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

KEITH P. MCCORMICK

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INTERVIEW

Q: Do you go by Keith?

MCCORMICK: I do.

Q: Keith, let's start at the beginning. When and where were you born, and tell me a little bit about your parents.

MCCORMICK: I was born in California, in Los Angeles, in late 1944. My parents had moved there in the '20s. My mother's family was from Montana. Both families were English and Scottish. Over the generations they had moved across the country from Massachusetts and Virginia, eventually winding up in California.

Q: Were they basically a farm family?

MCCORMICK: No, they had always been city people. Teachers, preachers, clerics.

Q: Tell me a little bit about your father. What type of work was he in, and where was he coming from?

MCCORMICK: My father was an engineer, attended Berkeley, and went into the space program. He spent most of his career in the space program and was a great believer in it. He came eventually to the Jet Propulsion Laboratory at Caltech in Pasadena. That's where we lived, where I spent most of my early life, in the Pasadena area.

Q: He went to the University of California in Berkeley. What about your mother?

MCCORMICK: My mother came from Montana. Her family had been reasonably wealthy in a small town but lost everything in the '20s and, like a lot of other people, migrated to California.

Q: My family went from Winnetka to South Pasadena, too.

MCCORMICK: Really? You know exactly what I'm talking about.

Q: The Depression got some people moving around.

MCCORMICK: I later had a very generous grant from the Cox Foundation to go to Montana. Their purpose was to send me to talk to people who knew nothing about the Foreign Service and never saw anyone from the State Department in Montana. In the process, I talked to enough people to learn a great deal more about my mother's background and the story of her family.

Q: Did your mother go to college?

MCCORMICK: She only went a year or two at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles.

Q: How large was your family?

MCCORMICK: I had two brothers. I was the oldest and my family was always interested in traveling; much more internationally conscious than average. I also had a great interest in the space program and science, although I didn't inherit any great scientific bent.

Q: Did you go to school in Pasadena?

MCCORMICK: I went to the Pasadena public schools, which in those days were excellent.

Q. Oh, yes, I went to South Pass Junior High and Henry Huntington School.

MCCORMICK: I know exactly where those are.

Q: In grammar school, you say you weren't interested in math; did you feel you should be?

MCCORMICK: No, I found it intellectually interesting but I never really had any great interest in it. I grew up in a child's imaginary world full of books, very literary, read everything.

Q: Can you think of any authors that particularly grabbed you - that were fun to read?

MCCORMICK: C. S. Lewis - his children's books; the theology came later. C. S. Forester - every one of the Hornblower books. Forester shaped my view of what it would be like to serve in a large organization like the Royal Navy or the State Department. What sorts of moral convictions; what sorts of ethical questions; what sorts of personal goals you might want to set for yourself if you were going to try a career in something like the navy or the Foreign Service.

Q: How about at home - were foreign affairs a matter of discussion? By the time you were ten or twelve the Cold War and the space race were on.

MCCORMICK: I was very conscious of all that, probably more so than most children my age. When I was twelve, I went to spend a summer in Mexico with a family there who had a son my age who later came up and lived with us. That experience added to my interest in foreign places. And yes, the general atmosphere at home was one of curiosity about international events, great interest in them. I remember growing up thinking of myself as living in a far away corner of the world - not in the center, not in London or Paris or New York, but off in California, which is a very strange place, not the middle of the world but off on one side. As a child, I had a vision of the world that was centered on Western Europe somewhere, not where I happened to live.

Q: Were movies or television part of your life?

MCCORMICK: Yes, although I probably wouldn't be able to come up with as many memories of them as I would about books. My family read a lot.

Q: In those days, Pasadena was considered a very serious place.

MCCORMICK: Yes, it was a very cultured, educated city. A Victorian city. It was founded by Midwestern immigrants with high Victorian ideals, who immediately set up a civic infrastructure of symphonies and libraries and so forth.

Q: Which high school did you attend?

MCCORMICK: I went to John Muir High School.

Q: Did you have any particular major interests there?

MCCORMICK: My interests at that time were the student newspaper, which was quite important to me; I debated on the debate team; played at individual sports but was never very serious about any team sports; my interest was much more in the area of student government.

Q: Was Pasadena a diverse community at that time?

MCCORMICK: Yes, it was. At the time I was going to high school, there were major battles about court-ordered de-segregation in the Pasadena school system, which was quite traumatic for the city and the schools. Of course, I would never have thought in terms of diversity per se. I had friends from various ethnic groups and it was not a particularly strained situation from my point of view as a white middle class person. Diversity as a goal would never have occurred to me.

Q: Were you picking up any of the dynamics of the Jet Propulsion Laboratory? This was during the '50s and early '60s when there was a lot of pressure on the space program.

MCCORMICK: Several things stand out to me. My father was transferred from Pasadena to the Strategic Air Command Headquarters at Offutt Air Force Base in Nebraska for two years while I was in junior high school. This was just after Sputnik in '56, and the great push by the U.S. government to have a space program, and to improve the science and math in our schools. In 1957, I recall the failure of Vanguard, one of the first American attempts.

Q: Well, there was a whole series of rockets that kept exploding at one point.

MCCORMICK: Exactly. That was well known to me and a lot of the kids I knew. Later, I probably had a bit more awareness than the average person of the entire program down through Apollo, certainly, and Voyager. Voyager really captured my imagination.
Q: Voyager being?

MCCORMICK: Voyager being the attempt to send a ship outside the entire planetary system after a close pass over Jupiter. That was really cosmic exploration.

Q: Was your father part of the "priesthood," people who thought and did?

MCCORMICK: Very much so. For him the space program was not a job but a grand, heroic drama. It would never have occurred to him to doubt that it was the central vehicle for carrying on the human history of discovery and exploration. Of course we would go to the moon, of course we would go to Mars, the only question was when.

Q: There was a tremendous push in the beginning and then it died down after the moon.

MCCORMICK: Very much. My memory would be something like ‘71 or ‘72, there was quite a lull.

Q: While you were in high school and thinking about the space program, were you getting much about the Cold War, which was certainly in full swing? Were you looking at events in Europe and the Far East?

MCCORMICK: Very much. I remember being highly conscious in high school of the war in Algeria. I had a French friend who wrote about it in the student newspaper. I was intensely interested in it, though my friends weren’t.

Q: You graduated from high school when?

MCCORMICK: I graduated in ‘62, and I remember another interesting thing about my perceptions of the world at that time. To me, places like Cape Town or Sydney or Honolulu seemed quite close, whereas St. Louis, Chicago, or Cleveland always seemed a long way away. It may have been because of the desert surrounding California, which made it so hard to travel overland. So I grew up feeling that in a way some places like Australia or South Africa, places with ports of trade, were not as far away or exotic as places on our own east coast.

Q: What about math and geography? For a lot of Americans, geography is just a course.

MCCORMICK: For me it was a first love. To this day I will pick up maps and read through them as one would read a book. I love that sort of thing.

Q: The National Geographic has certainly been a major influence for a lot of people.

MCCORMICK: I would say my mental world, when growing up, was very much maps, history, fiction, literature, travel, and a very healthy dose of adventure.

Q: As a kid, did you go out to the desert camping or whatever?

MCCORMICK: Yes, we tended to go to Montana or Canada for summer vacations to camp. Went to Yosemite a lot. Went to the Sierras. Not so much to the desert. We took several family trips to Mexico and saw quite a bit of Mexico and, as I mentioned, I lived there for a short time.

Q: In ‘62 you graduated from high school. Whither?

MCCORMICK: I went to Principia College in Illinois. I loved the place, but at the time I was consumed with an ambition to go to a great university. I was going to go to the Sorbonne or Berkeley.

Q: Well, Principia was religious.

MCCORMICK: It's a Christian Science school.

Q: It was Christian Science - is your family Christian Scientist?

MCCORMICK: Yes.

Q: Going back a bit, did being Christian Science set you aside a bit as a kid?

MCCORMICK: No, I wouldn't say that. However, its basic philosophical premises did influence me in choosing a career in diplomacy. It teaches that there are no insoluble problems; that you can look at what appears to be an irreconcilable conflict and can see the potential healing of it; that misunderstanding is at the root of so many conflicts and so much evil. These are exactly the kind of philosophical precepts that would lead someone into negotiating.

Q: Absolutely. How did you find going to a religious school set in the middle of the country. It doesn't sound like a place that would have much to do with maps or the world.

MCCORMICK: Interestingly enough, it didn't bother me at all. The campus was designed by Bernard Maybeck to resemble an English village, and I thought it was a wonderful physical atmosphere, a place where you had time for walks and thoughts and friendships and reflections. I had no sense at all of being confined and I loved being able to live without cars. What I did feel was, "You can't have this, as nice as it is, and also have the excitement of going to a great university." I had a very romantic picture of going to the Sorbonne, or Berkeley, with their great libraries and their great researchers and people sitting around in cafes.

Q: By the time you were a freshman in college, had the two words "foreign" and "service" come across your radar at all?

MCCORMICK: Yes, but I would not have called it the "Foreign Service." I'm not even sure I knew the term. I would have talked about the diplomatic service.

Q: "Foreign Service" is something we come across later on because it is sort of a professional term, as when we think of diplomats.

MCCORMICK: I think as a freshman in college I was only partially aware of the combining of the diplomatic service and the consular service. I had no interest in consular work; I had an interest in what I conceived to be diplomacy proper. One learned that the way you do that is to join the Foreign Service.

Q: Where did you go after your freshman year at Principia?

MCCORMICK: To Berkeley. The romance of a great university.

Q: So you would have been there from ‘63 to when?

MCCORMICK: I graduated from there in ‘66. Of course, that put me there during the “free speech” movement.

Q: I was going to say, Mario Savio and all that?

MCCORMICK: Mario Savio.

Q: For a boy coming from a Christian Science hamlet in the middle of Illinois, all of a sudden ending up on the Berkeley campus in the middle of the free speech movement, how did this go down?

MCCORMICK: That’s probably not quite the right image. Pasadena at that time, and my family’s background and interests, would have been fairly sophisticated, even worldly in some ways. So I never had any sense at Berkeley that, gosh, I was coming from such an innocent perspective. No, if anything, it would be the other way around. I was very involved in all those movements, but from the very beginning I would have been the type who insisted on formulating complex philosophical justifications for what we were doing. I was most interested in that. You asked about writers, “Who influenced you?” Well, from university age that is easy to answer. Of course the question just starts a huge flood of writers. It was highly canonical, literature as philosophical assertion. Everyone read the Russian masters and the Magic Mountain and the gritty Americans like Dos Passos. One writer who held such sway over us at that time was Hermann Hesse. Magister Ludi was essential training for life in Washington.

Q: Looking back on the free speech movement, it is almost like a precursor to the protests against Vietnam. What was the free speech movement about?

MCCORMICK: Initially, it was a very narrow point. It was during the presidential election of 1964 and the issue was whether the university could be used for various political activities - posters, meetings, or whatever -- or whether those should not be allowed because you shouldn’t bring politics into a university. However, the administration didn’t handle it very well. Instead of trying to defuse the issue or show flexibility, they took the kind of hard line which is guaranteed to make adolescent students rebel. So the initial demands, which were quite narrow, quickly escalated. Of course, that was just what some people wanted. Most of us were protesting because we had a specific goal, and if that goal was achieved, you stopped. However, some didn’t really want to gain that goal at all because they wanted to spark a broader revolution. They were actually afraid that there would be a compromise because if there was, they would have to keep thinking up new demands that couldn’t be met in order to keep the protests going.

Q: For someone my age, I was born in 1928, it seemed like a lot of kids were having a lot of fun. Being able to shout at older people.

MCCORMICK: Probably. But if you saw the student movement at that time – not later but in ‘64 and ‘65 -- I think you would come away thinking it was a bunch of very pretentious, but very serious, intellectuals. A couple of years later there might be a sense that some of this was becoming more fun and it had moved down from a tiny elite of very intellectual students to a bit more of a mass movement, and at that point it became something quite different.

Q: Other than protesting, what were you there for actually? I assume an education was part of the agenda.

MCCORMICK: I was not very interested in credentials. We were looking for something. Looking for God. Trying to find your philosophy. Trying to find your way. We sat around arguing and playing chess and having political arguments into the night and having a wonderful time. It never occurred to me to worry about what degree I would take or what they would call it. I knew I wanted to practice diplomacy. That didn’t match any academic discipline. It was not just political science and government. It was not just economics. It was not just history. It was not literature, but you’ve got to know literature. It was not languages but you must know the languages. What I wanted was a bit of all of these. So I put together courses in all of these disciplines and was fortunate enough that the university finally put a label on it and gave me a political science BA (Bachelor of Arts degree).

Q: Were you taking a particular language?

MCCORMICK: No. I had taken French. My interest in languages at that point was literature. At Berkeley, language departments hedged you into a deep and serious study of one particular language in literature. I wanted broad-brush European literature. I wanted to read all of Russian, Russian 19th century, and almost everything in German - not read it in German but in English.

Q: How did you find the faculty?

MCCORMICK: Outstanding. I remember the tradition of applauding a particularly brilliant lecture. The downside was that a university like that takes no personal interest in you. You are invisible. There is no one who ever looks at you as an individual as they would at some elite New England liberal arts college and says, “I think it would be best for you personally to do this, that, or the other thing.” More like the State Department.

Q: Was there an influential class of graduate assistants? You know, a great man or great woman will get up and make a performance, and then the graduate assistants had...

MCCORMICK: Yes, the graduate assistants do the bulk of the undergraduate teaching in certain areas. My oldest son is now a graduate assistant in physics at Berkeley.

Q: One of the things I’ve noticed, graduate assistants often are far more sophisticated and cynical than at any other time in their lives, and often they impart that.

MCCORMICK: Some of them infused in us undergraduates a very romantic idea of the Russian revolution. Political theory was the heart of the department.

Q: How about Marxism?

MCCORMICK: Marxism was studied more seriously then than it is today. There were many people there who were serious Marxists. I studied Marxism as a very serious intellectual matter. I was never one myself, because you can't be both a Christian Scientist and a dialectical materialist.

Q: Did you find there were efforts to recruit people?

MCCORMICK: No. There was constant argumentation and disputation. I was never aware of any sort of recruiting.

Q: What about Berkeley today being worried about becoming too oriental, too Asian? How about the Asian influence? I'm talking about native Americans who are of Asian ancestry.

MCCORMICK: There was no such concern at the time I went there because it was an overwhelmingly white university. There was no sense of prediction that in the 1990s or 2000 there would be massive Third World immigration into the U.S. Nor were there any disputes over African-American or other minority admissions. There was quite an active concern with discrimination against blacks in particular, and a very clear consensus about it. Everyone thought there should be color-blind application of civil rights for everyone. No one advocated affirmative action or reverse discrimination.

Q: The '63 to '66 period was the height of the civil rights movement, and people who went to school in the eastern establishment, those who were committed were going down south. You don't think of Californians picking up and heading for Alabama.

MCCORMICK: We were very much aware of civil rights but I don't recall any of my friends going to the South. The issue which burst on us was the war. Had it not been for that, I don't know what my last year might-

Q: We are talking about the Vietnam War?

MCCORMICK: Yes, the Vietnam War.

Q: Well, now how was this seen?

MCCORMICK: A gradual realization that the conflict in Vietnam was going to become a full scale war, the U.S. was going to get involved, and we were going to be sent there. That was a very sobering realization, and I remember it coming gradually. At first we thought it wasn't going to happen, then gradually more and more people came to the conclusion that it was. I was very torn about what would be the right thing to do. If there was to be a war, then obviously we ought to go and volunteer and do our part. But it didn't look right, didn't feel right. We didn't want to do that. There was no consensus one way or the other, but a great sense of uncertainty. People were morally very serious about it.

Q: You had mentioned earlier on, in elementary or high school, talking about Algeria. Did Algeria stick in your mind? About the French and Algeria? Was that a role or model of any kind?

MCCORMICK: Yes. There was a sense that what was unfolding in Vietnam was part of a broad, historical, anti-colonial movement. You couldn't stop it. The U.S. would find itself on the wrong side. It would not have a good outcome.

Q: Were the Marxists more dedicated young people who were caught up in the movement? Was there a cadre there?

MCCORMICK: There was a cadre for whom all this was an easy question. They were on the side of the North Vietnamese Communists. They thought Jane Fonda was right. I was not in that group, but I nevertheless started coming down more and more against the war. By my senior year, I was taking part in demonstrations against it. I recall the emotion that drove that. I mentioned earlier that the administration of the campus had not been very flexible in its handling of protests. If you handle conflicts right, you might have a chance to untangle them. My sense, as a senior at university, was that the Secretary of State and the President just weren't listening to our protests about this war. In the back of my mind, I suspect, I wasn't 100% convinced that I was right, but I was certainly convinced that I was not getting any sense that my concerns were being taken seriously. At the time, I blamed Dean Rusk, as much as I admire him in retrospect.

Q: What about Ronald Reagan, was he governor when you were there?

MCCORMICK: Not a presence of which I was aware. Other people have speculated about the growth of the university system, the growth of anomie and malaise, students protesting against a huge university where nobody cared about them. That was not what I was aware of.

Q: Did you belong to a fraternity?

MCCORMICK: No. At that time, serious people didn't belong to fraternities. They were absolutely infra dig (Beneath one's dignity).

Q: Did you sit around and talk late at night about God and...?

MCCORMICK: All the time. It was a great thing, very exciting, as long as you're actually doing some serious study as well.

Q: Did you have any contact with people involved in diplomacy -- professors or people on the campus?

MCCORMICK: I wouldn't have known how to go about it. I was not concerned about the Foreign Service as a career, I was concerned about foreign policy in general. I found plenty of professors who were deep into foreign policy issues, but I don't recall any of them ever telling me at that age what life in the State Department would be like.

Q: What about foreign policy? Were there any other areas - Asian, Middle Eastern, European, or Soviet, or African Studies?

MCCORMICK: Oh, Soviet. There was no debate about it whatsoever. Europe was the center of the world, Berlin was the center of that center, and the U.S.-Soviet relationship was everything. Nobody ever questioned this. I had no special interest in Asia just because I came from California.

Q: What about the Soviet system? Were you getting a favorable or unfavorable light?

MCCORMICK: Unfavorable. No one had anything but contempt for the Soviet Union. It wasn't like the 1930s. I don't recall anybody, short of actual party members, who would make even a half-hearted defense of it. The radicalism of that time had nothing to do with the Soviet Union or the bloc, although it romanticized left-wing governments in the Third World.

Q: Did you ever have the feeling there were other young adults that were trying to manipulate you all and support the Soviet Union?

MCCORMICK: Only once. I remember the sense of betrayal and shock when we learned that one of the protest leaders, Bettina Aptheker, was a member the Communist Party. She and her father were both active members. Her advice had been completely on their behalf, not genuine at all. We were sort of surprised that such things happened in life, but it would have cemented the sense that none of this had anything to do with sympathy for the Soviets or the Communists.

Q: So it wasn't being "one with the down-trodden workers?"

MCCORMICK: Not really. Most of us wanted a general change of society, which was too bourgeois, too materialistic. It was idealistic and naive and rather vague. I had no sympathy at all, for example, for the Vietnamese Communists. The question was simply whether we wanted to get involved in the war, to go over there and shoot and get shot at in this cause.

Q: What about San Francisco and the drop-out culture? Was that going on?

MCCORMICK: No. That was a couple of years later, when the Haight-Ashbury culture revolved around drugs. No one I knew would have looked at drugs with anything but contempt unless you dressed it up as being an intellectual exercise. Now, if you claimed you were doing it so your intellectual faculties could be enhanced, that might be all right. The idea of using drugs for pleasure, to get high, would have been regarded with utter contempt. I never got into that at all.

Q: How about your family? How did your family accept your playing with these ideas?

MCCORMICK: They handled it well, and I now try not to over-react to some of the ideas my sons bring back from university. My father was extraordinarily good about not allowing any differences, certainly not political opinions, to become irreconcilable. He was an extremely reasonable person with the temperament of a judge.

Q: Okay, 1966, whither Keith McCormick?

MCCORMICK: I did not go to graduate school directly. I went to the east coast and spent a year working as a reporter for the Christian Science Monitor. Getting the job was probably helped by my being Christian Scientist, but the newspaper is not religious at all. It is a professional newspaper. What I remember from that period, which was highly relevant to my Foreign Service career, was the drumming in of accuracy. It is a newspaper that regards itself as extremely precise and extremely balanced, accurate, and fair. It looks down on any sort of sensationalism. I worked for Saville Davis, the Washington bureau chief, and I worked for Richard Strout, who also wrote the column TRB in the New Republic. These gentlemen insisted on accuracy.

Q: It has no headlines, it has articles about full-blown stories in each edition. It was influential. Being overseas, we used to get copies. You didn't have to worry about the dates because each issue told enough stories.

MCCORMICK: Exactly, and that became my model for good Foreign Service political reporting. It still is.

Q: Talk a little bit about the business of the culture of the Christian Science Monitor. Is death a difficult thing to deal with as you understand it in Christian Science?

MCCORMICK: I wouldn't say that. Like all religions, it doesn't see this as our only life. It is not terribly different; it would be on the liberal side of the mainstream Protestant spectrum. No primitive notions of heaven and hell.

Q: You were working in Washington?

MCCORMICK: Yes, the old National Press Club building.

Q: Here you are, a young kid just out of college, full of piss and vinegar, ready to go out there and do things. What were you doing for your bosses?

MCCORMICK: I was really a research assistant. I would go up to the Hill and get copies of congressional press releases. I would write the first rough draft of a story that a more senior reporter would finish. I would keep files. I would research background questions. It was an interesting job, though not very glamorous, as I didn't write the finished product. It was good solid training.

Q: This was the beginning of reporting that was working the other way, and that was to start with an opinion and then start bolstering the facts.

MCCORMICK: That was unknown at the Monitor at that time. It would have been regarded with deep suspicion. Now Strout might have done a bit of that. He'd get an idea of investigative reporting and go looking for the trouble. But mostly, there was an atmosphere of extreme precision, accuracy, and a sense of getting beneath the surface to report on major trends. They did not look well on reporting merely isolated events. As you pointed out, it had to be a larger story, a trend. Good stories would point out something that was going on that people were not aware of, which had already led to this, and this, and this, or was likely to lead to these other things. Another model I took with me into reporting for the Foreign Service.

Q: Did you get the feeling you were now in the center of things in Washington?

MCCORMICK: Yes, I had a sense of coming to an exciting center.

Q: What about the Vietnam business at this point? We are now talking about the Johnson Administration, full commitment, real protests. Here you are, and how are you handling all this?

MCCORMICK: With great distress, I must say. I had a difficult year. I had actively been protesting the war as a student. Now I found that everything I learned was complicating my opinions. Nothing seemed as simple as it had in college. I wasn't sure what to do. It was settled for me by the government, which would have drafted me had I not gone into the Air Force Officer Training School in Texas.

Q: What about civil rights? This was still going on. Did you find this was more apparent to you there than in Berkeley?

MCCORMICK: It was more apparent, but I can't say I was much a part of it. My mind was focused on foreign policy.

Q: As foreign policy, what were you looking at in particular?

MCCORMICK: Three different levels: the global struggle, arms control, and Vietnam.

Q: Did you find that you were in sync with the Christian Science Monitor?

MCCORMICK: The Monitor prides itself on the ability to separate personal opinion from the objectivity of what you write. These were the watchwords. I drank very deeply of that. I held strong opinions, but I recall a growing frustration with the shallowness of the general debate about the war. I wanted opinions based on serious knowledge of Vietnam. I felt that people should have been digesting a greater amount of information about the complexities of the conflict.

Q: After '67, whither?

MCCORMICK: I went to the Air Force Officer Training School at Lackland Air Force Base. I was still very much in the grip of the anti-war, anti-military attitude I had had at Berkeley. Officer training was extremely difficult – not intellectually but psychologically, physically, emotionally. I discovered that there was a catch there. You were not allowed to enlist in the Air Force for less than four years, but if you washed out of officer's school, you had to serve only two years as an enlisted man and then you would be free. That was the way out. I had every intention of doing that. They only graduated about 45 or 50% of the cadets anyway, so all you had to do at any moment was raise your hand and say, "I can't take it any more," and you were out. Then you got exactly what you wanted. But I couldn't do it. I just couldn't bring myself to admit defeat like that. The thing I remember about it was feeling trapped. You are inside a big organization and there is no way out; you can't do less, and you can't do something different, so the only way you can have any freedom is to do even more than is demanded of you. I was so determined to be independent. Whatever they demanded, I did more of it and better, to try to convince myself that I was really in control although of course I wasn't. I wound up graduating at the top of my class.

Q: You were in the military from '67 to ?

MCCORMICK: To '71. I left as a captain.

Q: What was your branch?

MCCORMICK: When I finished officer training, I was still wrestling with my conscience. I didn't want to support the war, but if I didn't go then somebody else would. I decided I had to volunteer for Vietnam. To me, it was one of the most difficult decisions I ever had to make, and when I finally made it I went in and announced with great seriousness to my commander that I had reached my decision and was volunteering for Vietnam. He said, "Who cares? We'll decide where you go." They were not interested in my moral dilemma. As it turned out, I was sent to Alaska anyway. I spent my Air Force career in a mixed U.S.-Canadian North American Air Defense unit. I was stationed at Elmendorf Air Force Base in Anchorage, and I traveled around to the various bases and units scattered throughout Alaska to inspect them.

Q: As an officer, did you find at the BOQ (bachelor officers' quarters) some debates on Vietnam?

MCCORMICK: None. Once I entered the military I felt as if I had gone from a questioning, debating, intellectually curious society to one with an attitude of "We are just not going to talk about that."

Q: How did you keep yourself intellectually involved with the world while you were in the Air Force?

MCCORMICK: It was hard. Alaska is not a place that is in much touch with the rest of the world. I didn't fit in well there. My horizons were compressed to my job, which was not a terribly easy one. But I loved the physical beauty of Alaska. Also, I married during that time.

Q: What were you doing? You say looking at security?

MCCORMICK: I worked for Alaska Command, and my concern was the readiness of facilities in Alaska, including the radar and the forward fighter bases and the White Alice chain of communications back to the North American Air Defense Command (NORAD). I would visit these and conduct an inspection of my little part of that system. It took me all over the state and up into the Arctic.

Q: This is beginning a period of concern about our troops in Vietnam and also in Germany - the lowering of morale and discipline. Was the Air Force touched by this at all?

MCCORMICK: Less so than the Army. We had all of the normal command problems that you would expect when young enlisted men are separated from their families. I don't think it was particularly so.

Q: Where did you meet your wife?

MCCORMICK: I had met her the first time many years before. She was the editor of the student newspaper at Berkeley when I was there. I met her again back east in Boston, and we married while I was in the Air Force, went to Europe on our honeymoon, came back and got right back into this very parochial military life.

Q: After your four years what were you looking for?

MCCORMICK: I was impatient to get through with this obligation so I could go into the Foreign Service.

Q: Did you take the exam while you were in the Air Force?

MCCORMICK: I did. When I left the Air Force I went to the Fletcher School. I took the exam again while I was there. I took it twice. The first time I was told that I had passed, but I would be a consular officer; I needed a higher score to be able to choose the political cone. I didn't know it worked like that. I had to take it a second time and get a higher score in order to be offered a commission as a political officer.

Q: Do you recall any of the questions on the exam?

MCCORMICK: That was 30 years ago. But one question asked you to imagine a box comprised of four cities, and asked which statements comparing the inside of that box to the outside would be accurate. Others asked you to look at a map that was shaded and asked what that was a map of. They gave you the key -- this shading is 5 to 10%, this shading is 90%. What in the world could they be thinking of? Percentage of Muslims? Tropical forest cover? It was an excellent and stimulating exam. I believe very strongly that it should be kept very rigorous. One of the reasons why I wanted to go into the Foreign Service in the first place was that it was said to be so difficult to get in. I would never have been interested in it if it weren't.

Q: How about when you had the oral exam, do you recall any of the questions?

MCCORMICK: I don't. I recall thinking that my answers were not particularly brilliant. But, unlike some people, I may not have exuded any great sense of nervousness. It never occurred to me that I was not going to pass.

Q: Also, I would assume that four years as an officer must have helped, didn't it?

MCCORMICK: It gives you a lot of experience and a certain amount of confidence.

Q: You were at Fletcher from when to when?

MCCORMICK: From ‘71 to ‘74. I also studied at the Institute for Advanced International Studies in Geneva, known in French as HEI.

Q: Fletcher has been a nurturing ground for people who have been involved in foreign affairs, not just foreign service and Americans, but others. How did you find Fletcher?

MCCORMICK: Outstanding. I loved it. I felt I had finally found the kind of interdisciplinary program I had been looking for. It was highly demanding, very intimidating, and exciting; a wonderful mixture of all these different subjects which you needed in the Foreign Service. Excellent faculty. I can’t think of enough good things to say about it.

Q: In this ‘71 to ‘74 period, was there any particular area that you were looking at, or discipline you wanted?

MCCORMICK: European diplomatic history and strategic studies. I also did a bit of work on international finance. At that time, the entire world of international economic policy and international financial policy was different. We were taught in an atmosphere of fixed currency values. The dominant issue was controlling crises. If your currency is plunging, speculators are attacking, here is what you do. In the distant future, we imagined, there could theoretically be a world that had gone off the gold standard entirely, or even had freely floating currencies driven by just the market. Hardly anyone thought it would happen soon.

Q: When did Nixon go off the gold standard?

MCCORMICK: February 1973.

Q: So sort of right in the middle of your time?

MCCORMICK: Yes.

Q: Did everybody say, “Take a look and figure out what happens now”?

MCCORMICK: It threw everything into chaos.

Q: Nixon “shokus”.

MCCORMICK: Nixon “*shokus*”. I also remember being taught that a socialist economy on a massive scale could not, overnight, open itself up to international commerce at a non-controlled currency rate exchange. It would result in chaos. But perhaps it has.

Q: This brings up another question. I’ll state my bias. I think sometimes Laski and the Fabian socialists in England were probably more of a disaster than Lenin and Stalin and anyone else as *far as the Third World. Were you looking at socialist government pro- status, were you looking there to see whether these things worked or not?*

MCCORMICK: There wasn't a Fabian bias at Fletcher. I agree with you that socialist prescriptions have in general been disastrous for Third World economies. But Fletcher was very clear-eyed about this. There was no romanticism about socialist economics at all. I had by then lost virtually all of my interest in socialism, such as it was.

Q: Much of it, at the intellectual level, seems to have an answer. It seems to.

MCCORMICK: If I ever believed that, I didn't by the time I was at Fletcher.

Q: Were you looking at economies or countries to see what made them tick?

MCCORMICK: Not in my world. We were looking at the arms race first and foremost. The East-West clash, the arms race, strategic studies - I had become deeply interested in arms control. In Geneva, I studied with Louis J. Halle, who had been George Kennan's deputy at Policy Planning in the State Department. Brilliant, moody man. Retired, went to Switzerland and taught there. Under his direction I wrote about arms control and nuclear deterrence.

Q: That is interesting, because this morning I was interviewing Edward Rowney, who just at this time was on the arms control Strategic Arms Limitations Talks (SALT). You talked about arms control - what were you talking about? Was it nuclear or was it more than that?

MCCORMICK: Nuclear. We felt the arms race could get out of control. The driving intellectual sense was the works of people like Kissinger, who wrote about how you achieve stability in a deterrence situation in which the real enemy is not just your opponent but the instability which threatens you both. At that time, mutual assured destruction seemed the least unstable nuclear situation you could imagine. In the military, I had become parochial. That changed completely when I got to Fletcher. I was extremely conscious of what was going on in the world. I was keenly aware that we were heading for the development of a ballistic missile defense system on a serious scale, which would have shaken mutually assured destruction to its foundations and precipitated a massive new arms race. In the midst of all the fierce debates we had about counterforce and counter value and the great temptation which a first strike offers, I became a passionate supporter of the anti-ballistic missile treaty. It was counterintuitive, but we knew that it could work. I was very excited about it. I thought that was what diplomats do. They take a problem like that and come up with a deal that benefits both sides by making unwanted and irrational conflicts less likely.

Q: That was the day of playing games - if they knock out 20 million of ours, we can knock out 40 million - and how you could survive. These were horrible games. The intellectual body was taking this very seriously.

MCCORMICK: Yes, the Rand Corporation had designed this stuff. By the time I came along, our thinking had evolved away from survival toward stabilization. I was interested also as a historian. It turns out that official thinking in Britain before World War II was very conscious of deterrence. They thought about it in very modern terms. Rather than prepare to actually fight a war, which would have meant construction of an air defense, they spent every penny on offensive bombing capability. They believed whole cities could be destroyed by conventional bombing – they understood the theory of fire storms but had the physics of it wrong by an order of magnitude – and thought it could deter a war. It was a radical reliance on deterrence, and it failed. That gave me great pause. Nevertheless, what I came out with was the thinking behind an agreement that neither one of us will build a defense system. We would rely on mutual vulnerability. Some writers spoke of the "pole of security and the pole of power." Two sides cannot both have power – if one does then the other doesn't -- but they can both have equal amounts of security without threatening each other. That was the kind of thinking that formed my study and informed my Foreign Service thinking.

Q: How did your wife feel about the Foreign Service?

MCCORMICK: We had always known that was what we would do. She never particularly loved the Foreign Service but there was never any question that that was what we were going to do.

Q: You came in in 1974?

MCCORMICK: I came in in 1974. I had taken my Ph.D. orals and was in the middle of my dissertation, but I dropped it, packed my family up, and moved to Washington.

Q: What was your impression of your basic officer course, the members of it?

MCCORMICK: Well, I'm afraid I was probably just insufferable, because by then I had been delaying this for a long time and was so impatient to get started. I'm sure I was very arrogant. My first impression of the Department was a disappointment. It was infused with what I thought of as a kind of humdrum, Civil Service thinking. There was no reflection of the high foreign policy issues, of the glamour, of the importance and the drama. All of these things had been carefully ironed out so that it conveyed a sense that we were simply postal clerks.

Q: That can be awful, a postal clerk type conversation about compensation and all that.

MCCORMICK: I was appalled. I thought it would be on a much loftier plane. We quickly learned to ignore that side of the State Department and focus only on the Foreign Service.

Q: By this time Vietnam was essentially over, wasn't it?

MCCORMICK: It was. The peace talks in Paris were over. We were in that interim, a decent interval between the United States withdrawing from the war and the fall of South Vietnam.

Q: How did your assignment work out?

MCCORMICK: Very well. I was prepared to go wherever they sent me. When I learned it would be Durban, I didn't even think of complaining, but I was disappointed because it struck me as being too much like Los Angeles. It didn't seem foreign, exotic, enough. Then I received a call at the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) saying that a new position had been created in Luxembourg which would be half consular work and half political. Did I want it? I certainly did.

Q: So you went to Luxembourg?

MCCORMICK: I went to Luxembourg in the summer of ‘74.

Q: You were there two years?

MCCORMICK: I was there two years.

Q: Often I ask about the political situation, but I can’t imagine that Luxembourg had changed much since the Battle of the Bulge.

MCCORMICK: The political situation would only be of interest to someone who wanted to study the advantages of social democracy versus market capitalism. But Luxembourg took its turn at the EC (European Community) presidency that year. It was an ideal situation in which to learn how to do political and economic work. I also enjoyed the consular work. I don’t mind doing consular work at all, by the way; I just didn’t want to be coned as a consular officer. I didn’t trust assurances that you could always change.

Q: Who was the ambassador?

MCCORMICK: Ruth Lewis Farkas. She was appointed by President Nixon. Her husband owned Alexander’s Department Stores in New York.

Q: Luxembourg has a reputation of being a controversial post, even today. How did you find working with someone who was a definite political appointee as opposed to somebody who got there for some other reason?

MCCORMICK: I found it difficult. I wasn’t mature enough at the time to realize that this was the way life was. She had no interest in the work of the post or anything which the Department of State was interested in. Her interest was the social side.

Q: I assume it was a pretty small post.

MCCORMICK: It was a very small post, although at that time it was larger than many of our smaller ones today. The DCM (Deputy Chief of Mission) was Peter Tarnoff. He handled the ambassador very well.

Q: So was it mostly visas?

MCCORMICK: No, American Citizen Services. The largest problem was created by Icelandic Airlines, which lands in Luxembourg. That was the carrier of choice for the backpacking crowd.

Q: It is the cheapest way to get to the United States.

MCCORMICK: Young people prided themselves on bumming around Europe on no money a day, then came into the embassy under the impression that we would give them the money to get home. Much of my job consisted of breaking the news to them that that was not the way it worked. There were some genuine hardship cases, but an awful lot of them were middle class Americans who expected the embassy to give them a handout.

Q: I assume you would turn away the normal Iranian student visa shoppers?

MCCORMICK: A lot of those, it seemed to me, though I suspect it was only average for most consular posts. The most difficult situation that I faced was getting a phone call one night from the State Department desk saying, "I can't tell you what this is about, but when you get the cable tomorrow don't worry. Whatever happens, the Department will back you up 100%." I didn't find this very reassuring. When the cable arrived, it ordered the embassy to serve the ambassador's husband with a subpoena. A grand jury had indicted him for perjury relating to the relationship between his political contributions and her appointment.

Q: Just about that time I had to serve the top American business man in Greece; a consular officer has to do that.

MCCORMICK: I suppose so. It didn't occur to me that someone a little more senior than a new vice consul really ought to handle this, and the DCM felt this was strictly consular. So I talked to the ambassador, and we reached an agreement that I would come to the residence, he would be there, and we would handle it like civilized people. I went over with the legal papers which I was supposed to serve. She greeted me very graciously and we sat and waited and waited but he never did come downstairs. Eventually, when she couldn't imagine what was keeping him so long, we discovered that he had left by another entrance, gone to the airport with a suitcase full of paintings, and left the country. He didn't return to Europe or the United States for years.

Q: So was the ambassador complicit in holding you up?

MCCORMICK: She told me she was not. We went back and drafted a cable reporting the situation to Washington. My personal impressions of her veracity were not required.

Q: That is interesting, because it is easy to denigrate the position of ambassador to Luxembourg. The president of my organization is Ed Rowell, and he was saying how great being ambassador to Luxembourg was, particularly later on as the European Union became more important, because it was a wonderful entrée into the thinking of the European Union.

MCCORMICK: That was very true in Luxembourg. It should also be the case in Strasbourg, but we have reduced Strasbourg to a consular post, whereas it should be giving us greater insights into the thinking of Europeans through their MP's (members of parliament) who attend the sessions of the European Parliament there. We reported widely on these institutions. On the consular side, we stumbled across the fact there was a great deal of illicit narcotics traffic coming into Luxembourg where there was a very weak capability to detect it, then going on undetected to Amsterdam. When we reported this, the U.S. drug agencies were delighted and were suddenly there in Luxembourg in force. We opened up all kinds of programs. I remember being dazzled by how much money you could tap into if you touched the right theme.

Q: Were you able to make much contact with the people in Luxembourg?

MCCORMICK: It was quite easy. They speak both French and German and are very pro-American, even in the Communist areas like the steel towns near Esch. I was there at the time of the thirtieth anniversary of their liberation by Patton's troops in World War II and there were constant events to commemorate it. The ambassador disliked giving speeches, especially in French, so I was frequently assigned to represent the embassy. The Luxembourgers treated me as a senior representative although I was just a junior officer, and they couldn't have been more kind. It was a wonderful opportunity. I can't imagine why she didn't want to do it herself. I learned another lesson about political ambassadors. I had briefly served on the Benelux desk before going out, and helped prepare Ambassador Leonard Firestone for his confirmation hearings as ambassador to Brussels. I was extremely earnest, I had just started out in the Foreign Service, and I was determined to help him succeed in his confirmation. I explained things to him, drafted all kinds of background memos, spelled out acronyms, predicted every question they might ask. Finally, he had to turn to me and say, "Look, I appreciate what you are doing, but I don't need any of this stuff." He had already fixed it with the senators. Later I saw him in Brussels on one of my visits, and he still didn't know anything about foreign policy and didn't care. I went to see him in his office and he said, "I'm so glad you're here. Shut the door because I don't want anybody to hear this. These hostage takers are my crisis at the moment, from the South Moluccas. Tell me, where in the world are the South Moluccas?" So I had to get up and show him on the map. He had no clue. On the other hand, this was a man who visited regularly all sections of his embassy just to keep morale up. He was well liked. He kept an eye on the overall functioning of the place and didn't try to do what he didn't know, but did very well what he did know. He reduced my tendency to criticize all political appointees as ambassadors.

Q: All of us have learned they come in all shapes and sizes, as do some of our professional colleagues, too. Sometimes they are the wrong people in the wrong place or they have gone sour.

MCCORMICK: Mrs. Farkas, as I said, was particularly interested in social concerns and I think she was very frustrated that she didn't manage to break into the court circles. The court circles in the Grand Duchy take themselves very seriously, and she was not their sort.

Q: I think it was Mr. Farkas who at one point made the remark, "You mean I paid $300,000.00 and all I got my wife was Luxembourg?"

MCCORMICK: You are precisely right; as the remark filtered through to us at the time it was, "You mean I paid $300,000.00 and all I got was," and he named a country in Central America. He then said, "I want Europe." As we heard the complaint, it was not that Luxembourg wasn't good enough, but that he wanted something in Europe, not Central America.

Q: When it is as blatant as that, it gets repugnant.

MCCORMICK: This is exactly the quotation that was referred to in the indictment. The other thing that we did that may have been of some utility there, Luxembourg is of no military significance (although it is a NATO member), but because of its geography it makes a convenient base for spying. Close to Paris, close to Bonn, close to NATO. So there was a very large Soviet intelligence presence in Luxembourg, both KGB and GRU, which didn't have anything to do with Luxembourg but was there because surveillance was more lax and it was better to be arrested there than in Germany or Belgium. A large and heavily guarded embassy with diplomats who didn't have any apparent portfolios. When they began to bring in daily flights, nonstop from Moscow to Luxembourg, with no real passenger demand, this just became too obvious. That was something I was able to help with, because our station didn't have much entrée to the Soviets but their ambassador was a graduate of HEI, so I did. We helped Time Magazine write an article about the extent of the Soviet presence there, explaining the point about being able to operate against three targets, and the government expelled the KGB resident and the GRU head of operations. This was by far the most important thing that anyone cared about in 1976.

Q: I think this is probably a good place to stop. We are up to 1976. Where did you go in 1976?

MCCORMICK: To the OP (Operations) Center.

Q: Great. Well, we will pick it up then.

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Today is August 18th, 2000. Keith, in 1976 - you are in the OP Center. What part of the OP Center did you work in and can you talk about how it was set up and what you were up to?

MCCORMICK: I was on the desk as a watch officer. They selected you for this assignment, you couldn't bid on it, so I was pleased to get it. I was also pleased to go back to Washington to get a broader perspective after being out in the field at a small post. My job was to respond to emergencies. It was a communication center. The day I arrived and reported for duty, trying to find out what I was to do, they were all recovering from the assassination of our ambassador to Cyprus, Roger Davies. He happened to have come from my home town in California. That was a quick introduction to how occasionally there could be a tremendous burst of urgency and crises interspersed with long periods of boredom. We worked on shifts around the clock.

Q: You were there in '76 and '77?

MCCORMICK: That's right.

Q: Let's say there was a crisis in Surinam or something like that, were you expected to be familiar with Surinam, or could you call up Mr. or Ms. Surinam to find out?

MCCORMICK: Strictly the latter. It wasn't our job to be the experts but to find them and alert them.

Q: Who made the decision to wake up the Secretary or Under Secretary because of the crises?

MCCORMICK: We did. I might have been the first one to get a phone call reporting that there was a crisis, and would talk to the director of the Operations Center, or his deputy, who would make that decision. We often called principals in the middle of the night.

Q: You mentioned the Roger Davies incident. How was that handled?

MCCORMICK: You make sure you can stay in contact, establish a secure link if necessary, alert key officers, start a log, begin assembling a team of specialists to deal with it. Often a team would be set up around the clock to deal with things like that. During the night, while we were waiting for this kind of thing, we also prepared a summary for the Secretary of State to read the next morning, of whatever cables had come in overnight. An enormous amount of work went into choosing and editing those.

Q: Keith, we were talking, off-mike, about music. Could you talk about music and the attitude there?

MCCORMICK: I was saying the tension level in the OP Center was often fairly high, and it was a situation where there could have been panic and inefficiency, and what we discovered was that playing chamber music had a calming effect. All this power and energy, but very controlled and disciplined. It had a calming effect on all of us. Any other kind of music would have been disruptive.

Q: You mentioned that the OP Center was a competitive appointment. How did you feel about that and your impression of the Department?

MCCORMICK: Oh, it was excellent. An excellent preparation for a wider perspective. After serving one tour in a very small European country, I had no idea at all of the worldwide perspective of the Secretary, the principals. This gave me the other end of the telescope. For example, Kissinger became very interested in southern Africa about this time. I had never thought that much about it, but his interest drove what we would focus on.

Q: Would there be times when you would be putting together a compilation of what people wanted to know? Maybe trying to read the Secretary's mind and saying, "You know, he is getting interested in Africa?" Was there word from the seventh floor, "I think maybe the Secretary ought to do this?"

MCCORMICK: Yes. His staff was constantly saying, "Look, what he cares about is this and what he wants to know about is this, so please keep an eye out for that." Others would come and say the exact opposite – "He doesn't care about this, but he needs to know it." This famously translated into the tension between the African assistant secretary, at the time, Nat Davis, and Kissinger. Kissinger had a very global policy. Africa is a subset of the worldwide Cold War. Anyone who doesn't see it in that perspective is missing the broader perspective and is going to become a captive of parochial interests. Davis took the opposite view, and they clashed constantly.

Q: While you were there, did you find that people came in from the geographical bureaus and said, "Hey, be sure to put something in about the new change in Liechtenstein?"

MCCORMICK: Yes, but our ability to put information in front of the Secretary was limited to what came in overnight.

Q: Was there a writing skill that developed from these telegrams?

MCCORMICK: Very much, since condensation was the essence here. Enormous effort went into accurately capturing what that message said, putting it in perspective, and doing it extremely economically. Some of the best and most intense editing I have ever seen.

Q: Did you get any feel for the different geographic bureaus, you and your colleagues at that time, about how you would rank them.

MCCORMICK: A pretty good one. No question that the European bureau was the flagship bureau, and the best. The Near East bureau and the East Asian bureau each consisted of real experts, specialists who had had to devote an enormous amount of time to learning these hard languages and formed elite corps of their own. Kissinger distrusted that greatly. He was constantly warning about it. He didn't like the "Chrysanthemum Club", the specialists on Japan. He didn't trust the Arabists. He wanted globalists. At that time the tension within the NEA (Near Eastern affairs) bureau between the pro-Israeli and the pro-Arab FSOs (Foreign Service Officers) had not yet quite become as sharp as it was later, or if it was I didn't know about it. Kissinger did regard the African bureau and the Latin American bureau as very much secondary. They were not key fulcrums of the world. They were not the center of anything. He tended to see these areas as chess board pieces, where a Soviet bloc or Western move or counter-move might take place. The Cubans had landed in Angola in the fall of 1975, and Kissinger took it as a personal affront because he had negotiated an agreement with the Soviets at Vladivostok that both sides would try to leave these global peripheral areas out of their competition if they could. He regarded the Cuban incursion as a flagrant breach of that agreement, and the Soviet landing in Ethiopia as even worse. I remember how furious he was about it. A betrayal by the Soviets.

Q: You were there through '77, which would have meant the transition between the Ford and Carter Administration. How did that impact on all of your operations?

MCCORMICK: Very directly, because the Carter transition team set up its headquarters in the OP Center. Unlike some later transitions, President Ford had given orders that the Carter people should be given every possible cooperation, so there was a very good atmosphere. Some of them came in with a great deal of suspicion, even hostility, toward the State Department, but the Department had been ordered to be quite open and accommodating, so I was under orders to cooperate in any way. We staffed, gave them papers, shared our documents. I found myself sitting in on policy debates about what kind of policy directions the Carter people wanted to take.

Q: Did you get a feel for any of the personalities in the Carter administration?

MCCORMICK: Once we knew that the new Secretary would be Cyrus Vance, there was a tremendous respect for him as a statesman and a gentleman; this is a person with enormous personal stature, particularly among those who disliked Kissinger and saw him as being too cynical. And of course the incoming Carter people despised Kissinger and blamed him for Nixon's war in Vietnam. They blamed him for Cambodia and the Christmas bombing; they blamed him for everything, including a willingness to overlook the human rights abuses and flaws of Third World dictatorships as long as they were our allies in the Cold War. The Carter people wanted to make human rights a new major point in our foreign policy. I remember listening to their debates on how to do this. The original idea was to keep it very disciplined and focused, not try everything at once but try to gain an international agreement to rule out the most outrageous human rights abuses. But as soon as they began to talk about it, various people wanted to add more rights -- the right to democracy, the right to prosperity…. It became a Christmas tree. That was never resolved. People simply didn't agree and each went off to approach it differently.

Q: I would have thought that there would have been a conflict between coming in with this idea and then the foreign service officer who is dealing with an area - while you were doing this, I was in Seoul, Korea as Consular General and human rights is nice, but we were concerned about a million troops 30 miles to the North of us, extremely well-armed and under the control of Kim Il-Song whom we thought was a mad man. We had a dictatorship, Park Chung Hee, and we were unhappy about some of the things, but we didn't want to over-disturb this. This is a tendency, and I think in a way the Carter administration did change the whole name of the game for the better but it was really threatening an awful lot of relationships.

MCCORMICK: Absolutely. A separate bureau of human rights resulted from these debates, led by Patt Derian. The Foreign Service all told her she was going to face a dilemma: "You can't lay a glove on the real abusers so you'll end up putting all your pressure on our allies." Her response was that the Cold War had allied us with all the wrong people, allies who were human rights abusers. This was a common theme of the Carter people, even though it was a Democrat, LBJ (Lyndon Baines Johnson), who famously said that someone was "a son-of-a-bitch, but our son-of-a-bitch." She rejected that and wanted to come down hard on Third World dictatorships who were anti-Communist allies.

Q: It was a difficult time but, of course, we had hands off on Israel and other places like that where there were abuses.

MCCORMICK: It was an intense and important conflict. Kissinger's view of southern Africa, for example, was within the Cold War context. Patt Derian would have said he was too willing to overlook the abuses of apartheid because of the importance of South Africa in a global East-West context. He would have said she had too little sense of the greater danger to human rights which worldwide Communism represented.

Q: When you were getting ready for Vance, was there a different thrust to what you were doing?

MCCORMICK: The greatest contrast was in style. Very gentle and courteous, where Kissinger had been a screamer. Both were extremely demanding in terms of writing. Kissinger would chastise people strongly for using a word with anything but the most extreme precision. I remember him complaining to someone that the word “vital” had been used when it was not really a matter of life and death. He also took it for granted that one knew history in great detail - especially European history. He would have been shocked to learn of FSOs who were not all that well versed in history. That was not the case under Vance. There was more of an approach of “explain this from the beginning,” for a broad audience rather than experts. However, he was far more considerate and much better liked.

Q: One of the things about being in the OP Center is that you are dubbed as somebody who is going to move on. What did you ask for, and what did you get?

MCCORMICK: Well, I asked for southern Africa. It was beginning to dominate a lot of strategic thinking. There were the crises in Rhodesia and Angola, and the diplomatic problem of independence for Namibia, and the fact that all of this had to be negotiated carefully with South Africa. And it was all happening in the aftermath of the Communist revolution in Portugal and the Portuguese withdrawal from Africa. It was very exciting. The OP Center had been a wonderful experience. You are right, it gives you a bit of extra cachet. Also, at the human level, one gets paid for these extra night time stints, and that enabled us to buy our first house. This was at a time when, after the oil embargo and the Yom Kippur ‘73 war, housing was suddenly exploding and none of us junior officers could afford anything, so we were very grateful for that. What I wanted was a desk in Southern African Affairs -- not a job on a large desk, but a small one of my own. As a relatively junior officer still, I wouldn’t be able to influence policy toward a major country like South Africa, but I could have some influence toward smaller ones. I wanted to canoe my own little boat. I asked for and got the job of desk officer for the so called BLS (Botswana, Lesotho, and Swaziland) countries. Lots of policy interest at the time. Little countries that no one had ever paid attention to before.

Q: One question I forgot to ask. How did the OP Center hours impact on the family?

MCCORMICK: Actually, it was very hard but it was only for a short time. You go off to work at dinner time and you come back the next morning. You are gone all night. It wasn’t any worse than some things.

Q: Okay, you were doing a B...

MCCORMICK: We all called them the BLS countries -- the former British High Commission territories in southern Africa. They represent the three tribes that didn’t try to fight the pioneers but asked the British for protection, so they became independent little countries when the Union of South Africa was formed. Unlike the homelands the South Africans had set up, these were darlings of the international community. The U.S. was beginning to put some very large aid programs into them. My timing, personally, was fortunate because we were in the midst of a major buildup in these little countries.

Q: You were doing this in ‘77 to when?

MCCORMICK: To ‘79.

Q: Let's take them separately. Take one at a time and talk about how we saw it, what were our interests, and what was happening.

MCCORMICK: Our immediate interests were driven by the collapse of the Geneva Conference on Rhodesia at the beginning of 1977. Talks had broken down and there was a good sized war developing. It was a major problem for Britain and therefore for us as well. We developed an Anglo-American initiative to resolve it which gradually became more American than Anglo, with the U.S. providing most of the money. "My" three countries were on the periphery of that war. Also, of course, they were on the periphery of South Africa, which was of tremendous interest to the incoming government. The combination of those two things meant we were going to be shifting assets out of South Africa and putting huge new programs into these little countries. Botswana was the most important. One of the few democracies in Africa. By refusing to get dragged into the Rhodesian war, and by cooperating with South Africa as much as it hated apartheid, it had managed to remain a kind of island of stability at a time we feared the entire region could go up in flames. Lesotho, on the other hand, is this very picturesque mountain country, completely encircled by South Africa. The only country I know of that is like a little hole in the doughnut of another country. It is a very unfortunate country. The people there are actually descendants of the survivors of the Zulu holocaust. They have always had a very difficult time; there is no economy except migrant labor in South Africa. My interest there centered on the possibility that Lesotho could exploit its mountain rivers to build the largest dam in southern Africa and sell both water and electricity to South Africa. Swaziland is a tiny, rather beautiful country with a traditional old monarchy, of little importance to us except that it was wedged between South Africa and Marxist Mozambique.

Q: On Lesotho, tell me a bit of history. I've read the book The Washing of the Spears but it has been a long time. What about the Zulu holocaust?

MCCORMICK: That was the book my boss advised me to read the first day I showed up for work. Dennis Keogh was the deputy director of the southern African office at the time. He was later political counselor in South Africa, and was killed there by a terrorist bomb. I threw myself into reading books about the place. I've always loved, in the Foreign Service, the excuse to read everything you can get your hands on about a new place to which you're being assigned. I hadn't known before that when the Zulus under Shaka erupted out of their Zululand coastal area into the interior, up on to the plateau, they killed every living being within a huge area. A handful of survivors came together on a mesa in the highest part of the mountains, and eventually became a tribe – the Basotho – and later a country -- Lesotho. I don't find this well known here, but it certainly impacts on South African history, because it happened during the Napoleonic Wars, which means that when the Afrikaner wagon trains from Cape Town began to arrive on the high South African plateau in the 1830s there was no one there. It was unpopulated – or rather, depopulated. So the white South Africans are absolutely correct when they claim that they were there first before the blacks. The blacks are equally correct when they insist that they were there first, because they were there prior to that and had been wiped out in an unbelievable massacre. It is typical of the tragedy and salvation of South Africa – everybody's right.

Q: During this '77 to '79 period, did the Cold War (we had a new Administration who were looking at things a little differently) intrude in your particular-

MCCORMICK: Absolutely, every day. Kissinger had been so insistent on a global perspective that he had a program called "global outlook" to make sure that FSOs in Latin America or Africa remained aware of global issues, and were thinking first and foremost, "How does what I do relate to the central struggle of our times?" The Africa bureau always resisted that, so I found myself under a certain amount of tension, and now it's not even under the Kissinger regime anymore, it's under a regime with a different view but nevertheless, there is still this tension. The incoming Carter people had much more interest in the racial aspect of apartheid, but the State Department as a whole still had to think, and I thought very much, in regional terms. There is a war in Rhodesia; what is that doing to the countries around it? These countries' economies were in danger of literal collapse. How is all this going to relate to the Cuban intervention in Angola, which at the time was heading straight for South African military intervention and a heavy shooting war reaching right up to Luanda.

Q: Was Botswana, which is a very large country, the main focus of interest?

MCCORMICK: There was a serious threat that the war in Rhodesia could spill over into Botswana. Black guerillas were retreating from the Rhodesian troops into Botswana without Botswana's permission. They vastly outnumbered the little Botswana defense force. Botswana asked the United States for arms and somebody in the State Department has to think through whether this would be smart or dumb. Looking at just Botswana, I thought, absolutely, they are responsible enough to handle these weapons and they are under threat and they are a democracy, of which we have had very few in Africa. But you have to look at it globally. The last thing we should be doing is introducing arms into southern Africa, no matter to whom, because if we do, the Soviets will and it will be all downhill from there. So I came down strongly on the side of no arms. The United States should not arm anybody in southern Africa. We should deal with the Soviets bilaterally and try to extract from them a commitment to show the same restraint.

Q: What about Mozambique and the border of Swaziland?

MCCORMICK: Yes, we rapidly built up our little embassy in Swaziland. It doubled and tripled in size. We moved the Regional AID Headquarters there. We moved FBIS (Foreign Broadcast Information Service) out of South Africa to Swaziland. We added to that embassy all kinds of elements which would have to do with information on both countries and the region in general. All of a sudden we paid a lot of attention to this little place. Most of the buildup was well thought through. Not always. For example, in those days we had one ambassador to all three countries. That was actually a marvelous idea and worked very well, but Dick Moose, the assistant secretary, favored three ambassadors. He thought we would get two new slots for Foreign Service Officer ambassadors, but it didn't work out that way. What we got were political appointees who wanted to be somewhere near South Africa and spend all their time in Cape Town. On the other hand, we did handle reasonably well the concept of aiding these so-called front line states through a new kind of assistance, which was not going to be for economic development. It was going to be for economic stabilization, or eventually we had to call it security supporting assistance. It's now called ESF (Economic Support Funds). We were going to help Zambia, for example, absorb the cost of sanctions against Rhodesia. AID was supposed to give Congress a report explaining why we suddenly needed this massive new amount of money and new concept. They had gotten bogged down and the report wasn't going to be ready on time. I was detached from my job to go help AID with that report to Congress. Without it, we were not going to have this money, so there was a huge urgency attached to it. I went out and visited each of these countries, along with Roy Stacey of AID and someone from the policy planning bureau. From Lesotho all the way up to Kenya. Then we came back and tried to lay out the framework to explain to Congress, in their terms, how we would use this new type of aid.

Q: And did it work?

MCCORMICK: We managed to get the report accepted by approaching it completely differently than AID would have done. We explained it in a different way, we got the money, and we managed to establish an understanding with the Congress of what we were trying to do and why we needed that much money. The part we were missing originally was that it has to be put in terms so a congressman could understand in concrete terms exactly what we would get for our money and how we would know whether it was doing any good or being wasted. It all foreshadowed the current interest in accountability and criteria and setting out clear goals so they can be checked.

Q: Of course we came in with a zero-based budget which meant you started right at the beginning and said, "Okay, what do I want to propose, how are we going about it, and how is our money being spent?" It was a new management technique at the time. There must have been a certain amount of reflection of that.

MCCORMICK: Absolutely, but it was a new idea and AID resisted it. They were very good at traditional development but this was a new type of assistance and they had to think differently. Everything had to be related back to the goal of ending the Rhodesian war on sensible terms. We thought that would require setting up a trust fund to buy out the whites. In the end, that trust fund proved to be more of an ephemeral promise than a real thing. But the key focus, in my view, was never my three little countries in and of themselves; it was always, "How are these part of a broad southern African strategy to get peace in Rhodesia?" At the top, there was a very clear policy which all of us understood. We would concentrate on Rhodesia first and we needed South Africa's help to do that. Then we would turn our attention to Namibia (Southwest Africa as it was known then) and, again, that can only happen with South African cooperation. South Africa is far too powerful to be pushed out of there. Finally, and only then, we would turn our attention to the problem of South Africa itself.

Q: I was in INR (Bureau of Intelligence and Research) in a meeting on the Horn of Africa, back in the very early '60s, and the conventional wisdom was "eventually this whole thing was going to collapse and there would be a night of long knives and the whites would have a big refugee problem with those that survive."

MCCORMICK: I would say that was the public's general image. Personally, I think that traces back to our Western nightmares, back to the Sepoy Mutiny, not to the facts on the ground. People thought there was going to be a night of long knives. I just didn't believe that ever. I regarded South Africa as a bastion of stability, even through the Soweto riots, which tested the government's ability to maintain order to its limits. My analysis was that there was not going to be any overthrowing of the South African government at all. On the contrary, the question was, how was that powerful military and economy going to act in the region? Are they going to disrupt countries and overthrow them? Are they going to get bogged down in full scale wars, as in Angola? Above all, how was the regional economy going to be affected by this? For example, the Andrew Young people backed an initiative called The Southern African Development Coordinating Conference, whose purpose was to reorganize the economy of southern Africa away from its dependence on South Africa. They envisioned things like building Botswana a railway to connect to the black African north, so they wouldn't be dependent on Johannesburg. They envisioned creating separate electrical power grids for little countries like Swaziland and Lesotho which, of course, bought their power from South Africa. I regarded this as economic nonsense. I thought it was a disastrous plan. It would disrupt efficient economics and deprive us of whatever sort of peacemaking effect there was in economic collaboration between the countries which were enemies in the region. We would wind up with a mess. I preferred regional economic integration rather than independence.

Q: What about South Africa and its relations as we saw it during the time you were there? I would imagine they were keeping a close eye on it. Were they pulling strings in these small countries - how to act?

MCCORMICK: Swaziland was pro-South African in its policies for a number of reasons which stem from the conservative nature of that government at home. Lesotho was not a democracy. It had its own king, but the power was in the hands of a man named Leabua Jonathan, who was extremely conservative in domestic terms but anti-South African in foreign policy. Botswana was headed by an extraordinary man, Sir Seretse Khama. He came to the United States to receive an honorary doctorate at Harvard, and I had a chance to spend four or five days with him and his family and established a friendship that continued for many years. I believe the family steered a very responsible and stable course, practical cooperation with South Africa but a very principled rejection of toadying to them. Botswana was by far the most successful in this. I was always interested in the regional issue. For example, this was the time when South Africa began getting input for its own electricity from Mozambique, then in turn supplying electricity to other countries including southern Mozambique. I thought if these countries tied their economies closer together it could head off a race war. I became so interested in this that I asked for, and got, a year's sabbatical to go and study all this. Fortunately, the State Department had and has a program for area studies.

Q: Did you find, when you were in the Africa bureau, that we had a solid cadre of African specialists?

MCCORMICK: Many people who were African experts did stay there and know Africa very well, but some of them had such a missionary impulse behind their interest in Africa that I regarded their view as a bit parochial. They saw themselves as standing up for the interests of poor little Africa, which was always being left out of things. Then there were people who served in Africa and really got to know the place, knew what was going on, but were handicapped by policies such as FSI had at the time. FSI didn't want to teach Afrikaans, for example. That would indicate some kind of sympathy for the South African regime. We won't speak that language. Well, that is a good way to not know what is going on. So I thought the Africa bureau was weak, and of course many officers who serve in Africa enjoy it when they are younger but when their children start to go to school they want to go someplace else.

Q: Also there is a tendency to use Africa as a place to put successful Foreign Service Officers, as ambassadors, who are coming out of other areas. I remember talking to Nat Bellochi and talking to Chas Freeman in Chinese. They are both Chinese experts. But something was happening in a hurry and they both went to Africa.

MCCORMICK: I worked with both of them, and later on China as well. Other people, including Frank Wisner, who was a tremendously important and effective southern African expert. He really knew the region. I think we were struggling to understand Africa well because there were these preconceptions, there was the irresistible temptation to try to force American civil rights images onto South Africa, which is totally different. There was a temptation on the part of the Africa bureau as a whole to be much more unwilling to criticize its client states. “They are too weak. You have to understand that you can’t hold them to the same standards.” In general, I think we were always scrambling to know what was going on, and the press had little clue. When I served in South Africa, I was always astonished by how inaccurate, I thought, much press reporting was. When I went to Europe later, I was astonished at how good the press there was. They knew exactly what they were talking about. Sophisticated, deep, well-sourced articles. Not in South Africa.

Q: Did you find that the missionary attitude also had a certain amount of condescension?

MCCORMICK: Very good question, and the answer is yes, absolutely. The Africa bureau felt, quite rightly, that Africa was always being misunderstood, ignored, unfairly criticized, and victims of a sort of prejudiced and dismissive attitude. But their own view, which I characterized as missionary, had an element of condescension. Can we hold these countries to certain standards? As Foreign Service Officers, should we see our job as being to advance American national interests when we deal with them? That’s how we would deal with any other country. The answer is no; the Africa bureau never encouraged its officers to think like that, but rather to think in terms of being custodial toward those countries. So the issue would be how to get more aid for the country we dealt with. Fight against other bureaus to get our word in. You were constantly put in a position, not of being an advocate of American interests vis-a-vis the country you were dealing with, but an advocate for that country in the Washington political arena.

Q: What about the black caucus? Today I guess it would be known as the African- American element, both in Congress and beyond. Was this playing much of a role?

MCCORMICK: Not as much as later, from my point of view. The focus at that time was very much on Rhodesia, on the war in Angola, on the half war going on in Mozambique. There was a great sense of keeping the lid on and a sense of urgency in bringing about a resolution in Rhodesia. Vance knew a great deal about Rhodesia, since he had personally worked on the issue. In the end, what happened of course, was that Rhodesia won the war, won every single battle and lost the economic war. Eventually, the country was too weak to withstand the South African pressure to settle. South Africans were thinking “If the Rhodesian war isn’t settled, if it expands and goes on, then those flames will spread to South Africa.” They wanted to calm things at home by minimizing racial conflicts elsewhere.

Q: When you mentioned the LSE (London School of Economics), I have my own ideas, that this was more destructive of India and a lot of African countries than Marxism, in a way. Was that impacting on what you were dealing with?

MCCORMICK: Well, it was impacting on the economy in these countries. One imagines that newly decolonized countries probably would be socialist. But the LSE has always emphasized distribution and not production, as if all we had to do was redistribute the fruits of labor and didn't need to worry about production.

Q: As though it were a pie and how you slice it, rather than making a bigger pie.

MCCORMICK: Right. These countries, by and large, were not as good at making a bigger pie as they were at talking about distribution of assets. When you add to that the political instability of new governments - they were fragile, they had to worry constantly about threats - the natural temptation would be to do whatever pacified the population in the Capital, even if that was at the expense of the rural food producing villages.

Q: What about AID (United States Agency for International Development)? One has the idea that often AID would go off on a tangent and devise a scheme for Lesotho, or what have you, that happened to be the scheme of the moment back in Washington. Or they had some expertise or money allocated to say digging wells or whatever, as opposed to really what made the most sense in the country. Did you have a problem with that?

MCCORMICK: A mixed experience. AID officers out there knew what they were doing. Washington didn't. The AID Africa bureau was not well led at the time. I saw lots of horror stories of stupid projects and idiotic individual things, but in general I would say AID probably had a pretty good handle on what was going on. Some of these things are very difficult. For example, Lesotho loses one percent of its arable land every year to erosion. It is the most eroded country in the world. It is obvious why: because they value the number of cattle one owns, not the quality. They would rather have a herd of 50 scrawny cows than 20 healthy ones. In pursuit of that, they had denuded hillsides with their overgrazing. Now, AID was perfectly capable of showing them a demonstration. They would fence off a hillside and manage one well, and the other would be denuded, then they would say, "See, we can show you how to do it better." But AID would not - as a matter of policy - impose a Western, economically more intelligent way on a deeply rooted cultural tradition. It would be disruptive and they didn't want to do that. Also, they didn't want to deal with issues like the environment. They were afraid that Congress wouldn't support them if they thought that all you are doing was sustaining. You had to have a sense of forward motion. I have every sympathy with AID; I am sure I would do the same thing. But I was critical of that, because we weren't addressing problems like environmental degradation which underlay everything else.

Q: When you look at the vastness of Africa and the number of political leaders, this is not a glorious time for political leadership in Africa. Were there any debates within the bureau that you were privy to, about whether we should withdraw support from some of these people?

MCCORMICK: Except for the white regimes, the Africa bureau tended to support whoever was in power. They were afraid that if you started challenging corrupt or incompetent African leaders, the others would instinctively protect them and the United States would be accused of neocolonialism. And, of course, the African experts felt that all of these regimes were very fragile and that once you started questioning the status quo, the entire map of Africa with its irrational borders could start coming unraveled. In southern Africa, we generally managed to avoid becoming too identified with one or the other of two rival groups. Within Rhodesia, for example, we wound up not supporting either Joshua Nkomo's group, which was more Soviet allied and equipped, or Robert Mugabe's, which was supported by the Chinese and mostly Shona. They eventually had a bitter military falling out, but we tried as best we could to stay focused on how to integrate them both into some sort of coalition government when British authority was reestablished and majority rule was brought to Rhodesia. That was very well done, all things considered, trying to integrate these two completely different black rebel armies with the Rhodesian army itself. And in South Africa, we didn't really side with either the ANC (African National Congress) or PAC (Pan-African Congress). But the bureau always tended to support a leader who was effectively in power, even if he was a hard-core Marxist or demonstrably incapable of governing his country, because of this concern about stability. It sometimes leads you into supporting someone like Mobutu in Zaire - perhaps it was *"faute de mieux"* as much as anything - long after you shouldn't.

Q: The countries where you were, by being essentially small nations, you didn't have the tribal problems that beset most of Africa, did you? Was this sort of a real blessing or not?

MCCORMICK: A blessing. As you point out, the BLS countries are almost the only countries in Africa that are homogeneous. Yes, it meant that Botswana's internal politics were really very civilized by African standards, very restrained. Swaziland's were traditional – tribal in the sense of unified. Lesotho's were not. There was bitter internal conflict there, and the homogeneity didn't prevent it.

Q: Did business interests intrude?

MCCORMICK: There was little business interest in any of these three countries. The Africa bureau saw it as their job to drum up business interest. I was uncomfortable with this, because I had thought the job of the State Department was to evaluate in a very dispassionate sort of way and then advise American investors whether to get in there or not. That wasn't the mood; the mood was rather to think of all the talking points one could to make these unattractive African economies sound a little more attractive, because of course if Western capital did start flowing in it would increase development and reduce their dependence on aid.

Q: Let's talk a bit about your year of contemplation.

MCCORMICK: It was an outstanding program. I wish the State Department made more use of it. I went from '79 to '80. I chose to go to UCLA (University of California at Los Angeles). It had one of the best African programs, and it was a chance to go back to California. I hadn't lived there since I left to go into the Air Force. But I was disappointed in UCLA. They knew everything there is to know about the Horn of Africa or West Africa. They were tremendous experts. But they knew nothing about southern Africa. They hadn't a clue. They were delighted that I had come, because they thought I might know something. I couldn't understand how they could be so knowledgeable about the rest of Africa and so utterly ignorant about South Africa. The answer was that as a matter of political correctness they would not subscribe to journals from South Africa. They thought that was giving aid and succor to the apartheid regime. They would only deal with hardback books by scholars. That's a two and three year time lag, hopelessly behind any contemporary development. They also had a tendency to impose American assumptions on South Africa, which simply don't hold up. I found that their scholarship, which is of such a high level on other parts of Africa, was not very useful at all. I found other professors in California, Ned Munger at Caltech and others, who knew far more about South Africa because they were constantly going there.

Q: I think it is interesting to look at the state of higher education, because this helps mold thought about foreign policy. Was there almost a boycott on scholarships going to South Africa?

MCCORMICK: Very much. There was no interest at all in physically going there, or in establishing university-to-university links, much less in anything that could be misconstrued as somehow identifying with it. There was a boycott mentality, and of course the Marxist bent of the department. I have nothing against a Marxist bent in scholarship necessarily. Dick Sklar of that department was a Marxist and he was a very clear-minded expert on Nigeria. But in South Africa it led them into a trap. They taught their students that an analysis of South African politics should start with the New York banks who actually control what goes on there. That's ridiculous. I never found any empirical truth to that. In fact, what drives the Afrikaner politics is much more a history of opposition to international banks. If anything, they have kind of a socialist, red flag tendency.

Q: Also, did you find there were black national militants? Blacks will triumph?

MCCORMICK: Yes. A bit sophomoric sometimes. The sophistication just wasn't there regarding South Africa. The mindset was rather the one that you pointed out of "Won't there be a revolution, blacks rising up and overthrowing apartheid?" Well, maybe, maybe not. I didn't see that happening.

Q: Having already served there and dealing with the area, how did this mesh with the Foreign Service approach?

MCCORMICK: Some officers use this year to get an advanced degree; I didn't care about that but I had a very clear idea of what I wanted to learn. I had spent a lot of time in the region by then – a number of trips, the AID study I mentioned, a visit to look into a nuclear issue that arose. I had a lot of on-the-ground observations to draw from and I was looking for a broader, theoretical framework. What I found was that they couldn't help me that much on contemporary issues, but it was a chance to deepen my knowledge of history. So I spent a lot of time learning the historic background to the region. I could never have done that in the evenings while on duty.

Q: What were you concentrating on, South Africa, or southern Africa?

MCCORMICK: Increasingly on South Africa. It became clear to me during that year that I wanted to go to South Africa as a political officer. The bureau encouraged me.

Q: Did you write anything?

MCCORMICK: Yes, I did some work on this theme of regional interdependence. I also wrote on historic themes, because I didn't meet that many people who seemed to have a good grasp of Afrikaner history and politics. Nobody spoke the language. Nobody knew the journals. Nobody even seemed to be totally on top of the major political movements in Afrikaner history.

Q: I would imagine there would be a lot of looking upon this as being the Afrikaners are the benighted rednecks and you just have to brush them aside.

MCCORMICK: There was a lot of simple prejudice in that regard. The usual mistake that when one is far away, you sort of think of the whole country as being a certain way and you forget about the differences between the Cape and the north, or Natal and the Orange Free State.

Q: It is interesting. You are saying that this also permeated to a certain extent the State Department, not taking Afrikaans?

MCCORMICK: Yes, there was a reluctance. There may have been a particular sensitivity because the June 1976 Soweto riots had turned on the proximate issue of the role of Afrikaans in the black schools. They didn't want the embassy to look too much as if it was in bed with the South African government, business as usual. They wanted it to be rather confrontational, in the same mentality that we saw our embassies in the satellite states, as outposts. A special effort was made to assign black officers to test limits.

Q: I take it there was no program within the academic world going to the major South African white universities?

MCCORMICK: No. Ironically, had they done so they would have encountered South Africans with views very much like their own. Universities like Witwatersrand in Johannesburg prided themselves on being anti-apartheid. They were very familiar and comfortable places for us. But from a Foreign Service point of view, more interesting information came from places people never heard of; the University of Potchefstroom, for instance. Nobody's heard of Potchefstroom, but it was a hotbed of radical thinking among young Afrikaner intellectuals, whose parents were top national apartheid figures, but who were beginning to question it at a very fundamental level.

Q: I just want to take you back very quickly to your time when you were a desk officer. Did you get any feel for the expertise of the CIA at this point?

MCCORMICK: Better than it is now. At that time the CIA had not yet shifted to its current policy of rotating younger analysts into and out of these jobs more quickly. It had more people who had been around on a single account longer. These days, that is not the case and INR probably has more people who have been on an account long enough to know what they are talking about. In those days CIA had some pretty good people. They focused more than we did in the State Department on East-West conflict, Soviet role in Africa, what the Cubans are up to, military capability, and stability analysis.

Q: In this regard you mentioned you went on a study group looking at the nuclear explosion. Could you explain the genesis of why we were doing that and how you came out from this?

MCCORMICK: The intelligence people reported there was a flash or an explosion of some sort off the coast of South Africa and it could have indicated a nuclear explosion. Could that mean the South Africans had secretly tested an atom bomb? Do they have that capability; why would they do that? We wondered what sense would that make in South African planning. Would they spend money on something like that? What would they do with it? Well, it turned out that they had a sophisticated nuclear research center located between Johannesburg and Pretoria and it was named what is generally rendered either Pelindaba or Valindaba, which means "when the talking stops." That sounds rather ominous, like a Masada weapon. On the other hand, it really doesn't make a lot of sense because it is extremely expensive and what would they do with it? The group never did come to a final conclusion about whether this had been a South African nuclear test. They decided if it was, it almost certainly had an Israeli connection. The Israelis were very closely involved with South Africa at that time. They had no place of their own to test. In retrospect, we know the South Africans did pursue a nuclear weapons program, and in the end they renounced and gave up any attempt to develop it.

Q: Also in terms of military things, it made absolutely no sense at all. This is not the way you fight guerilla movements.

MCCORMICK: I wouldn't think so. But the only way to know would be to meet and talk to people, some South African military strategist, and draw them out. Of course it takes a lot of effort and time to build up those contacts. Having them is precisely the sort of thing the Africa bureau feared. So that is another example of where we were caught between the need to know what was going on and the need to look as though we don't talk to those people.

Q: It's interesting, because we were certainly doing just that with the Soviet Union. We were reading the journals, working hard to establish contact. We were getting a good idea of the Soviet military push.

MCCORMICK: We would be foolish not to do that. I never understood why we could not do the same thing in South Africa.

Q: How about when you were in Los Angeles, was there a South African consulate there? Were they helpful if there was?

MCCORMICK: There is, but I had no contact with them. It was a very academic year and I put it to pretty good use. It was worth it for the State Department because when I arrived in 1980 as a political officer in South Africa, I had a wealth of background of exactly the kind we needed.

Q: Just on a sociological note I guess, during the '60s and into the '70s, students were *challenging their professors. How did you find the mood of the students?*

MCCORMICK: All that atmosphere was gone. I remember asking students what they wanted to do, and having them answer in extremely material terms. They were ambitious to make money. One young woman said she was going to be a dentist. I said, "Oh, you're interested in that?" She said, "No, it sounds like a horrible thing but I've got to make a million dollars so I have to do it." I didn't see much rebelliousness.

Q: Well then, how about being a Foreign Service Officer? Were you able to do any recruiting or did you find yourself defending yourself?

MCCORMICK: Yes, there was tremendous interest. A certain amount of suspicion. All students and student groups with whom I ever spoke about this had the same question. "Wouldn't you find yourself defending policies you didn't agree with? What if you don't agree?" My answer was, "That happens much less than you might have thought." I didn't encourage them to think of a Foreign Service Officer as primarily sent out there to make speeches defending policy. I thought of it as primarily going out and trying to figure out what in the world was going on. What is the real truth behind some superficial shallow headline? I think of that as the core job of a Foreign Service Officer, at least political officers doing internal affairs.

Q: Did you find it difficult to keep up with all that was happening in the world while you were in Los Angeles?

MCCORMICK: Yes.

Q: I know when I visit my son in Pasadena, the Los Angeles Times is all right but you do kind of feel you have fallen off the edge of the world a bit.

MCCORMICK: You have very much gone away from the center of the world. Of course, the L.A. Times is an excellent paper, but you are absolutely right. Life is so pleasant, it is a long way away from some of these places, people don't have the same interest in policy as they might in Washington or London. But people were quite interested that somebody was there from the State Department who had traveled to many places, and was studying to learn more about them.

Q: In 1980 you are off to?

MCCORMICK: I went to South Africa to join the political section. I stayed there three years, from 1980 to 1983. When I arrived my job was transferred from Pretoria to Johannesburg. It was an embassy job, but we decided it is harder to know what is going on in certain areas from Pretoria than from Johannesburg. Black leaders, business, and NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations) are there. So I lived in Johannesburg and reported through the consul general there, George Trail.

Q: What was the situation in South Africa when you got there in 1980?

MCCORMICK: Tense. Recovering from the 1976 Soweto riots. A guerrilla war on in Namibia.

Refugees arriving from Rhodesia. But I did mostly internal politics. I loved it. The ambassador, Bill Edmondson, was a very good ambassador. He knew I knew the country and he gave me a very long leash to go out and develop good information. Being at the consulate, I had a great advantage. I escaped a great deal of the work that kept my colleagues in the embassy with paperwork, while I was out on the street all day. Of course, that makes you look a great deal better than you are. The wire services and newspaper correspondents there had such a fever pitch of expecting revolution that they were constantly jumping on little tiny things. They often missed the larger stories, but they caused a stir in Washington. So I would be sent off for days at a time to track down information that we wanted, and of course I wound up with much better contacts than anyone else because I had the time to develop them. You can't develop those contacts after you need to know; you have to build them up beforehand. So the system worked much more effectively than what I have seen in other embassies where FSOs are increasingly behind their desks because of paperwork, trying to know what's going on out there without being out there. I had a huge range of contacts. Contrary to what people had told me, I found I liked everyone in South Africa. I liked the Afrikaners, I liked the black nationalists, I liked the English, I liked the Indians, I liked the Coloreds - I didn't find anyone I didn't get along with. I found it much easier than I would have thought as a white middle class foreigner to establish contact with black activists.

Q: In other words you have to get someone you can talk to so you aren't rushing out and catching somebody on the street.

MCCORMICK: Exactly. I also had the tremendous advantage of coming off this year of study with a great deal of background. That made it much easier to get past all the natural suspicion of a U.S. diplomat. Black activists in particular were used to talking in a very guarded fashion, a kind of code. There was no reason why they should open up and spell out everything to a foreigner in words which would get them into trouble. Government people often did the same, for different reasons. What I found was that the historical and other work that I had done researching those movements and their background (both black movements and the Afrikaner political rise and its background), all of this allowed me to speak in a perfectly comprehensible way without spelling everything out in a way which would cause them to draw back and close up tight. I hope the bureau is still investing in those study years; they're worth their weight in gold.

Q: In effect, spelling it out would make an over-commitment.

MCCORMICK: An over-commitment was dangerous. So you needed to know the codes. If they made an allusion and what they meant was to try and tell you that this was going to be the party line now, if you ask, "Well, who is that you are talking about and tell me the story of how that person won his conflict within the party against this other person or what that means," they'll just dry up.

Q: Well, let's take Soweto.

MCCORMICK: Southwestern Township. The word is actually an acronym, because of course it is the classic monument of this massive social engineering that the Nationalist government did when it came to power in '48 and created an orderly, sterile, segregated, ultimately miserable township to replace the old Sophiatown slums. Not in Johannesburg, it is actually miles away out in the veldt.

Q: Could you go in there without having South Africans (I'm talking about the government) checking you out?

MCCORMICK: You could go wherever you wanted. There were no restrictions on foreign diplomats on where they went and who they talked to. I would not conclude from that that it was without their being aware of it. But no, there were no restrictions on our movement.

Q: How did you make your contacts?

MCCORMICK: Well, the idea of being sent into Soweto was a little bit daunting because, remember the riots are still pretty new, and this is the equivalent for an American of going into some very rough slum areas and I felt a little bit ill at ease. The place was dangerous. Some of the leaders I wanted to meet would be perfectly happy to meet in Johannesburg. We could have lunch, a cup of coffee, or whatever. Eventually I would go to their homes, which I found quite interesting. But others would meet you only in the equivalent of back alleys. Some of them were unpleasant, and of course those might be the ones most valuable to know, so you rely on other people to vouch for you and you just have to be very careful to build up a reputation for not being some kind of spy or just the careless type who gets someone in trouble by talking too much. By the time I left South Africa, I was struck by how comfortable I felt in Soweto and other black townships, and how much I had been in people's homes. I'm not sure that has always been my experience in every country, and of all places to find yourself invited into homes -- I'm including illegal taverns and "shebeens", speakeasies. That starts slowly. You don't walk in on day one, especially a white middle class foreigner, and do that. Soweto was pretty raw. But I was struck by the extent to which so many American preconceptions about Johannesburg were out of date. People had told me it would be like segregation in the Jim Crow days. A lot of that was actually ignored by the time I arrived in South Africa. You could certainly take a black guest to dinner at international scale restaurants. You would not be able to do that in a small café out in a small town in the countryside. In Johannesburg, nobody cared about so-called "petty apartheid" any more.

Q: What would you say the mood and the attitude of the leaders in Soweto, the ANC, type of...

MCCORMICK: Well, there is no doubt that Nelson Mandela's African National Congress was the most important organization commanding the loyalty of black nationalists. The Pan-African Congress, led by Robert Sobukwe, was the second largest, a distinct minority. On the other hand, while I was there, there was a sharp rise in a movement which they called black consciousness. That was generating support, among the young in particular, for the PAC's approach. The African National Congress, the ANC, was an inter-racial movement. It was not a racist or a counter-racist movement. It was socialist; it was Communist oriented. The Soviets controlled their purse and their military wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe. But it would have described itself as a Marxist, non-racist movement, anti-apartheid. And many of its leaders were Indian, Colored, and white. The PAC, by contrast, was a militantly racial movement. The killing of Steve Biko led a lot of younger blacks to throw their lot in with this radical, throw-the-whites-out group, with their motto of “one settler, one bullet.” The two groups couldn’t stand each other. Then, as you remarked, there was a third movement, Inkatha. Technically speaking, Inkatha was not a political party but a cultural movement, which allowed it to get around all kinds of laws and bans. It was probably 85% Zulu, the other 15% coming from those tribes which identified with the Zulus because they had been Christianized later, educated later, and remained more tribal, so they were looked down on by the other tribal groups as being kind of backwards. So the ANC was the key. In retrospect, we know that it emerged as the government now in the post-apartheid era. That was not self-evident in those days. The embassy maintained a lively debate on these three groups and which one would emerge on top, if any of them would.

Q: How were we seeing the ANC? What were they after, as we saw it, in this ‘80-’83 period?

MCCORMICK: We maintained a dialogue with their leadership in exile. That was easy. You would call to make an appointment with them in Lusaka. Inside South Africa it was a little harder. You had to gain their confidence and see them with a certain amount of privacy, but you didn’t want to push this to the point of being PNGed (declared “persona non grata”). The Africa Bureau tended to see them as a government-in-waiting, and was trying to wean them away from their Communist allies. I personally never trusted the ANC. It was not a democratic movement or a terribly nice one. But it never decided to make a really major use of terrorism, and that was the key. It made it easier for us to deal with them and ultimately made it possible for the ANC to turn itself into a responsible government under Mandela.

Q: You arrived during the end of the Carter Administration and then we had the Reagan Administration. Was this seen with a certain amount of apprehension by yourself and others?

MCCORMICK: It was seen with apprehension by South African blacks. A number of white South Africans thought Reagan would be pro-South African and turn a blind eye to apartheid. Nobody really knew that much about him and how he would act. However, at that time black activists were focused on a problem of their own, because they were trying to lead a movement of increasingly unruly, dangerous, and alienated young people who wanted action. They wanted to do something. Being unable to mount any organized resistance, like the idea of somehow storming the Bastille, what they did was to turn on their elders, on the educational system in particular, and they tried to boycott them or destroy them. So they wouldn’t go to school and wouldn’t allow anyone else to go to school. They thought it would bring the country to its knees. They called it “making ourselves too heavy to carry.” Well, that’s pretty double-edged stuff. The serious leaders knew it was a kind of suicide and they were desperate to regain control. If they didn’t, they thought, there would be chaos and they would become irrelevant.

Q: I was thinking this is probably a good place to stop and we have already talked about dealing with Soweto and dealing with the ANC leaders. We will pick up dealing with Afrikaners, the university people and I suppose it should be the more liberal. Then your impression of the implementation of our policy of constructive engagement. Also the Sullivan boycott. Then how the embassy was seeing things and what we were doing in development at that time.

Q: This is the 8th of September 2000. Let’s talk about those things I mentioned before. How about the Afrikaners, were we able to tap into them?

MCCORMICK: We had difficulty understanding Afrikaner politics and Afrikaners. We approached them in a negative and biased spirit, looking down on them as if they were a bunch of rednecks (which, by the way, has the opposite meaning in Afrikaans: a naive city person whose neck is red instead of tan because he doesn't get out in the real world enough). We didn't speak enough Afrikaans. We didn't really want to see the Afrikaner point of view; we wanted to have a cartoon preconception about them. At one meeting, I recall the assistant secretary, Dick Moose, actually saying that he didn't think that they were very rational, we shouldn't waste much time on figuring out their motives and rationale. I can't imagine a statement I would disagree with more. We needed to understand the South African government's strategy and policy and internal dynamics and its fears and plans.

Q: Were you able to talk to Afrikaner leaders without having it turn into political lectures on their side, and political lectures on your side?

MCCORMICK: Yes, I found no difficulty at all in talking to Afrikaners. They were highly sensitive to prejudice, but the minute you signaled, through perhaps just a bit of the use of Afrikaans, or something else, that you weren't approaching with the usual anti-Teutonic prejudices of the English-speaker, they were actually quite open. I rarely encountered the kind of harangue we had been warned about. Actually, I thought they kind of longed to be understood. The government put a high priority on good relations with the United States, which is why American diplomats like me who stayed in contact with the representatives of "terrorists" didn't just get thrown out.

Q: We knew what we wanted. We wanted to see a color-ban-free South Africa and no problems, but because of the educational system and background, was there a feeling that if the native Africans took over the whole place would fall apart? Or were we looking at a situation where we felt these things would work out?

MCCORMICK: That was a very real concern. As diplomats, our primary job was not to change South Africa's internal situation, but to deal with its external policy. Most of us spent our time trying to think how to get South Africa to use its leverage with Rhodesia toward a peace agreement or to let their territory of Southwest Africa evolve into an independent Namibia. But a lot of my job was to encourage them in this experiment that they seemed to be gradually beginning, of moving slowly away from apartheid and eventually perhaps considering some form of mixed or even majority rule. Imagine how daunting that must have seemed to them, to think of turning everything your family has built up for hundreds of years over to an angry, poor, and enormous Third World population. Just for a start, such things as public schools would probably become impossible, financially impossible, to keep at First World levels. But the key was always law and order and democracy. We kept telling them that as long as a majority government was democratic, it didn't really matter whether they were competent, because they would have and use the same white expertise the country always had as long as there wasn't the kind of bitterness and reverse oppression which would drive them out.

Q: Were there pretty strong divisions in the black politics?

MCCORMICK: Well, we talked about ANC and PAC. Black politics were dominated by the tension between those two movements and the tension between the reformers and the revolutionaries. It was very difficult for some Soweto leaders with whom the embassy maintained contact through its self-help programs, for example, to keep doing what they were doing, which was reformist in nature, against the criticism of some black leaders who wanted to "shut the country down." And of course there was a lot of tension among the language groups or tribes. Different parts of Soweto spoke Zulu or Sesotho or another language, and there was little love lost between them.

Q: You keep talking about Soweto. Was Soweto where the action was? Were there black settlements elsewhere?

MCCORMICK: Soweto dominated black political action and thinking. However, we also needed to know what was going on in other black townships and the countryside. Attitudes in the villages were very different, and it's easy to be naive when you live in the city, surrounded by people who speak English. And you needed to contact individual people who had been banned, sent out to some little place in the middle of nowhere to cut them off from political activism. We did a lot of traveling, to every corner of the country. You have to. It's one of the reasons I joined the Foreign Service in the first place, to do exactly that, and if you don't get out and around you soon get out of touch. I traveled to almost every corner of the country, and we've got to keep our officers doing that and not allow them to get bogged down at their desks -- especially in Africa where everything looks very different once you go outside the air-conditioning zone.

Q: What about communication? What was the way these people kept in touch – BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation), Voice of America?

MCCORMICK: South Africans were always in close touch with the world. There was never anything like the Radio Free Europe culture, with its censorship and samizdat and so forth. Until the 1948 elections when the National Party came to power and began the policy of apartheid, it had always been a very open society, with a free press and a free judiciary. Most of the English press was violently anti-apartheid, so anyone could pick up newspapers like the Rand Daily Mail and get an attitude very critical of the government and the kind of reporting you wouldn't get in a closed society. South Africa was not a closed society. Information flowed fairly freely. There was the BBC and so forth, but the picture I would paint was of a country where power was held with a strict monopoly but where the civil society was actually quite open.

Q: Did you ever have confrontations with the police officials on various things?

MCCORMICK: Very rarely. I went there expecting it. Even though so many of the preconceptions about South Africa that I was taught in Washington turned out to be such nonsense, I kept expecting the police to interfere with us. This just didn't happen and we often asked ourselves why, because we knew the perception in Washington was of a much stiffer police state. I suppose it was because the government wanted good relations. After a while it stopped occurring to me to think of the police as any kind of danger to me. I was much more afraid of my contacts. I knew a number of senior officers in the police, including in the secret police. One of them told me when I first arrived that if I ever had a problem with a burglar, to shoot first and not take any risks, and they would make sure that no trouble came of it. They assumed I owned a handgun.

Q: Did you have people, particularly from the African-American movement or whatever you want to call it in the United States - Jesse Jackson and others, come to make a certain amount of political hay?

MCCORMICK: Yes. Perfectly normal. Some of them were frustrated because they expected apartheid to be crude and visible, like throwing people out of restaurants because they were black. At the kind of restaurants they went to, people would roll their eyes at that idea. The vicious side of apartheid was more subtle.

Q: If you were in Israel, you would get the reverse, but I mean they would be coming looking for something. Did you get that?

MCCORMICK: Absolutely. Visitors came with a scenario in mind and looked for evidence to confirm it. Their mistake was thinking that South Africa was not a foreign country with its own dynamics but a kind of replay of the civil rights days in America. It wasn't and it isn't. Its political dynamics had more in common with those of Israel. The whites were torn – they didn't want a police state, they wanted a peaceful and democratic country, but they were afraid of drowning in an African majority. In the end there were the imperatives of the economy. Harry Oppenheimer, who died last month, was the voice of the liberal business community there, which thought apartheid was ridiculous and just wanted to get on with a colorblind, free market state.

Q: What about the American media? Did you feel the reporting was pretty good?

MCCORMICK: I thought the reporting was awful. I was very disappointed in it. The individual correspondents, with whom we maintained close contact, were all highly intelligent and understood a lot of these paradoxes. They were trying, just as we were, to inject reality as we saw it on the ground into the preconceptions of their editors in the U.S.. Nevertheless, I found reporting on South Africa to be very poor. It was full of misconceptions. It focused on little eruptions of violence which had no political relevance and missed important, larger stories.

Q: The reporters you met and exchanged information with, I assume you were trying to tell them what was happening because there was no particular reason not to have them aware that this was an important element in the formation of policy. Was it happening in their minds? What were you getting from that?

MCCORMICK: I recall reporters expressing their frustration that they were expected to write to certain preconceptions. One of these was the tendency to see all of black South Africa's interests as analogous to African-American interests, whereas in many ways they are actually more analogous to Native American problems and issues. There isn't the history of slavery, there was a history of being driven off their land by settlers in wagon trains. For many black South Africans, the real problems had and have to do with development issues, but the media didn't pick those up because they're complex and they didn't fit the paradigm. They wanted to cover a revolution, and that wasn't going to happen. Meanwhile, they missed the real story of why and how both sides began to change their strategies.

Q: From what you are saying, this helps explain why so many of us thought there would be a night of long knives. But we were sort of surprised that the actual transition to a black African government worked fairly well and we weren't prepared for it.

MCCORMICK: The embassy was more prepared than most. It's true that within the mission and the bureau, I was by far the most optimistic about it, and we used to joke about that – that I refused to think in terms of bloody revolution. I never gave any credence at all to the idea of a night of long knives. Things don't work like that in South Africa. Many South Africans would say it was different from the rest of Africa and I thought they were right. For example, the picture I painted of a country trying to hold on to western standards, or let's say trying at a minimum to keep the economy functioning efficiently by not sliding totally into the incompetence that dictatorship brings. For example, the gulf between older and younger white South Africans as to how much they were willing to sacrifice in their own lives in order to maintain the white monopoly on power. For example, the sense South Africans had of "riding the tiger" – how do you get off safely? For example, the amount of energy – most of it missed by the press -- that Afrikaners put into their thinking about a safer future.

Q: Was there concern or were you seeing a brain drain of the best and the brightest, particularly white South Africans?

MCCORMICK: That was never a critical factor in South Africa as it was in Rhodesia. There were just too many white South Africans. The image of them all wanting to flee to America or Australia was just not true. I never thought that was crucial. What was crucial was the question of whether they were going to have a modern economy or be shackled by the inability to use talented black labor. What was interesting about a government fighting to remain a part of the Western world was how much of their economic policy resembled the very Third World countries they despised. Remember, the Nationalist government that came to power and instituted apartheid did so, to a large degree, in order to lift the Afrikaner people from a very poor, oppressed and down-trodden sort of farm and laboring class, really 1930 Dust Bowl images, into a prosperous modern people. Afrikaner nationalism had a strong socialist element to it, a statist and dirigist element. Perfectly natural; no one ought to write about South Africa who doesn't understand what "Hoggenheimer" means. Against that was the liberal, English-speaking business community. That's why one important wing of the embassy was always dead set against economic sanctions. They reasoned that the economy and the business community was the very backbone of these forces pushing for reform, and that if economic sanctions weakened that business community we were weakening the very middle class effort that was the hope for a peaceful transition. So we had strong debates about whether economic sanctions would be a useful lever or a disaster.

Q: What was the status at that time? Did we have sanctions at that time?

MCCORMICK: We did not. We had a vigorous American economic presence in South Africa and when you looked at it closely, it looked very good. Most American companies paid decent wages; they followed the so-called Sullivan Principles, which you mentioned, about fair treatment; they promoted black managers; they integrated cafeterias. They, in general, set a good example. I was surprised because I'm pretty cynical about such companies and my personal bias is I would expect to find that they were simply exploiting the situation. I didn't find that.

Q: We knew what we wanted. In a way it must have been pretty frustrating for you all. In other words, if you have to deal with a problem, it is best to know the reality of it. Even if you are both on the same side - you both want to get rid of apartheid - you better understand what this was all about rather than to create a boogie man.

MCCORMICK: It was very frustrating for several of us in the embassy because, by our Foreign Service training, clearly the way you know what is going on here and predict the future is to get close to the power brokers. Those power brokers are Afrikaner and to get close to them you have to understand the dynamics of Afrikaner politics. You need to know, for example, how real is the threat from the Afrikaners who had broken away to form a separate party on the right – were they a serious electoral threat? You need to know what sort of intellectual proposals are being floated in private among Afrikaners about where they might go. You need to know what the security forces, what the military and the police are advising. You need to know that the average black person in the townships fears the coming of a police vehicle but is relieved to see an army presence. That is seen entirely differently - far less threatening and violent. We were handicapped in doing that by the concern that we would be perceived in Washington and the U.S. as somehow being too much in bed with the government. For example, there was a very important philosopher who argued that the Afrikaner people had survived two great treks already - the first one being the Great Trek into the physical wilderness in 1832 and the second one the great trek into the economic wilderness of the cities when they fled their poverty-stricken farms in the 1930s. Why could they not survive a third great trek into the political wilderness of giving up their monopoly of power? Those were very powerful and influential images and it seemed to me ridiculous not to follow that debate. His name was Wimpie de Klerk and his brother became the president who released Nelson Mandela.

Q: Well, how did you feel - you mentioned Dick Moose, who was the head of the Africa bureau? Did you feel that at the top of the African Bureau - You were there from when to when?

MCCORMICK: I was there when the new assistant secretary, Chet (Chester) Crocker, came in. Suddenly things were different. Crocker came in with expertise in southern Africa and a strong commitment to what he called constructive engagement with the South Africans, as opposed to simply walking away. We took lots of flack for this because constructive engagement is the same phrase used by people who defend business involvement in a lot of countries that you wonder about. He was intellectually consistent about this and ran a very successful policy on that basis for several years.

Q: Did you feel that your reports were going in to a bureau that was more willing to listen to what you were saying?

MCCORMICK: Yes, definitely. Crocker was interested in facts and far more open-minded when they challenged preconceptions.

Q: Under the Carter administration, you had the feeling that you were almost cut off because there was a curse of political correctness.

MCCORMICK: I think that is right. Both parties came to the subject of South Africa with intellectual baggage, but political correctness was the curse of the Carter Administration.

Q: There were elements within the Republican Party to the right that were harking back to the southern anti-black.

MCCORMICK: There were. They made the same mistake of not wanting to see South African blacks for what they were. There were preconceptions on both sides but I would say, in general, it was easier on the professionals during the Crocker era. The Republican right wing couldn't stand him.

Q: Well, hadn't there been something about "the first one was going to be an African?" The Africa bureau ran across a problem of somebody getting involved with "mother's milk" working for Nestle.

MCCORMICK: I don't remember that, although it sounds like something I would have been terribly interested in. At the time I was probably quite focused on the country I was posted in.

Q: What about things non-governmental organizations (NGOs) were doing, like giving covert support to develop political movement, mimeograph machines, typewriters and the equivalent thereof?

MCCORMICK: Yes. The embassy ran an extensive self-help program to give support to people doing all kinds of constructive things, from books for libraries in black areas to equipment to begin establishing an NGO. There was no attempt by the apartheid government to interfere with or disrupt these programs. The programs helped us to establish contacts. One important drawback was that we could not extend them to so-called homeland areas where the need was greatest, because it was our policy not to have anything to do with the homelands because we didn't want to look as if we recognized them. That's pretty tough on the people in these places. I opposed that policy. It was like refusing to help the victims in order to punish the government. We also had a firm policy that U.S. diplomats would never go there. That meant we had no idea what was going on out there. These places were dumping grounds for "excess" labor, and it was wrong not to be aware of what conditions were like in them.

Q: Sort of like not talking to the PLO (Palestinian Liberation Organization).

MCCORMICK: Like not talking to the PLO. Well, pressure was building up, among the rank and file officers like myself, that this was silly. We might have a policy of non-recognition, but does that mean we should never send anybody in to look and see what is going on? So we had an extensive debate over changing that policy. Eventually, the embassy won, and in 1982 we were given permission to make the first tentative visits to the homelands. I was tapped to do it because that fell in my area.

Q: So what did you see?

MCCORMICK: Well, the first thing we saw was, it was very difficult on the ground to distinguish between the homelands created by South Africa and the bordering states created by the British. Botswana and Bophuthatswana, for example, didn't look very different. Lesotho and Qwaqwa looked very similar on the surface. We also found that, as you would expect, creating little miniature states entrenched a political class and we found that those ranged from fairly popular to completely unsupported and corrupt. There were a lot of these homelands. Dozens of them scattered all over the country with a large black population. The dilemma was how to aid the people in them without becoming party to the policy of stuffing unwanted people there instead of sharing power with them.

Q: How did the homelands work? Was this where the women stayed while the men went to work in Soweto.

MCCORMICK: That is right, an overstatement, but that is exactly what they were.

Q: Well, was there a political movement in these areas?

MCCORMICK: No. That was another question the embassy had. How do we know, for example, are these places potential bases for some kind of a geographic black authority that would be analogous to the Palestinian Authority, or is that nonsense? Are they bases for guerrilla movements, or a reservoir of conservative black thinking? Are they ecological and economic disasters? What we found is more the latter.

These areas were where the development problems that South Africa faced were being shoved off and postponed. They had exactly the problems faced by any developing country and you can't put them off forever; quarantining them out in the country is just going to mean that South Africa ten or twenty years down the line is just going to face bigger, unsolved developmental problems. Then we have the dilemma - shouldn't the United States be doing something now to help South Africa deal with the developmental problems that it would face some day as a majority ruled state? Or should we do no such thing because that is just helping prolong the situation?

Q: By the time you left, did we have any feel about what we were going to do with these?

MCCORMICK: Not in the short run. But we began to integrate developmental problems into our thinking about South Africa and its future. That was all for the good, because when majority rule did come, the U.S. would want to turn around and pour assistance into South Africa, and these areas would be the greatest challenge. Under Crocker, we at least knew more about what was going on and understood the place a great deal better after 1982. We also knew there wouldn't be a Rhodesia-style guerrilla war beginning in the homelands.

Q: What about crime overall? Crime has become quite a problem in South Africa today. I'm talking about 2000, but in the early 1980s, was one of the benefits of apartheid keeping crime down?

MCCORMICK: I suppose it was. At least, it kept crime out of the white developed areas. Soweto always had a high crime rate. It was an enormous area with the kind of atmosphere which Alan Paton describes in Cry, The Beloved Country. But the overall rate was lower. The high crime rate today affects both black and white communities. Not only whites, but blacks also, used to feel far safer from crime than they do today. It was not a major problem for the embassy.

Q: It is today.

MCCORMICK: It is; they are very security conscious, as everyone is there, black or white. But in the early '80s that was not a major threat or problem.

Q: It sounds like you had a police force that would come down heavily on crime.

MCCORMICK: Yes, although they had fewer policemen per capita than the U.S. does. I just don't remember worrying about it, though people would complain at cocktail parties.

Q: What about other embassies and their non-governmental organizations? One thinks of the Swedes, or the remains of the German Socialists, and others taking a very strong interest in Africa per se, and I was wondering whether they were working in these particular fields, too.

MCCORMICK: Some were. The Australians and the British. The Swedes placed all their bets on the future government. They thought the ANC was a revolutionary movement which would come to power by force. They were not willing to do anything to improve the internal situation in the meantime. It left them without any influence or knowledge about what was going on internally. That is what Crocker meant by "walking away from the situation."

Q: How about the French?

MCCORMICK: French policy was much more practical. There was considerable cooperation, nothing like the romantic Swedish view. Other countries were even more so. The South Africans' most intimate relations were with the Israelis and Taiwan – the league of outcasts.

Q: We had this very close relationship with Israel, particularly the intellectual community in the United States, which had a heavy Jewish influence, but is violently opposed to South Africa. Did this cause a bit of a problem for reporting officers?

MCCORMICK: We were not encouraged to get into that area very much. I don't know whether it was because there was concern about embarrassing Israel or because Washington just didn't want its embassy getting into the military field.

Q: It was the military.

MCCORMICK: Relations between South Africa and Israel were primarily military and strategic.

Q: Well, did you get any feel from anybody, from our attaches, about the South African military?

MCCORMICK: Oh, yes, the role of the military was important. In Rhodesia, we missed the important fact that the army was out in front of the government in its willingness to allow majority rule as long as it was constitutionally done. In South Africa, we knew the military was more pragmatic than the party. The navy didn't even bother with segregation since it was impractical aboard a ship, and the army didn't bother with it in the war zone in Namibia. They cared about survival of the state. If apartheid is a threat to a continued South African state, get rid of it. The security police gave different advice since they were focused on maintaining control of the townships.

Q: When you were there, who was the president?

MCCORMICK: P.W. Botha.

Q: How was he viewed?

MCCORMICK: By South Africans? A relative liberal, in their context, a *verligte*. He was from the Cape, where attitudes toward race are not as hard as in the north. He was also a pragmatist. He focused on South Africa's domestic issues more than President Vorster, who had been extremely active in the rest of Africa. But generally, his regime was moving the country gradually but inexorably toward some kind of accommodation or even transition.

Q: Were you able to get out and look at - I think of the Boer farmers out in the countryside running little plantations?

MCCORMICK: That is still an accurate image in some places, but then it is equally accurate to talk about "Boers" as industrial magnates and sophisticated academics.

Q: I'm talking about just getting out into the country.

MCCORMICK: When you went to the countryside to try to get a feel, for example, for the depth of the seriousness of the rightwing challenge to the National Party, which was strongest out in the countryside, I had difficulty finding that sort of paradigmatic, archetypal Afrikaner. I'm sure they were there but either there are a lot fewer of these people than we think or I didn't find them. But I did come across some very hard line views in smaller towns, convinced the government was being sweet-talked by the West into committing suicide. But we had to be careful we didn't fall into the journalists' trap of looking for a story to match your stereotype.

Q: This, of course, is the problem. Most of us in the Foreign Service may not be liberal in all of our politics but we think of the South of the 1930s or '40s even as being a certain way, and you get surprised by race relations in many places. It just wasn't the way we thought it was.

MCCORMICK: One idea that was quite important to get over was that it is hard for Americans to see Africa as a permanent home. We think of it as something temporary. Always a little dangerous. You keep an eye over your shoulder and if things get too bad you might have to leave, like Lebanese traders in Liberia. Well that is utter nonsense, of course, for people who have been there for 350 years. They have no place to go and wouldn't want to go anyway. In a peculiar way, they are much more comfortable with being a white minority in a black majority than we would be. They'd like to be a dominant minority, of course, but it's like the difference in racial attitudes here between the South and the North. Afrikaners and black Africans understand each other very well, and neither of them is going to leave and go live somewhere else.

Q: As you were there sort of as an observer, was there a predictable metamorphosis among the Foreign Service Officers that came out after going through and saying, "Gee whiz, things are quite different" and changing not their basic attitude or being opposed to this but a little more understanding?

MCCORMICK: Oh, very much. Most people in the embassy thought we were always struggling to insert reality into the preconceptions in Washington, though things were so much better after Crocker took over.

Q: You left there when?

MCCORMICK: I left in 1983, and came back to Washington. My family wanted to return to Washington. I didn't; I liked the overseas assignments, but that wasn't what was best for the kids. That point has dominated my career: I have four children, all of whom need very good and demanding schools, so I was never able to go to some of the more exotic places I was interested in. So I went back to Washington as desk officer for East Germany.

Q: When you left, whither South Africa as you left there?

MCCORMICK: Not to any kind of revolution. To the end of apartheid, and eventually an unavoidable transition to some sort of shared rule. I gave apartheid 20 years, and was wrong by half. But I always thought the whites would voluntarily relinquish their monopoly on power and form a kind of racial coalition government. I certainly came away with a very strong belief that the future would not be driven by violence and would not be driven by the strength of the ANC, either as a revolutionary movement or as a guerrilla force. It might be driven by economic issues, including sanctions. But much more likely, it would be driven by the simple fact that nobody wanted civil war. Looking back, South Africa's emergence as a peaceful democratic state, its safe transition, and the fact that I was able to play a small role in encouraging it, is one of the most important satisfactions of my life. When you are a small and proud and frightened country, wondering if the leap of faith the world is yelling at you to take is suicide, it makes a great deal of difference if the representatives of the most successful country in the world are telling you, "You can do it, it is going to work. You're going to be all right."

Q: When most of us come back to Washington, we are full of all sorts of knowledge that we want to impart. Were you able to impart any of that?

MCCORMICK: Well, actually, I did. Usually Americans have a limited interest in hearing all of your great expertise. South Africa was different. Everybody had an opinion; everybody had an interest; everybody did want to know. Many people were quite surprised by observations from the ground. Two years later, I was sent on a tour around the western part of the country to talk about South Africa. This was after the debate on sanctions heated up. My job was to go find some television station, radio station, newspaper, or anybody else who would interview me and ask, “What does the State Department think about South Africa?” I found interest much higher than I would have thought.

Q: Did you find yourself up against people who were so committed to the cause of the black Africans that you ended up sounding like an apologist of the regime?

MCCORMICK: Perhaps, perhaps, because the dominant attitude was a sense of injustice, not a desire to actually be involved improving, but a desire to think that somehow it would all be changed by a convulsion of history. I was saying I didn’t see anything like that happening. If we want to change things there it will take a sustained, comprehensive American involvement, which is just what people didn’t want to do.

Q: Let’s go from ‘83 to ‘85 when you were on the East German desk.
MCCORMICK: That’s right.

Q: I can’t recall, what was your connection to Germany before? Did you serve in Germany?

MCCORMICK: I came into the Foreign Service as a Europeanist, but became fascinated by southern Africa and went off there for several years. I was always interested in coming back into European affairs. I had chosen this job very carefully, hoping to get it. I was the entire East German desk - one person - within an office which was very much focused on West Germany, so much more important. I wasn’t too interested in being on that larger desk where I feared I would be number whatever. On the other hand, East Germany seemed to be a very important country where there really was an opportunity to do a little bit of policy.

Q: How did we view East Germany in 1983? What were our relations?

MCCORMICK: Well, our relations couldn’t have been worse: they were minimal, they were cold, they were distant. East Germany was seen as the toughest and most dangerous of the Soviet satellites. I always thought the GDR (German Democratic Republic) might be the last of the satellites to go. A critical bastion for the Soviets. I could envision other satellites changing, leaving the Bloc, escaping as it were, before I could envision Moscow giving up the GDR. On the other hand, all this had gotten frozen into a real anomaly in our policy. Our grand policy at the time with the satellites was one of differentiation. We would treat each of them differently, according to how independent they were of the Soviet Union. It was a great idea but it was a one dimensional criterion. It wound up in paradoxes such as the fact that Romania was highly independent of the Soviet Union but extremely oppressive domestically. The GDR on the other hand wasn’t independent at all. Couldn’t move a bit. They were tightly controlled by the Soviet Union. But they had bilateral issues with the United States of some importance. We were not thinking about those. We had no means of addressing them. A new ambassador had gone out, Rozanne Ridgway, a professional FSO. One of the best I have ever met. Very practical thinker. Took one look at this and said, “We need to make up a package of the American bilateral interests with the GDR and think about how we might advance those interests and see what might be done.” It turned out there were very concrete interests. We had claims by American citizens against the GDR dating back to the Holocaust. We had the fact that the East Germans, unlike the West Germans, had never paid any serious compensation to Jewish victims. We had important art works on both sides that belonged to the other one. Americans had liberated them or stole them from the eastern part of Germany, and East Germany had things that really belonged back in the United States. We had the fact that American churches had important co-religionists in Germany who were not allowed to practice their religion, who cared about that and wanted the State Department to win them some space. We had a lot of other issues of bilateral interest.

Q: Family reunification problems still?

MCCORMICK: Family reunification problems could, conceptually at least, be taken care of multilaterally through the Helsinki process. What she proposed, and what I learned about on arriving on the desk and was an instant convert to, was a very practical diplomatic initiative bilaterally with the GDR. These were nuts and bolts State Department issues and I was delighted to deal with them.

Q: This was the fairly mature Reagan Administration, George Shultz was Secretary of State. Who was Assistant Secretary for European Affairs?

MCCORMICK: Rick Burt. You are absolutely right to place it squarely in the Reagan Administration environment because, seen from the GDR point of view, Reagan was a wild man threatening World War III. He was not only tough, he was dangerous. There was a very strong feeling in East Germany, a genuine fear, not propaganda, that Reagan had abandoned the containment policy and embarked on roll-back. If so, the GDR was in real danger. They were quite worked up about this. Erich Honecker, the head of East Germany, said detente was over. We were headed for a new Cold War that would be worse than anything in the past. A new Ice Age. He canceled a breakthrough visit to West Germany and put a screeching halt to the process of inner-German cooperation and detente. So when I went over there for my first visit, I ran into a tremendously fearful, angry, worked-up GDR perspective. They seemed to believe there was a real danger of war. I remember this very strongly, because I found myself at a meeting in the foreign ministry in front of a large audience of people who somehow had the impression that I had been sent there with a message, although I can't imagine why they thought it would be entrusted to a mere desk officer.

Q: This was an arranged question and answer time?

MCCORMICK: Yes, I thought it was supposed to be just a routine orientation session for a junior visitor but it turned into a large and very serious, businesslike, and intellectually rigorous confrontation, totally unlike anything I had experienced in Africa. I think they had a fundamental misconception about my rank. It was actually a wonderful, exhilarating debate, because they really knew what they were talking about, as I found out on many similar visits. Very demanding. The message I was trying to convey was that the Reagan Administration thought of itself as using its first term to build military strength back up, but they would see that its second term would be dedicated to turning that into some serious arms control agreement. After all, you don't build up your strength for nothing, you build it up for the express purpose of being in a position to turn it into concrete arms reduction or arms control agreements. This turned out, of course, to be true, but it was really just a personal opinion, a typical Foreign Service view. What electrified them was that I confirmed that we were prepared to change the policy of differentiation, that our policy toward East Germany would become bilateral, and could be insulated from overall East-West relations even if those went south. This is what the embassy had been telling them but it looked as if it was being confirmed by Washington.

Q: That is the way most administrations go, too. There is a learning process in foreign affairs. The world out there is a complicated place and you can posture, and then all of a sudden you begin to come to reality and find ways of getting things done.

MCCORMICK: The real impact, of course, was made by Ambassador Ridgway's brilliant handling of the negotiations. She could out-sit GDR negotiators who were masters of the iron-bottom school of dragging out negotiations. My boss, John Kornblum, had tremendous respect for her and sensed the opening she was creating. His boss, Tom Niles, also sensed it and handled it with enormous skill. I had the sense of working for real professionals. Both Ridgway and Kornblum were later assistant secretaries of EUR (Bureau of European Affairs).

Q: You really had people who were steeped in European affairs and had done it from the kindergarten on up.

MCCORMICK: Exactly. They knew what they were talking about, so I had the sense it was a very high morale thing for me because I was working for the best of the best.

Q: Also, George Shultz gave a steadying hand. He was rock solid.

MCCORMICK: I have vast admiration for George Shultz. He used to talk about gardening, as he called it; cultivating relationships, not just reacting to a crisis all the time, but thinking ahead to build relationships, not just neglecting them and then expecting them to be there when we needed them. In the case of the GDR, that seemed to open the possibility of a sort of side deal in the Cold War, not a part of any overall detente, but just an exploration of whether East Germany didn't have concrete reasons to become less East and more German. It could take place even if you had Soviet relations deteriorating, which was the key part with the audience in Berlin. Strictly in our mutual interests, nothing to do with better relations overall.

Q: On these elements that you are talking about, how did we deal with these during your time?

MCCORMICK: The GDR negotiating teams who dealt with these things saw them very much like a business negotiation. The financial dotted line was of interest to them; they wanted to know exactly what they were getting out of it. They were highly professional. It was the opposite of the atmosphere I had become used to in South Africa, where everything was driven by emotion with very weak knowledge about specifics. So this was my first experience with the kind of tough, hard negotiating over specifics that I had imagined the Foreign Service did. Ridgway was brilliant. She would come back from these long, frustrating sessions and review them and come up with new ideas, new approaches, "What if we try it this way? Suppose we rig the deal differently. We offer this if they'll do that." Then she would remember to come back to

Washington and go up to the Hill and explain all this in plain, straightforward language, never condescending, just explaining how we proposed to do our job. She was the best at that I ever saw. The GDR always hoped that this would open up a broad improvement with the U.S., but she kept the focus on specifics. We got closer and closer to a deal. One aspect which I cared about was the religious freedom issue. The GDR oppressed all kinds of churches with important American connections. It wasn't really because they were ideologically anti-religious, they just wanted control. They would crack down on religious worship if they thought it was a challenge to their temporal authority but perhaps not if it wasn't. Very Lutheran. This kind of insight has to come from analytical reporting, which was very good from Embassy Berlin. So we were able to wedge open some greater space for a number of American denominations, including Mormons and Christian Scientists, but not Jehovah's Witnesses who couldn't accept the church-state separation.

Q: Looking very closely at the relationship with the Soviet Union, it was beginning to creep a bit, wasn't it? I'm not quite sure when Brezhnev and Andropov and Chernenko - it was just about that time...

MCCORMICK: When I arrived, the Soviets kept an extremely tight hold on the GDR and the GDR leadership was still, perforce, very loyal to them. After all, they could hardly survive without them. On the other hand, if we looked we saw specifically German themes and dynamics up to the very top of the GDR leadership. For example, the regime had always downplayed German history. They wanted no remembering of Germany's imperial past. They were the ones who tore down the royal palace in Berlin, the sods, and weren't about to rebuild it for tourists. But as they became more desperate for popular support, they started to restore some churches and preserve the German culture of East Germany. They talked more about East Germany rather than the GDR. All these things clearly were in ferment and I thought this was an area where we could usefully talk. It turned out that was a very fruitful area, historic restoration and preservation. In the long run, keeping these cultural treasures safe for the future was just as important as what happened to the political GDR.

Q: One of the great complaints today, in what was East Germany, is the fact that the arts aren't particularly subsidized. They were subsidized up to the hilt before.

MCCORMICK: As you say, the arts were in some ways better off then. Not only the subsidies for culture, but the critical arts - satire, literature - they had more of a meaning and probably those were in some ways good days for the arts. The arts per se were not an area where we established any dialogue. However, in terms of art property, we had a lot of issues with the GDR. We were interested in getting some specific pieces back and moving toward a world system of restoring stolen art to its proper place. It lent itself to a more dispassionate, business-like, traditional diplomacy between states that don't necessarily like each other but have business to do in each other's interest.

Q: I would have thought that you would have run across the American Art Institute mafia. I mean the Toledo Institute of Art is not delighted in giving up something it had.

MCCORMICK: Well, actually I ran into very cooperative attitudes. My memory is that the

Toledo Art Institutes of the world were very concerned about provenance, about establishing that they really did have legal, proper provenance for all their work. I found very little tendency to say, "Oh, I don't want to hear about this subject. I just want the painting and I don't know if it is stolen." No, there was a very cooperative attitude in that regard. We made great progress toward the mutual return of paintings.

Q: We are going to stop at this point. The issues you want to raise we can put on the tape here.

MCCORMICK: To remind ourselves next time? I think the spy exchanges we were involved in and the systemic problem that that represented. Why the desk officer was involved in it. The peculiar theology about Berlin, and the odd system that was maintained in East Germany of military observers which led to the killing of Major Nicholson, and the sit-ins at our embassy.

Q: Another thing I would like to raise is the Helsinki accords and any role they played at that time.

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This is the 26th of September 2000. Keith, we are still talking about Berlin. You were doing what?

MCCORMICK: I was the desk officer for East Germany. We had to do whatever we did bilaterally with the East Germans very much within the larger context of our Berlin policy. We always talked about it as Berlin "theology" because the policy issues regarding the special status of Berlin were so complicated and so important. In fact we had to make very clear that we had an embassy that was to the GDR but it wasn't in the GDR. We never did recognize that East Berlin was the capital of the *sogenannte* (so-called) GDR instead of part of the unified Berlin.

Q: Shall we talk about the military officers and the problems? You were there from when to when?

MCCORMICK: This was in the years '83, '84, and '85. A peculiarity was that State Department officers who dealt with anything with a Berlin component traveled there using occupation funds and carried both a diplomatic and military title. Always in support of the theory that Berlin was still a unified city. So it meant that when we went to East Berlin for bilateral diplomatic business with the East Germans, or to visit the embassy, when we went through Checkpoint Charley we had a very strict regime we had to follow. We were not going to give them a U.S. diplomatic passport and accept an eastern visa. That would undermine the idea that we have a right to go into East Berlin at any time. Of course, this infuriated the East Germans: imagine not being able to control foreign diplomats' entry into your capital. I once spent an hour and three-quarters sitting in the limousine because they didn't want to let me through under the way we did it, which was to hold the passport up so they could see who we were, but not to roll down the window and let them actually have it and stamp it. When they didn't feel like it they wouldn't open Checkpoint Charley and we would just sit there until they did. A U.S. military jeep would pull up behind us, one of theirs would pull up behind them, and we would have a miniature stand-off. On a few occasions it got fairly serious. I regarded it as two hours of inconvenience and discomfort. We also had, as part of the same arrangement, an agreement by which U.S., British, Soviet, and French military officers could travel freely within the other Germany as observers to make sure the situation was peaceful and nothing wasn't as it should be. This was very strictly governed and each would tell the other side about their plans and there were complicated maps of zones that were closed off. But this was a fairly tense time and in the middle of that tense period one of our observers, a major named Art Nicholson, was shot and killed in East Germany. I guess because he got a little too close to a place near Ludwigslust where the Soviets may have had SS-20 missiles. We knew that 20 of these had been moved very far forward, perhaps into East Germany, and our Pershings that had been installed and caused such furor were in reaction to this, and he may have been looking for one of these. The incident suddenly took us back to the worst of the Cold War tension at a time when we felt we had been making a lot of progress on the bilateral track with the East Germans.

Q: Did you get involved in the shooting?

MCCORMICK: My only role was that I happened to have been the last U.S. Government person who was on that spot in a completely unrelated and totally legitimate visit around East Germany. But we dealt strictly with the Soviets over the heads of the East Germans on something like that.

Q: In this, who did the shooting? Was it the Soviets?

MCCORMICK: Soviets. Not the East Germans. But it forced them closer back together at a time when we were trying to increase the divisions between them.

Q: It must have been difficult for our embassy in East Germany, or not in East Germany but in Berlin, to deal with the East German government. I would imagine all their dealings would have a certain amount of precedent-setting.

MCCORMICK: They did. We were very fortunate. We had an extremely able ambassador, Rozanne Ridgway, and an extremely able deputy, Jim Wilkinson, a very capable embassy over there, and they had to tread quite a fine line on this but we had a clear concept of what we were trying to do, which was to reach a bilateral deal about specific issues, and then use it to widen the gaps between the Soviets and the GDR. We had a lot of Congressional support for this policy, primarily because Ambassador Ridgway was so good at explaining it to Congress and because it was the kind of thing the Congress thought the State Department ought to be doing, addressing the interests of domestic American groups.

Q: How about family reunion?

MCCORMICK: It was very tricky. The embassy thought the way you measure success is how you help individual families and individual cases, getting people out. But in order to get practical results for people in an individual case, you more or less had to enter into a certain degree of negotiation or even complicity, if you like, with that system. There were times when we had East German families staging sit-ins in our embassy to be allowed to go to the West. We did use the Helsinki agreements on reunification of families. Much later, when I was interested in a completely different issue, I remembered that and went to Ambassador Ridgway who was now the head of EUR and we made good use of it.

Q: From what you were gathering, East Germany was always held up as being the acme of economic world production, equipment and all that. Were we getting a pretty good picture? United Germany is still trying to bring East Germany up to standards, including manufactured goods. Were you getting a good feel for all this?

MCCORMICK: I think so. It wasn't that East Germany could hold its own in some sort of free competition with the Western industrialized countries, but that in comparison with the rest of the bloc it was streets ahead. It had industrialization much earlier to start with, and it had a more efficient government. It was all relative.

Q: How did we feel about the police state? Was that giving us problems at the time, and the Stasi was sort of everywhere?

MCCORMICK: Very much. East Germany was among the strictest of the bloc in that regard. The Stasi were everywhere. It has since come out in a number of books, including one by Tim Asher called "The File," about the decision of the Germans to open some of these files so now, after unification, you can go back and find your own file, which he did. He found it fascinating. It showed that, first, practically everybody was in the pay of the Stasi for some little informing. Second, it was a pattern of complete bumbling. They had spent the taxpayers' money on shadowing people who were no threat of any kind and not even getting it straight. So I had the picture of a very strict and sometimes very cruel police state that was not as efficient as we had imagined.

Q: I spent five years in Yugoslavia and was unaware that our home was being monitored, but I kept thinking they had a pretty good fix on the Kennedys' social life and how my wife organized the international Girl Scouts there.

MCCORMICK: Exactly. Well, it was taken for granted that one was shadowed very closely and the Stasi made sure they were doing their job, by making regular and repeated but somewhat transparent attempts to put one in a compromising situation. Some very beautiful young women. It was to be expected. I never found that it was so subtle that it was impossible to evade.

Q: Is there anything else we should cover?

MCCORMICK: I mentioned the exchange of spies at the Glienicke Bridge that created so much work for us. I wondered why the State Department was having to do that. It turned out that the U.S. military had adopted a new evaluation system which was quantitative. You were promoted if you recruited so-and-so many new intelligence agents. East Germany was already overrun with every sort of intelligence operation you could think of. They were tripping over each other. So all of a sudden we had a lot of people arrested on charges of espionage, and a responsibility to get them out. Eventually exchanges were arrived at and handled in the classic George Smiley manner across the bridge there. But we wound up spending diplomatic capital to retrieve a blunder caused by our own incentive structure. I never forgot that. Ask for quantity instead of quality and you'll get it.

Q: I know I got involved in a little of this when I was in Yugoslavia, and this is 20 years after the crises right after the war, and these Yugoslavs suddenly appeared in my office and said, "Captain Smith of the CID, back in Trieste in 1946, promised me you would take care of me." It was sort of a blank, and I'm sure Captain Smith got all sorts of crud because nobody knew who Captain Smith was. We had a problem which I turned over to the station chief. I said they should try to do something nice for this person because these people have 20 years and they were working for us. It was done without any regard for what we were really after.

MCCORMICK: One thing we did right was not to sell the property on Pariser Platz where the pre-war American Embassy had sat. We now had a functioning embassy building in East Berlin. There seemed to be no prospect of needing a U.S. embassy in West Berlin, so the resource people wanted to sell the property. They needed the money. I was violently opposed. I knew nothing about the property issues involved, but it seemed to me that we would be sending a message to the Germans that we didn't really believe in unification. Now, whether I really believed that -- if you had asked me at the time, I probably would have said, "Within my lifetime, not within the next ten years or even twenty" – didn't really matter; what was important was that the United States not seem to be abandoning its commitment to reunification. We must not give up that property. Fortunately, we didn't.

Q: Now we have built a large embassy there.

MCCORMICK: Yes, we definitely need it today. In a similar way, I fought to block the idea that we should abolish the Office of Central European Affairs and instead just have a Western office and an Eastern office, or that we should make the GDR desk part of Eastern Europe. It was sometimes awkward bureaucratically to have it in the Central European office, which was focused on Berlin and NATO, while all the rest of the satellites were handled by the Office of East European and Yugoslav Affairs. But we believed in Central Europe as a concept. We didn't accept the idea that there was a line down the middle of it that would be there forever. We tried to see beyond that.

Q: Well then, in '85, where did you go?

MCCORMICK: I thought about going to East Berlin. But my son was born in Bitburg and his diplomatic passport said that he was born in "Germany." The East Germans would not accept this; there was no more Germany in their view, and it had to say you were born in either the GDR or the FRG (Federal Republic of Germany). It didn't seem right to give in to the GDR's demand that a U.S. diplomat would have to have his family's passports changed for their convenience and ideology. So my next assignment was a Congressional Fellowship. While I was preparing for it, the Una Chapman Cox Foundation gave me a grant to go out to "the middle of the country," as they put it, and talk about the Foreign Service. That was a wonderful experience. I took my two older boys along with me, we rented an RV (recreational vehicle) and we drove around Montana and Wyoming. I was supposed to talk to students about the Foreign Service, but it turned out there was so much interest in South Africa that I called the Bureau of Public Affairs and they reorganized the focus. I did about a dozen radio and press and television interviews about our policy toward South Africa. But there was also a great deal of interest in how to get the attention of the State Department. Montana had all kinds of border issues with Canada. They wanted help from Washington but they had a very vague notion as to how to actually get into the State Department and find people they could talk to. It seemed to me this was a practical issue that the Department ought to deal with. We're not as user-friendly as we should be to state governments.

Q: Were you able to make any points of contact with them?

MCCORMICK: Yes, I was, and some of them turned out to be quite valuable when I went to the Senate because issues like U.S.-Canadian border relations were important to the Hill.

Q: You were doing this Congressional fellowship. Could you explain what it is?

MCCORMICK: There are two such programs. One is sponsored by the American Political Science Association (APSA) and is mostly meant for academics, but they always choose one or two Foreign Service Officers and send you up to the Hill to work for a year. The purpose is to gain a broad understanding of how the Congress as an institution works. The other is the Pearson Program, which is entirely separate. There the idea is to send up a person with an expertise in some specific area - like immigration law. I much preferred the APSA. It gave you a chance to take a very broad view and understand the entire function.

Q: Well, who did you work for?

MCCORMICK: I worked for Senator Frank Murkowski of Alaska. First, a job on his staff was empty and he needed somebody to do foreign policy. Second, he was on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. That offered me the chance to work in areas I was familiar with.

Q: Did you do this for two years?

MCCORMICK: Actually, I had barely started when the Department pulled me out to send me on an urgent, short assignment. The Administration was under tremendous pressure on South Africa and had set up a kind of political task force to defend the policy. They called Ambassador David Miller back from Zimbabwe to head it and I was the deputy. It was run by the NSC (National Security Council) but sat in offices at State, and had an interagency staff which I was supposed to assemble. I remember that Commerce, Public Affairs, and the Africa bureau sent particularly good people. Our job was to slow down or stop the domestic political pressure for disinvestment from South Africa or even sanctions. For the next two months Ambassador Miller and I went around the country, giving speeches or talking to people to explain why the administration was opposed to sanctions. I was sent immediately to Penn State University to debate Randall Robinson of TransAfrica on this issue. Of course it was a setup – naturally the vast majority of a college crowd was going to be with him – but you can always get some people to listen when you know more about the facts. We talked to editorial boards, universities, anyone we could find to listen to the State Department's argument that disinvestment was the wrong way to end apartheid. Eventually Ambassador Miller had to get back to Zimbabwe so I took it over for a month or so until the White House found a new ambassador to head it. In retrospect, it was a bit of a lesson in the diplomatic motto of *pas trop de zèle* (not too much zeal). We had a chart on the wall with what was going on in every state legislature in the country, every major pension board, the largest corporations, and it was really quite an effective operation. But eventually, we began to have second thoughts about whether diplomats from the U.S. State Department ought to be going out and lobbying inside the country for the policy of the day, in kind of a propaganda sense. After all, the law doesn't allow USIA (United States Information Agency) to do that, and that's a good law. So it began to be disquieting. We had patterned this on Otto Reich's much larger and more important group advancing aid to Central America, which came in for great criticism on the Hill. So we pulled back a little bit from the aggressive lobbying.

Q: Was this an issue that sort of engaged the active students? A different generation than the ones who protested the war in Vietnam?

MCCORMICK: Most students simply wanted dramatic gestures to show solidarity with the anti-apartheid forces. A few really wanted to know what would be the most effective tool for ending apartheid without destroying the economy of the country and the region. We kept trying to put it on that basis. I was surprised and pleased at how mature and serious the interest was among editorial boards, among the World Affairs Council types, and so forth. I don't know about the students.

Q: Were there any sorts of legislature? I would have thought the Massachusetts legislature would have been one of the first to slap something on. Something like South Carolina would say no.

MCCORMICK: We tried hard to persuade the states that steps like that should legally and constitutionally be left to the federal government. We may have managed to persuade a few of them to be a bit cautious about this sort of thing. All of this pulled me out of what should have been my real job, which was the assignment to the Senate.

Q: Then what happened?

MCCORMICK: I returned there and took up the remainder of my year of working for Senator Murkowski.

Q: What was his posture or thrust on foreign affairs?

MCCORMICK: Very different from the State Department culture. He is a great, big, gruff, straightforward bear of a man. A banker. Things were black and white. Not an isolationist, but not an internationalist. A very practical person who didn't care about policy as much as jobs and contracts for constituents in Alaska. Like most members of Congress, he had limited patience for the central premise of diplomacy, that all sovereign countries are equal. The fact is, he would have said they're not. A helpful dose of reality for a professional diplomat, who takes it for granted that all right-thinking people support ideas like "international cooperation."

Q: How did he use you?

MCCORMICK: When I arrived, he had fired the staffer who represented him on the Foreign Relations Committee - he was always firing people - and he offered me the job. This was at the time of the Reagan Doctrine, at the time of vote after vote after vote on aid to the Contras. But a lot of my work was on Asia. Senator Lugar was the chairman of the committee and Murkowski chaired its subcommittee on East Asia. That was not because he was interested in Asia, but because he understood that Alaska, which was suffering a bitter recession at the time, could trade its way out of it by exporting to Japan, Korea, and Taiwan. It was a very sound and good idea. Having had that insight, he left it to me to sort of flesh it out in speeches, legislative proposals, anything we could think of.

Q: As the Reagan Doctrine shaped up, was there any part that gave you particular difficulty?

MCCORMICK: I came out of the globalist school at the State Department. I believed in the so-called grand bargain. We had five major conflicts at the time with Soviet proxies, in Angola, Mozambique, Nicaragua, Afghanistan, Cambodia. Instead of trying to win each one, we needed to make sure the Soviets *didn't* win. We had no use for any of this real estate, we just didn't want the Soviets to control it. We had to keep that goal in mind, never shrink from using force, but remember the purpose of using it isn't to get involved in local revolutions, it's to keep the Soviet army out. The senator gradually came to understand that view and support it as a basic guide for how to deal with these issues, Nicaragua then but later Cambodia as well. It avoided our lurching from one view to another, being a dove here and a hawk there. It avoided excessive entanglement and gave him an intellectual framework for taking a tough and principled stand but not getting bogged down in expensive, long-term operations overseas or on the wrong side of some local crises.

Q: What about the Nicaraguan crisis?

MCCORMICK: Very tough for him to come up with a position and he looked to me to build one for him. We decided we were not in the business of looking for trouble in Central America; we were in the business of keeping the Soviet military out. That may take force, it may take covert aid, but we're not trying to win a parochial little jungle fight, we're trying to enforce the Monroe Doctrine. He was comfortable with that. The problem isn't revolutionary Central Americans, it's irresponsible Soviet adventurism.

Q: Did the Ollie North-Iran contra thing come up while you were there?

MCCORMICK: It came up the following year. During the first year, I don't remember all the issues that came up. It seems to me I had never had to deal with so many different issues. They constantly came up and the Foreign Relations Committee took up a lot of his time. On that committee, if your boss did not attend a session, you were authorized to give his proxy to another member. I would urge him to attend a hearing or a markup session, he would show up long enough to ask the questions I had prepared for him, and then he would leave for another meeting which was more important from his point of view and tell me "not to let anything go wrong." You had to decide how he would vote, if he were here, on each point. This places an FSO in a difficult position, especially in the markups on the State Department bill, because you get some very strong pressure from both sides. Sometimes from everybody in the room, if it's an even split the way it was in those days. But it isn't about what you think, it's about how he would vote. You have to be fair. I often didn't agree with him. I remember one day having lunch with him, arguing that he ought to put a bit more distance between himself and Senator Helms. Not because he would necessarily disagree with Helms, but Helms was too predictable. He was opposed to almost any agreement at all, because he simply didn't trust the other side to live up to anything they promised. That meant he had no real leverage with the Administration. My argument to Murkowski was that he should oppose whatever he felt he should oppose but for specific reasons. Raise concrete objections which can be met. Make it clear that if they can meet them, your support can be obtained. But only if they are met. That gives you meaningful leverage. If you're impossible to satisfy, they write you off. He did adopt that view, and I must say he became consistent and predictable in a very businesslike way in dealing with these issues, though it meant he was always asking for a *quid pro quo.* The most important one was INF [the Intermediate Range Nuclear Force Missile treaty]. It was absolutely crucial that he understand and come around to supporting that, because those hyper accurate missiles were more dangerous than anything because they were destabilizing.

Q: Were there any international issues that were particularly strong in Alaska, like fish?

MCCORMICK: Fishing was a major issue. We had a staff member who did nothing but that. The foreign policy issue that became the most important for him had to do with contact with Siberia. We had entered into a period of detente, and there was a great deal of talk about people-to-people contacts with the Soviets. People in Alaska began to think that somehow the senator was going to arrange for everybody in Alaska to go visit the Soviet Union. The Native people were particularly interested in this, because they had relatives on the other side. We had gotten ourselves into a position where we needed to do something about this, make it happen. I went up to the state to try to understand it a little better and came back convinced that he could gain a lot of support from this. Alaskans really were interested in opening up the border with Siberia. It's a kind of miniature reflection of the Iron Curtain there between Alaska and Siberia, and when you live there it can really get to you. Since 1948 there has been a ban on any sort of travel back and forth, or any sort of visas, or any sort of contact or trade. But the Eskimos are a people who are literally related on both sides of the Bering Sea there. You mentioned the Helsinki Agreement on family reunification. Well, we decided to try to make that work across the Bering Straits, and by now Roz Ridgway had become assistant secretary of state for EUR; we managed, with her assistance, to get the issue onto the agenda for the Reagan-Gorbachev summit. We eventually got the 1948 visa ban lifted, and then got permission to open limited amounts of trade and contact, including direct flights to Siberia from Alaska, and including the exchange of delegations to talk about the Russian history in Alaska, Arctic medicine, anything we could think of to keep the dialogue going. That was enormously popular, particularly with Native voters in the western part of the state.

Q: You did this until when?

MCCORMICK: Well, I was supposed to do that for a single year, that was the program. In fact, I was again pulled out at the end of it and brought back into the State Department to be deputy director of the Secretary's Advisory Committee on South Africa. This was something like a royal commission. It consisted of people like Larry Eagleburger, Roger Smith of General Motors, Vernon Jordan, Frank Cary of IBM. The State Department provided the staff and these people were to spend a year writing a report on what we ought to do about South Africa. Of course it was bitterly divided. It was badly bogged down. Ambassador Bill Kontos was the chief of staff. The report was not going to come out on time and it was going to be a split report which would embarrass the administration. He was tearing his hair out. I was told to go help bring it out on time and to make sure that it was not a split report. So I did, for the next six months. It involved working with each of these people and the staff and the rest, and trying to come to some sort of consensus. We would hold public hearings and call experts and make visits to South Africa and listen to everybody and hope that somehow we could arrive at a modicum of consensus.

Q: You've been roped back into South Africa; by the time you are moving up to '87 or so, were you seeing any progress?

MCCORMICK: Oh, definitely. South Africa was jettisoning the ideology of apartheid in order to defend the state itself, the way any sensible state does when it realizes that an ideology is counterproductive. Easier said than done, and of course they had no intention of giving up complete power. But we were seeing everything from a change in attitudes to economic pressures to a growing sense that white South Africans just didn't want to spend their lives in a garrison country. Nevertheless, it was at this time that public opinion in the U.S. began to coalesce around the need for some kind of sanctions. We were slow to realize it. Senator Lugar warned us, Senator Kassebaum warned us, but the Administration waited a bit too long and when it finally broke Senator Kassebaum drafted a sanctions bill that couldn't be stopped. By that time I had finished the report and the Secretary said I could go back and have a second year on the Hill because I'd been so interrupted. Not without some valuable experiences though. I remember talking to Frank Cary, chairman of IBM, about sanctions, and he pointed out that I was seeing it the wrong way around. The issue wasn't whether sanctions would affect South Africa or help our policy. The issue was that if we were going to shoot our companies in the foot, we had to make sure other countries did the same or else their companies would have a big advantage. Bill Coleman, African-American former Secretary of Transportation, I remember arguing with him that something or other didn't make any foreign policy sense. He said for him this wasn't an issue of foreign policy, but of domestic civil rights. South Africa was just a symbol.

Q: Where did your Senator come out on this?

MCCORMICK: I still believed that sanctions were crazy, but that wasn't the right advice to give him. He needed to be in the center of his party, not its right wing. Also, there were minor little ironies. Alaskan gold would actually benefit by imposing sanctions on the importation of South African gold. Foreign policy in the Congress is a messy business. We had to vote yes, we had no choice. But it turned out later that it helped him in his re-election, insulated him from various charges.

Q: We are talking about '87?

MCCORMICK: Yes. By early '87, Iran-Contra was the most important issue. That of course took place in the context of a period of intense concern about terrorism. That was a period that I would later look back on and describe as the era in which we looked to the CIA first to fight terrorism. Then, when that didn't work, we looked to the military. Then later, in desperation, '89, we started looking at the State Department to maybe use a little diplomacy. This was shortly after the bombing of Libya, at the time when the Omnibus Diplomatic Security Act was being debated, which I strongly supported.

Q: What were the elements that you found positive?

MCCORMICK: Doing something about the attacks on U.S. diplomatic personnel abroad. Our embassies were woefully under-guarded and under-built, and a large amount of money was eventually voted by Congress to harden them. Built into the bill was the principle that if we can't protect a post we shouldn't keep it open. The Department took the opposite view, that we ought to be present in every single country, no matter how small. That question has never been resolved. In any case, a massive program of reconstructing U.S. embassies was passed. Now we seem to be getting carried away with it, in my opinion overly concerned with trying to protect ourselves by pouring more concrete, building bunkered embassies, but nevertheless, it was a major piece of legislation. The terrorism issue also produced an anecdote that stands out in my mind regarding Secretary Shultz. He showed up to testify at one hearing where the attitude among the senators had sort of degenerated to wisecracking. I don't know what was wrong with them that day. Sometimes this mood just takes over. The Hill is far more irreverent than the Department or the Foreign Service would ever dream of being. Many people on the Hill regard the Foreign Service as being staid to the point of prudish and with no sense of humor. But this was out of control – demeaning and disrespectful - and Shultz just brought it to a halt. He had this massive dignity and I remember him suddenly saying, "That's not funny." All of a sudden the senators looked like chastened school boys.

Q: Did you feel the State Department was dealing with Congress well, particularly the Senate?

MCCORMICK: I think so. It certainly served the Congress well in the sense of expertise and coming up with policy. When a member of Congress talks about policy, what he really means is a position, like being against something or for it. The State Department would come up with a real policy in a sense of how do we get from where we are to where we want to be? Step one, step two, resource implications, real work. On the other hand, it would refuse to answer questions; it would hide behind obfuscation; it would decline to talk straightforwardly, the way Ambassador Ridgway did. She didn't try to be pontifical but would tell them something was a 60-40 call, but she thought this or that was probably the best way to go about it and here is why. Often the Department's tone didn't mesh well with the way that members talk. But on the whole, yes. One's rather proud up there to be in the Foreign Service. I would say "Foreign Service" rather than "State Department," since there seems to be such a hostility toward the Department, but the Foreign Service has great prestige. A very high reputation for individual quality, and a certain amount of glamour because you went off to exotic foreign climes and dressed for dinner. Many of the staff I knew were very interested in getting into the Foreign Service and greatly envied us our jobs, though that generally evaporated as soon as they learned you couldn't pick the places that you went and might get Bangladesh instead of Paris.

Q: How did you see the role of Senator Jesse Helms at this time? He was considered the bête noire of the foreign policy establishment.

MCCORMICK: He was very much the bete noir of the foreign policy establishment, and he would probably be very pleased at that description, particularly if you included the word "establishment." I had to work very closely with his staff. That was the old staff. That staff probably didn't serve Senator Helms very well by being so confrontational and so prepared to get him into a fight before he had authorized it. Sometimes they were almost operating on their own and not for his good and certainly not for the good of the country. He finally reined in his whole staff, fired nearly all of them and brought in new people and asserted more control of his own. There were lots of areas where I disagreed profoundly with him. Especially his basic assumption that we cannot ever trust another country to enter into a treaty or agreement and abide by it. Of course you can't. You write agreements with the incentives built in for compliance, like a business contract. He never understood that.

Q: Did you see him hold up appointments for ambassadors and that sort of thing?

MCCORMICK: Oh, yes. That has always been a tactic of his. He held up the confirmation of Melissa Wells to Mozambique because she favored the Marxist government over an anti-communist rebel group called ENAMO. One that I had to get involved in was Dick Viets, who had served with great distinction as ambassador to Jordan but had treated very badly a junior officer in his administrative section, who left the Foreign Service and later turned out to be a Senate staffer and became very clear in his memory that Viets had violated some administrative regulation – had the Embassy pay for his personal Christmas cards. Well, of course, that's not right but it's hardly grounds for the Senate to reject a distinguished diplomat, although it does show that you meet the same people on the way down as you do on the way up. I wound up thinking that the confirmation process involved altogether too much hostage taking.

Q. Was it hard to get your Senator interested in foreign policy?

MCCORMICK: I wanted him to take charge of the Philippines issue. He was chairman of the subcommittee on East Asia. It was clear that Marcos was finished and the forces pushing Cory Aquino were ones we needed to get behind and not against. But that was just not something he felt comfortable leading on, he did not want to do that. Senator Lugar did step up and did the leading on that issue which was necessary. That was a disappointment for me. On the other hand, when Korea started to fall apart in April of that year, when the president disbanded the commission that was trying to get Korea away from the old idea that a general would hand power to his hand-picked successor, and of course that started to produce huge anti-American riots, I pressed him very strongly again, because he had a certain profile in Korea, and I urged him to take charge of that issue and see what we could do. And on that he did. He took a very positive and constructive role. He sent me out to Korea along with Lugar's staff and others, and we met with Kim Dae Jung and Kim Young Sam and the other opposition leaders as well as the president of South Korea, and we all came back agreed that our Senate bosses ought to try to lead a shift in the U.S. view about all that. We had to get ahead of the curve on this one. And he did. It was clear that a kind of unholy alliance was building up between some members who wanted to smack the South Koreans because of human rights, and others from textile states who wanted to use this as an excuse to take protectionist measures which had nothing to do with foreign policy. That kind of a combination can win, and it can't be allowed to come to a vote on those terms. You can't beat something with nothing, you have to have something else the Senate can do about this situation, which was actually pretty serious. It has to make the Senate look active and in charge; it has to be bipartisan; it has to be square with the Administration and the State Department (and there we worked with Gaston Sigur, the assistant secretary, and the DAS, Bill Clark, in EAP and both were just terrific); and we managed to work with Senator Byrd to draft a bipartisan resolution which laid out what was happening in Korea, how our brilliant guidance had brought them to a point where they could afford to have democracy without endangering their security from the North. Which all reflected great credit on the United States. Sort of a strategy of declaring victory. That passed and it stopped what could have been very significant sanctions.

Q: The sanctions weapon is always an easy cop-out for people who don't stand or do something.

MCCORMICK: I couldn't agree more. I had great praise for people like Senator Lugar and Representative Lee Hamilton, who tried to put together legislation which would require the Congress to answer a couple of simple questions before imposing sanctions. Like how long; with what goal; under what conditions would we lift them; what it would cost; and what do the experts think the likelihood of achieving its goal is?

Q: Did you come away with a positive attitude towards Senator Lugar?

MCCORMICK: Extremely positive. He is a committed internationalist and he knows what he is talking about and he cares about conceptual things like building the architecture for a long-term sustained effort. I also came to respect him enormously because he had an ability to defuse the ego problems that prevented us from doing business. When he was in the chair, he had a way of saying, "Well, we are all going to school on this issue and none of us really knows the answer for certain. We are all just trying to deal with this." He created an atmosphere where none of the members felt put down or unable to ask a simple question. I admired him enormously for that. I also saw the opposite under some other senators where good-faith discussions just weren't happening because some button had been punched to cause everybody's ego to be involved and we weren't going to get anywhere. So I give people like Lugar and Kassebaum and Congressman Leach and others up there very high praise. I came away with a soft spot for the Senate rather than the House. The Senate isn't like the House, where the bill itself has priority and you always feel the train is leaving and if you have something to say you better run up to the microphone and shout your piece before you run out of time. Whereas in the Senate, the member has priority, not the bill. And that bill isn't going to go anywhere until all of us have had a chance to express concerns and reach some kind of agreement, even if that agreement is based on deal-cutting or compromise. That greatly appeals to me. In fact, it appeals to me enough that I formed the opinion that a Senate is a very valuable and very necessary institution. We went to Canada on a mission for the senator -- I was actually in the House of Commons in Ottawa when the prime minister was answering questions about the American bombing in Libya -- and I came away from those encounters thinking that an upper House is useful even if, as in Canada, it is not made up of distinguished elected people, but old favorites. When I later went out to New Zealand, I felt the New Zealanders had made a big mistake abolishing their senate.

Q: One of the issues I have heard a number of times is that in the Senate, on the staffs of Senators, you have people who have their own personal agenda. Often because of marriage or ethnicity. I think there was somebody dealing with Nicaragua or Central America at one point on

Helms' staff who was married to a- This is not just outstanding ones but there are others who have this. Can you remark on what you saw during the time you were there?

MCCORMICK: I knew all three of the people you are referring to, and you have summarized it quite accurately. It was very damaging, this freelancing. If a staff member has connections somewhere, and is going around the Administration and the embassy and playing all kinds of games, that can be very damaging. I also became increasingly uncomfortable about the role of ethnicity in Congressional foreign policy-making as more and more people were more and more honest about the fact that they didn't really care what was good for the United States, but what was good for an ethnic interest group. I was probably naive going up there. I remember working very hard on one of the Saudi arms sale issues. It was a big deal. I carefully thought through all the foreign policy implications, how the Saudis might use them, how it would affect diplomatic negotiations, stayed in touch with State and DOD (Department of Defense) and NSC and I wrote this and that. Then somebody pulled me aside and very kindly told me I was wasting my time. What I didn't know was that the Senator's predecessor was defeated by a revenge campaign by AIPAC (American Israel Public Affairs Committee).

Q: Senator Percy got shot down by AIPAC because of AWACS (airborne warning and control system) in Saudi Arabia.

MCCORMICK: Senator Mike Gravel of Alaska suffered a similar fate. The senator was well aware of this, so the message to me was that my foreign policy expertise was fine but needed to be married to somebody's hard political advice on that. Yes, one was a bit more cynical on that issue after this experience than before.

Q: I don't think it's going to get any better, because I think maybe the Jewish ethnicity is still there but has kind of outworn its welcome to a certain amount. Wait until we start getting the Koreans, and the Chinese, and the Indians, who are becoming increasingly important and wealthier in the United States and they will all have their agenda.

MCCORMICK: I think it is going to be extremely unhelpful to any kind of coherent American policy.

Q: I don't know, I haven't finished him yet, he is off somewhere, but I was interviewing Peter Galbraith, who was on the foreign relations committee, and I have a feeling that he was one of these people who was sort of running off having a wonderful time.

MCCORMICK: Peter was excellent. I worked very closely with him on the committee, because he represented Senator Pell, who became the chairman when the Democrats took over. There were some complaints from Helms' staff that I worked a little too closely with him, because we did have votes where only Murkowski would support it on the Republican side. Some of those Peter and I had actually co-drafted, because he was very sensible, very moderate, not especially partisan but interested in policy. I had no trouble working across the aisle. Murkowski pretty much trusted my judgment on that kind of thing. He knew I wouldn't get us into too much trouble, and of course it was only foreign policy, it wasn't as if it were a vote on timber harvesting or oil.

Q: I was so relieved... The making of foreign policy is like watching sausage being made. You don't want to watch - it's messy. When you left there, you came back with sort of a view of how it was done, but outside of intellectually understanding it, were you able to put this into use later on?

MCCORMICK: It was a very valuable and broadening experience, although of course it doesn't help your career in the State Department. The Foreign Service regards those years on the Hill as sort of lost, irrelevant. I was also surprised that there was no attempt to get these FSOs who have been up on the Hill to do State's legislative work when they come back. You'd think there would be, sort of as the price for going up there and to take advantage of their knowledge, but there wasn't. There was never any doubt that I would go back to State. I had a chance to stay, as many people do, but I would never have exchanged the life of a Foreign Service officer for that of a Senate staff aide. Besides, I was anxious to get back to serious foreign policy work. I had gotten interested in terrorism on the Hill, so I went to work for Jerry Bremer in S/CT (Secretary's Office for Counter-Terrorism) when I came back. Terrorism was an enormous issue at that time -- Achille Lauro, Libya, Ollie North – and Shultz was very interested in it. He trusted Bremer completely. I had formed these strong opinions about the issue and I wanted to go do something about it.

Q: So you did this from when to when?

MCCORMICK: Well, I went there in 1987 and I did that for the following year. They give you a title when they can't promote you, so I was Director of Plans and Policy, which meant I was supposed to think up ways to make some progress on a couple of major problems that we had. The one that I was interested in and came in there specifically to do, if they would let me, was that I was worried that we had let our counter-terrorism policies become too closely identified with Israel. That is not the only place where terrorism takes place, and we shouldn't be tied too closely. I was no more comfortable after the first round of talks with our Israeli counterparts. We had a very limited definition of terrorist attacks but they were counting them as any attack on Israel, including military. My view was that we should be expanding counter-terrorism cooperation with the EU. We faced major terrorism problems in Europe as well as in the Middle East. This would lend credibility to our claim that this was not a political issue. This was an issue of principle, that terrorism is wrong wherever, whoever, and so forth. The Europeans had put together something called the Trevi Group, which brought interior ministries, not foreign ministries but interior ministries, together to cooperate against terrorism, as you would against ordinary criminals. So I argued that we should cooperate with this group and make our information available to it. We couldn't become a member but I took a delegation to Cologne to participate as an observer. That was the first time the United States was given that status. A lot came out of that. The other thing that Bremer cared about was getting the U.N. General Assembly to pass a resolution on terrorism. It never passed, because the Arab countries thought that we were just using "terrorism" as a stick to beat the Arabs. They didn't believe it was anything but politics. The only way around that was to really mean the formula that a certain type of action defines a terrorist, regardless of who does it. No matter what political motivation - for a good reason or a bad reason - whether it is one of your people or theirs, it doesn't matter, it's the action itself, such as hostage taking, whether it matches criminal codes. Using that formula, we managed to convince some Arab delegations and eventually did get that UN roadblock overcome, and Shultz was very happy about that.

Q: I would have thought that one of the stumbling blocks at this particular time would have been the Irish Republican Army with Senator Kennedy. It seems like every bar in South Boston was contributing to NORAID [Irish Northern Aid] or whatever it is.

MCCORMICK: We made no progress at all on that and I was very disappointed about that. The Congress would not allow us to move against collection of money which went into arms and terrorist bombs with a thin pretense of going to widows and children. We couldn't overcome the political romanticism. I also had another of my lessons, I guess, in political reality in a hearing on that subject when I heard the senators close the door in mid-hearing, go behind into the Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing room and discuss the issue in the most intelligent, constitutional, principled language. I was able to go with them and I was so impressed with their seriousness and grasp of the issues. Then they went out and turned the cameras on again and behaved like the most pandering – Biden, others, the same people who had struck me with how wise they were behind closed doors. It was a very disillusioning moment. We also had to spend enormous time cleaning up the mess that Ollie North and company had left in their desire to get short-term results and never mind the damage to cooperative relations with other countries, particularly Italy.

Q: Ollie North was putting special forces into Sicily and surrounding this plane which we forced down, and kidnapping.

MCCORMICK: Exactly. It would appeal to someone who wanted immediate results or perhaps had read too many airport novels, but it put at risk a huge cooperation with Italy which had done tremendous work, developing the so-called Penitente laws which had helped so much to break the Brigate Rosse in Italy and really bring a very serious terrorist threat there under control by a brilliant, legal approach through their system of very courageous magistrates and these Penitente laws. It also put at risk a whole network of information gathering that hadn't been considered, and a number of other things. I was appalled. I wanted to use the system that we had, including diplomacy, and work with our allies and not get into this cowboy mentality.

Q: Had the Ollie North "quick-fix nastiness" been discredited by this time or were there still sympathizers within the government?

MCCORMICK: I saw very little of that in the State Department. I felt I was working with people who were very sober and careful and knew what they were doing and would not go off on a tangent.

Q: There were a couple of times but, basically, up to today, the United States has been remarkably free of people running around putting bombs around. We have had a couple of incidents - the World Trade Center and the Oklahoma City thing, but basically this isn't very American.

MCCORMICK: I guess terrorism has been mostly a foreign phenomenon from an American point of view. I don't know that I ever spent much time reflecting on that because domestic terrorism is the FBI's business, and good for them that they have managed to keep it that way. They ought to concentrate on doing that job instead of trying to do ours. And I never stopped to think about the difference between Oklahoma being threatened by terrorism and Frankfurt or London being threatened, that this wasn't happening within our borders. It was happening to our allies, it was happening to our diplomatic posts, it was happening to our marines.

Q: When you were working on this, were there tough problems with the FBI and the CIA, and military intelligence?

MCCORMICK: Nothing but turf battles. But Bremer was extremely good at reducing them by a genuine inclusion of everybody, and giving respect to everybody for his portion of it, making you feel you are part of a team. He wouldn't allow one agency to disparage the work of another. The turf battles with the FBI were worse than with anyone else. FBI agents who were indispensable to a combined operation abroad, but could not do it by themselves, never gave any credit or respect to the role of the State Department, CIA, and other officers who worked with them to set it up.

Q: There does seem to be a systemic problem with the FBI. There are movies and books written about the FBI moving in on other police departments and sort of claiming everything for themselves.

MCCORMICK: I didn't have the best experience with them of all the different agencies I dealt with. It was hard for them to think in terms of inter-agency cooperation. They wanted secrecy to preserve their operation. That required them to tell no one anything, which destroyed the ability of the U.S. Government to bring in CIA intelligence assets and State Department diplomatic assets, and the embassy analytical assets, and the military contribution, and the Treasury's ability to pursue the financial side - where the terrorists were going to get their money. The successes that we had were due to the ability of people to overcome that kind of petty, interagency jealousy. CIA was pretty good about this. William Colby had actually started this fight. He had talked the President into terrorism being so important, elevating the entire thing, and he meant to run it out of CIA and give it to the covert action boys. He was pulled back after there were incidents in Lebanon that didn't work out well. There was then a sense of "let's let the military do it; after all, if we know who has done it we can go and hit them." But that doesn't work when you don't know. So the fact that State had now been given the lead on this was pretty new, but CIA did not refuse to cooperate the way the FBI did.

Q: You got there about the time that we bombed Libya, didn't you?

MCCORMICK: The previous April.

Q: I have a feeling that in the long run this turned Qadhafi around. He was no longer the great white God of bombers.

MCCORMICK: I'm often a critic of military force to deal with terrorism. I'm a big supporter of that one. When you do know, when you have the evidence, and you have a government that is sponsoring terrorism and you can use military force to bring the lesson home to them, I would say, absolutely, do it. No question. The problem is when you don't know. Or you feel political or other pressure to strike before you've got the evidence in. When we don't have all the information, I am a little cautious about drawing conclusions. But yes, the air strike on Qadhafi was a wise move.

Q: By this time it was about 1988 and you left?

MCCORMICK: Yes, the Foreign Service rule about overseas hardship assignments was catching up with me. I had personal reasons why it was time for me to go abroad again. Going abroad has never been easy for my family. The pressure has always been to stay here because going abroad and finding a place with adequate schools for your kids is tough.

Q: How many kids do you have?

MCCORMICK: I have four boys, and the problem comes as they approach high school. So I was facing a typical situation as to what to do. The system says, quite reasonably, that you can't spend all of your tours in nice, pleasant places. You've got to bid on hardship posts. My wife quite correctly said we were not going anyplace that didn't have first-class schools. We identified Bangkok as a place that qualified as a hardship post and had a first-class school. It wasn't the job I wanted but you can't have everything, and I have always been a big proponent of viewing the Foreign Service as offering the benefit of options so you can really control your own life if you pick among them and don't try to have it all. So we went to Bangkok.

Q: I was a personnel officer at one time, and looking back on my career and everybody else's, there are these options. Often one is making choices and you look back at them and wonder if you never made ambassador because of this one or that one. But, at the same time, you often look at the things that were interesting to you, after you retire and haven't made ambassador, and you look to see if you have had fun.

MCCORMICK: I agree with that completely, and I am a great believer in serendipity, so I don't think I would want to trade any of my assignments. I enjoyed them all, but you do have to make your choices.

Q: Often people don't realize what choices they are making. Well, I think this is probably a good point to cut out and we will pick this up the next time in 1988 when you are going to Bangkok. You were there from 1988 to when?

MCCORMICK: In 1988, I began a year at language school at FSI and I arrived there in the summer of 1989 as deputy political counselor.

Q: You were there until when?

MCCORMICK: Until '91.

Q: All right, we'll pick it up then.

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This is the 27th of November, 2000. Keith, you were going to Bangkok, so let's talk just a bit about Thai training. How did you find the language? As we get older, sometimes it doesn't get easier.

MCCORMICK: It doesn't get easier. I disliked it very much. I think it was probably difficult for language teachers to deal with FSOs. The quality of the language training was really quite good. I left there with a competent ability to speak Thai.

Q: One of the problems I found is that it is very hard as an adult to put yourself back into being a child and repeat all the time.

MCCORMICK: It's frustrating, but that's what you have to do.

Q: Were you picking up anything on Thai culture from your language? Sometimes you get a pretty good idea of what you are up against through the people, with your teacher.

MCCORMICK: Yes, quite a bit. The organized attempts to convey Thai culture were probably a little too childish to be useful. But just by talking to our instructors, going to lunch with them, yes, absolutely. You gain a great deal of insight into Thai culture. And it would have been quite silly, particularly in Thailand's case, to go there without sufficient preparation in that part of the exercise.

Q: Well, how about briefings for the political world because of the complex political situation there?

MCCORMICK: Those were not very good at FSI. They had people who were perfectly capable of giving them, but they weren't allowed to. The level of sophistication had to be kept at what was appropriate for everyone – ambassadors, secretaries, everyone in between. FSI was so afraid of being accused of elitism that it approached things at the lowest common denominator.

Q: You got there in what - '89?

MCCORMICK: I got there in '89. I was supposed to head the internal political unit, but some genius realized that I simply wouldn't have been very good at that in Thailand, while I was exactly what they needed as the head of the foreign political section. So they changed my assignment. In theory, we handled all of Thailand's foreign relations, included bilateral relations. In practice, life was dominated by the war going on in Cambodia next door.

Q: Lets talk about the political situation in Bangkok - what was it at that point?

MCCORMICK: In Thailand, parties really have the old original sense of the word - a group of people who band together for the purpose of contesting for political power. Ideology was very weak. Throughout Thai culture, ideology is very weak because they just don't take it seriously.

They take personality very seriously. What you get is a series of governments that are democratic in form, reasonably benevolent in substance, with close ties to the military and the Chinese-dominated business community. Fragile, depending for majorities on all kinds of parliamentary maneuvering. Inclined to change quickly. Fascinating stuff. The Thais have a history of coups, but at the time I served there they had a relatively stable, conservative government trying to run the country during a time of enormous economic boom. Thailand was growing economically at a tremendous rate; it was very good for the country in one way, but very destructive in many other ways. And they were trying to do this in a very bad neighborhood. Looking out from Thailand, there were nothing but problems in most directions.

Q: Yes. You have Burma, China, and Vietnam.

MCCORMICK: Absolutely. With a raging conflict right on the border in Cambodia, which had then caused massive numbers of Cambodians to flee into Thailand. This was taking place against the background of a huge disillusionment with their view of the United States' staying power in Southeast Asia after the end of the Vietnam War.

Q: Who was the ambassador while you were there?

MCCORMICK: Dan O'Donohue.

Q: I interviewed Dan. How did he operate from your perspective?

MCCORMICK: As a manager of people, not very well. But as a manager of policy, extremely well. He had a very broad view which included all agencies. He had a good Foreign Service sense of the strategic situation, which was extremely complicated at the time. The Khmer Rouge had taken over Cambodia and had led to the killing fields, which was an unbelievable holocaust. It had been brought to an end by a Vietnamese Communist invasion of Cambodia, which left an unpopular government in Phnom Penh which we opposed. That left the United States in an impossible situation. We didn't support this Communist government in Phnom Penh, but favored a coalition of three opposition forces. One of them was the royalist forces led by Prince Sihanouk and his son Prince Ranariddh, and another was the republican non-Communist opposition led by Son Sann. But the third group was the Khmer Rouge. Those three groups, with nothing in common except their opposition to the Communists, were in a weird political and military alliance, with their bases along the Thai border.

Q: During this time, what were the relations of Thailand to Cambodia? Who were they recognizing and how were they viewing the situation?

MCCORMICK: They backed the resistance, but were very careful not to do so in a way that would get them into a shooting war with Cambodia and certainly not with Cambodia's patron, Vietnam. Cambodian forces were no threat to Thailand but the Vietnamese army was. It was a very delicate situation and it also involved Thailand's neighbors in southeast Asia, members of ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), who still believed in the domino theory and were very afraid that Vietnam would threaten all of them.

Q: This is really 15 years later.

MCCORMICK: A mere 15 years later, the Thai would have said.

Q: While you were looking at our relations with Cambodia, were you or any of the officers who were dealing with this concerned about some of the company, like the Khmer Rouge, that we were getting involved with?

MCCORMICK: Very concerned. That was the fundamental problem. We couldn't actually go inside Cambodia. The U.S. had no embassy there; we didn't recognize Cambodia. We also had no embassy in Vietnam; we didn't recognize Vietnam. We had no way to talk to either of those governments, and we needed to know what was going on in the war. So I spent a lot of time at the border, including giving political guidance to the non-Communist rebel forces. On one of my first trips, I was flying out in a helicopter with a group of Thai officers, flying over green rice paddies, and I was struck with a sense of *deja vu*. It was like being back in the middle of the Vietnam War. That war was over, we were past all that. And yet on the ground in Bangkok, in the U.S. embassy, which was a huge, sprawling complex, there was a sense that we were still fighting the Vietnam War. They were the enemy. I found that disturbing. Officially, the U.S. backed the non-Communist resistance, not the Khmer Rouge, but in reality they were all operating together, so we had this very tricky problem, how to support the two non-Communist partners and not their Khmer Rouge allies.

Q: Was there any realistic hope that the resistance forces would prevail during this '89 to '91 phase?

MCCORMICK: I didn't think so. The [CIA] station was convinced there was. I arrived just at the beginning of the big push, starting in the northwest corner of Cambodia. I thought all of this with its maps and plans and charts of weapons flows was unrealistic. What I wanted to know was how all this was going to get us to a political end game in Phnom Penh. We began to try to work out more of a political strategy based on how this could somehow end up with the non-Communists in power and not the Khmer Rouge.

Q: You have an extreme, leftist, radical Communist Party fighting a more centrist Communist group.

MCCORMICK: Yes. A falling out of thieves. We couldn't understand why Cambodians would support the Khmer Rouge. Why would anybody support the Khmer Rouge? I never believed it was a matter of sheer terror. We began to see that it was driven by patriotism, nationalism. The argument of the Khmer Rouge was that this was Vichy France, and they were the Resistance, Communist perhaps but holding out against the German occupiers. At the intellectual levels they actually used that analogy. So if you could somehow cut a deal to get the Vietnamese out of Cambodia, support for the Khmer Rouge would dry up. They would be isolated. There was a risk here, but if we could do that, they would lose their main advantage, and the non-Communist friends of ours would be fighting on their best ground, which was the political arena, instead of the military one where they didn't have a chance.

Q: It would seem that the bull in the china shop was the Vietnamese army. It could go wherever it wanted, do whatever it wanted, and nobody was saying a word until it voluntarily left.

MCCORMICK: Exactly. So it seemed to me that thinking in military terms was heading us into a dead end. The war was being driven largely by the deliveries of arms and war material. Cut that off and it would dry up much faster than a western conflict would. So the question was how do we cut a deal to cut those arms deliveries off and get the Vietnamese out and pen the Khmer Rouge up? We couldn't deliver arms to our side - it was not legal, Congress wouldn't allow it - but the Chinese were delivering arms to the Khmer Rouge in large quantities. The Soviets were delivering arms to the Vietnamese-backed regime in Phnom Penn. The strategy that emerged was to first see if we could get the superpowers to pull back on the grounds that none of us really wanted Cambodia, we just didn't want the other ones to have it, and cut off the arms flows which were driving things, and then get the Thai and Vietnamese out simultaneously and sort of ratchet the war down to a more political struggle our guys had a chance to win.

Q: We are talking about strategic denial I guess.

MCCORMICK: Exactly. What we talked about before.

Q: American arms were getting to the opposition weren't they?

MCCORMICK: No. We weren't allowed to give lethal arms to anybody, certainly not to the Khmer Rouge, even through the covert program.

Q: Well, where did they get their arms?

MCCORMICK: The Khmer Rouge got them from China, the other two from some ASEAN countries.

Q: Well, what about the Communist government in Phnom Penn? Was that a government?

MCCORMICK: The human rights groups said no. The humanitarian NGOs, the ones that give relief aid, thought it was and thought we ought to simply recognize it so that we could deliver humanitarian aid to the people. The same dilemma we were wrestling with about the homelands in South Africa.

Q: Well, that would be cause to hold up, wouldn't it? Was this played at all through the embassy where you could observe it in Bangkok, or is this on a higher level?

MCCORMICK: The final diplomacy was done at the Paris peace conferences convened by the French and Indonesians, but a great deal of the strategic thinking was coming from the embassy. Even a diplomatic settlement at that level wasn't going to move us forward unless we also had some kind of a plan on the ground for how to move the conflict into the political arena where the non-Communists could win. That meant possibly some day recognizing Vietnam, perhaps establishing an embassy there. In the meantime, Embassy Bangkok was designated as our only point of contact with Vietnam, and it was bigger than it normally would have been because we had to deal with both Cambodia and Vietnam as well as Thailand. We had people who were sort of waiting to be the nucleus of embassies in Phnom Penn and Hanoi if we did establish them.

Q: Were these groups mostly independent in looking at Phnom Penn and Hanoi, or were they all coming together in the political section?

MCCORMICK: Mostly part of the political section. It meant we reported to two different offices in Washington.

Q. How did you deal with the exile movements?

MCCORMICK: They were constantly intriguing and maneuvering with each other, us, the Khmer Rouge, probably Phnom Penh. We didn't know which one of the two would be more likely to prevail. We couldn't take Gallup polls inside Cambodia. Washington backed Son Sann, because his group was better armed and because they couldn't stand Prince Sihanouk. But I was convinced the royalist movement of Sihanouk and Prince Ranariddh would ultimately prove to be the strongest. I found Ranariddh quite an appealing political figure. He had a Western education and many Western ideas. Sihanouk was a different matter. But what counted was who was going to come out on top, and how we could make sure they would be democratic and pro-Western. Cambodians have a word for a kind of rallying point around which everybody can compromise, that would appeal to everyone, and that's what Sihanouk, if he went back as the king, would offer. So I wanted U.S. policy to back the royalists. They couldn't win a war – I used to have to give speeches to their troops in the bush and they were a pretty ragtag lot -- but they might win an election. Washington hated that idea. They assumed that royalists and kings were somehow un-American. But they were wrong. Eventually the U.S., Soviets, and Chinese all did pull back, and then the inner ring of Thailand, Vietnam, and ASEAN all pulled back and there was a four-way, UN-supervised election and of course the royalists won.

Q: Were you following events in the Soviet Union at this point? It would seem that Eastern Europe had moved into Western Europe, essentially, and the Soviet Union was going through a time of trouble. Was that beginning to be a factor?

MCCORMICK: That was the key to it all, of course. We told the Russians this was no time for the Soviet Union to be wasting ammunition on a faraway corner of the world. They had more important things to worry about and Southeast Asia wasn't important to them as long as it didn't fall into the hands of China or some crazy Khmer Rouge psychopaths.

Q: Were we setting out markers saying we really didn't want any bases here or anything else? Let's get this neutralized?

MCCORMICK: Yes. That policy had to be fought out, but once it was, that part was pretty clear. The U.S. doesn't want this; the U.S. isn't going back into Southeast Asia in a military sense; we are not going to try to put a military presence in Cambodia.

Q: What about as these things are being thought - I'm sure at a military mission at the embassy, they would be talking obviously about how to win the war on the ground. What about the CIA?

Southeast Asia has been a big area of CIA influence. What were you getting from your pals there?

MCCORMICK: Well, that post is one of the largest in the world. A lot of the people there had come out of the culture of covert assistance to the Afghans to fight the Soviets and they all had AK-47s on their walls. So the CIA saw this as an extension of the same struggle that had taken place in Angola, Mozambique, Afghanistan, Ethiopia. Their focus was very much on the military. It was also a bit revanchist – the possibility of a rollback of the North Vietnamese.

Q: Well, did you sense that at the embassy, since you were in the political section, you were maybe looking for a political solution, but back in Washington there were all sorts of currents and eddies of what to do about it, or was Washington of one mind?

MCCORMICK: There was no consensus. Nobody really knew what to do. They wanted the Vietnamese out but didn't want the Khmer Rouge in. The whole thing was a huge embarrassment and difficulty, and there was no desire to get sucked into some new conflict in Southeast Asia. More confusion than a hard debate. So when the State Department and the embassy began to piece together a strategy which might just get us out of this, there was a willingness to give it a try. Solarz, on the Hill, was pushing the same idea.

Q: What about the Thais? I assume their main thing was they didn't want the bloody Vietnamese Army too close.

MCCORMICK: Exactly. They tried to walk a very careful line, but this is Thailand. There was lucrative, illegal logging inside Cambodia which could only be done by complicated arrangements along the border between all kinds of people. There were gem mines in the Khmer Rouge territory in the Elephant Mountains. There were at least 300,000 Cambodian refugees along the border, all of them doing deals with everybody else. Bangkok was officially neutral, but was deeply involved on both sides of the border.

Q: With the Cambodian refugees, did you find that in our policy the nine governmental organizations dealing with refugees had played a role in our policy?

MCCORMICK: The refugee people were a very big section of the embassy. We relied on them for a lot of information about the mood and situation at the border and in the camps, because of course the refugees would play a big role in the election and the reconstruction if they did go back. I wouldn't say they played a big role in policy.

Q: The recognition of Vietnam was a very hard pill for Congress to swallow.

MCCORMICK: Very. It was later my job in H [the Bureau of Legislative Affairs] to gain the Hill's agreement to open an embassy in Vietnam and get our first ambassador confirmed. It was extremely difficult.

Q: What happened to the Khmer Rouge in the end?

MCCORMICK: We were all afraid we might have gambled horribly wrong, that the Khmer Rouge might come back and the killing fields might come back if we did succeed in getting the Vietnamese Army out. But they didn't. It all worked out very much the way we said. There was a UN peacekeeping force and a UN-supervised election, reasonably free and fair under the circumstances. The royalists won, but not decisively. So the Communists and Prince Ranariddh's group agreed on a power-sharing arrangement. Horribly inefficient and expensive, but much better than the war. It lasted until 1997 and opened the way for the U.S. to open an embassy. The fighting stopped, and we began to pour money into reconstruction. The Khmer Rouge did not move in and take over a weakened country as one feared they might. It turned out we had been right in our analysis. As soon as the Vietnamese army was out, a lot of their support began to fade. It faded very rapidly and eventually the Khmer Rouge leaders were isolated and this fearsome movement just collapsed, deprived of military and political air.

Q: Did you find that running this section, as you did, was a very tricky thing and that you were having to sit there with insurrection in the ranks with the junior officers? I would imagine this would cause a lot of people to have very strong opinions.

MCCORMICK: A lot of junior officers were very worried about the gamble. We were worried about the gamble. They thought the Khmer Rouge would hide their arms and come back later. Others were very troubled by concerns that we were secretly supporting the Khmer Rouge, although in fact we weren't and the easiest way to deal with that was to make sure they saw more of the facts. So there was a lot of angst on that score.

Q: How did you yourself find dealing with the Thai government? Getting information? What was your impression about how responsive they were?

MCCORMICK: I found it personally very easy, because my job dealt with the foreign ministry and the National Security Council, which was highly focused in the same direction that we were. Those groups were easy to deal with, we shared traditions, cultured people, we were able to talk on a very sophisticated level. I found it harder to deal with the military. I liked them, but I just didn't have that special rapport, that instinctive understanding that lets you really get inside an institution and know what's really going on, the way I did in South Africa. Sometimes you do and sometimes you don't. The Thai military are a hard-drinking, hard-whoring bunch.

Q: Well, I'm told that in some places one of the major things you have to do is play golf, and drink a lot in the clubhouse.

MCCORMICK: We played a lot of golf, and we spent a lot of time on the border. I never had any doubts about depending on them for my safety. I liked Thai officers. In fact, I liked all Thais. Like most Americans who served there, I fell in love with the Thai culture and one of my greatest personal concerns was that I could see traditional Thai culture all around me disintegrating under the impact of the economic boom. We could see life becoming harder, not easier, for the poor. At the same time money was floating around in unbelievable amounts at the top.

Q: It wasn't a part of your particular bailiwick, but were you getting from your officers in the *economic section, "Hey, this is a boom, this is based on some personal ties." There were real problems because it blew up not too long afterward.*

MCCORMICK: Everybody in the economic section knew the boom couldn't last, but no, we never reported that to Washington. In retrospect, you wonder how we could have missed it, but nobody wanted to hear that kind of thing. The emphasis was all on the commercial potential. Even the economic work was focused on removing barriers to trade. Inside the embassy there was a feeling that this was the way development was supposed to work. The Thais had done it right. They had a good educational system, a very strong value system, they had brought their birth rate down. It turned out their financial system wasn't really sound, or even honest. I don't remember the warning though. I do remember that all of us were troubled by the environmental disaster this was creating. The Thai had long dismissed environmental thinking as a silly Western preoccupation, they didn't believe it, they didn't want to listen to the warnings. But there was a massive mudslide off a deforested mountainside which buried a village and killed a lot of people. Suddenly there were Thai intellectuals and journalists who were saying, "Well, maybe there is something to this. Maybe there are costs." That still was kind of an exception to the general attitude that forests were there to be chopped down and sold just as fast as you could.

Q: Were a lot of American business people coming there to work?

MCCORMICK: Factories were springing up in rice paddies faster than you could count them. Shopping malls, highways, everything. There was a huge explosion of construction. I hated the boom. I thought it was ruining Thai culture, I thought it was out of control. They were chopping down their trees and filling in the graceful old canals. Eventually the king said it had all been a very bad mistake.

Q: What sort of effect did that have on the embassy personnel?

MCCORMICK: Well, it made housing extremely difficult to find. A lot of people at the embassy had come to Bangkok because they liked living in Southeast Asia and they couldn't go back to Saigon or Phnom Penh. They always complained that what they remembered in Asia was a nice house in a quiet, traditional neighborhood, and now Bangkok was much more like Manhattan and we all lived in apartments. World's worst traffic.

Q: I was going to say, the traffic must have been a real pain in the ass.

MCCORMICK: Yes, traffic disrupted everything. We spent huge amounts of time in getting to the foreign ministry and other places.

Q: The fact that Bangkok was sort of the sex capital of the world and brought hordes of, not so much Americans, but Europeans and others there, this could have a very disrupting effect on an embassy, which is essentially a family. Was this a problem?

MCCORMICK: It was very disruptive and contributed to the reasons why I left and went on to a totally different kind of place. I had teenage sons, and they were at the age where this was not a good place for them to be. It probably was not out of control. In fact, for the family Bangkok had a number of advantages. There was a very good school there, the International School of Bangkok was absolutely first rate, and it had previously had quite a drug problem but they had brought that problem under control and it turned out to be quite a fine school and a magical experience overall to live in Thailand.

Q: The problem was renowned there.

MCCORMICK: By the time I got there it had been brought under control. The school was excellent. Life was interesting, good, and safe, for the most part. But the problem of the sex market was extremely disruptive.

Q: Had AIDS begun to hit there?

MCCORMICK: Most Thai didn't take it very seriously.

Q: Well, let's turn to Burma. What was the situation while you were in Bangkok in Burma and what were our concerns and Thai concerns with Burma?

MCCORMICK: The Thai were afraid they might have another full-scale war and another flood of refugees just as they had on their eastern border with Cambodia. It really is a very difficult neighborhood. They also didn't want to set a precedent for too much Western interference in the internal affairs of an Asian country, even a thugocracy like Burma. Our dilemma was that half of the world's heroin comes from Burma. To fight it, you need to give aid and intelligence to the government. How could we do that if they would probably use it against their own people? How could we not?

Q: We had an embassy in Rangoon.

MCCORMICK: We had an embassy in Rangoon, and Burma policy was made in Washington. So our role was minor: gathering information along the border, pushing the Thai to let a few more refugees in. The biggest problem was the dilemma over drugs.

Q: I understand the Drug Enforcement Agency is made up of basic cops and they wanted to take an active hand so they could get much more involved than they might. As a political officer, I could see you saying, "Oh my God, they have done it again."

MCCORMICK: Exactly right. Of course, through AID, we had a program of assistance to replace the cultivation of poppies with the cultivation of something else, and crop eradication, but the DEA types didn't think much of that. For them, all of northern Thailand and northeast Burma was the wild west. It was a fantastically open place to operate in. So there was a systemic conflict of objectives.

Q: It certainly was an active time but then you left in 1991. You said partly because of your family.

MCCORMICK: Very much. I loved Thailand and the Thai culture even though I could see it changing in front of my eyes. It was a great privilege to live among the Thai for a while and learn from them. But if you had teenage boys there, and you pointed out the sex trade, this was a risk I didn't want to take. There was also a huge pollution problem. The embassy didn't pay enough attention it. The worst was lead pollution, from unleaded gasoline.

Q: I might point out, because time is moving on, that lead at that point was a standard additive to gasoline to make it more efficient, and came out of the exhaust pipe.

MCCORMICK: For all these reasons we asked for another posting. I applied for the DCM job in Wellington, New Zealand. The ambassador decided instead to move the political counselor up to be her DCM and asked if I still wanted to go, but as political counselor. I thought about it and decided that I did.

Q: So you went to Wellington when?

MCCORMICK: In the fall of 1991.

Q: And you were there until when?

MCCORMICK: Until the fall of 1994.

Q: Did you have any problems getting a transfer? You talked about your family and other people must have had the same concerns.

MCCORMICK: No, the State Department was quite good about this. When issues really involved family health, if that was what you wanted to do, you could do it. You had to find your own assignment. You had to think about the consequences, whether it was the right career move and all of that.

Q: I would have thought a lot of people would be concerned about the same things you were.

MCCORMICK: A lot of people don't have teenage children. Most people at the embassy were happy with Bangkok.

Q: I would think the lead poisoning thing would have begun to —

MCCORMICK: I think they used to do a poor job of being alert to that. That was something that we became concerned about after learning how serious it was and how it affects children.

Q: Wellington. You went there in '91, and I guess maybe it has gotten a little better, but our relations weren't the greatest with New Zealand at that time were they?

MCCORMICK: They were terrible at that time, unfortunately. Historically, of course, they had been very close, but they had been strained badly by the dispute over ANZUS and nuclear ships.

Q: Who was our ambassador at that time?

MCCORMICK: Della Newman. A political appointee, head of the Bush campaign in the state of Washington.

Q: How big was our embassy at that time?

MCCORMICK: It was a great deal bigger than it is now. The political section had five or six people. That was driven mostly by the perceived importance at the time of the ANZUS (Australia / New Zealand / U.S. Treaty) question, though we also had a lot of work to do because of the extensive scientific contacts that we had, including cooperation in Antarctica. Most U.S. operations in Antarctica go through New Zealand and we do them jointly with New Zealanders. Ironically, since the U.S. Navy supported that, we had political/military work to do coordinating that at the same time we had cut off every other sort of military contact because of the nuclear flap. New Zealand was also president of the U.N. Security Council at that time, and very active in UN affairs. I shouldn't think it would be anything like that size today.

Q: What was the political situation in Wellington when you arrived?

MCCORMICK: New Zealand was in the midst of a very difficult experiment in radical economic reform. It had always been an almost Scandinavian social democracy. Very high living standards; an extensive welfare system. That all came to a halt in the '80s after the European Union started cutting back on Britain's ability to give preference to New Zealand exports.

Q: You're talking about butter and-

MCCORMICK: Butter, lamb, these kinds of things. A very trade-dependent country. So the New Zealanders were simply running out of the money to fund this extremely generous social system and this very comfortable and stable society. They decided on a radical transformation of their economy. They abandoned all their subsidies and began to privatize everything. It was very much like Newt Gingrich's "contract with America."

Q: My understanding was that New Zealand had a lot of people who came out of the labor side from the British Isles and they brought labor class war, and workers' take-over of industry.

MCCORMICK: They had a very important labor movement. When I was there we had a fulltime labor officer. But there wasn't the labor militancy that you might find in Australia. New Zealand and Australia are extremely different. There are virtually no class differences in New Zealand, it's the most egalitarian country I have ever seen, completely unlike the United States with our extremes of wealth and poverty. There's also little of the Australian sense of wanting to prove they're just as good as anyone. Minimal class distinction, job security, generous social services – it was rather a matter of taking these things for granted than of fighting for them, because they already had them. So things worked very well while there was enough money coming in, but the global terms of trade were turning against them and they also found that as a First World country in the Third World South Pacific, too many foreigners were coming in to take advantage of free services. Their hospital system was being swamped by South Pacific islanders who came there for free medical care. They called a sudden halt to all of this, ended a lot of their subsidies cold turkey, and began a radical experiment with free market theories. Ironically, although U.S. conservatives were so interested in it, this experiment in New Zealand was begun by the Labor Party.

Q: This was just before you got there?

MCCORMICK: This was just before I got there. When we arrived, they were on the downside of the curve. There was a lot of unemployment, a lot of worries. By the time we left they were enjoying the upside. It had all worked out very well. New Zealand had reformed its economy. They had paid off their external debt; they were prospering.

Q: When you got there, what was the American policy toward New Zealand and New Zealand policy towards the United States?

MCCORMICK: We were in a bitter dispute over what we called our policy of NCND – that we would neither confirm nor deny whether U.S. warships carried nuclear arms when they would dock in a friendly port. That formula was a very subtle and important thing in places like Australia and Japan, because it allowed host governments whose people were very anti-nuclear to sort of look the other way. You can imagine how some Japanese would feel if we acknowledged that a ship in Tokyo harbor carried atomic bombs. New Zealanders are a little too blunt and honest to appreciate that kind of subtlety, and they kind of made themselves the skunk at the picnic by insisting on knowing one way or the other. They required all ships to declare that they had nothing nuclear, and the U.S. was unwilling to do that and unwilling to guarantee it would defend New Zealand if it couldn't set the rules for sending its ships there. The Navy feared that if New Zealand got away with this not-in-my-back-yard approach, arrangements in Japan could really come unraveled. So New Zealand was suspended from the ANZUS alliance and we cut off all high level political and military contact.

Q. What did you think about this?

MCCORMICK: I thought the estrangement was outdated and absurd. By the time I arrived, it wasn't important any longer to be able to send our ships into New Zealand harbors. The Cold War had ended, President Bush had taken the nuclear missiles off our ships. I was concerned that the whole thing had degenerated into an argument over pride, over which side would acknowledge first that we didn't really need to keep on feuding.

Q. How did it start?

MCCORMICK: I'm afraid my hero, Secretary Shultz, mishandled it. Before this all blew up, we used to have regular consultations with the Australians and New Zealanders. Worked with them very closely. When Shultz arrived for those talks in 1986, New Zealand had just elected a Labor government, and Shultz was pushing them to promise that they wouldn't change their policy on this NCND issue. It was just the wrong moment to do so. They had just come into power and they were completely preoccupied with an internal crisis of their own because they were facing a sudden and major foreign currency crisis, and it was exactly the wrong moment to push them to make a complex foreign policy decision like that. But we did, and they got their backs up and said no, and we reacted badly and it all went rapidly downhill. Looking back later, we wondered why in the world we hadn't just let it wait for a better moment. There had never been any problem; there was no indication that we would face one. But once we insisted, it became an issue and all sorts of matters of face and pride became involved. We ended by completely cutting off all high level military, diplomatic, and political contact in order to force them to back down.

Q: When you were there, what were we doing?

MCCORMICK: We had two different views inside the embassy. The military wanted to press the New Zealanders harder to see sense. They saw them as irrational on the nuclear issue and unwilling to carry their weight in the common defense. But they had no real plan for changing anybody's mind, and anyway they didn't really care about New Zealand, they cared about the effect of New Zealand's defiance on other countries like Australia and Japan. So their real policy recommendation was to isolate New Zealand "*pour encourager les autres"* (to encourage the others). My job, on the other hand, was to get us past this situation. There were a lot of things we needed to talk to the Kiwis about and couldn't. They knew more than we did about the Pacific islands. They could talk to a lot of countries whom we couldn't, like Iran. We needed their help in the Security Council. We needed their help as one of the few democracies in Asia. And so forth. So the issue wasn't to make them bend the knee about some Cold War policy, it was to get us past this issue and resume cooperation. And I thought more pressure was a crazy way to try to walk a very proud, small country back from an overstatement.

Q. Did you succeed in changing anything?

MCCORMICK: Well, the New Zealanders had gotten themselves pretty worked up about all this. They saw it as David and Goliath. The new prime minister wanted to solve the problem if he could – Jim Bolger, who is now the New Zealand ambassador to Washington – but didn't want to lose an election for it. Most New Zealanders strongly supported the anti-nuclear stance. They had very unwisely written it into law and not just policy, which would have been easier to change. By now our navy's nuclear missiles were gone, so the question was really the safety of our nuclear reactors. We knew they were safe, but New Zealanders didn't. So we decided to work very closely with people in that new government, we and the British, to see if New Zealanders couldn't assure themselves that these ships were safe. Not just take the U.S. word for it. The Navy wouldn't share with anyone, even New Zealand, enough of the information on how the nuclear powered ships worked to reassure them, so the solution was a commission of New Zealand experts who would study this and come to their own conclusions about how safe it was. At the same time, we had to do an immense amount of personal diplomacy, very labor-intensive, and also a lot of public diplomacy. I worked very hard to develop some personal credibility with them, which you could only do by acknowledging some of their concerns. I must have met with every member of Parliament they have, and of course they are extremely appealing and likeable people so that was a pleasure, but it was a matter of slowly walking back suspicions and you couldn't do it unless you understood or even shared a little bit of their world view which is so remote and different from, say, what you see at USNATO or Berlin. Eventually we managed to reduce the temperature enough on both sides that we were able to go back to normal political contacts. Bolger came to Washington, saw the President, and we began to reestablish a very valuable exchange of information. But we never did make them repeal their law.

Q: From your observation, how did - who was our ambassador again?

MCCORMICK: Della Newman.

Q: How did she work?

MCCORMICK: She was actually quite an effective ambassador. Knew nothing about foreign affairs at all, but she was a very gracious person, and endearing to the New Zealanders. She was smart enough not to interfere very much in the running of the embassy. She went around the country giving speeches about how we were such similar countries, with common values and a common English heritage, and everybody should relax. It turned out to be the right message.

Q: Well, a particularly gracious woman would be non-threatening at that time, when you were trying to say the United States was not trying to bully them. It could work very well.

MCCORMICK: It did.

Q: Who was the DCM?

MCCORMICK: Well, I was acting DCM for a lot of the time out there because we didn't have an ambassador, but the DCM was David Walker. He was very good, because he communicated openly and well with everyone. His successor was not a successful DCM, because she did not. Sylvia Stanfield. Very secretive and mysterious, always closing doors and whispering. Morale went down because everyone thought something terrible was up. It wasn't; that was just her way.

Q: What type of government was in when you were there?

MCCORMICK: When I arrived, a conservative government had replaced a labor one. Until then, New Zealand had been politically stable. It was extremely civilized and running very well. But they decided it wasn't fair that people who supported smaller parties were in a way disenfranchised because of the two party system, so they talked themselves into a constitutional change to adopt proportional representation. I thought it was a terrible idea. They would wind up like Israel or Italy where there are more parties than you can count and sensible policies are held for ransom by some tiny party you have never heard of. But they went ahead and changed to a very idealistic system which now suffers from instability.

Q: The Clinton Administration came in shortly after you were there. Did the ambassador change?

MCCORMICK: Eventually, a new ambassador did come out, after some rather unseemly scuffling over who would get this plum post and when. Most policy didn't change. The Clinton people brought a more aggressive emphasis on commercial promotion.

Q: Was there good dialogue between you and your New Zealand counterparts?

MCCORMICK: Extremely good. New Zealanders are appealing people, and their diplomats were very professional and sophisticated. Their foreign ministry was also very efficient. They were always well informed. They don't have the kind of interagency rivalries we do in Washington, so when a meeting was held they would send off a very quick, short, cable and all their people would know the next day what the essential points were. Meanwhile, we would draft a longer and more detailed cable which would be held up while people argued over what it ought to say – not about what the other side had said, but about what we had said, to make sure that we looked good and were loyal to the party line. The New Zealanders always knew more than we did about what was going on in other areas of the world, though we knew more about any one particular issue. I suppose it was the lateral vision which you need as a small and trade-dependent country where it really matters a great deal what is going on in diplomatic circles in the outside world. Compared to them, a lot of the energy we expended was internal. So much of what goes on in the U.S. Government is isometric.

Q: Was New Zealand trying to insert itself, or was already there, within the Pacific area?

MCCORMICK: Already there. The Pacific islands all looked to them. They were generous with assistance and unthreatening. Their knowledge of the culture and the area is good. There was also a very romantic strain in the Kiwis in which they pictured themselves and the South Pacific as a kind of idyllic haven of peace and goodwill in the world. This went down well in UN circles. New Zealand used it to win a carefully planned election to the Security Council. This was during a period where there was a huge increase in interest in peacekeeping. It was going to be a New World Order, after the Cold War, where the UN was going to blossom into a worldwide peacekeeping force. We were working closely with the New Zealanders on that, and it made it even harder to stick to the policy of not exchanging any intelligence with them. In Somalia, for example, it would have been crazy. So eventually we set that policy aside.

Q: How about immigration? I would think it would be such a small country that there would be concern about immigration from the islands or from China.

MCCORMICK: There was a lot of concern about it. More about the islands than from Asia. The closest thing to a slum you could find in New Zealand - and it wouldn't be very close - would be populated by Pacific island immigrants. On the other hand, they were very anxious to increase their trade with Asia, and there was a lot of romanticism about multiculturalism since the country is so homogeneous – it must be at least 90% British – so the elites and the government supported immigration even though most ordinary people probably deplored it. I wouldn't call it a major problem. Much more serious was the issue of the indigenous Maori population. They had been a tiny percentage of the population until New Zealand decided to compensate them for the fact that so much of their land had been taken by settlers, and the terms were extremely generous and applied to anyone with as much as four or five percent of Maori blood. So the number of people who saw themselves as Maori suddenly went up ten or twenty times. There was also a burst of nastiness from Maori radicals who thought perhaps it was time to reclaim the entire country and rename it Aotearoa. But on the whole, I would say that race relations were remarkably good and peaceful, and if anything New Zealanders had trouble understanding just how serious these problems are in the rest of the world.

Q: Were there any problems with the New Zealand government over American activities in Antarctica?

MCCORMICK: Well, there could have been because New Zealand, unlike other countries, actually claims sovereignty over its portion of Antarctica. That could be a major problem. But they agreed to suspend those claims in the interests of the international treaty on Antarctica, which created a regime designed to allow scientific work there but demilitarize the continent and preserve it. The New Zealanders also had a very romantic and progressive view of Antarctica, the clean white South which they would help preserve as a pristine wilderness where all countries could cooperate for science. There was a lot of practical work for us because of that. The treaty partners decided it was no longer acceptable to dump any garbage in Antarctica and the impact of that decision on our operations was enormous. How do you get the tonnage of garbage generated by a program the size of the American program off the continent? But in general we worked very closely and well with them.

Q: When you were looking at relations between Australia and New Zealand, I would imagine these would have been very close and very strained.

MCCORMICK: They were close and they were strained. On the political side, Australia did not appreciate New Zealand's nuclear stance, and thought New Zealand was allowing Canberra to carry an unfair share of the burden of their mutual defense. Economically, they had a very successful common market, but New Zealand had embarked on these radical free market policy reforms we talked about, while Australia was still a protectionist and traditional economy. Obviously, you can't have both of those – you either have to harmonize your policies or stop trying to be a single market – and there was a lot of tension over which to do. Eventually, it seemed to work so well for the Kiwis that Australia also began to get rid of its subsidies and tariffs and adopt a more free market stance.

Q: Did you find yourself sitting down with your Australian colleagues from time to time and trying to figure out what was going on - us against them in a way on some things, or not?

MCCORMICK: On the nuclear issue, yes. That was very much a joint, British-Australian-American approach, trying to convince the New Zealanders that they were the odd ones out. They always pointed to the Canadians, who remained a respected, dependable ally even though they also had renounced nuclear weapons after being part of the original production of the atomic bomb in World War II. On economic issues it was the U.S. and New Zealand against Australia. We were very careful never to surprise the British or Australians with any of our attempts to get around the nuclear issue with the Kiwis.

Q: How did you feel you were supported back in Washington? Was New Zealand sort of a place for a politician or someone in the State Department to kick once in a while because of the nuclear thing?

MCCORMICK: A bit of that, especially in the Pentagon. But the basis of our policy was the fear that if New Zealand could get away with not having to share in the risks of defending the West, then others would refuse to share them, too. A very unfortunate basis for a policy but there it was.

Q: How about the Japanese, were they fairly aggressive in their policy there?

MCCORMICK: Not on the nuclear issue, but New Zealand is very active in international environmental diplomacy. The Wellington convention limiting drift net fishing shows that kind of interest. And the Japanese were always on the opposite side. New Zealand is a country with a small and wealthy population which wants to preserve the world's environment. Japan is an overcrowded country that says it can't afford not to exploit resources. Relations between the two were sometimes tense.

Q: I know Australians, and I assume with New Zealanders that most people, when they graduate from university, take a year off and wander all over the place. Was there much knowledge of the United States there?

MCCORMICK: There was a great deal. As you say, they all like to do this "overseas experience." It didn't create any consular problems that I knew about, because they were generally so well behaved and went home again. But Japan reminds me of one thing I wanted to mention. When the 50th anniversary ceremonies of World War II came around, it was assumed in Washington that New Zealand would have no place in them. They were no longer an ally, and they didn't have any great World War II battles in New Zealand, so they were completely excluded from all the plans. It turns out, though, that hundreds of thousands of American troops were stationed in New Zealand in World War II. When Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, the New Zealand army was off in Europe and New Zealand itself was defenseless. Rather than bring the New Zealanders back to defend their own country, and weaken the allies overall, the U.S. sent its troops to be trained in New Zealand and defend it while they were there. It was an extraordinary demonstration of mutual trust – can you imagine letting somebody else take over your country and defend it? – and it worked extremely well. People in Auckland and Wellington had very fond memories of them. The embassy insisted that this should also be commemorated, and it helped enormously in getting us past the nuclear dispute. Man for man, the New Zealanders were the finest fighting forces in the Second World War, and we had helped defend their homes for them while they were off defeating Rommel. These celebrations gave us a chance to convey to them the great respect and admiration which we had for them as allies, and what we got back in return was an enormous and unanticipated outpouring of affection for the U.S. in New Zealand. It was quite an extraordinary thing around the entire country, and it was a crucial step in restoring good relations.

Q: Then you left there in '94?

MCCORMICK: I left there in '94 to come back to Washington.

Q: I think we will stop at this point and pick up in '94 when you are back in Washington. What job did you have?

MCCORMICK: I went into legislative affairs.

Q: Okay, we'll pick it up then.

Q: This is the 8th of December 2000. Keith, in 1994 you moved to legislative affairs. You were there from when to when?

MCCORMICK: From 1994 to 1997.

Q: Would you describe the role of legislative affairs "H" when you got there in '94? How did you see it? You had never done this before, had you?

MCCORMICK: I had never done this before. I had spent two years on the Hill, so I had some knowledge of Congress, but no background in legislative work per se. In fact, I always thought the Department should staff H with people who had served on the Hill.

Q: Who was the head of legislative affairs?

MCCORMICK: Wendy Sherman. When I joined H -

Q: Wait a second here. Lets talk a little about Wendy Sherman. What was she like? What was her background first and then - this was the Clinton Administration - how did she fit into this?

MCCORMICK: She came from Barbara Mikulski's staff, the Democratic senator from Maryland. Wendy was an extremely good political operator. She didn't know anything about foreign policy, but she knew the Hill very well, knew how to use it, how to work it. She was also extremely partisan. That was a constant problem, because she never looked at things in terms of what was best for the State Department's foreign policy, but what was best for the Administration overall, the party and the President and their struggle with their Republican opposition. She was widely detested for that in the State Department, but she had the Secretary's confidence and she knew what she was doing.

Q: By this time you had a Republican Senate and a Republican Congress.

MCCORMICK: I arrived before that. The election was in the fall.

Q: This was the election of '94?

MCCORMICK: The election of '94, so beginning in 1995 it was an entirely different Congress, with the Republicans in the majority in both houses for the first time in decades. It was a huge change. Wendy and the Schedule C [political] appointees were in shock. There was a sense of panic that they wouldn't be able to work with the new Republican leadership. They didn't know anyone who knew anyone who ever talked to "those people." I was literally the only person we had who knew anything at all about Senator Helms. To the FSOs in the bureau, who didn't think in partisan terms, it didn't seem as much of a disaster as it did to the political appointees.

Q: From your experience on the Hill, what was your impression of how the Department of State responded and worked with Congress on your level? I'm trying to find out what your baggage *was when you arrived.*

MCCORMICK: Well, there was not a very good understanding of the new Republican leaders. But in fact, the State Department's legislative work is a great deal better than most people realize. One indicator of that would be the extent to which Secretary Christopher, and later Albright also, and their legislative staffs were able to get so many of the initial State Department budget cuts reversed. On the other hand, we are not very good at articulating to congressmen exactly what our foreign policy is trying to achieve. We take too many things for granted when we should be spelling out exactly what we can do, through foreign policy, for their constituents.

Q: How did you find the staff of both Foreign Service Officers and civil servants in H? Did they seem to understand how to deal with Congress?

MCCORMICK: The staff was good -- a mix of civil servants, FSO's, and political appointees. Most FSOs don't go there unless they know a bit about the Hill. The bureau was poorly organized and managed, but extremely focused. It had a reputation for being a very difficult, intense place to work – more like the screaming and shouting on the Hill than the cool, calm image of a State Department office.

Q: Did you find from Wendy Sherman and others almost a visceral reaction to Senator Helms and to Newt Gingrich?

MCCORMICK: Yes. She thought in terms of Hillary Clinton's [accusation of a] "vast right-wing conspiracy," and she was convinced that they intended to "destroy the Clinton presidency." But she was very disciplined and skilled at dealing with them, thoroughly professional. She established a very good working relationship, for example, with the Speaker's office even though she couldn't stand Newt Gingrich personally. I have to say that her open partisanship was sometimes less of a problem for us than the broad disdain the average Foreign Service Officer had for Helms and Gingrich, even though we didn't really know anything about them.

Q: As I recall, when the '94 Congress came in, somebody was making a big point of being real Americans and half of us don't even have passports because we stick to the United States. Of course that just raised the hackles of the Foreign Service.

MCCORMICK: Exactly. It turns out it was actually not true, but it was a typical story and it illustrated the atmosphere and it did raise the hackles of the Foreign Service. This was a difficult group to work with. Many of them had no understanding of foreign policy at all and no sympathy for it.

Q: What was your particular slice of this pizza?

MCCORMICK: Asian affairs. My job was to get the legislation that we wanted in the Asian area passed and stop the legislation that we didn't. It was essentially a legislative strategist's or tactician's job. We called it "Legislative Management" which actually describes it pretty well.

Q. Why wouldn't that be handled by EAP (the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs)?

MCCORMICK: EAP makes policy toward East Asia. Our job was to advance that policy on the Hill and defend it from attacks. You can't have individual bureaus dealing with the Hill on legislation, even though they're the experts on the area. It's important to have that done by legislative specialists. That's partly because they understand how Congress works, and partly in order to ensure that what they do supports the Secretary's policy overall, not just the policy of one bureau. There was a built-in tension in this regard. For example, I arrived at just the time when Taiwan launched a major initiative on the Hill. It hired a lobbying firm in Washington and put a lot of money into it, some of that money, by the way, apparently going straight to members. It was trying to go around the State Department to get the Congress to allow a visit by President Lee Teng-hui, although of course we didn't recognize Taiwan. EAP was quite alarmed about what this could do to our relations with Beijing. Part of my job was simply to warn them. Legislative officers ought to be up on the Hill all the time and just bring back intelligence the way a political officer in a foreign country would. This is brewing, this is where it's going, and you've got to worry about this. It's also to help the Secretary balance whether we are better advised to oppose a bill or a move completely, or attempt to work with it to see if we can get it watered down or changed or made more palatable in the end. On this one, we were headed for a massive defeat. The Secretary didn't want to suffer a humiliating rebuff on this issue, but EAP wanted to go down fighting just to show Beijing that the Administration hadn't changed its policy even if Congress did, and they refused to try to soften the vote at all. We lost by 97 to 1 in the Senate and everyone to no one in the House. At the last minute I went to Senator Johnson of Louisiana, who was one of our few supporters, and wrote a colloquy which he and Senator Murkowski agreed to give which said the vote had nothing to do with foreign policy and didn't change our policy in any way. That was about the most we could salvage out of the defeat.

Q: Good God. I'm not an East Asia hand, but it rankles me that somehow over the years we have sort of let the Peoples' Republic of China dictate how we behave a lot. They are always saying if we don't do this, they will go into a pout or do something. I always thought that those involved with mainland China affairs tend to say, "Oh my goodness, we can't ruffle the Chinese." So it is one of these things where the Chinese can dictate to us. Did you have any of that kind of feeling?

MCCORMICK: Well, personally, I might have, but it wasn't my job to second-guess the policy, it was my job to protect it on the Hill. As usual, both sides had a point. What you have just articulated was the view of almost everyone in Congress, and of course it made a lot of sense. Why should China tell us who could visit America? But EAP was also right in warning that this would precipitate a crisis with Beijing. That's what I meant by saying I didn't think the State Department always did that well in explaining its views to the Hill. The point was not whether China would like it or not, the point was that we had made a valid diplomatic commitment not to let a Taiwan leader visit (because that might imply political recognition) and we needed to abide by our commitments. Even so, there were some members, including Senator Helms, who insisted that diplomatic agreements, even treaties, do not have force in law above the will of the Senate. That is a fundamental point of disagreement.

Q: Yes, once you've agreed to it, it is not for the Senate to take back.

MCCORMICK: That's what I would say. But after three or four years of doing this, my conclusion was that the State Department simply needs to deal with the Hill the way it deals with other countries. Use diplomacy. Use the kind of Foreign Service skills we have in abundance to find out who is about to do what up there. Analyze the power centers and their motives. Think of different coalitions that might be constructed to support or block something. Isn't that just what we do overseas?

Q: What were the issues in Asian affairs during the time you were there in '94 to '97?

MCCORMICK: Policy toward China was the most important single issue. It became an enormous legislative issue because of this vote on Lee Teng-hui. Americans just could not understand why this mattered very much, but Beijing concluded that this was an act of serious, long-term hostility. They always make the mistake of thinking we know what we're doing. Unlike the Taiwanese, they knew very little about how Congress works. In any event, we wound up with the crisis in the Taiwan Straits, with Chinese missiles being lobbed in the direction of Taiwan. The U.S. responded by dispatching an aircraft carrier through the Taiwan Straits. For the next three years, a great deal of my work was driven by the chill in U.S.-Chinese relations. At the same time, our overriding objective each year regarding China was to gain renewal of the Administration's policy of maintaining "most favored nation" – later we began to call it "normal" -- trading relations with China.

Q: To make your case, were you talking to our people on the desks? I mean the Taiwan interest people in Rosslyn but also the China desk? Were you talking to them on this matter?

MCCORMICK: Yes, constantly. If you are doing the job right, you should be spending half of your day up on the Hill understanding what is going on up there, and the other half with the desks discussing what we do about it to support our policy. The process on the Hill is very opaque. Although it is perfectly public, things are published and so on, that is really all after-the-fact. By the time you learn about it, it is too late. What we need to know is what is going to happen tomorrow. It takes the same kind of work that an embassy does: identifying contacts, building up rapport with them -- not always an easy thing to do, there is a tremendous amount of suspicion to get past, establishing some kind of credibility and a record of consistency and accuracy in what you are conveying up there. You never want to make something up. You are delivering the Administration's policy, not your own. But this is what diplomats do. The State Department ought to be better at it than anyone.

Q: You find out there is another problem brewing over China relations. When you come back could H orchestrate a program to deal with this? In other words say, "Let's call up so and so who is a good friend of Congressman so-and-so." In other words, could we fine tune this?

MCCORMICK: Yes. H does this very well, much better than people think. You identify ways to get past obstacles, decide whom you should avoid and whom you ought to work through, use the right arguments, attach things to the right bills or detach them from them. Mostly strategy and tactics. Hold preemptive briefings, make the fundamental decision whether you are going to try to work with them to make a bad bill better or just try to kill it. You have to know key members' interests, what this has to do with their constituents. For each major issue, we would write a strategy paper. I did the one on China MFN (Most Favored Nation). It was very unpopular at first, but wound up being adopted and became our fundamental approach. All it really said was that we couldn't win this through a partisan approach, relying on the President's party in Congress to carry our water, because the opponents of renewing MFN were conservative Republicans and liberal Democrats and if we put it on a party basis and relied on the White House, we would lose.

Q: I would think that you would immediately find yourself up against a very dedicated group of Taiwanese connected Chinese-Americans, particularly on the west coast, and maybe some in New York and other places, who could go to their congressman - there obviously are money contributions, contacts, and I'm told the Taiwanese excel in doing their own orchestrating. So, the normal congressman, if he has a delegation supporting Taiwan, is not going to get a delegation supporting Communist China.

MCCORMICK: That's right, although of course it's not our problem to make sure they hear the Chinese side either. Our problem is to make sure they hear what foreign policy experts say is in the U.S. interest.

Q: How would you operate? Take a typical day.

MCCORMICK: Other sections of the bureau would respond to questions from the Hill or answer requests for information. My job was to move legislation forward or get it amended or killed. We spent a lot of time preparing for hearings -- negotiating the appearance of the Secretary or assistant secretary, setting the ground rules, getting the bureaus to write good testimony. Good advice from H can make a witness' job much easier by letting him know what kind of questions he is likely to face and what the agendas of the various members are. You would sit behind a witness like a lawyer, warning and advising him but rarely interrupting. We also spent a lot of time arranging briefings. Briefing the Congress on a policy initiative doesn't mean that someone had informally discussed it with an individual contact. It is a much more formal process to make sure that we have made the responsible parts of the Hill aware of something the Department is planning.

Q: How does one brief?

MCCORMICK: By sending a qualified official to explain what we are about to do, and why, and what it is likely to cost. Good briefings are preemptive – they don't wait until some irate congressman demands them, they get ahead of the curve. You don't brief every junior staffer who asks, you need to go through committees with distinct responsibility. If you brief the wrong committee, you are going to have problems. You have to brief inclusively; you can't do it for one side and not the other. You must have representatives from both minority and majority. You make very clear what is classified and what is not. You listen to their questions, discuss it with them, make sure we are warning the people we will later depend upon to fund this plan. H insists on orchestrating briefings, but it shouldn't try to control them, or to substitute its expertise for that of the policy officers. Its role is to facilitate.

Q: Looking at the mechanics, do you then go to somebody on the Hill and say, "Look, we would like to brief you on what is happening?"

MCCORMICK: Absolutely. For example, we spent a vast amount of effort briefing in support of the need we saw to open an embassy in Vietnam. You brief the policy authorizers and the budget appropriators and some key supporters and make sure you're building the case, because they have to fund it and you're trying to preempt and answer their objections. You also use the briefing very deliberately as a tool, because once you have briefed a congressman in confidence he cannot use that information publicly. In many cases, they don't want a briefing; they're not interested, or interested in something else. You work past that kind of resistance the same way you would with a foreign diplomat. Of course, the other side of that is someone from Congress calling and demanding a briefing on this outrageous situation. What you want to do is to get ahead of that so you are not always on defense. For instance, there was the very controversial nuclear agreement with North Korea, the so-called Agreed Framework. In December of '94 there seemed to be a very serious possibility of war in Korea. Think back to Time Magazine, they had a cover saying, *"This could mean war."* The concern was that the North Koreans had nuclear reactors that could produce atomic bombs. The "framework" was a brilliant idea to offer them a different kind of reactor whose waste is less easy to make into bombs. Well, that is going to take some explaining on the Hill. The man in charge of that, Bob Gallucci, had his work cut out for him trying to get Congress to fund such a crazy idea.

Q: Well now, how did Bob Gallucci work with the Hill? Obviously, this thing was not something that was going to take place in a vacuum. Here is a regime that has been abhorrent for very solid reasons for more than 50 years.

MCCORMICK: What H does is to get Gallucci talking to senators, staff, committees. H should identify who really counts, and how to approach them. It was very important to determine whom we had a chance of persuading and whom we would be wasting our time on. Then you ask yourself, "Who would hold any credibility with opponents?" We called in former Vice President Mondale, now ambassador to Japan, who assured his old colleagues, in a series of one-on-one meetings, that the Japanese could be relied on to go through with their promise to help fund the initiative. That sort of thing. It's very labor-intensive. But people on the Hill are much more reasonable than one would think if you can somehow get them into a private conversation, out of the limelight, where they feel they are getting not an argument or a snow job, but a real discussion.

Q: Did you have a problem of civilizing some of our State Department colleagues, Foreign Service types and political appointees when they went up on the Hill, to tell them to use their manners and not to talk down?

MCCORMICK: Never on manners.

Q: But you could be snotty as hell.

MCCORMICK: Yes, that is something we should all watch out for when we go up on the Hill. With Bob Gallucci, I remember going up there many times and saying, "Bob, remember to talk more slowly". He is just so bright that he would be light years ahead, and that would cause a lot of people to pull back into a kind of defensive intellectual crouch for fear they are being fast-talked, “spun.” You can try to spin the public, maybe, but not Congress.

Q: Describe what “spin” means in our context.

MCCORMICK: Being disingenuous or cute or not completely honest in the way you discuss things. The most effective arguments I saw on the Hill were extremely honest. They acknowledged the opponent’s point quite fairly and said we had a better way and told them why in a very concrete way. They didn’t convey the idea that we knew best and anyone who disagreed was dumb.

Q: One of the complaints I have heard about, and this is just a plain operating thing, not on major issues, is that somebody on congressional staff is doing something and they call up a desk to get information or a quick summary of what the policy is, and it gets bogged down because everybody wants to get in on it. There seems to be a fear of letting somebody fairly far down give the answer to somebody else who is fairly far down. It’s not useful.

MCCORMICK: Well, that’s very true. I couldn’t agree more. The answer is simple in theory. Desk officers know perfectly well what they can say and what they can’t about their policies, they ought to just speak very easily and openly about it when it isn’t classified, and they know how to do that and in any case they ought to be working closely with people on the Hill who are interested in their areas and keeping them informed. But H has a very bad reputation, which it thoroughly deserves, for trying to tell the rest of the building that they somehow shouldn’t be talking to the Hill. That’s nonsense, and I’m sorry to say that Wendy and her successor, Barbara Larkin, contributed to it. Policy officers ought to talk to anyone they please up there, as long as they’re talking about their policy and not specific legislation. When it comes to legislation, they should just refuse to comment and let legislative officers convey the official position. It’s just like talking to the press -- all officers should be doing it but only the official spokesmen ought to give the party line.

Q: Did you run into a problem with the assistant secretaries of state of wanting to make sure that nothing came out of their bureau (with the Congress) that wasn’t thoroughly looked at by them?

MCCORMICK: No, it wasn’t a problem at all. They did a very good job of it. You don’t want anything going up there that has not been properly vetted by the policy experts. The EAP assistant secretary at the time was Winston Lord, and I had excellent cooperation from him. He was extremely good at putting things in language which would gain the confidence of a senator or member. That was not true of everybody at the assistant secretary level that I dealt with. On the other hand, I think the weak point is the difficulty of translating arguments which seem self-evident in our world into ones that seem self-evident in theirs, and there you need to make sure legislative people have their input also. For example, when we wanted to open an embassy in Vietnam, we needed to make clear that re-establishing diplomatic relations with that government didn’t mean that we approved of what they did. It meant that you establish a channel for communications, and then you use that channel to pursue whatever agenda you have in mind, including agendas the Congress wants pursued. So you don’t try to downplay Vietnam’s record on human rights, or kind of dismiss some congressmen’s concerns that we are not getting enough cooperation looking for POW/MIA’s or whatever, you acknowledge these concerns and argue that an embassy would allow us to address those questions more effectively. That's rarely how State Department rhetoric comes out. Vietnam is a nightmare, just a nightmare. You can imagine how strongly some people in Congress feel about it, while a lot of people in the Department have already made up their minds that normalized relations are a good idea and just want to get there as fast as possible and are extremely impatient with having to convince the Congress.

Q: Even today, in the year 2000, 25 years after the collapse of South Vietnam, we have a strong movement in the United States who go with the idea that there are still prisoners of war tucked away somewhere in Vietnam. I find it incredible, but it is there. In a way it is a political movement. How did you deal with that?

MCCORMICK: My advice was to disarm it; take it seriously. The minute you are suspected of not taking their concerns seriously, they won't take you seriously either. When I was on the Hill, my boss was chairman of both the Senate Foreign Relations subcommittee that dealt with Asia and also of the Veterans Committee, so he had to think about it from both points of view. He didn't believe for one minute that there were POWs still being kept in Vietnam, but you have to recognize the anguish of these families and you have to listen to every serious allegation and question at the same time as you get them to see that we need to talk to Vietnam to settle this. That was the approach we tried to take. There was a great deal of suspicion about this on the Hill. Bob Dornan in the House and Senator Robert Smith of New Hampshire articulated this most. Quite frankly, they milked the issue for all the contributions they could get from it, but that is not the point. To get an embassy open in Vietnam ultimately took reaching a "good faith" deal with them that a part of an embassy's job would be to pursue this issue. It took hearing after hearing to put the evidence out there and try to convince them we were working with the Vietnamese. It took a lot of what a legislative officer does all day; a lot of late night sessions sitting with the staff from one of their offices, going over the exact language in a bill, fighting to get them to allow us flexibility. It also took nominating an ambassadorial candidate like Pete Peterson, who was a superb choice, politically as well as diplomatically. I also handled his confirmation, trying to smooth the way for it the same way we approached a piece of legislation.

Q: How did you find the people in the White House, particularly NSC, but also some of the principals - President and Vice President? Were they attuned to the Hill problem, or was that left to you all?

MCCORMICK: No, no. NSC was very good, very attuned. This was after the period of the initial years of the first Clinton Administration where the White House staff was in such chaos, really in the hands of people who needed adult supervision. It was now in the hands of very qualified people who knew what they were doing. On something like Vietnam I would work hand-and-glove with Legislative Affairs at both the White House and the NSC.

Q: Would you sit down with somebody at NSC and say, "Okay, lets talk over our war plan. How do we do this?"

MCCORMICK: Exactly. I don't know about sitting down; it was always very frantic and we never had enough time for a good discussion, but yes, this was how we developed a strategy. For example, MFN for China was the most important issue for the White House in my area. This was a big, big vote, required by law. In those days, before China finally joined the WTO (World Trade Organization), it had to be voted on every year, usually in June.

Q: In talking about most favored nation for China, how would you approach this? Because we are talking about Tiananmen Square in 1989, so its shadow had not gone away at all. How did you deal with this?

MCCORMICK: I was actually very conflicted about this. There were important arguments against just trading normally with China with all its human rights abuse, and personally I couldn't have cared less whether U.S. business made a profit in that market. But normal trading relations was our policy, and from a foreign relations point of view I agreed with that, because the last thing that we wanted was to get into some kind of spiral of self-fulfilling prophecies about hostility with China. In any case, nobody asked me my opinion about the policy. They asked me to figure out a strategy that would get us to a "yes" vote on the Hill. The White House was extremely worried about it. As I said, the opposition wasn't partisan, one party versus the other, it was individuals from both parties. Senator Helms and a liberal Democrat like Nancy Pelosi. Gerry Solomon on the right, Senator Wellstone on the left. To beat that, you would have to build a coalition outwards from the center. You can't use party machinery or whips or any of those things you usually rely on, you have to construct bipartisan ones *ad hoc* on just this issue, working with people who usually don't trust each other. That was not a very popular recommendation, but it turned out to be the best way we could go.

Q: Well, you had a strong element on the Republican side of business interests that wanted to get in there. In some ways, the normal thing was almost reversed wasn't it? The people who were generally more conservative and to hell with these Communists were also pushing to open up these markets.

MCCORMICK: The sensitivity to human rights abuse in China came from both conservative Republicans and liberal Democrats. I presume it was genuine on both sides. Those who wanted to put business interests first were also pretty evenly divided between the parties. We might assume Republicans were closer to the business people, but throughout the time I worked on this, there was enormous, constant pressure from the Clinton White House to achieve results that would be good for businesses, particularly large corporations. There was definitely pressure to cut corners in export controls. When Hong Kong was about to revert to China, we faced a real dilemma, because if we were logical we would have started to apply controls to Hong Kong – that is, if we didn't want a computer or a piece of military machinery going to Beijing, we should no longer let it go to Hong Kong. But that is an enormous market, and we decided instead to let things go to Hong Kong if they promised not to send them on to China proper. That takes a certain degree of faith.

Q: What guarantee would you have?

MCCORMICK: Less than a lot of people would like. I think the Department could have raised its credibility on other issues by putting more emphasis on this, appearing a bit more skeptical on the Hill. Our rhetorical position was that there would be no problem. That was bound to make some people think there was a problem.

Q: How did you see the motivation for this "no problem" attitude?

MCCORMICK: People who work with China hear so many attacks on China they become reflexively defensive and upbeat. But there is also a disinclination in the Department to acknowledge problems, because they know some people will seize on any admission of uncertainty and exaggerate it. That doesn't work with Congress. The Foreign Service loves to say we simply must fight harder with the Congress, go up there and *make* them agree with us. It's kind of the mirror image of how Congress often wants us to treat foreign countries. But you can't do that when you need legislation to support your policy. Suddenly cutting off all the cooperation we had with Hong Kong – drugs, crime, everything – the day it stopped being British would not make sense. But giving it some kind of quasi-independent trading status takes Congressional approval and specific legislation. Eventually, we got it, thanks to the chairman of the Asia subcommittee in the House, Doug Bereuter, who was an extremely thoughtful and far-sighted moderate Republican.

Q: Were there any sorts of clashes that you witnessed between H and the rest of the Department?

MCCORMICK: Constantly. Most of the Foreign Service deeply distrusted Wendy Sherman. They saw her not as the State Department's person on the Hill, but as the Hill's mole in the State Department. That's a bit unfair to her, but she distrusted anyone with State Department epaulettes and constantly disparaged the professionals. She also tried to control all access to the Hill, which caused enormous resentment. A lot of this is just ego, and it's absolutely wrong. When Secretary Powell arrived he put a stop to a lot of it. The bureau made itself a lanyard with the motto, "The New H."

Q: I can see the freedom of information problem, but I would imagine that it would be almost vital to have book on congressmen and senators. In other words - he likes scotch and she likes gin - they don't respond to this type of argument. I'm not talking about anything bad. This is what we have to do with foreigners, but to do it to Americans is dicey because it would say, "I want to see your book."

MCCORMICK: Exactly. You have put your finger on a very important point. If you don't do that, you are operating on a very amateur basis, but if you do it's very dicey. While I was there, we made an attempt to give our embassies and consulates more information on the political context when a congressman would travel. They needed to know exactly the kind of thing you are talking about. Just very simply, among other things, when a member like Frank Wolf visits an embassy to talk about human rights, you ought to know how likely it is that he could end up being the chairman of our appropriations subcommittee. So H began producing cables that would give the embassy some political context for CODELs [Congressional delegations]. Extremely valuable, extremely appreciated, until Representative Gilman found out about this and wanted to see them. At that point we stopped doing it, because they would have been just pablum.

Q: Did you find that you had friends, either staffers or members of Congress, who would say to you, "Keith, I know what you are trying to do. I suggest you go to George Smith or see Willie Green because they really are the key," someone who is in there and directs you where to go?

MCCORMICK: Exactly. Those are your allies, and nobody could do anything without them. That is exactly how it works.

Q: Did you have anybody who was sort of a prince of darkness either in Congress or staff or a lobbying firm, say on China, the most favored nation issue?

MCCORMICK: Oh, yes. A number of people come to mind. There was a great tendency in H to talk that way, because it made it easier to think of the opposition as being evil or irrational, but of course that's nonsense. We still had to deal with them, and thinking that way only made it harder. For example, the opposition to our opening a consulate general in Saigon was led by Chris Smith of New Jersey. He was then the chairman of the International Operations subcommittee, and he had the power to block it. Smith got up the nose of the State Department rather badly. He was the one who held up almost a billion dollars in UN funding over abortion. Smith hated Vietnam because of human rights, but what he really cared about was refugees. And refugees from Vietnam weren't going to be any better off if we continued our absurd, expensive method of handling them from Bangkok instead of having a platform in Saigon. But the refugee bureau refused to have anything to do with Smith because they viewed him as an unappeasable critic of so much they did. They wouldn't talk to him, they wouldn't negotiate. We finally managed to work out a deal, because in the end it did make sense in both his terms and ours to have a consulate in Saigon, but a deal like that – in both his interest and the Department's – was much more difficult to achieve and very nearly fell apart because there was too much tendency to demonize opponents.

Q: Well, you left there in '97?

MCCORMICK: I went to the NSC as director of legislation.

Q: You did that how long?

MCCORMICK: Through early '98. At that time, China had emerged as our number one legislative nightmare in the foreign policy arena, even worse than Russia. A lot of people in Congress were convinced that China posed a clear and present danger and we had to stop kowtowing and stand up to them. The President was convinced that China was the Germany of the 21st Century, a rising power full of all these grievances about not having a place in the sun, and we needed to draw it into a mesh of international agreements and arrangements to restrain it so it wouldn't drag us all into a conflict with the kind of awkward adolescent aggressiveness which Germany showed before the First World War. That was a very farsighted view and I supported it completely. So the President was committed to a "breakthrough" summit meeting with Jiang Zemin, and Congress had put up no fewer than eight separate bills that would embarrass or block that. Each one rested on one aspect of the case against China. One was human rights; another was Tibet, another Beijing's intimidation of Taiwan. Another asserted that China was indeed selling missiles covertly to Pakistan, triggering automatic legislative sanctions. The passage of any one of these bills would have been, at least in Sandy Berger's view, a serious setback to the China policy, so my job was to stop them all. Eventually we did.

Q: With your brief exposure to the NSC and from your aspect, had it settled down and become a pretty professional organization?

MCCORMICK: Yes. I had the impression that was not the case in the first few years of the Administration, but by the time I got there it was a very professional organization. Of course, the NSC is staffed very largely by people on secondment from the Foreign Service, the CIA, the military. The White House staff is different, more political.

Q: What was your impression of Sandy Berger and how he operated?

MCCORMICK: My impression was that he operated extraordinarily well on the level of daily efficiency and competence. He runs an organization which is able to communicate extremely well internally. There is a degree of discipline and brevity; you go directly to Sandy Berger when you need to and don't have to cut through layers of bureaucracy. On the other hand, he is a person who manages for the moment. He doesn't do strategic planning. Totally unlike Tony Lake. He doesn't sit there thinking about what will happen over the horizon. His reaction, I suspect, if he were sitting here, would be, "We'll get to that when we get to that. Let's make sure we have got a sufficiently broad horizontal grasp of everything that could be going on everywhere in the world right now."

Q: But when you were there you technically had the full spectrum of foreign affairs, is that right?

MCCORMICK: Foreign affairs and trade. Someone else handled defense and intelligence. We both reported to a senior director.

Q: You said you were spending your time on China. Technically, you also worried about events in North America.

MCCORMICK: I did anything that was foreign policy as opposed to defense and intelligence. China, as I said, was my number one headache. Other major issues that could demonstrate how the place works? NSC is not supposed to try to run the State Departments' legislative operations, only coordinate them. My role was to make sure different agencies weren't working at cross purposes on the Hill and were reflecting the President's policy. One way you do that is to agree on a statement of Administration policy toward a bill and work from that. Inside the NSC, much of my work involved determining whether to recommend the President veto or support a bill, or use the threat of a veto to obtain the necessary changes in a bill as it was being fought out in committee, on the two floors, or in conference. Externally, with the agencies, it was a matter of getting different agencies to pull in harness. For example, we had a bill on Africa we wanted to promote, the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act, which would exempt them from some tariffs if they met criteria on democracy and human rights. Typical bill. Well, you want to make sure all our efforts on this subject are coordinated, so you don't have USTR (U.S. Trade Representative's office), for example, testifying, or saying in briefings, that the Administration doesn't really like this bill if we do. USTR was always difficult. DOD less so. I never had problems with the CIA. Their legislative chief, John Moseman, had been my boss on Senator Murkowski's staff, and he is extremely good about this sort of thing.

Q: What about Yugoslavia? Was Kosovo popping when you were there or was Yugoslavia sort of quiet at that point?

MCCORMICK: Not nearly as much as one would think, considering how it dominates everything today.

Q: It was a quiet time then. Obviously, southern Kosovo hadn't blown up yet.

MCCORMICK: That's right, that wasn't until the following year, and of course legislative work doesn't always reflect what is happening on the ground, it reflects what is happening in Congress. From my point of view, the biggest danger, after China, was Russia. There was deep suspicion on the Hill of Strobe Talbott's Russophile foreign policy. They felt the State Department was far too soft on Russia to start with. We had to beat back a number of attempts to use the blunt instrument of sanctions to try to stop Russia selling nuclear equipment to Iran or whatever. The trouble with that kind of untargeted sanctions, of course, is that you end up cutting off not only programs that are meant to benefit Russia but also ones – like the Nunn-Lugar program to help pay for the Russians dismantling nuclear weapons – that benefit us.

Q: Was the domestic side of the White House breathing down your necks about policy, or was that pretty well kept away from you?

MCCORMICK: There was no question that they were the boss. If NSC decides we have to go one way for foreign policy reasons, and the White House legislative people decide we have to go the other for domestic reasons, they will probably prevail. You can imagine the kinds of disagreements we would have, but I don't recall those disagreements ever degenerating into really bitter arguments. I had more difficulty with the legal counsel. Again and again, it seemed to me, I would argue that we needed to take some question seriously and engage some congressman and try to work it out, or at least maintain the best relations with the Congress that we could by not gratuitously refusing any legitimate information. The legal people saw it differently. They felt that kind of approach was giving things away preemptively; that you should never answer a question you are not forced to answer. There was no such thing for them as a good faith discussion with a member of the opposite party.

Q: Where were these lawyers coming from? Were they coming out of a partisan campaign type mode?

MCCORMICK: They were very partisan. These were Clinton's lawyers. They saw things in terms of Whitewatergate, defending the President, and this was just at the time that the Monica scandal broke. It was part of their culture that you give nothing away. You never have just a discussion. You make [the Congress] pay for dragging every bit of information out of us.

Q: How would you resolve this? What would you do? Did you make sure you didn't consult the legal people?

MCCORMICK: No, you couldn't do that. You argued it out with them, and Berger and others would decide, and I probably won as often as I lost. But if they say you can't do something, it will jeopardize legal positions you don't even know about, you have to back off at some point. In retrospect, it's much more clear how many of those points they were referring to lay totally outside the foreign policy area.

Q: Well, you left in when?

MCCORMICK: I left in early '98 to go to the Office of the Inspector General.

Q: You were with the Inspector General from when to when?

MCCORMICK: For two years.

Q: Why there?

MCCORMICK: I had decided I would be leaving the Foreign Service. My wife was very unhappy about going overseas again, and I didn't want to stay in Washington. I was burned out. If I didn't get another promotion, I would have had to retire in a few more years in any case, and if I did get a promotion, I still would have to leave because the Foreign Service doesn't let you keep turning down overseas assignments after five or six years in Washington. OIG (Office of the Inspector General) offered me a job where I could travel overseas and the family could remain in Washington. My first assignment was to inspect USUN (U.S. Mission to the United Nations). This problem of the billion dollar deficit was distorting everything.

Q: Well, how did that work out? What were your impressions of USUN?

MCCORMICK: It was very poorly managed by Ambassador Bill Richardson. He had superb political instincts but no interest in management. They had no fewer than five ambassadors, but only one of them was a Foreign Service Officer, and he couldn't handle the management side because he was the U.S. Government's top expert on Iraq and they needed him 24 hours a day for that. So they had a terrible situation that was very poorly managed and was grinding people up very badly. We also found that Congress' action in refusing to pay a billion dollars in UN assessments was causing concrete U.S. interests there to suffer. That seems intuitively obvious to you and me, but if we were going to get the Hill to pay those dues we were going to have to document that fact. Otherwise, if it wasn't actually costing us anything, why settle the dispute? The mission didn't understand that. So we asked if they had documented this, and they had not, because they didn't like to report to Washington anything except successes. In fact, it turns out that because of other countries' resentment of our refusal to pay, we had lost a vote on x and y and z. But the Foreign Service doesn't like to report that kind of thing. My own experience on the Hill convinced me that without that kind of documentation, we could not convince the Congress to pay up.

Q: After the UN where did you go?

MCCORMICK: I spent the next two years evaluating policy work at embassies and consulates – Paris, Vienna, New Delhi, Zimbabwe, Zambia. Generally, you spend a month in Washington talking to agencies who are consumers of our products or contributors to our policies, a month at the post inspecting how the post is doing its work, and a month back in Washington writing the report and making recommended changes. I used to think of OIG inspections as merely focusing on whether everything was done correctly, but in fact the instrument is much more suited to a kind of management review. At Embassy Paris, for example-

Q: Was where?

MCCORMICK: Paris. I thought it was an extremely well-managed post. The ambassador was Felix Rohatyn, who had come in from the private sector after a very successful career as an international banker and was playing a very active role in some worldwide efforts to reform and streamline some of our management practices. But it's difficult because it's very hard to measure and evaluate that kind of work. For example, Congress wanted to know in effect how much it costs for the State Department and the embassy to be able to demarche the French Government and get something that we wanted -- an agreement, say, or better treatment for American companies. But the measure of that is not the fifteen minutes that it takes a political counselor to call the right person in the French Government. It is the huge investment in the training, including language training, in establishing and building up the contacts, understanding France and what is going on there, so that person knows just whom to call and how to get results. The actual demarche is just the tip of the iceberg.

Q: When they put the new inspection service in, this was in the late '80s, there seemed to be a tremendous effort by accountants to try to see how we are spending our money. Frankly, the State Department doesn't have that much money to spend, compared to the Department of Interior. Did you find the inspection was looking for problems or criminals more than it was worth?

MCCORMICK: The Inspector General, Jackie Williams-Bridger, was interested in documented savings, looking for the waste of money, a very numerical approach. My own job was to look at whether what we were doing was effective rather than efficient, whether it made any sense in terms of our policy goals. For example, Paris had abolished its internal political reporting section because they thought perhaps we didn't need that many reports about internal politics in France. But then the effectiveness of other sections started going down, because the ambassador needed to know about a politician he was about to meet, and they didn't have anyone any more who did that. Then they get a negotiating team from Washington on economic issues and they need to know whether the head of the French delegation is about to lose his seat in parliament or cares about a particular domestic issue, but they can't do that any more. What they had miscalculated was, again, that reporting those things is only part of the work, the other part is learning about it in the first place, and you can't do that by listening to CNN.

Q: This so often is the case when we reward for reporting. Contact understanding is really the strength. Reporting is really the whipped cream or something.

MCCORMICK: Exactly. Reporting is just turning that knowledge into the final product. So we try to inspect not just reporting, but the whole political or economic function, including analysis and advocacy and policy development. Ambassador Rohatyn was also instrumental in driving a couple of other things. He thought it was ridiculous to have a thousand people – not from the

State Department, but from 39 U.S. Government agencies – in the embassy and not have anyone in Bordeaux or Lyon. Congress had closed our consulates there in its budget-cutting moves. So he came up with something called the American Presence Post, a one-man post which would give us a basic commercial and public diplomacy presence. The idea was not to reopen a consulate the Congress had closed, but to put a single officer in a place like Lyon. He didn't care whether it was a State Department officer, a USIS (United States Information Service) officer, or a Foreign Commercial Service officer. So he talked those agencies into the idea and began to open them in several cities in France, and we went out to see how it was working. We found that it worked extremely well. I don't know whether it could be replicated elsewhere, especially in the Third World, but the officers doing it thought it was exciting and in a way it was almost getting back to the concept that I had when I first came into the Foreign Service, of getting away from the huge bureaucracy and being out there on your own to sort of do it all.

Q: So you did this until when?

MCCORMICK: Until this year, when I retired.

Q: And what will you do now?

MCCORMICK: I will be traveling twice a year for the Inspector General's office as a consultant. But first, I'm going to take a year off and not work at all. I don't remember when I last had any time to myself.

Q: Great.

End of interview