

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

NORMAN L. PRATT

Interviewed by: Dayton Mak
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INTERVIEW

Q: This is an interview of Norman Pratt conducted by Dayton Mak at the residence of Norman Pratt in Bethesda, Maryland on Tuesday, November 19, 1991.

First of all, Mr. Pratt, I wonder if you would be good enough to give us some idea of your background...where you were born and raised, where you went to school, what you studied and a little bit about your interest in foreign affairs that might have drawn you into the Foreign Service?

PRATT: I was born in Buffalo, New York, but by the time I was two the family moved back to Cleveland which was my parents home. I went to elementary school there until the time I was ten. Then we moved to Westfield, New Jersey just outside of New York City. I finished high school, from there I spent four years at Dartmouth College and two years at Harvard Business School. After finishing at Harvard Business School I moved to Wilmington, Delaware and went to work for the heavy chemicals division of DuPont, then in their marketing analysis division until 1941 at which time my military service started.

Q: What sort of subjects did you take at Dartmouth?

PRATT: I majored in economics and had a minor in European history. I did study international affairs to some extent. I completed my senior year by winning a biography of Secretary of State, John Hay. I did business studies at Harvard. A development there had a major effect on my career. At that time, because of questions and problems of industrial mobilization that military forces in the United States would face, we had both naval and army officers there as students. Just before the close of the second year, one of these officers was saying that the army was desperately short of reserve officers in the supply services. The army would like to commission us if we would do the necessary by taking their elementary correspondence course. It seemed by the spring of 1939 that the conditions in Europe were such that this made it a very attractive proposition. During the two years in Wilmington I finished the course and by the spring of 1941 I had a commission as a second lieutenant in the Quartermaster Corps.

I went directly from there to active duty in Washington at the then Administrator of Export Control, then under Army control. I had a friend who was there previously from my Harvard class.

You mention my interest in foreign affairs. I couldn't say when this interest first arose. It was a continuing one as far back as I can remember. Perhaps it was triggered by the fact that I had a once German grandfather who was so thoroughly naturalized that his German had become so weak that he had to concentrate an entire afternoon to write a letter to his cousin in Germany. But aside from that I can't point to any decisive event.

I studied some aspects of international business affairs while at Harvard. I knew of the Foreign Service, but at that time it had the reputation of a place that required a private income to survive.

Q: So after you had finished your college and got a reserved commission in the army that would have brought you up to the beginning of the war. Had the war yet begun or was that before?

PRATT: I started on active duty on July, 1941, about five months before Pearl Harbor. I stayed in Washington for a year and a half and then went overseas to Egypt via the Cape of Good Hope. In those days it took a month and a half to get around the Cape to Suez. I served there in the civil affairs branch until May, 1944, about a year and a half.

Q: I presume that period in Egypt was what sparked your interest in the Middle East?

PRATT: That is correct. I had known, of course, a certain amount about the Middle East. I had read the history of that part of the world many years before.

Q: Then you went on to Italy?

PRATT: I went on to Italy. I even started some Arabic at the American University in Cairo through an army sponsored program.

In Italy it was a straight Quartermaster Supply operation going right up the east coast for the Air Force there and on up eventually, by the end of the war, into Venice.

I returned home in November, 1945. While in Cairo I had met some of the Embassy people there who assured me that times had changed in the Foreign Service and it was now possible to live on one's salary. A dubious piece of information.

Q: Do you remember any of the names of those people?

PRATT: Oh, yes. Ray Hare and Ed Dowell were there. Alexander Kirk was Minister at that time. Those are the principal ones who come to mind. Joe Jacobs, who later was Minister of Albania briefly at the end of the war, was DCM.

Q: After World War II what did you do?

PRATT: By the end of WWII I was thoroughly interested in the Foreign Service and after the war ended in Italy they passed out application forms to take the Foreign Service exam. In due course my application was accepted and I took the Foreign Service written exams in November, 1945 in Naples at the University of Naples chemistry lecture hall. I returned to the States in December, and after a trip to California I returned in February, and found I had passed the exams. I then talked my way through the orals and by June I had been offered an FSO commission. By then I was back working at DuPont and had to decide by the 15th of July whether to be in Washington or in Chicago to sell DDT.

Q: And we know what you did.

PRATT: It became the standing joke of the family, particularly after we went down to places like Raseltin Palace to sign the King's ceremonial book on occasion, to say that, "It sure beats selling DDT in Chicago."

Q: What was your first post?

PRATT: I went back to Egypt as vice consul at Alexandria. It was a fairly routine operation in retrospect, although I did have a brief period of being in charge while the consul general, Hooker Doolittle, went on leave and transfer before his replacement arrived three months later. It was a fairly quiet time. We did have one or two bomb threats and that sort of thing.

Q: Bomb threats by whom?

PRATT: Oh, against the Americans. The British were in the process of leaving the Delta area...moving out their troops from Alexandria and Cairo into more secure installations at the canal. The Americans, of course, were always to blame in that part of the world for that sort of thing too. We were the staunch ally of the British in the Egyptian eyes.

Q: What were our interests that you had to look after in Alexandria?

PRATT: In Alexandria our principal interests were the usual protection of Americans. We had about 150 Americans in the colony there and a few missionaries down in the Delta. The rest of it was the routine of consular visa work. One interesting aspect of it was the fact that we still had the remnants of the consular court system. Personal status cases of American citizens were not tried before any local court but came before the consul general sitting as judge of the court. I became quite popular when it was discovered during my brief period in charge that I had perfectly legal authority to grant divorces.

Q: You had authority over whom?

PRATT: American citizens. If they wished to have a divorce they could come to the consulate and apply for divorce and the usual legal procedures. Actually, in a case like that we would seek what was known as a referee, to join the consular judge at arriving at a decision. We had two judges on the mixed courts of appeal, the mixed courts of Egypt, before which foreigners in those days went to trial. One was Judge Brinton and the other Judge Henry.

Q: Was that Robert Henry?

PRATT: Robert Henry and Jasper Y. Brinton.

Q: Judge Henry's son Bob later became an official with ARAMCO, I believe, in Saudi Arabia.

PRATT: I am not sure of that. There was a Henry who was an oil executive who went on active duty in our Headquarters in Cairo during the war. He was a Mobil Oil official before then.

Q: Was there anything else of interest that you did there? Was it pleasant living?

PRATT: It was excellent living. We had no problems. We had our share of ex-royals floating around. I remember watching the funeral of Victor Emmanuel of Italy going down the main street of Alexandria. It was Farouk's way of paying respect to other royalty.

Q: What was the attitude towards Americans in Alexandria at the time?

PRATT: We really didn't have any problems with the mayor. We could even have naval visits in those days. We had the Sixth Fleet in once or twice. They did have to put the town out of bounds to all troops at one point when we did happen to have an oiler visit. The situation could easily arise when the town was out of bounds that somebody highly placed socially would be upset because it spoiled her party to which she had invited the admiral. She would in fact raise hell with the governor to get the town put back in bounds for the occasion.

Q: After Alexandria where did you go?

PRATT: From Alexandria we were transferred to Tripoli in Libya. It was a new post being opened up. Our interests in Libya revolved around the air base, Wheeler Field, which at that time was merely a small operation. It would have served, as I understand it, as a recovery field in the event of an air attack on the Soviet Union, a place where our planes could come back, if need be, for relief and repair.

Q: How did we manage to get a base in Libya?

PRATT: At that time the Libyan base was under the auspices of the British. You must remember that Libya had been occupied during the war by the British Forces Eighth Army. The Italian authorities had been thrown out. The British continued to hold that governing authority right up until the end in 1951 when they finally turned it over to the Libyans. But in 1948 when the field was opened it was almost the case of reopening a field we already had had there.

Q: What was the attitude of the Libyans there at that time towards Americans and our presence?

PRATT: They had no problems with us as I recall. Our people were basically out of sight. They were out on the base and seldom came into town. So, while the Libyans knew we

were there, but there was very little opportunity for irritation. Some of our people, of course, lived in town in residential areas within the Italian Quarter...European Quarters.

Q: You mentioned the Italian Quarter. I believe it had been an Italian colony.

PRATT: It had been an Italian colony.

Q: What was the influence and the presence of Italians in Libya at that time?

PRATT: In Libya at that time the Italians were still very active in Tripolitania. However, in Cyrenaica the Italians basically had all left when the Italian forces withdrew in 1942. The Emir of Cyrenaica did not let them back in except for a few at the Cathedral in Benghazi.

Q: Will you explain the Emir of Cyrenaica?

PRATT: The Emir of Cyrenaica at that point in Greece, as head of the Senussi brotherhood, a Sunni Moslem religious group, had a long history in Libya. It started out as a religious order with strongholds in Libya going back into the 19th century. I have rather forgotten the history of it now. Evans Pritchard has written a long book on the Senussi. But basically in Cyrenaica, which was their stronghold, they were the resistance to the Italian conquest of Cyrenaica. In fact it was not until 1931 that the last part of the Cyrenaica, Kufra Oasis, was occupied by the Italians. There was a bloody period with concentration camps, local leaders being chucked out of airplanes without benefit of parachutes, etc.

Q: Were the Senussi like the Wahhabis? Were they very puritanical?

PRATT: They were not puritanical in that respect. They traced their ancestry back to the Saudi Arabian peninsula. They were another one of the mystical orders, but quite orthodox in their views.

Q: Were they anti-Western?

PRATT: No, they weren't anti-Western. The Emir of Cyrenaica, himself, had gone back to Alexandria in exile after the Italians had come into the northern part of Cyrenaica. He had cooperated with the British during World War II in regaining Cyrenaica. He was the beneficiary of a promise by Anthony Eden in 1942 that the Italians would never be allowed to return to Cyrenaica, which became one of the cardinal principles eventually at trying to arrive at some settlement of the Italian colony question after the war.

Q: But that did not apply to Tripolitania?

PRATT: Tripolitania was outside that and it was not really Senussi territory.

Q: What sort of problems did you have at the Consulate that required your presence?

PRATT: Our primary object of being there, besides the odd visa, was as a listening post; to know what the local people were thinking. To know what the British government was doing in the territory and how this would affect the operations of our air base in Tripolitania. The whole question of Italian colonies stayed with us the entire time we were there.

There was an attempt to bring the Italians into Tripolitania through the UN which was defeated by one vote in the spring of 1949. This was accompanied by massive demonstrations in the streets of Tripoli.

Q: Anti-Italian?

PRATT: Anti-Italian and in front of the British for permitting this sort of thing to happen. The solution with the defeat of that resolution...we had actually made a recommendation for a US Trustee-ship to be considered for Tripolitania, but that was shot down up on the Hill as too much of a commitment that the United States just was not prepared to make.

The eventual development was that, after putting together all the speeches and the pros and cons in the UN, our position emerged that we would support eventual independence of Libya arrived at under UN auspices.

Q: Am I right that there was a UN presence there?

PRATT: The UN presence grew out of this decision which was taken by the Department in May/June 1949 and leading eventually to the General Assembly in November of that year creating the UN Council for Libya to be chaired by a neutral observer and with members from the two occupying powers, namely France, which had the southern part, the Fezzan, under their control and the Brits because of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica; ourselves because of our position in the Security Council and our interests in the air base; the Italians because of their interests in the minorities; and representatives of the local people from Cyrenaica, Tripolitania and Fezzan and from the local Italian colony in Tripolitania which numbered about 40,000. Added to this to give it a proper third world flavor, we had representatives of Egypt and Pakistan.

Q: So it was rather an interesting time, wasn't it?

PRATT: It did become interesting after a while.

Q: How long were you in Libya?

PRATT: I was in Libya for about 3 and a half years. We left in late January, 1952. By that time the Libyan UN Council had done all the necessary...the Dutch High Commissioner,

Adrian Pelt, shepherded constitutional deliberations to a conclusion. They were waiting, when I left, for the election of Libyan deputies to the National Assembly.

Q: Do you have anything more you want to say about Libya before you move on?

PRATT: You were there for the last year and a half. You know it as well as I do. You may want to fill in some details I have forgotten.

Q: This isn't about me so I will drop that suggestion. You went on to Berlin, didn't you?

PRATT: I went from there to Berlin, yes. There again this was a straight consular operation with really nothing to do but to make sure the visa and passport sections worked smoothly. But at the same time we had the Soviets on the other side of the city. I would get involved from time to time in bringing back an American who had strayed across the line and gotten arrested. The Soviets used to turn them loose quite easily after two or three days. We had a liaison arrangement there. Each of the four occupying powers had a liaison/protocol officer who used to talk to each other and settle these things. Our officer was Jules Bernard who was absolutely fluent in Russian and we used to go over and pick up these strays and bring them back.

Q: What were the years you were in Berlin?

PRATT: I was in Berlin from 1952-55.

And of course even at that time we had a number of Americans who had succeeded in getting into trouble with the Soviet Union, had served their terms and were being released from concentration camps such as Vorkuta, and sent back to the Soviets in Berlin and turned over to us.

Q: Did you find it interesting in Berlin?

PRATT: It was interesting. I had really no political responsibility or anything of that sort.

Q: Would you like to say anything more about Berlin before moving on?

PRATT: I don't think there is really much more to say about Berlin.

Q: You might tell us who your family was at that point?

PRATT: By the time we left Berlin, there was Georgia and three children, John, Elizabeth and Margaret. Margaret was only a few weeks old when we left and returned to the United States. That was the summer of 1955.

Q: What did you do back here?

PRATT: I was in the Foreign Service Institute; in the Office of Chinese Affairs; and the last year studying Arabic to go back to the Middle East.

Q: What did you do in FSI?

PRATT: I basically supervised consular training. Then later on the area students, and the special students at universities in economics. Not that they required much supervision really.

I spent a year in Chinese affairs.

Q: How did you happen to get into Chinese affairs?

PRATT: My explanation is that during home leave I used to go out to California, which was Georgia's home. One time some scout caught me riding the street car through China Town and reading the financial page of the Chronicle and with that extreme Far Eastern economic experience I was a natural for this.

Q: It was certainly a bizarre assignment for you. What did you think of it?

PRATT: I didn't like it. It wasn't my field.

Q: Where did you do the Arabic training? At FSI?

PRATT: I did my Arabic at the Foreign Service Institute.

Q: What kind of Arabic was it?

PRATT: The Moroccan and the written language, both.

Q: Who conducted that course?

PRATT: Warren Benedict who was later at the FSI school in Beirut. Carlton Hodge, who later went on to become a professor at Indiana University. I did have the chance to do a long study on language and area training which was used to make changes in the program.

Q: Did you have a pretty good program then? How many were in it, other than you?

PRATT: In the Arabic program, we had five or six.

After completing the Arabic program I was assigned to Casablanca. The economy, of course, was very largely French dominated, considered itself modern. Very little of the old city was there. Even what might be called the Moroccan Quarter was largely concrete with none of the old city charms that we associate with that part of the world.

One major concern was our air fields which dated back to the French period. They were in the process of being phased out, but there were considerable military facilities, not only air force. One was nearby at Nouasser, we had one outside of Marrakech [Ben Guerir] and the navy was up at Port Lyautey, north of Rabat. And there were others scattered around the countryside.

Q: Had the rights to those facilities been granted by the French?

PRATT: Those facilities came through the French. The very fact that they had come through the French was a source of irritation to the Moroccans. Of course, we had had a long history of relations with Morocco going back to 1787. In fact every office had a photocopy hanging on the wall of the first letter of George Washington to the Sultan of Morocco concerning his recognition of the United States. Our Tangier building had been a gift of the Sultan of Morocco. One of the things that stood in our favor was that we had this independent treaty with Morocco predating the French Protectorate, established in 1911 over the Moroccan government. In effect we stood as somebody who had recognized the basic rights of Morocco to their independence, although we also recognized the French Protectorate.

Q: I imagine this didn't help your relations with the French at the time.

PRATT: French relations were not very happy. There was a remarkable degree of French culture throughout Morocco to the extent that even the local Moroccan trade movement would publish its weekly paper in French. I don't know how many French there were there at that time. It was up in the hundreds of thousands. The French do have a way of impressing their culture on the local people. It was fascinating to watch when once Josephine Baker come down from Paris and all the Moroccan notables gathered around for this party and just ohhhed and ahhhed at her songs of Paris that were reminding them of their days when they were at the Cité Universitaire.

Q: Did they know that she was an American?

PRATT: Oh, yes. It was well known who she was, but she was a representative of French culture to them. Her entire career had been tied up with Paris.

Q: Were there many Americans there other than the military?

PRATT: Other than the military, we had only a handful of Americans there.

Q: So what were your principal duties there?

PRATT: Principal duties as far as I was concerned evolved around reporting on two specific fields, fisheries and minerals. There is quite a variety of fish in Morocco. Phosphates were a big item there. That meant periodically going down to the phosphate

mines at Khoribgha and talking to the people and getting the usual two dollar tour of the establishment.

Q: Who was the king at the time?

PRATT: The king at the time I got there was Mohammad V. He died and his son, Hassan II, took over. He is still king. He is an extremely adept, extremely wily politician. When I first got there, the movement of intellectuals, if you will, was quite outspoken and opposed the king. It had a rather vague program, but basically a more modern program. He succeeded, one way or another, when he became king of co-opting these individuals into ambassadors, ministers, etc. In fact, one of the things I had to do periodically when their newspaper was seized on the streets was to dig around at odd corners to see if I could get a copy for the Embassy in Rabat. The editor of this paper showed up many years later as a Moroccan Ambassador in Beirut. I remember going over to him and telling him about my paper search and he gave me a dirty look and said, "You have too long a memory."

Q: The king comes from a long line of royalty there?

PRATT: The royal family goes back probably three or four hundred years. When the family established itself Fez was at the time the capital for Morocco. You know it was only later that they moved down to Rabat. In fact most of the leading families of Morocco have Fezzi antecedents. The Fezzi themselves are an interesting group. They can trace their ancestry back to Moorish Spain. The final fall of Granada was when they came over to Morocco. In fact some of the old houses in Fez still have the keys hanging on the wall of their houses in Granada.

I remember the first governor of Casablanca when I got there was a man named Mohammad Bargach. Allowing for Arabic phonetics this comes out very simply as Vargas. How Spanish could you get? Blond haired and blue eyed.

Q: Did you find it interesting in Morocco?

PRATT: Morocco was interesting. I did get a chance to do a certain amount of traveling down to Marrakech, up to Tangier. I had one long trip out into the desert. There was an oil exploration company working there in the Spanish territory of Rio de Oro. They had had their trucks seized by Moroccans--they had gone across the frontier. So I had to take a group of their engineers and bring those trucks back. This meant going as far south as Agadir and on to Goulimine where the road ends and then another 160 kilometers across the desert to a little town of Hassi Tantan near the coast.

Q: Did your Arabic come in handy or was it too difficult?

PRATT: The Arabic wasn't much use there and why speak Arabic when everybody speaks a little French.

Q: And you spoke fluent French yourself.

PRATT: I knew enough French to stumble along.

Q: That was often the case.

PRATT: It happened most places that way. The only real use I had for their language was in handling documents that were too hot to be handled by our local translators.

Q: Do you have any particular stories you would like to tell us about Morocco?

PRATT: We are going back close to 30 years. I'm afraid the details are rather vague.

Q: They tend to fade away, particularly when more interesting things happen afterwards.

PRATT: But Morocco basically was a fairly quiet post. The airfields were closing up because the Moroccans felt they didn't want them there. But they did permit the navy to stay on under certain conditions.

Q: What was the attitude towards Americans, the Consulate and the US in general while you were there?

PRATT: Well it is hard to tell. The newspapers had a standard drum beat of the third world, anti-American propaganda. The French newspapers were resolutely non-political, they stayed away from that sort of thing. For international news they were very good.

Q: What years were you in Morocco?

PRATT: I was there from 1960-63.

Q: Then where did you go?

PRATT: From there I went to Damascus.

Q: I think you had a great time there.

PRATT: Yes, Damascus was quite a place.

Q: Tell us about it.

PRATT: We were transferred to Damascus directly from Casablanca. I welcomed the move because it meant going back into the Middle East, itself, and also because the then Ambassador was Ridgway Knight, whom I had known well in the days of Berlin.

Q: What was your position there?

PRATT: I was economic officer working in an office that was combined econ/AID under an AID man, Mission Director, John Tobler.

Q: So, lets hear about your story of Damascus.

PRATT: We got to Beirut in July, 1963. While on our way there we had heard of the failed coup against the regime that was then in power.

A little history. They had gone through the period of unity, 1958-61, with Egypt. That had broken up basically because of the Syrian dislike of any foreigner and especially the Egyptians who came in acting as if they had conquered the country. The old conservative ruling groups came back to power with the breakup of the union. They lasted until March, 1963.

Q: They were led by whom?

PRATT: I have forgotten their names. They predated me.

March, 1963 saw a coup by the Baath party which was partially political but basically military. By August when we were arriving there had been various conversations with Nasser looking towards a restoration of the union, but they had broken down because Nasser found that they really didn't have any idea of what they wanted.

Q: That would be the restoration of the United Arab Republic?

PRATT: Yes. The August coup which failed was led by military who were interested primarily in restoring the union as opposed to Baath who had their own political agenda. This Baath agenda is hard to pin point. It has elements of Arab socialism, whatever that means. Basically it evolves around the nationalization of major industries and generally a controlled economy and getting rid of the old landed aristocracy which had put their money into industry. Labor practices were pretty brutal. The biggest of the industries was a cotton mill that had the practice of firing its employees after every two and a half months; the reason was that in three months they gained permanent status and certain benefits from the company under Syrian law. So even Syrians who were fairly conservative felt this sort of thing was not the way to run a country.

Within the Baath party, itself, you had the emergence of a fairly conservative group as against a more active, more socially minded group. The party, itself, of course, was dominated by the military. There had been a continual purging of the ranks in the military, getting rid of the more conservative officers and the Baathi officers emerged more and more in control. They in turn split. I hesitate to say that it was a split based on religion. Certainly the more radical group was distinguished by their membership in the

Alawite community, which is a heterodox Moslem religious minority, the roots of which are rather vague. The Alawites are concentrated in the mountains east of Latakia.

Q: This is continuation of an interview by Dayton Mak of Norman Pratt, on November 19, 1991. Mr. Pratt, you said you had two things you would like to add to your other two adventures. One in Libya, I believe?

PRATT: No, the first was in Alexandria at my first post. During that time, I think it was early 1948, just before Israeli independence, Bill Porter, later Ambassador to Algiers, and at that time political officer in Jerusalem, visited us on his return from Washington. His mission was to fill us in on the various developments that had gone on in Washington leading eventually to the decisions to support the Israeli independence and to give us the background of Cabinet opposition to Truman and the seeming inconsistent American policy it reflected. That Cabinet opposition Truman eventually squashed.

At that time, we were also getting increasing reports of local disturbances within the police force. I remember very well the chief of the foreign branch of the Alexandria police, a Lt. Colonel, called on us and explained how desperately poor they were and how they were not getting any salary increases. To prove his point he turned to the Consul General while I was watching him, and he flicked up the tails of his jacket and showed two patches on the seat of his trousers. He said that this was the price of being an honest policeman today in Egypt. It was this kind of discontent that led to the police strike.

I mention this in connection with Bill Porter because on the first day of the strike he was scheduled to go down to Alexandria on the 9 o'clock train. Bill never really recovered from his indignation when the Consul General at that time, who was a bit on the starchy side, refused to let him have the Consulate car to go out in the midst of the strike. Bill said years later that the Consul General thought the car was more valuable than an FSO. But the strike lasted for a day and a half and it finally cleared up. I think the police did finally get their raise.

But it was this sort of discontent that kept building and eventually led to Farouk's overthrow. He would cover the night clubs and it was said that was a table always reserved for him wherever he went. He started out as a hopeful young man, well regarded by his people. But he had become absolutely gross as a satisfaction of his own appetites.

Q: Yes, the stories of King Farouk are legion.

PRATT: Indeed they are.

Q: Profligacy.

PRATT: Yes. The other episode relates to the trip I made down to Hassi Tan Tan to bring back the oil trucks.

Q: That was at Rio de Oro?

PRATT: Tan Tan is just north of the Rio de Oro, in far southern Morocco. I was well received there by the Moroccan officer commanding the post. In due course I picked up the trucks and headed back first to Goulimine, which is the camel market of the so-called bluemen, the Tuareg Berbers. And then back up the road another 100 kilometers to Agadir. I had a long and interesting talk there with the governor. The Algerian and French fighting was going on and he prided himself on the fact that he would allow no supplies to get through to the French from Agadir which was the closest port. This becomes important overall because there are massive high grade ore deposits right inside the Algerian border. The only feasible way to get those ore deposits out is down the valley of the Draa River and through Morocco to the coast. As far as I know those ore deposits still sit absolutely idle because of political differences. The deposits have been pretty well written up in books on that part of the world. They are still a latent asset.

Q: These are phosphate deposits?

PRATT: These are iron ore deposits of a very high grade--in the 50-60% range as I recall.

I followed the old Moroccan custom, having arrived back in Agadir right at lunch time, of waiting until after lunch before calling on the governor. When he received me he said, "I knew you were in town for the last hour and a half. Where have you been?"

Q: Why did you wait?

PRATT: Because I wasn't going to interrupt his lunch.

Q: Okay. Do you want to get back to Syria?

PRATT: Yes.

I sketched out generally the background of the divergent wings of the Baath party. The Syrians did make various attempts at unity with Iraq which as usual came to nothing. They sent a detachment of troops over to Iraq in 1968 to fight the Kurds but came back within a few weeks having accomplished nothing. This condition gradually deteriorated between the two wings leading in early '66 to the coup which threw the right-wing civilian Baath leaders out of power and brought in the more radical regime of Saleh Jadid and Hafez al Assad. During this period the drum beat of anti-American propaganda got worse and worse.

Q: That was because of our position on Israel.

PRATT: Yes. It was complicated by the fact that there was also a spy case involving our CIA representative that led to an American of Syrian origin being hanged in Marjeh Square.

We had a small AID program there mostly dated from Egyptian unity days. We had already completed the aviation facilities but the big grain silos project we decided to cancel out leaving them only with blue prints for finishing the actual construction. In February of 1967 these attacks had become so violent and with personal attacks against President Johnson, etc., we felt there was no point on continuing the project. The cancellation was conveyed through the Syrian Embassy in Washington rather than by us. By that period we had been forbidden access to Syrian officials except by special appointment through the Foreign Office. Our oil companies, who were merely marketing units in Syria, had been nationalized with no prospect of immediate compensation. Finally the local manager of the Trans Arabian Pipeline had asked us to refrain from seeing him because of the attention he was getting from the Syrian government.

When the June war came along and the big lie of the American and British support for the Israeli Air Force, the ground work for a break in relations had already been laid.

Q: Before we go into the '67 war, could we go back a bit? What was the make up of our Embassy?

PRATT: Our Embassy consisted of the usual ambassador and a relatively small staff. We were without a DCM for many months in 1966-67.

Q: Who was the ambassador?

PRATT: The ambassador was a political appointee from the academic world, Hugh H. Smythe. His specialty was African studies. He really didn't know too much about the Arab world although he tried hard to understand it. He was also a man who could be quite outspoken in this area sometimes. We had the usual political, economic, consular sections, the usual line up of military attachés--army and air.

Q: It was fairly small wasn't it?

PRATT: It was basically small. I think when it finally became time to evacuate in 1967, including the Marine Corps detachment and a couple of schoolteachers, we had a total of 40 Americans to take out.

Q: That is not including dependents.

PRATT: The dependents had already left.

Q: I see.

PRATT: We had a consulate up in Aleppo, but that was a small affair. It didn't have much to do.

Q: And your personal relationships in Syria?

PRATT: Personal relationships in Syria were quite a contrast with the official position of the Syrian government. In fact, I found that everywhere I would go in the souks in Damascus the people were friendly.

Q: Did they bring up the Israeli situation with you?

PRATT: I never recall discussing the Israeli situation with a private Syrian.

Q: Do you attribute that to inherent politeness or...?

PRATT: I think there were two reasons for it. The first, as you mentioned, is the inherent politeness of the people. The second, to them as individuals they were perhaps showing their opposition to the regime by being polite to us. Even three or four days before the war started, I remember walking in the souk and finding the old Arabic library there, now next to the Tomb of Saladin, and being shown great courtesy. They produced all the old manuscripts for me to look at. They couldn't have been nicer.

When I went back for the first time, and I will pick this up in more detail later, I spent most of my time walking around shaking hands and being welcomed back to Damascus after a year and a half's absence.

Q: Do you have any feelings that the Syrians were unhappy with Americans? Would American tourists have found it difficult at that point? How were they greeted? Were there any tourists?

PRATT: We had very few tourists coming through. They would come through on tours for a day, go down to the souks, bargain as the guide books said they should, and, of course, pay the usual outrageous prices. They didn't realize that the businessmen were all literate and read the guide books too.

Q: Was there a Palestinian community there?

PRATT: Very substantial Palestinian community, probably 150,000 at that point.

Q: In Damascus?

PRATT: In Syria.

Q: How did they treat you or did you come across them?

PRATT: Both our cooks were Palestinians. They were the only good cooks in town. Syrian cooks didn't exist. They had worked for the British. We had no problems with

them. The Palestinians were not too well regarded by the Syrians. They had no citizenship in Syria. They were accepted only as refugees.

Q: Were they in camps?

PRATT: There were refugee camps, yes. Very sizeable ones. Some were living in town. Some had jobs with the Syrian government. Some were teaching. The Arabic teacher I had in Damascus was a Palestinian.

Q: Please continue on Damascus, if you would.

PRATT: We could feel and see the tension building up with the April, 1967 shoot out when the Syrians lost 6 MiGs over Damascus.

Q: What was the reason for that?

PRATT: They had gone down and made the mistake of tangling with the Israeli air force.

Q: So they were being chased?

PRATT: They were being chased. You have to remember that from what was then the Israeli-Syrian border would be calculated as a 2-minute flight.

Q: It was hard not to over fly the border.

PRATT: You couldn't miss it. You couldn't turn around in time. I think it illustrates the problem of how close these frontiers are. There is very little space to maneuver.

Q: With these fast moving planes you have no chance.

PRATT: No.

Q: So they lost 6 MiGs which sort of heightened tension a bit?

PRATT: It didn't help any. And, of course, at the same time the Syrians were beating the drums for the Palestinians. The papers were full of communiqués from various PLO outfits attacking places inside Israel and great enthusiasm was built up for that type of thing.

Q: Did you have the feeling that the Syrians thought that they had the upper hand?

PRATT: I never had that feeling. They had confidence.

Q: They were feeling very brave.

PRATT: Yes.

Q: What gave them that confidence? Lack of information?

PRATT: Lack of information, yes.

Q: Yes. Then, of course, we know what happened.

PRATT: The situation started deteriorating after April. Nasser started getting on his high horse. He started by kicking the UN peacekeeping force out of the Suez area, which had separated the Israelis and the Egyptians as a result of the '56 settlements. He asked U Thant to take the troops out. Having established himself there it was almost a big tragedy because having gotten that far, it meant he had to assert his sovereignty all over the area which included the Sharm El Sheikh Straits which controlled access to the Israeli port of Elat. Then having done that he had to threaten the blockade of Israeli ships.

Q: Do you think Nasser was surprised that they pulled out so quickly?

PRATT: I think he was surprised by the fact that it happened so fast. In fact I am left wondering whether he realized that he had overreached, but by that time he was on a roll and he couldn't stop.

So then the buildup started.

Q: As I remember, we, the United States, Britain and France, and other Western nations, were pretty upset that the UN pulled out so quickly.

PRATT: We were indeed upset at the quick pull out. We came up with various proposals like naval vessels in the Red Sea to patrol, etc.

But this was preempted by the Israeli's strike on June 5, which was accompanied by the Egyptian charges that American and British planes had supported the Israelis in their effort.

Q: What was Syria doing at this time?

PRATT: Syria was mobilizing. They had constructed, overlooking the Golan Heights, a massive, dense fortification system. They, of course, would shell an Israeli settlements in the valley, something, of course, the Israelis felt was intolerable over the long run. It was a closed area. We could not get in. We had no idea what these facilities were beyond knowing they existed. We could pick up evidence of military buildup, but since Damascus was a leave center for Syrian troops there were always lots of troops on the streets, so that didn't prove anything. But the buildup did go on. We knew it. People were being called up.

I have reviewed the reporting of the June 5 war and we in Damascus really didn't have a lot to contribute to this beyond what was going on in the press. We, of course, looked into our evacuation plan as we knew this could very easily become a problem. It was complicated for us because at that point too the Syrians had imposed a requirement that we, and possibly other Western diplomats, could only leave the country after obtaining an exit visa and 48 hours advance notice was required to get that visa. But we were able to have our wives go down to Beirut to shop and, of course, they never came back.

So by the 5th of June most families were gone. The Ambassador's attitude on the evacuation was to keep a normal presence as long as possible. In fact, many people in the Embassy felt he overdid that. He had the optional authority for a long time to issue evacuation orders, which were important from a financial point of view because that meant transportation would be paid for by the Department. Without that authority we could not claim transportation and could be stuck in Beirut and a burden on the Embassy there.

But finally the Department saw what was going on and told him to issue the evacuation orders. So we had evacuation a full week before.

The tip-off to me was the Friday before the war when Moshe Dyan returned as Minister of War. I remember discussing that very point with Ambassador Porter in Beirut. I had gone down to see my family off who were on their way to safe haven in Italy.

The morning after the staff meeting on June 5 we came out to learn that the war had started with the Israeli bombardment of the Egyptian airfields. The Israeli activity over Damascus did not begin until around noon. They flew about 28 sorties knocking out the oil storage tanks east of town, the Aleppo road and generally reduced to a shambles what was left of the Syrian air force.

We didn't know until late Monday or Tuesday the progress the Israelis had made-- Tuesday was the 6th. I was told to come back to the Embassy around 8 o'clock, at which point the Ambassador reported he had been summoned to the Foreign Office and we were to leave within 48 hours.

Q: So that took care of your exit permit.

PRATT: That took care of the exit permit situation. So for the next 24-48 hours we burnt files, cleaned things up and got ready to go. At 5 o'clock Thursday night we packed ourselves into our cars and headed down the mountain to Beirut. We left all our furniture and belongings behind.

Q: Who did you leave looking after all this?

PRATT: We left it all to the Italians as the protecting power.

Q: And how did they physically do it?

PRATT: They moved into the Embassy. We were allowed to maintain for three additional days the head of our administrative section to take care of whatever needed to be done. He cleaned up the loose ends and then came out. I don't know too much about what was done. We, of course, had our local staff there which continued on. There was some question as to how they would be paid. I think it was a rather poor decision on somebody's part that they should be continued on the payroll only through the end of the month. The translators were arrested under the suspicion of espionage, and held under very difficult conditions for several weeks before they were finally let go.

Q: Tell me a little bit about the Embassy? You had a political ambassador. Did the Embassy work smoothly? How about your relations with the CIA and the attachés?

PRATT: Our relations with the attachés and CIA were good. Actually the station chief's cover was as economic officer and we sat together. His number two was in the political section. We had all had very long experience in the Middle East. The station chief's wife was a Swiss from Alexandria. His assistant's forebears dated back to the founding of ANB. It was interesting because during the period of the buildup, those who had only been there for a short while weren't worried. The more service one had in the area, the more worried one was.

Q: Did you ever feel that even during this war period that the Americans were in any danger?

PRATT: I never felt any danger. We did have one small demonstration. I'd had my car in the repair shop and they brought it back about 11 o'clock that Monday morning that the war started. I took it out to try it and as I came back to the Embassy the mob was already forming. I had to duck down quickly a side alley.

Q: Was it a government inspired mob?

PRATT: I went down and parked in the Ambassador's driveway which was across the street from my apartment and waited until the mob dispersed before I walked back to the Embassy building itself.

The worse episodes were at the consulates. And they seemed to be simultaneous, not only in Alexandria and Port Said in Egypt, but we had mob attacks at both the British and American consulates in Aleppo. In Aleppo they set fire to the building while our people were still in it. Fortunately, the administrative officer, anticipating trouble, had everyone go to his office from which they could slide down a rope and get out of the building. It was a scary time for them. They were all herded together after getting out of the building and taken down to the Baron Hotel. They were held in isolation in the bar there.

Q: So you went over the mountain to Beirut and then?

PRATT: We went over the mountain to Beirut and to the Phoenicia Hotel. I had a little trouble sleeping that night as I had been pretty busy. I was up early the next morning and went over to the Embassy and talked with the Chargé, Dwight Porter had already left by then. Adrian Middleton told me that the plane to take us to Rome had space for only 35. Two of the people who stayed behind were CIA communicators. I told him at the time that I would prefer to stay and would take the junior officer Gene Marshall and take him with me. I didn't want to leave the ball game until it was over. Also there were other considerations which made me feel it was best for me to stay.

Q: So you didn't get to go to Rome or Athens?

PRATT: No. I didn't get there until weeks later. In the meantime the family had been in Rome and then went down to Capri.

Q: And leaving you in that terrible Beirut.

PRATT: Right in the briar patch.

Q: So, continue from there. You were, I believe, assigned to Beirut.

PRATT: I stayed in Beirut until late July. It was interesting too because all of the Syrian friends that had stayed away from me in Damascus very soon found out that I was still there; so I reestablished acquaintanceships very rapidly. In fact, they were never really broken.

Q: They sought you out in Beirut?

PRATT: They sought me out in Beirut. I was in Beirut during the temporary period until I left in late July. I thought the most useful thing I could do was to try to develop sources of information as to what was going on in Syria.

Q: This is the resumption of the interview on December 3, 1991.

PRATT: Developing contacts to get an idea of what was going on in Syria was not too difficult. Physically Damascus and Beirut are less than 100 miles apart. The Damascenes whom I had known and who had stayed away from me the last days in Syria because of fear of the attention of the Syrian intelligence were only too glad to see me in Beirut. One of my close friends who had deliberately asked me to stay away from him showed up three weeks after the war in Beirut. He treated me to one of the finest lunches I have ever had at the hotel in full view of everyone. And, of course, there were other Syrians who had gone down to Beirut in the years previously that I was able to see and talk with.

Q: So in a way you had more contacts with Syrians there than you had had in Damascus in recent days.

PRATT: That is correct. I know the morning I came down to Beirut in June, I saw more people that morning to talk with on developments than I had been able to see in the months previously in Syria. Plus there was an assortment of Beirut newspapers always available, which provided more background for reporting to Washington.

Q: Do you recall what was happening in Syria while you were away?

PRATT: It was first of all...in the outgrowth of the war, itself, it was the reserve forces basically that had been defending Syria on the Golan Heights. The crack Syrian troops, the 70th and 72nd Brigades, were kept in Damascus to protect the regime.

Q: Were they Alawite or something else?

PRATT: They were probably basically Alawite, although the complete Alawite domination did not really take effect for another year or two.

One of the things I was able to accomplish was...I had a commercial assistant named Ibrahim Teen. He had been in the United States during the war for an indoctrination training course. He was a local employee, a Lebanese national, although he lived in Damascus. He also had an admirable talent for developing information as to what was happening. He was enormously valuable as a source of information during my time in Damascus. He still had his contacts there when he came back to Beirut that allowed him to continue to develop this information. I was able to have him put on the Beirut payroll. He returned on a Friday and started to work on a Monday. The sad thing is that the continuing pressures he was under during the years in Syria had affected his heart and in November he died of a heart attack.

There is a gap in my recollection because, from late July until November, I was out of the Middle East and back in Washington, nominally on the Egyptian Desk although it boiled down to about four weeks there then home leave and some briefings for my return to Beirut.

The developments in Syria during this point were not terribly significant. The regime had managed to hold on primarily because of its military strength and its control through its intelligence and police. A great factor in all of this was the old ruling class in Syria. The entrepreneurs who had done the economic development had never considered the army as significant. Therefore, none of their sons ever became military officers. As one put it very bluntly, "We let the army get away from us."

Q: So the army was sort of an under class?

PRATT: The army started out as an under class, particularly with the Alawites. This group lived up in the hills beyond Latakia and in the valley around Homs. They were poor peasants with little chance for advancement or education, except through military schools. As the minority, they found favor with the French Mandate authorities. They were

encouraged to become non-coms and eventually go to officers' candidate school at Homs. Thus, they emerged as a military caste devoted primarily to their own Alawite interests.

The Alawite are heterodox Muslims about whose beliefs we know little. Their dogma is considered secret. Their poverty as peasants showed up particularly because they were the tenant farmers for the wealthy, Sunni Moslems, and the conditions under which the Alawite lived were not good. There was a study done on rural hygiene back in the '30s which described it vividly. Thus when you get into situations like the one in the mid-'80s where you had the Sunni uprising in Hama against Alawite and the Baath Party, and the subsequent government bloody reprisals and suppression of the revolt, it is understandable that this is basically the working out of the Alawite antagonism against the Sunni landlord.

Q: I gather the Alawite were not a merchant class?

PRATT: They were not a merchant class, but basically poor peasants. One of the things that was done to them was that their daughters were almost auctioned off into slavery to the wealthy households in Damascus and Beirut where they would go to work for a pittance for years on end. This started at the age of 10 or 12, or even younger.

Q: Do you think the Alawites had a built in resentment against the rest of the...?

PRATT: They had a built in resentment against the rest of the Syrian world.

Q: Doesn't that make for a very severe fragmentation in the Damascus scene or the Syrian scene?

PRATT: It does make a fragmentation on the Syrian scene but, at the same time, you have to remember the Syrian system of control, with night arrests by the G-2, the military presence, etc.

Q: It sounds a bit like a communist system that could break up and go smash all of a sudden.

PRATT: Well, whether the system could go smash all of a sudden or not, I don't know. The Baath Party started out with socialist ideas of reform and was captured by the military class. The Party undertook nationalization of industry and commerce without compensation (despite promises to the contrary at the beginning). Syria had never experienced this during the period of the merchant classes. Nevertheless, the Baath Party brought a degree of political stability to the country.

Q: This is the second tape of an interview by Dayton Mak of Norman Pratt at Norman's home in Bethesda, Maryland on December 3, 1991.

PRATT: Back in Beirut, November 1967. I was in charge of the economic section there with the usual responsibilities connected with a large American business community and specialized problems such as the American position on the recovery of the defunct Intra Bank. The Syrian aspect of my work was very much of a sideline. But it was always with me because for one thing I had a steady stream of our local employees coming down from Damascus seeking advice, help, etc. Some of their personal stories were not terribly happy. I remember the Ambassador's housekeeper showed up at my office in Beirut one morning with a story that she had been arrested in Damascus. She had stayed on as housekeeper of the residence that we owned in Syria. She had been arrested by the Syrian G-2 with only a few Syrian pounds in her working clothes pocket after we had severed diplomatic ties and taken down to the G-2 and held until 6 in the evening. She was then put in a taxi to Beirut as she was a Lebanese national Armenian. Her case was easy to solve. We hired her for our family, having known her well in Damascus.

Insofar as keeping in touch with Syrian affairs was concerned, through some of the people that I had known there, it was possible to follow events in the broad outline fairly successfully. At the same time, the Italians who were protecting our interests in Damascus made regular visits to the Embassy in Beirut to discuss various problems that they had with our properties there. While in Beirut they filled us in on developments as they saw them in Syria.

At that time it was completely forbidden by the SARG for any American to be issued a permit to enter Syria. This situation continued for well over a year. When Americans did have special reasons to go to Syria, it was a long and elaborate rigmarole they had to go through to get a visa.

However, the Italians felt, a year and a half later, in late September, 1968, that the events had moved to a stage where it might be possible for an American representative to return to Damascus on the grounds that they needed help in the affairs of our American properties there.

Q: Before you go on could you give us some idea of what our interests were? What were the things that they had to protect that were important to us?

PRATT: Basically our property. We had an Embassy building there that we owned. We owned the Ambassador's Residence, which is one of the three or four private houses in all of Damascus because almost everyone else lived in apartments. We also had a large plot of ground on which the school sat, the American Community School. Those were our three major concerns.

We also had financial interests there in blocked funds. We had certain AID loans that the Syrians were servicing regularly, as well as blocked PL 480 money. Blocked in the sense that no disposition had been made of them.

On this I was helped by the fact that in March, 1967, before the war, I had arranged for the AID files to go to the AID mission in Athens because we had closed the AID office in Damascus. I was able to recover those files from Athens and keep them in Beirut for reference purposes. They had the detailed background of the technical aspects of AID matters.

There was the legal question of the property on which the school sat...a thick file. It had a lot of classified material in it but only related to the title of the Embassy land. Although it was a classified file, during the evacuation in 1967, the admin officer merely wrote declassified and the date across the cover of the file and turned the whole file over to the Italians.

Q: Did the Italians do a pretty good job of protecting our interests?

PRATT: I think they did an excellent job of protecting our interests. They had an officer, Luigi Conte, who moved into the Embassy building and retained a staff of seven or eight of our most experienced locals, particularly on the administrative side. His successor, Mario Matolini, who I got to know well over the following years was equally conscientious.

There was, of course, a difference in their approach to our local employees. The Italians were much more formal in their dealings with them than we were. Nevertheless, I think things worked out reasonably well. I came out of this operation with a considerable respect for the caliber of the Italian Foreign Service.

Q: Now, are you ready to turn to your responsibilities in Beirut? You mentioned the Intra Bank and I am sure there were lots of other peculiar affairs going on there.

PRATT: Intra Bank. A long and complicated history. Basically the builder of the bank was a Palestinian, Joe Beidas. He built a very successful bank in the sense that, if you came to him, he made a point of giving good service. His difficulty, of course, was that he was too frequently using the bank's funds for long range non-liquid loans. There was no long-term capital market as such in Lebanon. At the same time he, as a Palestinian, was disliked by the native Lebanese bankers. I must say that banking was a major Lebanese preoccupation. There were some, I guess, 60-odd banks in various stages of operation in Lebanon, including a number of major American banks.

Q: Didn't the Intra Bank have a connection that was particularly important to us as Americans?

PRATT: Yes. When Intra Bank went belly up in 1966 it put us in a difficult position because Intra Bank had taken deposits of some US\$15 million as a result of PL 480 sales. Thus the US Commodity Credit Corporation was a creditor to the bank for that amount. It became imperative that we do what we could to recover these funds. Because of the importance of the bank to the entire economic structure of Lebanon, efforts were

organized to attempt refloating and restructuring the bank. The mechanism for doing this was to set up a board of directors which included representatives of the Lebanese government, Lebanese private banking and representatives of certain other Middle East countries, notably Qatar. The American representation on the board was for the American Commodity Credit Corporation. The descending order of responsibility started with their representatives who were in Washington. Then the Embassy staff, starting with the agricultural attaché and working down to the economic chief and his assistant. In point of fact this meant that it fell to the economic chief and his assistant to carry on the day to day operations because the Washington people were tied up with other affairs.

At the same time, there was an involvement with an American advisory firm, Kidder-Peabody, to try to get the bank reopened. This really became complicated because the board decided on a multiple range of questions such as what to do about the bank's building on Fifth Avenue in New York. It owned 65 percent of Middle East Airlines, which was in the process of modernization. Thus we found ourselves debating not only the sale of the bank in New York, but also whether or not Middle East Airlines should buy U.S. or British aircraft. And at the same time the Board had to try to figure out a way to bring the banking operations back into paying and reimbursing the various depositors one way or another.

The decision was eventually taken to buy Boeing 707s, much to everybody's relief in the Embassy. In that we had a major source of funding from Ex-Im Bank in Washington.

Q: As I recall, Yusuf Beidas, or whatever his name was, died in Latin America somewhere, didn't he?

PRATT: I think so, yes.

Q: So we never heard much more...

PRATT: He disappeared from the scene in 1966. He got on a plane one evening without saying goodbye and that was it.

Q: What else was there of interest in Lebanon?

PRATT: Well, let's see. Other matters that became of interest were...we got into the hijacking of aircraft. The first hijacking was a TWA 707 into Damascus and it got complicated by the fact that there were two Israelis aboard the plane. The plane was originally supposed to go to Tel Aviv. The Syrians grabbed the Israelis and wouldn't turn them loose. At that point the TWA people said that they would keep the plane in Damascus until the Israelis were turned loose. They had that responsibility to their passengers.

It went on for three months when finally Syrians that the Israelis had imprisoned were freed. The two Israelis were then released, the plane flew out, and everybody was happy.

The involvement with Middle East Airlines (MEA) through Intra Bank took another form. One December day in 1968 the Israelis decided to retaliate for some terrorism somewhere by descending on Beirut airport and destroying MEA aircraft and those of a competitor Lebanese International Airlines (LIA). The next morning there was a joint meeting of the Intra Bank board and the MEA board. I still remember the report by the chairman which said, "We were able to resume operations because one plane was fortunately out of the country so we combined the London and Paris flights. Everybody showed up who was booked and we were able to make the flight as scheduled. Incidentally, we are fully covered with insurance and this will make the down payment on the new fleet that we need."

Q: The Lebanese seem to manage to land on their feet.

PRATT: Yes. A side note of irony, one of the insurers in the Lloyds pool was an Israeli insurance company and was one of the firms who had to pay up. It also had the effect of putting the competing Lebanese Airline out of business because they had lost a couple of planes but had been so sure of themselves that they didn't bother with insurance. They went bankrupt. This in many respects strengthened MEA and our position on Intra Bank because it made MEA the one national passenger carrier.

Q: What do you remember about the problems of the diversion of the various waters in Lebanon? As I remember, the Lebanese were trying to divert water that would ordinarily flow into Israel to keep it from going there. Was that a problem for you at all?

PRATT: No that was not a problem for me. This was primarily a pre-1967 issue. The Israelis got control of a lot of the area where the water flowed after the 1967 war.

Q: Well, you were there during the time when the real buildup of the PLO and other organizations in south Lebanon was going on. Can you tell us something about that?

PRATT: Not terribly much. They were building up there then, but I would have to go back to the records of that period because it was more a matter for the political section than for me.

Q: As I remember, Beirut was changing very rapidly during that period. Beirut had been a rather calm, pleasant place where one could talk to people when suddenly you had these armed people marching around the streets being rather unattractive.

PRATT: Yes. It brought out the fact that there was in Beirut this well-to-do upper crust dressed in Paris fashions and skiing at the Cedars, etc., and this massive proletariat, which was really not considered of any significance except when they had their periodic parliamentary elections and their vote was sought. This clash often confused the foreigners who visited because they could see the glitter of the St. George and Phoenicia hotels, but the refugee camps outside the city were not too visible from the road. The

visitors failed to see that great gap, which was a major factor, I think, in the civil war, as well as the fact that all the religious groupings were at each others throats even in those days.

Q: Does that pretty well cover your period in Lebanon?

PRATT: Well, at the same time I was going on with what could be developed with Syria. I knew all along that eventually there would be some sort of rapprochement taking place. There was a gradual softening of this very harsh attitude on the part of the Syrians. In following the developments there I was guided greatly by the advice of the Italians. They felt after about a year that I should think about returning to Damascus to see what was happening there. The Syrians had softened enough to issue me a visa as a former Embassy officer. They did issue the visa although I was told that it was after rather considerable debate within regional party councils of the Baath party.

Q: It is my recollection that Syria considered Lebanon part of Syria and therefore would have no embassies or visas. You would get a permit when you went across the border. Was that changed?

PRATT: I used the term visa perhaps loosely, but they did issue something that gave me authority to enter. I would have to check my passport to see exactly how it read.

Q: Was that issued at the border?

PRATT: Yes, at the border. It was only for the day. I came out that evening.

Then two or three months later, the Italians suggested that I try it again. I did, but by that time the Syrians had decided to lift the ban on Americans coming in to Damascus. I guess they saw the tourist revenue drying up and could use some more money. Strangely enough, I think the Italians found it ironic. The year after we left the export statistics showed that U.S. exports to Syria had increased substantially over this period of no diplomatic relations.

Q: What was the bulk of the imports?

PRATT: I have forgotten, but it was more or less across the board. The Italians showed me a copy of the report they had sent to Rome on this phenomenon.

Once, the Italians suggested that we see if we could get an American correspondent from Beirut into Damascus to talk to people and write some stories. The Christian Science Monitor man, John Cooley, who was something of a scholar in the area, did go in. He was received reasonably well. He wrote his story. This was one indication of softening.

I think the final stage in the rapprochement that we were working for came with the change in regime in about 1970. There had been friction developing between two leaders

of the Alawite regime--Saleh Jadid and Hafez al Assad. It was clear that sooner or later one would have to go.

In November, 1970 in a party conference, there was an attempt to get rid of al Assad. This was primarily because at the time of the September troubles in Jordan when there was the confrontation between the Jordanian forces and the PLO, the Syrians sent a Palestinian regiment across the frontier into Jordan, but al Assad, as commander of the air force, refused to support the operation with his planes. Then the Party leaders tried to ditch al Assad. He responded with his brother and a group of six or seven other generals by breaking up the party conference and arresting Jadid. This left Assad with sole power. This caused a certain dismay with the Soviet Ambassador who had been busy on the floor of the conference, lobbying vigorously for Jadid. But pragmatic consideration got this smoothed over. After all the Soviets were the major supplier of arms in those days and Soviet-built MiGs supplied the Syrian Air Force.

Finally in the spring of 1972, we had serious indications of Syria changing its heart when a Lebanese friend of the Embassy came in and suggested that if we wanted to talk with the Syrian Prime Minister, it would be possible.

We did pursue it. Yes, we would go. On a bright June day I was on my way to Damascus, nominally as a tourist. Georgia was with me to make it look good, along with a Jesuit priest. They went off to see Damascus and I rendezvoused with my Lebanese contact and off we went to the Prime Minister's office where I spent an hour and a half reviewing the situation. The details were put into a highly classified message back to the Department to arrange for further conversations to be held at a future date. So, in effect, we and the Syrian government had resumed talking to each other. One aspect of this conversation that caused a certain amount of stirring in Washington coming in unexpectedly, was that we deliberately did not attempt to get instructions from the Department prior to the meeting because we felt this would complicate our lives.

Q: Who was the Prime Minister?

PRATT: General Khulayfawi.

Anyway it was a very pleasant conversation. He kept his cabinet waiting for an hour and a half while he talked with me. I did not have a second session with him because I was reaching the end of my tour of duty in Beirut and Bob Houghton picked it up from there. In the meantime I do know that Joe Sisco and the Syrian Foreign Minister got together at the UN and went on from there. June, 1973 there were negotiations in Damascus and eventually the interest section was opened. By that time I was in South Africa.

Q: Could you give us just a brief idea of your feeling about living in Syria and in Damascus? What was it like to live there during that period?

PRATT: To go back into that period you have to remember I was in Berlin where I lived with the contrast between the free, democratic society of West Berlin and the restricted, dictatorship of the communist regime in East Berlin. We could go back and forth. Damascus was essentially like living in East Berlin at that time. We automatically assumed that our telephone conversations were monitored and Syrians were increasingly reluctant to be in touch with us. At the same time the average Syrian was very courteous to us when we went to the souks, etc.

Q: Would they come to you socially?

PRATT: Socially, no. The Ambassador's receptions were by in large avoided. They were afraid to be seen getting in touch with us. The government continuously damned the United States as the enemy.

Q: That was because of our attitude towards Israel, I suppose?

PRATT: Yes.

Q: Then, from Beirut you went back to the Department, I understand? What did you do back there?

PRATT: I didn't do much of anything in the Department. I did a study of the effectiveness of where we ought to place our commercial types at the various NEA posts. Then I got involved in counter-terrorism activities, trying to develop advance warning from intelligence sources.

Finally, after a year or so of that, I was transferred to Pretoria, South Africa, which was a completely new world to me. In those days apartheid was there. There was nothing much you could do about it. The most striking thing to me was the fact that there was little meeting between the various whites and the various black groups unless you met on neutral ground like an Embassy reception. Invariably when there was such a party going on...we always had blacks, of course...the black leaders were there as well as the whites. They would stare each other up and down for about ten minutes and at the end of that time they would be into the most involved political discussions. They just had no chance to get acquainted with each other.

I remember one woman who was absolutely shocked to learn that the blacks were not interested in learning the Afrikaans language and they objected to being taught it in the school. Well, this was very well known. In fact, it was one of the things that triggered the riots in Soweto in June, 1976. The SAG were making Afrikaans compulsory. The blacks saw it as a useless language in comparison to the world status of English.

Q: Did they mostly speak English as well as their own?

PRATT: In all the two and a half years I was in South Africa, I only ran across one case where English did not suffice. That was down in a small village in the heart of Afrikaner land in the Orange Free State. I wanted to get a sandwich at the drug store and no English was spoken. However, we made out all right. The old joke was that of course the man was completely bilingual, he doesn't know a word of English. "Bilingual" was a code word for an Afrikaans speaker, meaning only Afrikaners need apply.

Q: Did your work take you around the country quite a bit?

PRATT: Not as much as I would have liked to, because the situation in South Africa was that the Economic Counselor, which I was, took care of the whole Embassy operation when the Ambassador, DCM and Political Counselor went to Cape Town. It was a dual capital situation. The capital was considered to be in Cape Town and the Ministers were resident there when parliament was in session. When the parliament went out of session the Ministers came back to Pretoria, the administrative capital. Over the two and a half years I was in Pretoria, I was in charge of the office for almost two years and felt I could not travel to the extent I really wanted. I got to Cape Town a couple of times and once when the Ambassador was in Pretoria, Georgia and I went down to the annual chamber of commerce meeting south of Durban and from there continued around the countryside to the tip of South Africa along the garden route, and through the Transkei up to the ostrich farms, etc. Then on to Cape Town before returning--it was about a 1000 miles back from there.

Q: Did you find your tour interesting?

PRATT: It was interesting. It was a very relaxed sort of place. Pretoria is a town that closes at 5 in the evening. It was closed up tight, you couldn't even get a bus home past five in the afternoon. That sort of place.

Q: That is remarkable.

PRATT: Somebody said it is rather like living in Raleigh, North Carolina, but I think he was doing Raleigh a disfavor.

Q: Yeah, I think you could find a cab or something after 5:30.

PRATT: There were all the things that we knew about. Separate buses, separate entrances to the post office, etc. The signs were there, but this minor, petty apartheid was gradually going away. It was being abandoned.

Q: You didn't find it a great problem?

PRATT: Why should there be a problem?

Q: I mean, did you find it a problem for them? Was it just accepted by the blacks?

PRATT: It was accepted on the outside only by the blacks. I remember at one point I was being met at the Johannesburg Station. It was the first time I had been there. The Embassy driver couldn't come in to get me because he was black. I didn't know what he looked like, what the car looked like or anything else, so we had quite a time making contact.

Q: You mean the South Africans would have the same problem? Their drivers couldn't pick them up?

PRATT: They could pick them up but they had to wait outside the station. Of course, they know their own drivers. The other aspect of it is that an American businessman from Beirut came down to visit me in South Africa. He had come from a visit to Nigeria. I picked him up one Sunday morning in Johannesburg and brought him up past Soweto. His reaction to Soweto was, "My god, these people are more fortunate than those in Nigeria."

Q: I hate to think that.

PRATT: The contrast, of course, is not between Soweto and Lagos, but between Soweto and the white sections of Johannesburg, which the black population does see.

Q: Did you find your work interesting?

PRATT: The work was mildly interesting, but there was none of the excitement I got during my nine years in Damascus and Beirut. Life moved along at a fairly slow, even pace. In South Africa, itself, we had problems outside the country. Mozambique was in the throes of getting its independence from Portugal.

We had Rhodesia to the north of us which we were forbidden to have contact with. We couldn't visit or talk to Rhodesian officials. At the end the Rhodesians began to worry about contacts with the United States. Knowing that lack of direct contact was our policy, they located an American with business interests in Rhodesia and turned him into a intermediary on the grounds, quite correctly, that I could not refuse to see an American who wanted to come in and talk with me. I tried to get all the information I could from him. He had accurate information.

Q: So, how long were you in South Africa?

PRATT: I got to South Africa the end of January, 1974 and left June, 1976.

Q: When you came back from South Africa, what did you do?

PRATT: I had retired in South Africa.

Q: You retired?

PRATT: Yes, my time was up while I was still in South Africa. I passed the age of 60 which was the retirement age at that time.

Q: Yes, that's right. It seems incredible now, doesn't it, at the age of 60 then?

PRATT: Yes.

Q: You have been to a lot of places...Europe, West Africa, Middle East, South Africa. What would you say was the high point of your career? What did you really find the most interesting, important and worth doing and remembering?

PRATT: I hesitate to say at this point. I certainly found my work in Beirut, dealing with the Syrian problem interesting because I had no one from the State Department jarring my elbow, the Embassy or anyone else. It was purely on my own initiative.

I kept a copy of a speech that one of our Secretaries of State made about desiring good relations with all the Middle Eastern states following the 1967 war. I kept that tucked away as reference in case anyone asked me what in the world I was doing. But no one ever asked me.

Each post had their particular attraction. Tripoli, negotiating the base rights agreement as Libya moved towards its independence, certainly was one of the more interesting periods. Berlin, we saw the Communist regime close up with the strikes of June, 1953. Morocco didn't have an awful lot. It was a quiet post. Damascus, we lived through one coup there in February, 1966 when the army shot up the town. Of course, I was there in 1967 when the war started, the family had already gone. South Africa was fairly routine, fairly quiet. The Embassy was engaged in "make work" there. Things were blown out of proportion. In Beirut we would not have paid much attention to them.

Q: To wrap it up, would you have any thoughts you would like to record here on your career, the Foreign Service, the state of the world, etc.?

PRATT: I enjoyed the career. I made a conscious decision to follow the Foreign Service. I am glad I did. I have never looked back. On the state of the world? Well, the Soviet Union is breaking up, let's see what is going to emerge. It is going to be a fascinating thing to see. The Middle East has been in the midst of changing ever since the war with Iraq in 1991. Let's watch what happens there. China will change somehow in a few years as the old regime dies. There will be a lot happening.

Q: Well, thank you very much Mr. Pratt. I appreciate it.

PRATT: You are welcome.

End of interview