise, which I can now say as a private citizen I view as deeply damaging to any prospects for peace.

So having those things happen in the background, I think, always wound up coloring the interactions that I and my fellow officers from the consulate would have with our Palestinian counterparts. We did our best to maintain that the United States was an honest broker and was not putting its thumb on the scale in seeking a resolution of the conflict, but undeniably there were times when it was harder to make that case than at other times.

Q: Did you feel the American Jewish community putting this hand on the scale?

HUNTER: The American Jewish community is a diverse body. That's a point that's important to make, and it's also important to point out that there are many groups of U.S. citizens who have been exercising their right to lobby public officials. The segments of the American Jewish population are not at all unique in doing that. Something that did change over the years is that a greater variety of opinion is reaching the ears of elected officials. There are a number of the American Jewish organizations, such as AIPAC and the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations…

Q: AIPAC is the American Israeli Political Action Committee.

HUNTER: That's correct. They have been around for years and have been adept at laying out their point of view and their aims for U.S. foreign policy. But in more recent years another segment of the American Jewish population and their supporters have formed

organizations like J Street to give an alternate point of view. I think that's a healthy thing. On the other side of the coin—this is something that I've said not just to Palestinian contacts of mine but honestly to contacts in the majority of my postings—there has been a notable lack, for the most part, of organized political activity and lobbying by Americans of Arab heritage. There was never an effective Palestinian-American group that corresponded to any of the Jewish-American organizations that could provide a different narrative for decision makers to factor into policy creation. That, I think, is a shortcoming. Whatever the reasons were that these groups of citizens decided not to get involved—there are several that you could come up with—the impact of that decision, whether it was one taken consciously or unconsciously, was that they weren't in the game, to put it very bluntly.

Q: You mentioned there are several reasons you can think of why they weren't in the game, but can you give some of the reasons why you think they weren't?

HUNTER: I'll do that but with the caveat that I'm not Arab-American and so these reasons are purely speculative. But one example would be a feeling of numeric inferiority. The numbers of Arab-Americans have historically not been large in the United States. There's not been a history on a national level of very much organization even for charitable and fraternal purposes. The Arab world of course is a large and diverse place, and where people come from matters in whether they naturally gravitate toward one another. So that diversity I think may have worked against the ability of…

Q: (Phone rings.) Let me just get this phone here.

HUNTER: Shall I continue?

Q: Yeah, I'm trying to take this. Hold on. That was on my solicitation phone.

HUNTER: Yeah, we're all familiar with those! So I was saying, the diversity of the Arab-American community or even for that matter the Muslim-American community, which obviously goes beyond people of Arab heritage, has maybe mitigated against people's instinct to band together. Those are just a few reasons. I'm sure people could come up with others.

Whatever the reason, the impact—and that's the most important part—has been a near-total absence of organized lobbying by people who could come up with counter narratives or alternate points of view to feed into the policy process. At the same time, I should recognize that there are political organizations of Muslim-Americans and of Arab-Americans, as well as NGOs like the Middle East think tanks and so on, who focus on that region who have done very important and praiseworthy work to create understanding about that region and to interact with members of Congress and administration officials. But in the big picture, no organization has had the same weight over the years as an AIPAC, nor has any group of organizations had the same impact as the Conference of Major Presidents. I think that's an objective statement of fact.

Q: Yeah. Support for Israeli cause was quite widespread in the United States, wasn't it?

HUNTER: The United States was the first nation to recognize Israel as an independent state, so it shouldn't surprise anyone that there are many supporters for what has been an extremely important ally and friend of the United States in that region. That doesn't preclude us from saying that the conflict between Israel and its Arab neighbors has had ramifications far beyond that neighborhood that the United States has felt compelled to try to help solve, and that's been a tall order. Any time you've got a conflict that is so bound up with questions of identity and faith, and on top of that something that deals with a territory that in reality is much smaller than many people realize, it's bound to be a thorny set of issues that may be very divisive. That's what we've seen. Not surprising to me, and not an excuse for not having been able to solve it, but simply a reality.

Q: How did you feel about, say within the State Department, support for the Palestinian cause?

HUNTER: That's a question we could spend hours dissecting and parsing, because you'd have to be very careful on what you mean by "the Palestinian cause." As I was saying, within the American Jewish community—and this would be true within Israel as well—there's a wide variety of opinion on what the appropriate approach is toward the very notion of Israel and what its relationship should be with both its Arab citizens and its Arab neighbors. There's also a spectrum of opinion within the Palestinian population on those very same questions: what Palestinian governments should look like, what the Palestinians' relationship should be with Israel as a neighbor, and with the Arabs who live within Israel's borders.

To take things at the broadest level, once President (George W.) Bush finally did articulate the goal of a two-state solution, which I think was something that came as a relief to most if not all people in the State Department who were focused on those issues, the approach that we then could openly pursue was one aimed at creating two democratic states, side by side and that is an outcome that, while it's still theoretical, is realistic to envision, in my view. There's nothing inherent in the Palestinian character, whatever that might be, that would prevent them from living in a democracy that is worthy of the name. But that diversity of opinion that I referred to has wound up being extremely challenging in trying to bring about a democracy that includes acceptance on the part of all citizens of Israel's right to exist. That difficulty is only made worse by the geographic separation between Gaza and the West Bank and a lot of the economic and social grievances that the Palestinians have.

But to answer your question as concisely as I can, I think people in the State Department working on the Arab-Israeli conflict have seen the Palestinian cause as something that should result in the creation of a State of Palestine run on democratic principles and living in peace and security with its neighbor, Israel. Those were the policy lines that we repeated over and over again. I think they were appropriately drawn, and ones that I hope will one day in the future reflect the reality on the ground.

We should probably move on from this posting because we could spend—we've already talked for nearly an hour and we can talk many hours more!

Q: I know it! So let's move on.

HUNTER: While in Jerusalem, I bid on State Department postings for the first time as a State Department officer. You recall, I said I got the Jerusalem posting prior to the consolidation of USIA with State, so I had never had to get myself an assignment, and even that Jerusalem one was something that a supervisor of mine handed to me. I was very fortunate in that regard. I found that I wasn't especially skilled in having to go out in this now much larger organization that I was part of and line up a job for myself. In retrospect, I would have done things differently and made some other decisions. There were personal factors that I won't go into that led me to decide that I needed to come back to Washington from Jerusalem. It would have been perfectly possible to seek another overseas posting, but I decided that I needed to be back in DC. The job that I eventually wound up getting was the director of the State Department's congressional liaison office. That was then only a few years old. It was Secretary Powell, when he was Secretary of State, who realized that the department didn't have an office on Capitol Hill, a shock to him as a military man. The Department of Defense was wise enough to have set up its own liaison office after World War II, and so had many people there interacting with members of Congress, answering their questions, taking people to see military bases and other facilities around the United States. Of course, DOD has an inherent advantage over the Department of State in having facilities of one kind or another, or at least people in uniform, from every single congressional district, which is probably is not true of Foreign Service officers. So that reach of DOD and its long track record of interacting with congressional offices have given it a significant advantage over the years in making sure that its needs were not only understood but met in budgets year after year. So Secretary Powell wisely decided to set up a congressional liaison office, a very small operation. We had two Foreign Service officers: one consular officer whose job it was to respond to queries on consular matters from members and staff, and then another officer and an office management specialist; so three in all.

When I arrived in 2005, there was one office covering both houses of Congress. In a subsequent year—I'm not sure exactly when it was—we were able to establish an office on the Senate side as well, but at the time I was there we were a single office located down the corridor from DOD's office in the Rayburn House Office Building.

Q: What were the years you were doing this?

HUNTER: I was supposed to be there from 2005 to 2007. It was a two-year assignment, as Washington postings tend to be, but I served only one year. I'll get to that in just a moment. But in terms of what we wound up doing, as I said my consular colleague was focused on taking a near-constant stream of calls about American citizens who were feared missing, had lost their passports, been mugged, or otherwise had issues overseas and had contacted their member of Congress. So it was a very busy job for my colleague, whom I had only the greatest admiration for. For almost all of my time, a woman named

Julie Ruterbories had that job. I wound up nominating her for the Secretary's Award for Public Outreach, which she received because she did a superb job in serving as a public face of the State Department in dealing with all of those issues that came up day after day.

My focus was more on answering policy-related questions or connecting staff members with people at the department to get their questions answered or be able to have a discussion on whatever topic they were interested in pursuing. During my time, I also established a weekly electronic newsletter for staffers that would make sure that they kept abreast of personnel changes at the department, and electronic documents that became available—statements on different policy matters or particularly significant briefings by an administration official. They would get links to those. At the time that was still a fairly new thing. It seems sort of old school now, but back then it was a useful resource to provide to people.

Another function that I had was serving as a point of contact for State Department fellows on the Hill, whether as Pearsons or APSA fellows, and setting up briefings for A-100 classes of new Foreign Service officers. They would always come up to the Hill for a briefing that normally included talks by one or two staff members and whenever possible I tried to set up a "Peter and Paul talk." Peter Yeo and Paul Foldi were two staff members, one of them a former Foreign Service officer himself, who had a very engaging way of talking about both the legislative enterprise and the importance of having FSOs who understood what that process was and our need to work with Congress, as two of the three branches of our government, in order to pursue the national interest.

So it was a busy job. I enjoyed it a great deal, I have to say. But this was during the time when our Iraq mission was facing increasing challenges. The invasion began, as I said, in 2003 when I was in Jerusalem. By 2005 the initial period of calm that followed Saddam's defeat had turned to the start of armed opposition to the presence of coalition forces and so there was an increasing need for staffing in our Iraq mission. The decision was also made at that time to adopt and adapt in Iraq a model that had been created in Afghanistan of provincial reconstruction teams (PRT). In Afghanistan those teams were military-led. The decision was made that in Iraq they would be civilian-led but include military components, civil affairs teams. So the call went out for volunteers to be PRT leaders. There was also a need for continuing to find officers to staff our embassy in Baghdad.

I thought about what I was doing on the Hill. I thought about where I was in my career. I was at that time an FS-01 officer and about ready to "open my window," as it was called, to declare my candidacy for the Senior Foreign Service. I was a little bit fearful that being in the liaison office for two consecutive years, supervising no one and with a somewhat limited scope for any significant policy-focused initiative, might disadvantage me a little bit. So that factor, and of course the track record that I'd had of service only in the Arab world and of being an Arabic speaker at a fairly proficient level, made me conclude that sooner or later Iraq was going to be in my future. And I preferred to have that happen on my own terms rather than to be told that I was going to Iraq. That decision was made easier by the fact that Secretary Rice was pressuring the assistant secretaries of the

various bureaus in the department to come up with people to serve in Iraq. So I went to our then-assistant secretary for legislative affairs and said I was willing to volunteer to go. While that created a bit of a short-term problem because of the vacancy in the liaison office, it also enabled him to go to Secretary Rice and say, "I have someone for you." On balance, that was something he was more than willing to do.

So my assignment at the liaison office was broken and I was named as the first PRT leader for Babil province, located in the city of Al-Hillah, which is about sixty-five miles due south of Baghdad. I was replacing a fellow named Fred Fonteneau who had had the title regional coordinator. He had covered five provinces in the Shia band immediately south of Baghdad. So the provinces of An-Najaf, Karbala, Babil, Dhi Qar, and Wasit were all his territory. He was sort of a proconsul for that whole region. When the PRTs were set up, Babil was the only one for those provinces that was fully staffed from the outset. We had smaller teams covering all those other four provinces, but from the compound that we had in Babil, which I have to say was a very difficult situation for the officers assigned to those other teams. They could only very infrequently go to the province that they were covering, and that was before we had very reliable video-conferencing technology or anything like that. We didn't enjoy the kind of mobility that our military counterparts did. We had—at least at the outset—an embassy approach toward mobility security that was limiting, I'll put it that way. We had to go in Department of State vehicles with Blackwater security accompanying us rather than being able to travel with the military. That changed over the time that I was there, after Ryan Crocker became ambassador. He adopted a more expeditionary mindset that I think worked to the benefit of those teams. The year that I spent, my first in Iraq, was both a very difficult and a very interesting one. The period of 2005 and 2006 was the most violent time since the invasion. Things looked pretty bleak in late 2005: a huge uptick in violence, a lot of U.S. and coalition troops being killed by IEDs, and occasionally by indirect fire as well. But the PRT experiment did help, I think, in getting civilian diplomats into the field with resources to try to help what we hoped would be a democratic future for Iraq take hold.

It's still a work in progress there, but what I found particularly interesting and challenging and ultimately fairly satisfying about being PRT leader in Iraq was trying to work with and encourage local leaders along that path of being responsible representatives to their constituents. The decades of Ba'ath Party domination and especially the brutal Saddam regime had created an on-the-ground reality where dissent was brutally suppressed and anyone with an ounce of common sense could readily figure out that the best way to succeed, or at least to get by, was not to get crosswise with any important decision makers in the Ba'ath Party apparatus.

What that meant at a provincial level was that the governors essentially were "yes men." Whatever Baghdad decided it wanted was what got implemented out in the provinces. That same sort of reality was replicated at every level below the provincial government. The upshot of that was that Iraqis were not raised during that time thinking that they could or should take initiative. That wound up being a serious shortcoming when all of a sudden the hope was that there would be a liberal democracy taking shape. When being

passive was a route to success, and all of a sudden you were expected to be active in making decisions and establishing priorities and paying attention to your constituents, there was a real clash of cultures. So a lot of the work of the PRT, particularly through some of USAID's implementing partners, was providing training for people in what it meant to be a representative; how it is that you went about listening to constituents; how you could rationally make decisions about resources, investments, and so on. During the time that I was there the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) had ceased to exist. There was an Iraqi government heavily reliant in some respects on assistance and guidance from the United States but one we recognized nonetheless as independent of us, and that government made the decision to decentralize some important parts of the government function, including no longer holding as tightly the reins of the budgetary purse.

So Baghdad began pushing out to the provincial governments large sums of money and saying to those governments, "All right, this is yours to do with. Figure out how you should spend this money." Our priority as the U.S. government, therefore, became what we referred to as "budget execution," trying to assist the central government and the provincial governments to be as effective and responsible as possible in managing that money.

As you might guess from what I said a few minutes ago, simply trying to get people to act in the first place was a bit of a challenge and in a number of provinces the other reaction to the news of the arrival of this funding was stunned silence, and no real action, because people didn't have experience in deciding on their own what to do with money. Their experience always was the money came with orders for Baghdad about what to do with it. So there wasn't a need to think independently and analytically about where to use it. Now that responsibility fell on the shoulders of more local officials.

So in all of our meetings with members of the provincial council, with the governor, with district mayors and so on, our refrain always was, "What is it that you think people need and what are you hearing from the people who elected you? Where do they want the money to be spent? What kinds of projects matter to them?" And we encouraged them to come up with prioritized lists of infrastructure projects and so on that they could budget toward. And at the end of my time there, in the summer of 2006—just shortly after I left—I learned that the Ministry of Finance in Baghdad had assessed the progress of all the provincial governments in Iraq—I think there were 26 of them but I could be wrong about that number—but all the provinces, how well they'd done. Babil province, the one that I worked in, had been the first one to have its provincial government allocate all of its funds toward a prioritized list of projects and activities. For being first across the finish line, it was awarded an extra allocation of funding so that it could take care of some additional projects.

I look back at that accomplishment, which, to be honest, at the end of the day was due to decisions by Iraqis, but it was also something that came about as a result of a real concerted effort by everyone on the PRT, as well as all of the military colleagues that we were interacting with, to have real unity of purpose and message in our interaction with

all the officials that we dealt with. That's not to say that we were naive about what that could mean. Without question there was corruption happening. There was some money that was not well spent, U.S. taxpayer dollars that wound up being wasted. I'm not Pollyanna-ish about that. But at the same time, the aims that we thought were important, the aims of emboldening properly focused, democratic decision making, those aims were appropriate and I think we made progress in achieving them during the time I was there.

I feel validated in that opinion by the fact that when I returned to Iraq a few years later as the public affairs officer at the embassy and talked with people in the political section, they said that in their analysis Babil province remained one of the leaders in good governance countrywide. That's a relative term and we have to be realistic about the fact that how democracy was and is working in Iraq isn't necessarily the same as what we would accept for ourselves here in the United States, or in other well-established Western democracies. But in relation to how far the country had come in a relatively short period of time, I think it did reflect a measure of achievement that those of us who contributed to it can be proud of. So that was my PRT year.

During that period people—Oh, I should mention one more thing before I left. The PRTs as I mentioned were an adaptation of the Afghanistan model and were being implemented at a time where when the Bush administration was considering what came to be known as "the surge" in Iraq. That's generally and correctly understood as meaning a surge in troop levels, but there was also discussion of whether there should be a surge of PRTs, whether the model was working well enough to warrant having more of them created. So in very late 2005, I was chosen with a couple of my counterparts, Stephanie Miley and Ambassador Jim (James A.) Knight, to be part of as conversation by secure video conference with President Bush, Vice President Cheney, Secretary Rice, National Security Advisor Hadley, and others on the question of whether the PRTs were working well enough to warrant a surge. The three of us felt that, at least in our provinces, we were making enough headway that it did make sense to create additional teams, which wound up happening. In fact just in my province, we wound up having a North Babil team created covering what was popularly known as the "triangle of death" in that area of Sunni-Shia blending where there was a great deal of violence, and a number of other teams were set up around the country that wound up working for a number of years subsequently.

Well, I'll close that chapter of that career and move on to the next assignment. As I said, those of us who were working in PRTs were granted, under rules that HR had adopted, the assurance that we would get one of our top five onward assignment bids for which we were at grade. I was able to use the Iraq experience, as well as connections to a couple of people I'd worked with previously, to break into (the bureau of) European Affairs for the first time. Up to this point, all of my assignments both overseas and domestically, with the one exception of my time working for Legislative Affairs, had been in Near Eastern Affairs. So this was a change for me, and I became the deputy director of the newly expanded office of Western European Affairs in EUR.

Prior to my arrival, Western European Affairs had comprised France, Spain, Portugal, Andorra, the Vatican, Italy, San Marino, and Malta. But just before my arrival, it had been combined with the old Office of U.K.-Ireland-Benelux Affairs. I got the old Western Europe part, so the continental countries that I just named, and spent two years in that job supervising a team of six officers. I had a counterpart deputy who supervised the Ireland/UK/Benelux portfolio, and had a number of different office directors, Kathy Allegrone, (Ambassador) Pamela (L.) Spratlen, and finally Maureen (E.) Cormack, who's currently our acting principal deputy in European Affairs after being ambassador to Serbia. Very interesting time, as you can imagine, an office that's constantly busy because, with the exception of Germany, which actually subsequently was added to Western European Affairs, you have our major Western European allies, the U.K. and France, major NATO partners also, lead members of the coalition in Iraq at the time, our Dutch partners, too. So a constant stream of visitors back and forth to London, Paris, The Hague; a constant need for briefing papers for the seventh floor. It was an assignment that in a way mirrored my time in the press office because we had contact with such a wide variety of offices across the department—very interesting and enriching. Often some late hours, and it could get a little tiresome to have this constant flow of paper to review and clear, but we had very good bureau leadership at the time. Dan Fried was the assistant secretary for most of the time that I was there. Kurt Volker was his principal deputy for the bulk of my time in the bureau. Very, very capable and experienced officers and a pleasure to work for them.

I expected, following that assignment, to stay in Washington for another couple of years. Again, not to get into too many personal things, but the same reasons that had brought me back to Washington from Jerusalem had made me plan more or less on staying for two years or more domestically, but I didn't do that. I left again for Iraq, leaving behind a partner in Washington whom I then felt that I should spend some time with. So I bid on and was assigned as a senior career development officer in the bureau of Human Resources as the follow-on to my Western European (Affairs) tour.

Shortly after that happened, fate came knocking. As I previewed when talking about my Jerusalem assignment, it laid the groundwork for some developments, the first of which took place in the spring of 2009, the very beginning of the Obama administration. At that time Jeff Feltman, after his time in Jerusalem, had briefly been in Iraq, had become ambassador to Lebanon and then gone back to Washington to become principal deputy in Near Eastern Affairs and ultimately assistant secretary. He called me up one day in March 2009 and said out of the blue, "What would you think of going to Damascus to replace Maura Connelly?" Maura at that time was the chargé d'affaires in Damascus. We had had a series of chargés since 2005 when we pulled our ambassador, Margaret Scobey, following the assassination of Rafiq (Bahaa El Deen Al) Hariri, and the Obama administration had come into office wondering if it might be able to change the dynamic of both the U.S.-Syria relationship and the U.S.-Iranian relationship. Part of that was going to be, in the case of Syria, sending an ambassador back to Damascus. So the analysis in Washington was that it would be best to have Maura leave, a new DCM assigned there serving briefly as chargé, before we could get an ambassador back to Damascus. So Jeff reached out to me. I thought about it and discussed it with my partner

and decided that this was really too good an opportunity to pass up. So NEA had my assignment to HR broken and I went to Damascus as chargé in the summer of 2009. The expectation, NEA's and mine, was that that would last for a matter of just a few months for the time for someone to be nominated and confirmed and get to post. It didn't work out that way, and ultimately I was chargé until January 2011, about a year and a half.

There was ultimately a nomination of an ambassador, Robert Ford. The Senate at that time was controlled by the Democratic Party but Ambassador Ford wasn't able to get a hearing to go to post because Republican members of the Senate put a hold on his nomination. It was ultimately only through a recess appointment later, in December 2010, that he got permission to come to Damascus and present his letters of credence to Bashar al-Assad. In the meantime, I held down the fort with a wonderful and very capable team in Damascus. We had a series of visitors that included John Kerry who came twice in his capacity as chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations (Committee) and we had meetings with Bashar al-Assad in that capacity. Bashar had become president of course in 2000 on the death of his father, and things had changed a lot by that time compared to how they'd been under Hafez al-Assad. In older days it had been possible for American ambassadors just to meet quietly and privately one-on-one with Hafez. That never happened in Bashar's time, so the relationship was much more distant even though the presidential offices were only a few blocks away from the embassy. I never had the opportunity as a chargé, nor did Robert, once confirmed, to just go have a private chat with Bashar. In my case and that of my predecessors, that was partly because the Syrians could simply refer to protocol and the fact that we chargés weren't confirmed ambassadors, weren't the personal representatives of the president of the United States, and therefore didn't have rank to warrant a meeting with the president of the country. You could say that there had been a lot of utility in the days—

Excuse me, I need to take a quick phone call if you don't mind.

Sorry about that. This is probably a good time to pause for a breath because I've been doing stream-of-consciousness and you've probably got some clarifying questions to ask.

Q: Oh no, this is going well. Where shall we pick this up next time? Or do you want to keep going for a while?

HUNTER: No, an hour and a half is a good long while to go. Why don't we pick it up the next time with my Syria assignment? We're now into the home stretch; each of these chats has covered about a third of my career, so we'll cover the final third, I hope, the next time we're able to talk. I appreciate your patience. I've talked your ear off once again! I look forward to wrapping this up whenever we next talk.

Q: Well, you've been dealing with a fascinating place.

HUNTER: Yeah; I can't deny I had a career that made me feel lucky and very fulfilled.

Q: Very good. I'll leave Heather to figure out when we meet again, and take care.

HUNTER: Sounds good. You do the same, Stu. Bye bye now. See you, Derek.

Q: I'm ready!

HUNTER: Me too!

Q: Okay, where were we?

HUNTER: That's a good question! (Laughter.) I know, we'd gotten to Syria but I don't recall if we got all the way through it or not.

Q: Well, we can always edit out the repetition. So let's talk about Syria!

HUNTER: All right.

Q: You were there when?

HUNTER: Between July 2009 and July 2011. I did say last time around that I was sent there at a time early in the Obama administration when the hope was that we might be able to get on a different footing with the Syrians; potentially with the Iranians as well, although that's definitely outside the purview of this oral history. Washington decided to have the then-chargé in Damascus, Maura Connelly, leave after only a year—she then became ambassador to Lebanon—and have me go for what we anticipated would be a short period before an ambassador would arrive.

Before I continue, I don't know, but I'm experiencing a lot of noise on the line. When I'm speaking I'm hearing a lot of feedback. I don't have any other devices open.

Q: Well, I'm not hearing anything.

HUNTER: That's strange; it hasn't been a problem in prior conversations.

Q: Well, it's coming through very nicely here.

HUNTER: Okay. All right we'll continue and I'll do my best to ignore that I'm hearing in my—Robert Ford ultimately was able to make it to Damascus through a recess appointment by President Obama. The time I served as chargé d'affaires, we did our best to convince the Syrians to move on the issue that concerned us the most, namely their policy of allowing extremists to travel to Syria from different parts of the world and then cross the border into Iraq where they were killing coalition forces. Ultimately we didn't achieve any progress on that, unfortunately. And so that hoped-for improvement in bilateral relations—

This feedback is too much. I'm going to log off and see if it's better when I come back.

Q: Okay, I'll sign off.

HUNTER: So sorry about that and I'll be back shortly.

Q: Okay.

HUNTER: All right, here I am.

Q: How's the feedback on your end?

HUNTER: It's much better on my end. I don't know what the problem was a few minutes ago but we're now good to go.

We never did achieve the hoped-for progress on that thorny policy issue. We did have a success of another kind, which is something I'm proud of, namely getting the Damascus Community School reopened. When I arrived that was one of the top agenda items I had. The Syrians had closed the school in the spring of 2009, probably in reaction to some U.S. military activity out near the border with Iraq. That not surprisingly had a huge impact on the embassy community, not just the U.S. embassy but also other missions with personnel whose children attended the school. It was also a place where some Syrian families had their children going to school as well. So not having that school functioning was a major disadvantage for us, not least of all in terms of recruiting officers to come serve.

When I got there I raised the issue with the foreign ministry. We didn't get a lot of traction initially. We began to have Washington visitors come through and I would ask them to bring that up as well when they had meetings with Bashar al-Assad. We understood that what the Syrians were interested in getting in return for the school's reopening was a release of a hold that the United States had put on a plane that was to be the Syrian equivalent of Air Force One that was sitting in Qatar. We didn't really want to encourage the idea of a linkage between those two things, so didn't talk explicitly in those terms. I kept trying to chip away at the stone wall that I encountered each time I would bring up the school, or would have others do it. Ultimately we had what I saw as an opportunity to come at it from a different angle when we had a group of U.S. senators visit—six of them altogether—and they included Senator Amy Klobuchar from Minnesota. I asked her in our pre-brief at the embassy, before the drive to the presidential palace, to bring up the school issue from the point of view of a mother, a parent, and to pitch it to Bashar al-Assad in that way: ask him to look at it through the eyes of a parent whose child would not be able to go to the school that he or she had been attending. And that worked! For whatever reason, Bashar al-Assad essentially blinked. It certainly didn't make his foreign minister happy who was sitting there and knew what the Syrian ask was. To have al-Assad say yes, he thought the school could reopen, without also bringing up what they wanted in the bargain, made him apoplectic. This was Walid (Mohi Edine al) Muallem, who passed away about a month ago. I feared he might have a heart attack on

the spot! It still took a few months before we got all of the i's dotted and t's crossed but we were able to bring back a former director of the school from several years prior who worked his magic. He reached out through educational channels and got a staff in place for the school to reopen in September 2010.

Unfortunately they weren't able to complete a full academic year because by the following spring, once the protests had begun, it was clear that "business as usual" couldn't be the way we operated, so they went to virtual platforms and were able to complete the school year that way at least. Then unfortunately after the 2010-2011 academic year, DCS (Damascus Community School) has not been operating.

Robert Ford, as I mentioned, arrived in January 2011 [and] presented his letters of credence to Bashar al-Assad. We had a couple of months of normalcy, an ambassador back in Damascus for the first time since 2005, while elsewhere in the Arab world we were watching the impact of the "Arab Spring" that had begun with the protests in Tunisia late the previous year. It was hard to anticipate that they would affect Syria with quite the speed and scope that ultimately they did, but starting in mid-March there were protests first in the southern city of Daraa, then in Damascus and elsewhere.

We ratcheted back our operations out of concern for security implications. There was no violence in those first few months, but we weren't really certain when a crowd could materialize and what direction things might go. We had a few consular mini-crises to deal with. [One was] an American citizen who was picked up in a regime raid on a mosque in Damascus. We were able to get him released after about two weeks, and he stayed at my residence the night before he flew out of the country so that he wouldn't be alone in his place after having gone through that trauma of being in a Syrian prison.

Then not long after I left, which was in July 2011—I completed my two-year assignment—As a parenthesis, had things not gone the way they did, I would have been urging the ambassador to recommend to Washington that we have tours of duty in Syria extended again to three years as they had been some years prior. It had been quite a while before people had done a normal three-year rotation there. But once the school reopened, then there was in my view really no reason not to have people stay a full three years. Quality of life in Damascus was excellent. There were no longer the shortages of consumer goods that the country had known years earlier. There were good air connections and so on. But alas, that too never came to pass and who knows when we'll have an embassy operating in Damascus again, [or] for that even to be considered!

So I left right at the beginning of July 2011; not surprisingly, we didn't have an Independence Day reception. There were no public events going on by that time. There were curfews in the city and so on. And just a few weeks after that—later in July—a mob attacked the embassy. A few people scaled the wall, tore down the American flag, broke some windows and so on, certainly with regime permission. Things like that didn't happen without officials knowing about it and probably encouraging it. But I was not there to witness that and I salute my colleagues who did remain and soldier on until ultimately the embassy had to close in February 2012. I want especially to salute Robert

Ford, a courageous and brilliant diplomat, who stood up for the rights of Syrian citizens to protest and to have a say in how they were governed. I think he did exactly the right thing and both his heart and mind were in the right place. He was the perfect man to be in that job at that time.

So I headed out and had been asked in the course of my final year in Syria by the then-principal deputy of Near Eastern Affairs, Ron Schlicher, to go to Baghdad as public affairs officer. Our embassy in Iraq was then the largest in the world, headed by Ambassador Jim (James F.) Jeffrey who'd come there from Turkey. I spent a year as public affairs officer there. Hadn't really anticipated doing a second year in Iraq, but it did provide a means of looking firsthand at what had transpired in the five years since I had last seen the place. I did have a chance even to go to Babil province, where I'd served as the PRT leader, and met with a few officials whom I'd known in my earlier tour. As I may have said in the segment about my PRT experience, even at that time the people in the political section in Baghdad said that Babil remained, relatively speaking, a positive example of governance in the Iraqi context. By no means perfect; I mean, we knew in 2006 and 2007 and subsequently that there was corruption going on and so on, but compared to some other places, the provincial government in Babil was a success story.

In Baghdad, and in partnership also with our consulates in Basra and Erbil, we had an active public diplomacy program. The surge had had the positive effect of re-establishing calm in the country so that it was possible to bring in some performing arts groups. We even had one of them perform outdoors in a public park, which would have been unthinkable in the 2006 and 2007 timeframe, and in theaters as well. [We] had a very active grants program to help out the nongovernmental organizations. We focused very much on education as a means of strengthening ties between the United States and Iraq. The ministry of higher education was willing to fund a good number of scholarships abroad and we wanted to do everything possible to have people choose to come to the United States. We had a lot of competition. The U.K., Australia, [and] other places could offer cheaper and faster degrees than the United States could, but we successfully made the case to a lot of people that the quality of education in United States, both for undergraduates and for graduate students, made the investment of time and money worthwhile.

We had on staff an educational advisor who had a wide network across the country and was so successful that during my time as PAO, I argued that Washington should bring her on staff back in DC to continue that activity once her time in Iraq concluded. She was the spouse of an officer assigned to one of the other sections in the embassy, and Washington agreed to fund a position for her to continue that educational advising, which again is something that I look back on with a great deal of pride. We had terrific officers working for us and a very deep cooperation with other sections of the embassy. Another of the excellent officers working on the public affairs team who had the exchanges portfolio ran an unbelievable recruiting effort that produced nominations from across this very large embassy. [It] was also quite successful in reaching consensus about what our priority areas of focus should be among the many thematic programs run under the umbrella of

the International Visitor Leadership Program. So I look back with a great deal of fondness on the work that that team did.

The same is true on the information side of the house with work that the team did in providing educational opportunities for Iraqi journalists and of course briefing Western and international journalists who were resident there or in the region. The embassy in Baghdad had really extraordinary facilities that included a TV studio, which we made good use of preparing short videos to offer to Iraqi television stations and for posting on the embassy website. Again, an excellent crew there. So that year flew by. The days could be long; there was always a lot to do. But I felt that we had a program that was able to make a contribution in the broader picture of U.S. engagement with Iraq, and was reaping the benefits of what the surge had accomplished a few years earlier.

From there I was very fortunate to be chosen to become consul general in Istanbul. I left Baghdad in 2012 and returned to Washington for a year of Turkish study, which I have to say was a challenge. I had tackled Arab a couple of decades earlier, and language learning doesn't get easier with age! I was glad to have had the background already in French and Arabic because modern Turkish has a good number of words borrowed from French and derived from Arabic. [There were] plenty of false cognates, too, so that was one of the challenges: to keep track of which words that I could recognize as Arabic in origin meant the same thing in Turkish as they did in Arabic and which ones had different meanings. But it was an enjoyable challenge with good and collegial classmates. I enjoyed excellent instruction from the staff at FSI at the George Schultz (National Foreign Affairs Training Center) campus.

I got to Istanbul in September 2013. This was about three months and a bit more after a series of protests had taken place in Turkey, initially in Istanbul in a place called Gezi Park adjacent to Taksim Square. The proximate cause of that first protest was a plan by the government to rip out a green area, one of the few in that part of the city, and rebuild an Ottoman-era barracks. That became the catalyst for wider protests that were focused more broadly on what people felt was an increasingly autocratic style on the part of then-Prime Minister (Recep Tayyip) Erdogan and the AKP (*Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi*—Justice and Development Party).

The protests had died out by the time I got there, but their effects were only beginning to be felt. Prime Minister Erdogan then came to be convinced that the United States was, if not actively encouraging or causing the protests, at least it was favorably inclined toward them. So what had been an increasingly warm period in the bilateral relationship, for a period of years that my immediate predecessors enjoyed, started to turn in 2013 and that turn accelerated at the close of 2013 with the launch by some prosecutors of a corruption investigation that wound up reaching the highest levels of the Turkish government. That investigation included figures who had contacts with two of the local staff at Consulate General Istanbul, who subsequently were arrested some years later and accused by the Turkish government of involvement in the failed coup attempt of 2016, which I'll get to in a little while.

My three years in Istanbul therefore were different from what I had expected them to be when I was chosen. During my time in Baghdad I was in contact with my immediate predecessor, Scott Kilner, who at that time was enjoying that warmer relationship that I referred to just a moment ago. He had begun his career some thirty years earlier in Istanbul and so had the pleasure of coming full circle and serving in his last tour as consul general and was struck at how the relationship was moving. I had hoped that smooth sailing would continue through my time, [but] that's not quite how it worked out. Nonetheless, we were able to be very active in the Istanbul consular district, which comprised the province of Istanbul proper and twelve other surrounding provinces on both the European and the Asian side of the Bosporus.

I made it a point to get to all parts of the consular district. We realized fairly early on in my tenure there that although the consulate had an excellent track record of cultivating and maintaining contacts in Istanbul itself, and in the provinces immediately adjacent to it, we didn't have as active a presence in some of the farther-flung provinces, particularly those that had smaller populations and maybe not quite the same economic importance as provinces like Bursa, for instance. So we devised a program—particular credit here goes to my then-deputy, Deborah Mennuti, but it was a collective effort to develop the program that we came to call "Beyond the Bosporus"—by which we had the first and second-tour officers assigned to Istanbul become virtual provincial officers with each one assigned one or two other provinces in which they were responsible for developing contacts, monitoring developments, and making sure—to the extent we could—we had ongoing, active relationships in all of those places I also visited all of those provinces at least once and when those trips happened, the officer responsible for that province developed the itinerary and came along and then did reporting subsequently. In some instances, it was the first visit by a consul general in over fifteen years. I'm hoping that my successors are able to get out to those provincial capitals and other cities on a more regular basis, because it is—

Q: What was the inhibition? The government wouldn't let you or—?

HUNTER: No, I don't know that there was any inhibition, but it's natural in a place as large and vibrant as Istanbul to have your calendar fill up with meetings and activities focused on that city. I don't mean at all to imply that my predecessors were lax in their duties or ignored at least the most important of the provincial capitals elsewhere in the district. I did get regularly to Bursa, to the industrial zone immediately to the east of Istanbul, to Canakkale, where every year there was a remembrance of the 1915 campaign there by the British, Australians, and New Zealanders. But in our view, it was important also to make sure that some of the lesser provinces got some love from the consulate's front office now and then. I think there is value in showing the flag in that way. As I say, I hope that that's something that can continue.

We had very active commercial promotions going on in our Foreign Commercial Office there, and I was pleased to offer up the amazing consul general's residence whenever I could for receptions for U.S. companies or to bring together Turkish business people to meet with visiting U.S. trade delegations, whether sector-specific, state trade delegations,

and so on. More generally I said to the team at the consulate general that (the) residence wasn't mine; it's the American people's and is there for representational purposes. So I encouraged people to hold functions there whenever they could and always enjoyed welcoming people in, particularly if the weather was nice for people to be outdoors.

Anyone who's visited that residence knows what an incredible location it is, up on a bluff overlooking the Bosporus on the European side above a village called Arnavutkoy. It's between what until recently were the two bridges across the Bosporus. More recently a third one opened right at the mouth of the Black Sea. But it's an amazing sweeping view over toward the Asian side and I would wake up every morning and remind myself how lucky I was to have the opportunity for three years to be in that position. We had many, many memorable events there. Every year we would host the American Women's Club in the fall and yearly events for the American Business Council.

One that I particularly remember was on June 26, 2015 to be precise. The reason that that date stands out in my head is that it was the day that the *Obergefell vs. Hodges* decision was handed down by the Supreme Court. That was the decision by virtue of which same-sex marriage became legal across the United States. The reason that was significant is that that very day the Boston Gay Men's Chorus was due to arrive in Istanbul. There's a story I'll tell about that visit in just a moment, but on a personal note it also happened to be the six-month anniversary of my own marriage to my Turkish same-sex partner in California. So it was kind of a trifecta to have the Boston Gay Men's Chorus arrive for a reception at my place that had already been planned on the day that that momentous decision was handed down in Washington. So you can imagine what a joyous celebration we had there. And I should note—

Q: How was this received in Turkish society?

HUNTER: Well, that will be a segue into the story that I had to tell about the Boston Gay Men's Chorus. Turkey as a whole is a fairly conservative country, especially when you get outside the major cities. There is no recognition for same-sex marriage; no kind of civil union for same-sex partners. By the same token, same-sex relationships have been around since time immemorial and certainly during the Ottoman period that had been a feature of life. Interestingly the Ottoman Empire decriminalized homosexual acts in the nineteenth century, long before any Western country did. So there was an interesting tension that existed between that liberal outlook that the Ottoman Empire had had and the underlying conservatism of the society.

Q: As I recall, there was a kerfuffle with the movie Lawrence of Arabia. It had a section showing Lawrence had been sexually abused and the Turks took great exception to this.

HUNTER: Umm… (Laughter.)

Q: Do you recall that, or—?

HUNTER: I don't, I'm afraid. If you're talking about the Peter O'Toole film, that would have been produced a few years before my time, but I don't doubt your recollection.

Q: No, I was just wondering if there was any residue or—

HUNTER: No, that was never anything that was brought up specifically with me. Long before my arrival, a tradition of Gay Pride parades in Istanbul had begun back in the 1990s. My first summer there, my first June in country in 2014, my then-partner, now spouse, attended but just watched. We didn't march or try to draw attention to ourselves. That next year, 2015, we did intend to march. The parade was due to happen a few days after the Boston Gay Men's Chorus's arrival.

Now the story concerning them. In Istanbul when I arrived there was construction going on for a commercial and residential complex in a very prominent location, perhaps a mile or a little bit more from the consulate general, called the Zorlu Center. Included in that complex was a state-of-the-art performing arts center. The Zorlu Center was completed and opened to the public in late 2014 and started booking different acts. I remember going to see Take Six there, a great African-American gospel vocal group. There were Broadway shows that were staged in Zorlu Center. And at one point or another the booking agents at Zorlu had a partnership with—I'm not going to be able to remember the name now—a New York booking agency that handled Broadway shows and so on. They put on their schedule a performance for the Boston Gay Men's Chorus in June 2015 during Pride Month.

At some stage it came to the attention of the Zorlu family that this group was an ensemble of homosexual men who embraced their identity. I don't know the details of conversations there may have been within the family or with officials in Ankara, but in any event the decision was made that the Boston Gay Men's Chorus could not perform at the Zorlu Center. This was after contracts had been signed. The chorus was informed of that well in advance of the planned trip. But the Zorlus, to their credit, decided to uphold the contract by saying that they would pay for the travel expenses and all the production expenses provided that the chorus could find another venue at which to hold their performance. So that became their challenge, to figure out where they could perform.

The LGBT student group at Bogazici University, the pre-eminent Turkish university, decided to approach the university's leadership to propose that Bogazici be the venue for the concert. The rector agreed that that would be an appropriate thing to do. She came under enormous pressure from the government in Ankara not to take that step. She didn't share explicitly what threats were communicated, but in any event she stood her ground and the concert went forward a day or two after the group arrived and had the reception at my place.

It was a terrific event even though there had been threats from various rightwing groups that there might be problems at the concert venue. There was a lot of security laid on. The university was very careful about screening attendees, so there was a full house for this outdoor concert and it went off without a hitch. The chorus called me up on stage to sing

their last number with them. As I think I've mentioned earlier, I've had a chance to be involved in music in most of my postings, and Istanbul was not an exception. That's another story, but it was a wonderful conclusion to what had been a really fraught few weeks leading up to the chorus's trip to Turkey.

They hoped that they were going to cap off that tour by marching in the Pride parade, but things didn't quite work out that way. The concert was on a Saturday. So the next day, Sunday, was to be the Pride parade. We had no indication that there was going to be any issue. As I mentioned, it had been going on without interruption and without incident since the 1990s, but as my partner and I were in the car on the way toward the kickoff point in Taksim Square—the parade always went down İstiklal Avenue from Taksim down to the Tunel area in Beyoglu—my partner began seeing things on social media saying that people weren't being allowed to gather; that there were police and riot troops there with in full gear; that what the Turks call *tomas,* these large tank-like water cannons were being massed in Taksim. So we were concerned that something was up. We kept on driving and I heard from a couple of the American staff from the consulate who had planned to march with us that the *tomas* were launching into operation and using these water cannons to disperse people from Taksim; that there was tear gas and people were being driven down the side streets away from Taksim.

Nonetheless, we were able to arrive to Taksim and to walk to what was to have been the point where the parade kicked off. At that point the square had been cleared. The riot police were still there in several lines and my bodyguards, who were Turkish police, talked their way into having me and my partner get between two lines of these riot police where we waited. There were already a few members of the European parliament who had also been there intending to march with a couple of leaders of LGBT nongovernmental organizations. So they were also standing there, both waiting to see what would happen and starting to make phone calls to see if there was some way to salvage the parade. After a time I was joined by my British counterpart and I joined in the phoning. I reached out to the deputy governor who handled security affairs, and pointed out that there had never been any incident in prior parades, that people were gathering peaceably to advocate for human rights and their identity as a community, and that if there were to be any trouble it would be by others outside that community who were coming to stir up trouble.

We waited and waited—I don't know whose communication with whom had this effect—but after a time the second line of riot police on Istiklal that were in front of us stepped aside and we were able to start walking. There were still a few brave souls on the periphery of Taksim hoping that there would be a parade after all. And when we began walking, they followed us and others began to rejoin, those who hadn't been driven completely out of the area. So we walked. At about the midpoint of Istiklal is a French lycée, and at that point we were joined by the French and Dutch consuls general who walked the rest of the way with us. Ultimately we were able to complete the full route of the parade. I went with my consulate colleagues.

I should say that throughout this time I was keeping in touch with our DCM in Ankara to make sure he was apprised of the situation and to avoid any surprises. I was not told to leave the scene and I was grateful that they had confidence that we'd reach the right judgment on our own if things looked like they were headed in the wrong direction. Fortunately they didn't, at least at that point. Once the parade concluded, those who made it down to the Tunel area gathered at various watering holes, danced in the streets. So my team and I had a bite to eat and I treated them to a round of drinks to celebrate. But just after I left, the police swept in and again cleared the area. So it was a disappointing finish to what we'd managed to salvage of the Pride parade day.

The Boston Gay Men's Chorus I think wisely decided to remain in their hotels and not try to force the issue, so they unfortunately did not have the pleasure of being among the people celebrating there. But all the same they did have a very memorable time.

Q: What was the threat? Turkey had had parades before; there's no pressure on the gay community from what I gathered you were saying, so what was the problem?

HUNTER: I wish I had an answer for you. During this time, Erdogan, who by that time had been elected president—he was no longer prime minister—had been increasingly successful in consolidating his power and seemed to be bent on turning the country in a more conservative direction than people had initially thought he was inclined to do. The early years of the AKP featured a lot of talk about democracy and openness, providing opportunities to segments of the population that had felt marginalized when under the rule of more Western-focus elites for some decades. That leveling of the playing field made sense from the standpoint of Western values; however, at a certain moment it became apparent that Erdogan's hope was not to have a completely level playing field but to tip things in the opposite direction. He made reference, for example, for wanting to raise a pious generation. So the concern was that the real intent, implicit if not actually stated, was to have a religiously conservative group dominate the country to the disadvantage of people who embraced a more liberal and Western concept of personal and individual rights.

So what happened was very much in keeping with that intent. Whether there was one single thing that triggered the decision to prevent the parade from going forward, or whether it was simply the continuation of this gradual trend toward a more conservative public morality, that also included things like raising taxes on alcohol and cigarettes, banning advertising for alcohol, which had a ripple effect that included prohibiting Efes Beer and other alcohol companies from sponsoring concerts as they had typically done.

So there was a gradually rising tide of this stricter public morality that also encompassed the quest for equality for LGBT citizens. And since 2015, there has not been another parade down Istiklal during Pride Month. In 2016 we salvaged things a little by having a boat or a couple of boats parade, so to speak, in the Bosporus with rainbow-colored balloons and so on. Not quite the same, but better than nothing. But since then, there's not been anything, unfortunately, and no indication of when that may return. A lot of the then-leaders of NGOs working for LGBT rights have gotten discouraged and moved on

to other things. I think there are a number of people who are wanting to step up and continue the fight, but it's not an encouraging environment in which to operate right now.

That was a long parenthesis about things we were able to do, including using the consul general's residence. One other thing that I should note is that we also were able to preserve a couple of the landmarks of the U.S. diplomatic presence in Istanbul. I don't take credit for either of these things, but they are worth noting. One of my predecessor's final duties—it was wonderful that as he came full circle in his career he was able to do this—was to sign a twenty-year loan agreement between the U.S. government and the Rahmi M. Koc Museum, which was focused on transportation, to loan to the Koc Museum *Hiawatha*, the motor launch, a boat that the consulate had had since the 1930s.

Rahmi Koc, who turned ninety in October of this year, tells the story of when he was a young man and attended what was then Robert College, which still exists today but at that time was on the campus of Bogazici University. When he attended Robert College he said he would sometimes look out at the Bosporus and see *Hiawatha* moving through the water. He so admired its grace that he wanted to have her one day and was able to realize that dream in his 80s through this loan agreement under which Rahmi's shipyard, in Tuzla, gave *Hiawatha* a stem-to-stern refurbishing and continued to make *Hiawatha* available to the consulate for use by Mission Turkey personnel for pleasure outings on every other weekend between May and September. Generations of people who were assigned to Istanbul and to Ankara remember going out on *Hiawatha* and it's wonderful that that can continue. The restoration was completed during my time there, so Rahmi and I jointly reinaugurated her, as it were, and *Hiawatha* continues to grace the Bosporus. That's one landmark that was preserved.

The other was the old U.S. consulate general. The consulate had relocated to another neighborhood, Istinye, in the early 2000s, but for decades prior to that time, the consulate had been in a beautiful building in the heart of Istanbul, in Beyoglu, called Palazzo Corpi. Palazzo Corpi continues to be U.S. government property, but it has been leased to Soho House and was completely restored and is now a hotel and club that is a jewel in that part of town. Obviously in the Covid era it's probably not getting very much use, but the restoration revealed details of the building that over the years had been covered up in the process of turning that late nineteenth-/early twentieth-century building into a U.S. government facility with dropped ceilings and white-painted walls and so on. Now some of the architectural details of that beautiful building are again available for people to enjoy. So having those two things happen during my three years were sources of a great pleasure for me; to see these bits of these history of the relationship preserved for the future.

Q: Are any of the original walls that made Constantinople such a bastion of power even before the Turks, are any of the walls still extant?

HUNTER: Oh yes, miles of them, in fact. Going back to what I said about using the consul general's residence for representational events, the very first one I hosted after my arrival was one I held for the American Friends of Turkey to honor a man named John

Freely, who taught for years first at Robert College and then at Bogazici [University] but also made a very distinguished contribution to the preservation of information about old Istanbul in the form of guidebooks that he wrote. He walked all around the old city walls and produced a number of guidebooks that are classics and still in use. He unfortunately passed away a few years ago, but was a real symbol of U.S.-Turkish friendship. Anyone interested in getting to Istanbul and going to see the monuments of Ottoman and Byzantine and even earlier history need to consult the works of John Freely.

Q: Thank you.

HUNTER: There's probably a good deal more I could say about Istanbul, but we're already at the one-hour point, so I'll wrap up the rest of my career rapidly so that three sessions will be enough.

Q: Okay. Take your time. I'm in no hurry.

HUNTER: There's actually not a lot to talk about following the conclusion of my tour in Istanbul, which ended up being my final overseas posting. I had hoped to come back to the United States to replace Randy Berry as the special envoy for the human rights of LGBT persons, a position created while John Kerry was secretary of state. Randy came to visit Istanbul while I was consul general there, which led to a conversation about whether his job might be available for me to move into. It appeared it would be at the time. Although initially that seemed to be on track and the bureau that it was affiliated with, Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, was supportive of my replacing Randy, the department's leadership asked Randy, who is now our ambassador in Nepal, to stay on until at least the start of the next administration.

So his position was not vacant for me to move into in the summer of 2016, which created a problem for me. I didn't have an assignment when I left Istanbul, and came back to Washington, technically assigned to the bureau of European Affairs, but without a slot to move into. The director general had me serve on a senior performance pay board, which filled a few months. I deferred my home leave, and then I hoped that, once the election was over, the transition might create some opportunities for me in Washington. We know how the transition went in 2016-17, which was unlike ones that people were accustomed to in the past, and those opportunities didn't arise. I was not alone in finding myself stymied in trying to line up a position.

A few months later, when Secretary Tillerson became focused on a backlog of FOIA (Freedom of Information Act) cases and launched what came to be known as the "FOIA surge" to try to clear them out, European Affairs asked me to be the bureau coordinator for their piece of that effort, which I did for a period of some months with a team of volunteers. I then was—

Q: Excuse me, but what were your issues that you were dealing with?

HUNTER: Well, the fundamental issue was that the State Department really wasn't meeting its obligation under the terms of the Freedom of Information Act to deal with requests in a timely manner. Under FOIA, a requester is supposed to get at least a preliminary response from the Department within thirty days, if memory serves. When the FOIA surge was launched in 2017, there were cases that had been waiting for years with no action. On one hand I can't really fault Secretary Tillerson for wanting the Department to do what the law required it to do. On the other hand, I think that making that such a focus at a time when there were clearly some other issues that needed to be dealt with, not least of all the morale issues that had arisen from a rather opaque plan to make sweeping changes in the Department, that having a FOIA surge going on then as a flagship initiative was arguably not the best use of resources, at least for actively serving Foreign Service officers.

There are a lot of re-employed annuitants who'd been enlisted in that effort, and that I think is appropriate, but to require a lot of people who are still actively serving as FSOs to take part in it was something that a lot of people had trouble with. Now it's unavoidable where research needs to be done in posts overseas for FSOs and local staff to have to participate in that, because a FOIA request often can involve searching cables and other records at posts overseas. But at least on the Washington end of things, I think it was unnecessarily disruptive to the department to have this FOIA surge take place. Nonetheless, my duty was to look at the cases that fell under the purview of European Affairs and try to have those dealt with as quickly as possible. We did make a lot of headway. I don't know what the exact figures are right now but that backlog has been whittled down substantially. I think department-wide over 90 percent of the cases that were awaiting action back in 2017 have now been resolved and they're handling newer ones more effectively.

So that was a brief chapter of my career that was then followed by about 14 months at the Board of Examiners of the Foreign Service. I arrived at a bit of an odd time. Normally new assessors come in late summer so that they can take part in assessor training just after Labor Day, but I moved over in April 2018 and spent my first months working on testing materials, new hypothetical questions, and so on, and learning to do suitability reviews for candidates in their last stage of consideration before they went on the registers, the waiting lists.

I was ultimately then trained as an assessor and got to do that for six-seven months until June 2019. I was lucky enough to be part of a group of assessors that went to Chicago when we re-established that as an offsite testing center. In years prior, the Foreign Service officer oral exam had been offered in a number of cities around the country. In fact when I first took the orals back in 1983, it was in Chicago—immediately after my college graduation. But in more recent times, the offsites were held only in San Francisco. So people's only options were the West Coast or coming to Washington for the oral assessment. The leadership in Human Resources decided to see if there'd be value in having the offsite take place again in Chicago, so we had a successful couple of weeks of testing there in May 2019. Going forward I don't know what they're going to

decide, whether to have Chicago or other cities offer the orals again. It's highly likely that Covid may change how those exams are given in the first place!

So it was my hope, both during the time that I was doing the FOIA surge and while I was an assessor with the Board of Examiners, that I might line up an overseas posting to get back abroad, which for a lot of Foreign Service officers is really where the fun is. I was not successful in doing that. I was shortlisted for a number of DCM jobs and other positions, but not chosen.

I then moved to the office of the special presidential envoy for hostage affairs (SPEHA). When I got there in June 2019, the special envoy was Robert (C.) O'Brien, who is now in his waning days as national security advisor to President Trump. Robert moved to the White House in September 2019, but for my first three and a half months he was our envoy, although not present fulltime in Washington. He had an arrangement, as a special government employee, that allowed him to continue his law practice in Los Angeles while working half time as the special envoy. To his credit, he was an extremely active and engaged envoy. [He] did a lot of traveling internationally to consult with governments that either had citizens wrongfully detained or held hostage abroad, or who were partners with us in trying to get Americans and others freed.

After Robert's departure there was a time where his deputy, Hugh Dugan, was the acting special presidential envoy. Then in March 2020 Roger (D.) Carstens became the new envoy and I worked with him from March until August 2020. He too has been a first-class envoy. I have the greatest respect for both him and Robert and the efforts they put into the very difficult task of trying to recover Americans wrongfully detained and held hostage overseas. I had the opportunity during my first couple of months with the SPEHA office to work on the case of an individual who was taken into custody in Syria. Because of my background, I had certain insights on how things worked that were helpful to both the U.S. government team that was working on the case and the family of the individual, who happily was released during the summer of 2019 and returned to the United States. We've kept in touch.

We were not as successful, unfortunately, on some of the other cases in Syria, the best known of which, of course, is Austin Tice, who has now been missing for over eight years. It's not for lack of trying by this administration, and Roger Carstens, as is now publicly known, was able to go to Damascus this summer to meet with a Syrian official and reiterate the request that President Trump had made in a letter to Bashar al-Assad back in March that Austin and other wrongful detainees be released. That hasn't happened yet.

We still have people there and in a number of places around the world, [including] in Iran, Venezuela, Saudi Arabia, and elsewhere, that mean that the SPEHA team continues to have a difficult task in front of it. They work in close partnership with the National Security Council and a hostage response group that was established there under Presidential Decision Directive 30 in 2015 and with the interagency hostage recovery fusion cell that's based at the FBI. All of the members of those groups are working hard

to try to reunite Americans with their families, with some successes. There have been Americans recovered from Iran, Afghanistan, and elsewhere.

Q: It's been written in granite that we will not pay a ransom for people, but how do we deal with—I mean, what tools do we have?

HUNTER: It is correct that U.S. policy is not to pay ransom to hostage takers or other malign actors. We have diplomatic pressure that can be applied in a variety of ways, including economic sanctions. Just a few days ago, an announcement was made of two individuals in Iran being sanctioned in connection with the disappearance of Robert Levinson there in 2007, unfortunately the longest-lasting case of an American taken by another regime. We have more traditional diplomatic channels of face-to-face discussions and negotiations. There have been cases where U.S. citizens have been rescued from hostage takers through military action. We have a number of instances of third-party countries working on our behalf to enable the release of American citizens, an example being the Swiss in Iran, our protecting power there. And more recently the Omanis were instrumental in helping make possible an exchange by which the Omanis sent back to Yemen a number of Houthis who had been in the sultanate, [and] two American citizens and the remains of a third were sent to Oman and on to the United States. So there are a variety of tools at the government's disposal, but ultimately, with the exception obviously of military action, a release of an American citizen requires willingness on the part of another government or a group that may not be easy to obtain.

Many of these cases unfortunately drag on for years. It's heartbreaking to know not only what these individuals must be going through in the prisons or other locations in which they're held abroad, or even if they happen to be on house arrest or under an exit ban, that enables them to live outside prison but not travel to see their loved ones elsewhere. That suffering is bad enough, but even worse, or at least as bad, is the suffering of their loved ones here in the United States and other places, and it's our obligation to them that helps motivate the work of SPEHA and the other parts of what we refer in shorthand as the "hostage enterprise." A number of those family members, and I would point especially to Diane Foley, the mother of James Foley, a journalist who was killed in Syria by ISIS, has channeled the grief that she felt at that loss into creating a foundation, the Foley Foundation, that works to support the families of others who have been taken hostage or wrongfully detained. SPEHA partners with the Foley Foundation, Hostage USA, and others, to do its best to support the families of those on whose behalf they are working.

So just to wrap things up, it was from the SPEHA office that I wound up retiring. Although I wasn't ultimately successful in the hope of getting back overseas, it was an honor to be able to spend my final year and a bit more serving my fellow Americans in the noble work of trying to recover hostages and wrongful detainees. I feel proud and happy that we were able to get back the people who returned to the United States during that time, and I will always have good and supportive wishes for the people who continue that work. Unfortunately, there are—

Q: I was wondering whether there are other countries, like the Brits, Canadians, or the Germans, who have hostages taken or are we a particularly ripe target?

HUNTER: The United States is a tempting target simply because of who we are and what we represent around the world, but plenty of other countries have had their nationals taken hostage, or in some cases wrongfully detained. There's a lot of legalese we could get into as to what the distinctions are between those categories and whether kidnaping for ransom is the same as hostage taking and so on. There's plenty of criminal activity that gangs in Mexico and elsewhere engage in that's beyond the purview of the SPEHA office, but to answer your question briefly, yes, there certainly are countries other than the United States whose citizens fall victim to hostage taking and wrongful detention.

Q: What are you doing now?

HUNTER: I'm not moving immediately into paid work. I've put my name on the register for re-employed annuitants at the department and may wind up doing some work through that. I've applied for a job overseas that a couple of colleagues were kind enough to draw my attention to. That wouldn't begin until about a year from now, so between now and then I'm open to possibilities as they might come along. My partner and I are talking about possibly relocating from Washington and looking at possibilities for that, but we don't have a specific and unalterable plan in front of us.

I'm at a moment right now of focusing mainly on the feelings of gratitude that I have for having had the opportunity for almost thirty-one years to serve my country as a Foreign Service officer. Gratitude to the two teachers at Monta Vista High School in Cupertino, California, who suggested the Foreign Service to me over forty years ago. Gratitude to all of the people I encountered throughout my career who helped and encouraged and shaped me. And of course to the parents who raised me with strong values of tolerance and open-mindedness and curiosity about the rest of the world, and who encouraged me to follow the dream that was first planted back in my teenage years to become a diplomat and explore the world. I got to do that in ways I never would have imagined when I was a teenager, and there's still a lot of world to explore, so I'm hoping for years of good health in which to do that.

Q: I really appreciate your contributing here, and I'm sure your examples and all will be of use to recruiting in future.

HUNTER: Well, thank you, Stu. I do talk up the Foreign Service whenever I have the opportunity. For all the travails of recent years and for whatever doubts other nations may have about the role of the United States and its willingness to be a force for good around the world, I'm still convinced that that's what we can and should be. The values that are at the core of the United States, though they're aspirational, and ones we've often fallen short of, are what we and others around the world should be striving for, and we diplomats have an opportunity to both represent those values and encourage others to embrace them, and that's a real privilege that I do intend to encourage others to pursue.

Q: If you run across anybody who you think might be interesting, a retiree, point them towards us for doing oral histories.

HUNTER: Will do. I'm sure you're aware of this already, that the Job Search Program that Foreign and Civil Service employees of the department can choose to avail themselves of as they retire, does an excellent job of steering people, or at least letting them know of ADST and its oral history project. I hope that more in the class that I just completed will come your way. By all means, I will keep that in mind as I'm in touch with already retired or soon-to-retire Foreign Service colleagues so that more of their experiences and anecdotes can be captured in our oral histories.

Q: When you get your transcript and edit it, remember it's not the be-all and end-all. You can add onto it; you know, embellish—

HUNTER: (Laughter.)

Q: —stories you want to tell, because more is better than less in an oral history.

HUNTER: All right. I will say again, as I think I did before the first, or maybe after the first session, that I pity the person who's doing the transcript of this because the statistic we got was that typically the conversation will be between an hour and ninety minutes and we've covered in excess of four hours, I think! So I apologize for the volume but I hope there'll be some value in it for subsequent readers.

Q: We've been doing this for some time and it's been working.

HUNTER: Well, good.

Q: Take care and thank you again.

HUNTER: And thank you very much for the opportunity, and happy holidays.

INTERN: Take care.

HUNTER: Thanks, Derek! Bye bye.

End of interview.