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

AMBASSADOR JOHN H. REED

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INTERVIEW

Q: Mr. Ambassador, I wonder if you would give me a bit about your background, where you were educated, and early experiences before we move on to your governorship, and the international aspects of it, and then to Sri Lanka?

REED: Yes, I'd be pleased to do that. I was born in Fort Fairfield, Maine, and educated in the public schools there.

Q: You mention Fort Fairfield as way up in potato country.

REED: That's way up near the Canadian border, where you look right over to Canada; and I graduated from high school there, went to the University of Maine, and graduated in '42.

Q: That was a good year to graduate, wasn't it?

REED: Yes, I moved quite quickly into the service. I went into the Navy, I was in the Navy for four years.

Q: What sort of work were you doing in the Navy?

REED: I enlisted in the Navy as a Storekeeper Third Class, and went to Newport, Rhode Island. Following my boot camp, I was selected to be a drill instructor, as a result of my ROTC at the University of Maine, and I enjoyed it very much. I stayed there for about a year, and then was commissioned in the Supply Corps, and went to Harvard for Supply Corps School. Afterwards I went to Mayport Naval Air Station in Florida for a tour as the disbursing officer. Then I was transferred to Cub 17, which was a unit selected to occupy one of the Pacific islands. I went to Okinawa where I was a supply officer, and stayed there through the duration of the war. After that, I came back and returned to my hometown of Fort Fairfield, and went into the farming business which had been operating for three generations. My grandfather Philo Reed was one of the founders of the potato industry in northern Maine. My brother, father and I continued to farm there. I stayed there for a number of years, and was always interested in history and government, and politics. I ran in 1955 for the Maine legislature, and was elected to the House. I served in

the House for one term, and following that I ran for State Senate from Aroostook County. I was elected and served two terms. I ran for President of the Maine State Senate in 1957 and succeeded to defeat an incumbent who had held the position for three terms.

Q: You were on the Republican side.

REED: I am a Republican. We had a Democratic governor at the time, Governor Clinton Clausen. And in less than a year unfortunately Governor Clausen died in office. We have no Lieutenant Governor in Maine, so I automatically succeeded him as Governor. He had just started the first four year term in history in Maine, after one year, and as I say, unfortunately passed away. So I served for one year by succession, and then I ran for the balance of the unexpired term, and won that election, and finished that term out. And then I ran and won a full four year term on my own, so I served for seven years as Governor.

Q: So I have you from 1960 through '66.

REED: Yes, that was the very start of 1967. Then I returned to my home in northern Maine--that was in January--and in April I got a call from President Lyndon Johnson. I might say that in my final term as governor, I was chairman of the National Governors' Conference, and got to know President Johnson very well. We had a similar background: he was a rancher, I was a farmer, and we had many things in common. We enjoyed each other's company. As a matter of fact, while I was Governor of Maine, President Johnson was visiting our state and admired our Maine deer which were considerably bigger than the deer in Texas. I shipped him two Maine deer, hopefully to upgrade Texas deer. As I said, he called me up to see if I'd be interested in serving on the National Transportation Safety Board. And I hadn't really settled on exactly what I was going to do, so I decided to accept. So I came to Washington in the spring of '67, as the only Republican on this new five member board. It was established to determine the probable cause of all transportation accidents, and to recommend corrective actions. I stayed there for a total of nine years, eight of which, after President Nixon came in, I served as chairman. I enjoyed the work a great deal, there was a lot of traveling which I like.

When President Ford came in he offered me an opportunity to go to Sri Lanka as ambassador. I think every former governor would like to be an ambassador, so I did accept that appointment and was there for one year. When President Carter came in naturally there was a complete change. So I came back to Washington and went to work for the Associated Builders and Contractors, as their chief lobbyist. In my years on the Safety Board I had many contacts with associations. I liked association work very much, so I found that an extremely enjoyable four year period. I had done some work during the Reagan campaign and in 1981 President Reagan called me up out of the blue on Labor Day and wanted to know if I would like to serve in his administration as ambassador to...and I wondered what he was going to say. And he said Sri Lanka, so I told him I would be delighted to go back. So that brings you up to date.

Q: I'd like to return to the governorship. We're interested in the Foreign Affairs field, and I take quite a broad view in this program. Maine has two provinces of Canada that you border, doesn't it?

REED: Yes, New Brunswick and Quebec.

Q: And basically you're just across the water to Nova Scotia. During the time that you were there--this is '60 to early '67, how did you deal as a governor with the sort of Maine provincial relations?

REED: Most of the relations were with New Brunswick because Quebec borders pretty much on our woodlands. I did make a couple of trips to Quebec but I didn't have as much contact with them. However, with New Brunswick we did have a lot of contact, and I went over there to meet with the Premier, and he came to meet with me on several occasions. We worked on various projects and we were especially interested in power development.

Q: The Bay of Fundy.

REED: Yes, the Bay of Fundy was one of the projects. The Quoddy project was discussed ever since the days of President Roosevelt. So we did have a lot of contacts with New Brunswick and especially Premier Louis Robichaud.

Q: Did you find that you were doing things, and then the State Department would say, hey, wait a minute fellows, keep us informed. Or something like that?

REED: Well, I guess the projects never got that far along actually so that we didn't have too much contact with the Department of State. But we would have, of course, if that program had evolved.

Q: This was a time when the Quebec Liberia Movement was getting rather strong in Quebec, the separation movement. And there are quite a few people from Quebec who have moved to Maine, haven't they, to live there?

REED: Oh, yes, absolutely.

Q: Did you get any sort of manifestations of this while you were there, or any problems?

REED: We were aware of it. Many of our Maine citizens are Franco Americans and did come down in the development of the textile industry. They settled in industrial cities of Lewiston, Auburn, Biddeford, and Saco. Since many of the folks did come down from Quebec we were well aware of some of the views on separation, but we didn't get involved in that aspect. In Aroostook County, many people traditionally came from Quebec to help with the potato harvest. In fact in those days we didn't have modern equipment and it would have been very difficult to get the crop out without the help of

these good people from Quebec. But as far as the Quebec provincial government, while I was governor, I don't recall that we had anything other than perfunctory relations.

Q: Well, then, moving back to the time that you went to Sri Lanka the first time. It was 1976 when you started?

REED: That's correct.

Q: What sort of preparation did you get before you went out?

REED: I felt the State Department had an excellent program for preparing ambassadors. We had many briefings, some at FSI and in the various departments, and also on the Hill.

Q: For the record, FSI is the Foreign Service Institute.

REED: And I made it a point to visit with a couple of former ambassadors to Sri Lanka. Ambassador Philip Crowe came over from the eastern shore, and I got a great deal of information from him. And another friend of mine knew a Foreign Service officer who had served in Sri Lanka, and I got together with him. I found it extremely helpful to have input from someone who had actually lived in the country.

Q: Sri Lanka sort of occupies a unique situation. I mean there's this India-Pakistan conflict which is a can of worms from American policy, and Sri Lanka is sort of down there and it's just plain different. What was our policy at the time? American interests in Sri Lanka?

REED: Actually, American interests were limited in the country. However, we were very pleased that they were neutral, and they had a practicing democracy. We'd always had very fine relations with them. There were some commercial interests. We bought tea, rubber and graphite from them. Singer Sewing Machine had been there, in fact they celebrated their 100th year while I was there. So we had fine relations with Sri Lanka, and we maintained those relations. They also have a very fine relationship with us. And, of course, the ship visits were very important. We didn't have too many that first year, not nearly as many as in my second tour. But that was a real plus because so many countries will not allow our ships to visit. India wouldn't allow us port visits.

Q: So it was a matter of keeping good relations?

REED: Yes, that is correct. For a number of years relationships had not been too good. As I understand it, we favored the United National Party and they were defeated by the Sri Lanka Freedom Party. However, when they had the insurrection against Mrs. Bandaranaike, who was the Prime Minister at the time, we did send in some helicopters. That was under Ambassador Robert Strausz-Hupé, one of my predecessors, and that did improve relations considerably. So when I arrived on the scene I felt that relations were quite good.

Q: Speaking of Mrs. Bandaranaike, were they very careful to brief you on how to pronounce her name before you went up for confirmation?

REED: Yes.

Q: You might explain what the reference is to.

REED: As I recall there was one candidate for ambassador who had been nominated, and was having his Senate hearing, and he was asked to name the Prime Minister of the country and he couldn't seem to remember the name, or pronounce the name of the Prime Minister, and that was a rather embarrassing incident. That has been a classic example of being prepared.

Q: I think from that time on, if nothing else, everybody has learned to pronounce the names of the Prime Ministers. All of us took that to heart, I think.

REED: I'm sure everybody did, and for a very good reason.

Q: Were there any things, particularly as a former governor...I imagine there were no particular problems of confirmation hearings?

REED: No, there was no problem whatsoever. It was very pleasant and went along nicely. In both of my hearings, I had support from both sides of the aisle.

Q: In the first place, were you able to pick your own Deputy Chief of Mission when you went out there?

REED: No, he was already on the scene, and there really wasn't an opportunity to do that. This is a key position but he was an astute professional and I had no difficulties.

Q: Who was he?

REED: That was Ray Perkins. Ray Perkins was a longtime Foreign Service officer. Mrs. Perkins was also a very fine individual.

Q: How did you find the staffing of the embassy? Did you find it worked? Or sort of a disappointment? You came from a different environment and all of a sudden there you were faced with this operation.

REED: The staff was very effective, and I never really had any difficulty. I was impressed by the caliber of individual, and we worked together as a team.

Q: I think this is all very interesting for somebody coming from a political field, I think often has an easier time getting into the swing of it, than someone coming from the business world where it's different.

REED: I would say you are right. Someone who has been in politics can usually adjust quite easily. I found them loyal and hardworking and competent in their fields.

Q: Sometimes this is considered a detriment when we're pushing trade. What was the situation in Sri Lanka during this '76-'77 period, particularly politically but also economically?

REED: Let's start with the economics. Actually they were at a very low ebb. Mrs. Bandaranaike is a fine individual, I have great respect for her, and we got along very well. Her policy was, at that time, not to let foreign imports come in, feeling thereby that their own people would develop these industries. But there was a shortage of consumer goods on the market, mostly of poor quality and the country wasn't big enough, I guess, to develop the type of industries that would provide the consumer goods that the public really wanted. She tried to get programs going. It was pretty much of a socialist system. There were a lot of government corporations and they just couldn't seem to generate the kind of economy and industry they wanted.

Q: Did you or your staff ever get involved in some discussions on this pointing out, an economy of this size, this won't allow for it, or anything like that?

REED: That was a rather delicate subject, and we really didn't try to pursue it. Sometimes they would question us about it, and we were glad to furnish information, but we had to be very skillful as far as dealing with that particular problem. They believed in their philosophy, and they were trying to make it work, but it just didn't seem to be working. So that was it. The economy was at a low ebb. There were a lot of people unemployed, and things weren't working the way they hoped they would have. For instance, automobiles. Practically the only automobiles around were a few old Austens, and Morris Minors, and they kept them going, they made parts and you didn't see any new modern cars around in '76-'77. So the economy wasn't in good shape.

Q: Was there a feeling that if they opened up things too much there would be a flood of material, particularly from India, and maybe Japan? Was this a concern?

REED: I think they were concerned about that. They wanted to build their own economy up, and they were concerned they'd be carried away by opening up. You could feel the ground-swell before I left at that time in '77. The public was just dissatisfied. They had a free rice program, and still everyone was unhappy. I remember my chauffeur saying after Mrs. Gandhi lost in India. "It's going to be just like that here." And he was right, they wanted a change. Mrs. Bandaranaike was a very decent, honorable person who wanted to make things work. But the philosophy, as I say, just didn't translate into reality.

Q: What about on the political side of this dissatisfaction? Because now we're looking, and I'm sure your second tour was filled with the ethnic problem, but...

REED: Yes, I'd like to comment on it if I may. In my first tour you could travel safely about everywhere. I went to Jaffna which is predominately Tamil a number of times and everything was friendly. You couldn't see any great unrest on the surface.

Q: Was this a sort of deliberate effort to make sure that we kept relations open with all groups?

REED: Yes, we kept relations open, but it wasn't front and center in those days. You knew there was a problem but it didn't seem to be of great proportions. However, when I returned it was a complete turn-around.

Q: Did you have a feeling...and again, we're referring just to this one period, that the Indians were messing in the situation, or what did you feel Indian policy was towards Sri Lanka?

REED: The biggest concern between India and Sri Lanka was the repatriation of some of the Tamils--the so-called estate Tamils who didn't have legal status. They didn't vote and worked on the tea plantations. Sri Lanka was ready to let a lot of them go back, but India wasn't taking them very fast. Also many weren't anxious to go back. That was the biggest bone of contention between India and Sri Lanka at that time. Of course India was looked upon as the big brother.

Q: What was your impression of how people looked at India? Was it a benevolent big brother? Or maybe not so benevolent?

REED: Well, I think they always kept a wary eye on India. It was probably normal to be concerned about a mammoth country like India exerting pressure in the area.

Q: I'm sure the Canadians could probably relate to that.

REED: Probably, and I guess we could understand that.

Q: Again, at embassies was there a pretty good mix say when you'd have receptions between Tamils and Sinhalese?

REED: Oh, yes. There was no problem in those days at all.

Q: You just didn't have any feeling, "Gee, we've got so many of this, we've got to have so many of that."

REED: Not at all, and you hardly knew one from the other. The people themselves hardly knew. I remember them telling me after the riots, "We didn't know, we were all going to

the same schools whether they were Sinhalese, or Tamil, while we were growing up." The seeds of dissent came after they became independent. When Sinhalese became the national language, the Tamils felt they were being pushed to the back burner. But in those days, as far as parties, or social events, there was no difficulty at all.

Q: Well, how did you deal with the government? I mean, while you were there Mrs. Bandaranaike was the Prime Minister. Which party?

REED: She was a Sri Lanka Freedom Party member. Her husband founded the SCFP. He had been assassinated before I got there so I didn't know him. He established the Sri Lanka Freedom Party during his early years. His family was very close with the British. He went to Great Britain to be educated. But it was there where he saw the thing differently. That's when he began to change and become more nationalistic and changed his whole outlook. So when he went back he saw the people wanted to be independent and that they should return to their roots, and cultural heritage, and throw off the yoke of colonialism. And that's why he established his new programs. He was a very dynamic man, and he espoused those views to the people and naturally there was a great deal of pride in their heritage. We understand that, so that's why the big change came. But that is also when the problem started. That is the difference with the Tamils. They had known each other for centuries. There had been enmity between the two because the Sinhalese arrived first. Then the Tamil kings invaded from the north and there were wars going on for years and years. So there was a latent problem. However, during the colonial period they got along quite well.

There was one thing that was always pointed out, and that is the Tamils are very hard workers by nature and the British used a lot of Tamils in their government services. Some of the Sinhalese were unhappy and felt the Tamils were getting preferred treatment in the government service. Even President Jayawardene said, "The Sinhalese people enjoy their Poya days, Peoratteras and festivals and don't feel as committed to hard work as the Tamils." So some of the traditions, and characteristics of the two peoples caused some of the Sinhalese people to be resentful. Some even suggested the British did this deliberately.

Q: The British tended to use different groups for different things--the warrior classes, the governing classes, and this type of thing.

REED: Yes, so it's not unknown.

Q: How did you and the embassy deal with the government, and with Mrs. Bandaranaike?

REED: Well, it all depended on what issues we had. We would meet with her on the major issues. The Voice of America station was one of our major interests. She allowed us to keep it open. Some of the communists felt that it should be shut down. However, after that insurrection, I believe in '71, we sent in helicopters to help her and relations did

warm up considerably. I dealt with her on the new contract with Voice of America which was about to expire so we did get preliminary discussions started on that. Also we were able to get clearances for ship visits.

Q: These are port visits of naval vessels.

REED: Yes, exactly. So, as I say, in those days there were a limited number of interests.

Q: I wonder if you could talk...'76 was really sort of the aftermath period of Vietnam, did you feel that American prestige, or something...I mean we lost the war in Vietnam, that this had an effect as far as the United States was viewed at that time?

REED: I didn't really detect that. I think they respected our position in the world. However, it was difficult for us to adjust to the situation. 1976, you will recall, was our bicentennial, and that was one of the biggest social events we had and it was very well attended. Mrs. Bandaranaike came, so our relations with her were very good. At that time there was a Vietnamese ambassador posted in Sri Lanka. It was interesting because when I returned in 1982 they discontinued their embassy. In those days the relations were much better with the Soviet Union than when I returned. The Cubans were active but avoided Americans.

Q: Did you feel the Soviets were trying to push you out? Was it sort of a live and let live thing between you and the Soviets? Or was there real competition?

REED: I didn't see that much competition. We were always watching them, as they were watching us. We were concerned, they were trying to get a foothold in the Maldives. The Republic of Maldives was the other country I was accredited to, as you know. We were concerned there because they were sending specialists in such as medical people. We were afraid they were going to lease Gan which is a very fine air base which the British left. And I think they probably did have designs on it, and were trying to develop a relationship. So we were very suspect of them in that aspect. It really was more to do with the Maldives than it was with Sri Lanka.

Q: How did it work being the ambassador to Sri Lanka and the Maldives? Maldives are some distance away.

REED: About 450 miles. Things worked fine, I'd go over there probably a half dozen times a year. It was an interesting change of pace to go over there, and relations were very good. They were developing the islands for the tourist industry. And so they too were open handed. They were concerned about the Soviets taking over. So they held them at arm's length pretty much. They did have some medical people come in, and a few doctors, and I guess soccer coaches or something of that nature.

Q: Did we have anybody there?

REED: No. In those days we didn't have anybody. We did have a consular agent later, a native lady. But, we had nobody there at that time.

Q: They were developing tourism at that time.

REED: They were developing tourism. They are very resourceful people, and they sensed there was a market for it. They had many small islands right around Mali, and they would develop a number of these islands for tourists. They were wonderful. The accommodations were pretty modest, but the climate is excellent and they were getting a great clientele from Europe. The Germans liked to go over there in the winter, and the Maldivians were making a good profit on tourism. There was a different president in my first tour. Later they had a palace coup and a new president took over. But anyway, they were developing a national tourist industry. They are a very practical, pragmatic people. I was very impressed with them.

Q: We were at that point beginning to establish the island of Diego Garcia as a major base which was later used during the war with Iraq in the Persian Gulf. Were they making any feelers towards maybe doing something in the Maldives, or mainly just to keep the Soviets out?

REED: It was to keep the Soviets out. We pointed out what a great base it was. I used to tell the Department we had to keep them out. There was considerable criticism in Diego Garcia by the communist element in Sri Lanka.

Q: Ceylon has got one of the great ports anyway, doesn't it?

REED: Oh, yes. A deep water port, and that has been developed a lot in recent years. It has been developed further and that's why our ships liked to come in. But Diego Garcia did come in for a lot of criticism from the leftist element.

Q: How about things like...Sri Lanka has been sort of a charter member of the non-aligned movement. It changed a lot since the early days when it was a real thorn in our side. How did we feel about it in the mid-'70s when you were there, and Sri Lanka's role?

REED: Well, we respected their position in the non-aligned. In fact that first year I was there they had a non- aligned conference, and that, of course, was the highlight of the whole year, and all of them showed up. It was a big event. So we respected it, and tried to counsel them against the more extreme elements in the non-aligned. We didn't have too much difficulty.

Q: How about with the United Nations votes?

REED: I'm glad you mentioned that because that was one of our major interests. They generally took a neutral role, and sometimes were supportive. One of the U.S. real

interests there, was their support in the United Nations. That was one of the things I would discuss with the Prime Minister.

Q: Did you find that she would listen? Or did they have their own thing, and you felt it was a pro forma thing to go with the yearly shopping list of the issues that we're interested in? Every ambassador does this.

REED: Yes, we did that. But on individual votes from time to time I would make a demarche and meet with the Foreign Minister directly. I also had a lot of contact with the Foreign Minister, and with the Foreign Secretary. They were quite helpful. A number of times they would take a position that would be contrary to the non-aligned, and we appreciated that.

Q: During the period you were in Sri Lanka this first time, Henry Kissinger was Secretary of State. I was wondering...I'm not sure if it happened right at your time but during the separation of Bangladesh from Pakistan. Henry Kissinger was the prime architect in sending an aircraft carrier task force up into the Bay of Bengal, and so-called tilting towards Pakistan. This was some time ago, but did you sense any kind of either resentment or aloofness, or anything about that type of policy? The Indian-Pakistan equation.

REED: I didn't really sense that. Mrs. Bandaranaike was very close to Mrs. Gandhi, and they were pretty much pro-India at that time. But, no, I didn't really detect that point of view. In regard to the fleet it must have happened before I got there because I don't recall any of that.

Q: It wasn't a burning issue. Just going back to the political thing, there's an outfit which issues a yearly report called "Freedom House" and I notice in early '76 they listed Sri Lanka as partially free, and then at the end of the year they listed it as free. It's sort of a world survey and this is one. Had things changed much regarding political prisoners, or that type of thing?

REED: There was always some criticism about political prisoners even during that early period. And I didn't think things changed too much while I was there. The Prime Minister had kept a number of them in jail after the insurrection. She let some out as President Jayawardene did later. But I didn't see too much in regard to this. There was a lot of criticism afterwards, but during that period I didn't see much.

Q: Is there anything else we haven't...

REED: As I say, the economy was at a standstill, there were no buildings going up, and there was a great deal of unhappiness and discontent, of course the campaign was well underway before I left.

Q: Was the Near East Bureau concerned about how this discontent might turn into something? Were we saying, "Gee, this thing might turn radically leftist," or something like that?

REED: There was always that feeling, but no, I don't think there was too much concern. Actually we were tracking the election campaign, and it looked quite favorably to the UNP. But there had been an election before when the UNP was defeated and it was felt the U.S. favored them, and that made Mrs. Bandaranaike very distressed. And our relations were quite cool at that point. So I tried to be very even handed in our contacts with all parties. It wasn't too much of a problem along that line.

Q: Let's move to your next phase. Do you have any idea why they called you back to go to Sri Lanka, within the White House?

REED: No, I cannot recall any particular reason. Possibly it could have been because I was only there one year and I was familiar with the country.

Q: So it was really about four or five years.

REED: Yes, about four years.

Q: So you served from '82 to '85.

REED: Yes, I was confirmed in December, 1981 and got over there in January, 1982.

Q: Before you went over...you, of course, were an old hand by this time, but what sort of briefing did you get, and preparation?

REED: The thing that sticks out in my mind was a briefing about the ethnic problem. It was a much more prominent issue than in the first tour. I also went to the United Nations for a briefing. Overall it was excellent preparation for both me and my wife. But there was a big change when I got there. I could describe that.

Q: Yes, if you would.

REED: OK. It was as different as day and night, an absolutely incredible change. The Japanese, of course, had really arrived. There were brand new automobiles running around, new buildings going up, and a lot of construction. South Korea was also there, some of their contractors were there. Japan built a brand new 1000 bed hospital and gave it to the government. Banks were coming in. The Bank of America came in, City Bank came, and also American Express. The free trade zone was going strong, and some textile industries had started. So it was just different as day and night, absolutely booming at that time. They were developing the port, and they had a whole new young team in there and everything was coming up roses. It looked just great. Couldn't believe the big change.

Q: This is the new government?

REED: This is the new government.

Q: Where did they come from, and who were they?

REED: I left in July of '77, just when the election was coming up. Mrs. Bandaranaike was defeated and President Jayawardene of the United National Party was elected.

Q: Could you spell his name?

REED: J-a-y-a-w-a-r-d-e-n-e.

Q: Just for the transcriber.

REED: We all called him J.R., his first name is Junius, but he always went by the name of J.R. I think he was in his mid-70s, because he was in his 80s before I left. He is a fine gentleman, a tall man, had great energy, a very clean living man. He drank coconut juice every morning. The Prime Minister became the number two person, and the President was the one with the power, and that was President Jayawardene. When I got there, of course, they were all entrenched. They had a big majority in the parliament, and they had a group of young lieutenants who were coming on strong. One heading up the port, another heading up the great Mahaweli scheme which many countries came in and gave millions to develop this river, the Mahaweli Valley River to bring many more acres of land under cultivation. The British built a big dam. They wanted us to build a dam, but somehow our AID people felt, "well, let's do something to get the water off to the people." We didn't get much attention, because that wasn't as glamorous, or spectacular, as dedicating a huge dam. But we put a lot of money into it, giving the conduits taking the water down to the farmers. So things were booming and going along nicely.

Q: Do we have a Peace Corps, or anything like that there?

REED: We had no Peace Corps, when I arrived but they were invited in by President Jayawardene. He called me over and said he wanted to get the Peace Corps back to teach English. He felt that one of the real problems was if the young people wanted to go to a foreign country to study they had a great handicap, because they couldn't speak English. So that's what got the Peace Corps back after a 13 year absence. So we did bring them back, and it was also during this period I worked on renegotiating the agreement for the Voice of America radio station.

Q: Was there pressure to get it out?

REED: They were a little reluctant to go ahead. They really were because they were getting pressure from the left. So it went on and on, but maybe I'm jumping ahead of my story.

But, of course, after July of '83 they took a much more conciliatory view on that, and we finally did wrap it up and got the new agreement. They were a little wary about going into it because I'm sure the Soviets were opposing it. They wanted to maintain an even handed relationship with the super powers. Relations were not nearly as cordial with the Soviets the second tour as it was in my first tour. The first tour was rather open and friendly. The second was rather reserved because of the relationship with our country at the time. In the early Reagan years it was pretty much of a stand off.

Q: Yes, this is the evil empire. Did you have a feeling as ambassador that the Ford administration was not as ideological as certainly the early Reagan years? Did you have a feeling that you were representing a different country in a way?

REED: Yes, I did. You didn't see nearly as much social activity. It was very strained and reserved.

Q: Were you under any pressure from the White House, or the State Department, to push things more? I mean, the American point of view, more than you had in your earlier tour.

REED: Yes, on a number of issues, considerably more demarches the second time, especially votes in the United Nations, and things of that nature. There was much more contact. Of course, I was there a lot longer. There were a lot more things, and more interest, we had a lot of cables from the Department asking to see the Foreign Minister particularly to get support on various issues such as the Puerto Rican situation.

Q: The Puerto Rican situation...

REED: Yes, statehood for Puerto Rico became a big issue. The average American wouldn't know what I was talking about. But it was a pretty potent issue.

Q: What were the political developments during the time you were there in the country?

REED: Well, one of the major ones was, their sensitivity in regard to any criticism of the government. I should bring this in because this erupted fairly early in my tour. We had a very fine, young, political officer who had some experience--the election was just coming up.

Q: This is Kenneth Monroe Scott.

REED: Yes.

Q: I saw some reference to it.

REED: Kenneth Scott is a fine young man. The election was coming up, and he would be talking with people, and trying to get some insight into the election. I recall one particular incident which took place at the American Center at a reception. Ken was talking to a

close friend of the President and he said, "What about corruption?" Apparently this man told the President about it, and it became a big issue.

Q: It was normal political work...

REED: Yes, he was just trying to find out about these issues and it was interpreted as trying to exert influence. The Foreign Minister called me twice on the matter, and then it went on for months. Finally the President even mentioned it to me. They were determined, and we fought as hard as we could. Finally they forced the young fellow to leave and I think it was very unfortunate.

Q: I think actually wasn't there a quid pro quo? I think Sri Lanka had to...

REED: I think that's what happened, as I recall.

Q: But you felt this was something blown up?

REED: It was blown up way out of proportion.

Q: Just for domestic reasons?

REED: Well, it got a lot of coverage, that may have been part of it. I don't know, but it could have been because of thin-skinned people. I don't know how this was interpreted. Scott was a man who wanted to do his job, and felt he was just trying to be objective, and he was interpreted as interfering.

Q: This must have had an inhibiting effect on all of you in doing your job.

REED: Well, for a long time it really got to be a major issue, and I didn't think it would get to those proportions, but it did. And as I say, we were not happy about it whatsoever, we didn't feel it was justified, and we said that right to the end. But finally, in talking with the Department, we moved forward on a quid pro quo.

Q: Did you find in general it was much more difficult to deal with various parties? I mean, was there more sensitivities so the embassy felt inhibited? Were political passions getting higher, or something like that?

REED: They were getting higher, but we kept on doing our job. I didn't feel it inhibited us really in a sense, and with the election coming up, we were scrupulously careful to be neutral, and just get the facts, and keep in touch with the other elements.

Q: The election was when?

REED: Well, let's see--that election was shortly after I got there, it must have been '82. The President was reelected by quite a margin. However, the next big thing that came up

was, suspending the parliamentary elections. And that caused a lot of problems. The President defended his position. It bothered many people and looked like a danger to the system. Suspending the parliamentary elections meant binding them in for another five years. The President took a lot of criticism on this position. I remember him telling me, "Even Abraham Lincoln did it." He felt very defensive. There was a great deal of unhappiness among some of the embassies.

Q: This was nothing particularly overt that caused this?

REED: No, I wouldn't say there was. But that caused a lot of unhappiness, why he would just suspend these elections, and bind these people in.

Q: How about the Tamil-Sinhalese?

REED: Yes, let me get into that. I was about ready to mention that. I made a visit in May of '82 to the north. Here again there was a dramatic change in the Tamil areas. There was an obvious change in the attitude of the Tamils. They were much more militant. I remember here again, as if it were yesterday, that we had a big event at a hotel and I met a lot of the leaders, and some of the younger leaders wanted to see me after the meeting. So I naturally stayed and talked with them, and you could see they were deadly serious about the concern, and for us to try to keep an even handed position as far as the issues that they were pushing for. They felt we should not try to interfere with it. They felt the Sinhalese were trying to hold them down. They said there was a large element in their population that was prepared to make radical changes. So you could see there was a tinder box in the north. As a matter of fact that was in May of '82, I never did get back up to Jaffna again.

Q: Was this too dangerous?

REED: Yes, it was considered too dangerous. In my first tour I was up there often. So I knew right then that this was a big issue, it was altogether different, it was real serious this time. It would never be referred to in a humorous way. The Tamil leadership there was more of a moderate type, they were in the parliament, and I met with all their leaders and they mentioned some of these things. They weren't nearly as militant as the younger people, but you could see they were very serious about it. And when the thing erupted they all resigned. I always felt that was a mistake. They were forced to take a loyalty oath, and this led to another problem. The President had started a program of improvement projects. I talked with an older Tamil who was heading up the program. I asked him, "How do you think this is going to work?" "Well," he said, "its got to work out." I remember, he was an older leader, a lawyer. He said, "If this doesn't work out, there's going to be a real problem. This thing is going to degenerate badly. We're going to watch it to see if they give us the money, and develop it, and improve the economy up here. We're going to watch it, and if it doesn't work out there's going to be an extreme change." In July things got worse, and there were the riots. You could see the change, in the eastern province also, but of course Jaffna is practically 100% Tamil. They are fine people up

there. I come from a farming area and noted that they raise most of the potatoes in Jaffna. It was tragic to see what had developed in this beautiful country.

Q: You could see these things; obviously we were reporting...

REED: I reported all these things back to the Department.

Q: Was there anything we could do?

REED: There was very little we could do. At that point I don't know what we could have done to avert the problem. I don't know as there was too much we could have done. We didn't intervene at all, which I don't think we should have at that point.

Q: How about the Indian government? Did you have a feeling that they were beginning to fish in the troubled waters, or were they unhappy about it?

REED: Well, they took an almost ambivalent position because at that time obviously some Tamils were training. It was generally known India was being used as a training base.

Q: What happened during the riots as far as the American embassy and your work? What sparked these riots?

REED: Well, I arrived at post in January of '82, and I was there a year and a half and I was coming back to the States for R&R. I just arrived in Washington when the riots erupted. I received a call from my PAO. I said, "I am glad to hear from you." "Well," he said, "you won't be when I tell you what's going on." When he told me about the riots, I made plans to immediately go back. Mrs. Reed stayed here in Washington, and I went back at once. You could see the havoc that had been wrought. It's a long way from the airport into Colombo and you could see all the devastation, homes had been burned, and people had been killed. The American embassy was all right. There wasn't any particular problem at the embassy.

Q: There weren't sort of leftists stirring up the mob?

REED: No, not against ex-patriots, and I never did see any of that during the rest of the time. They were careful not to, because that would have hurt their cause.

Q: Who was rioting against whom?

REED: It appeared to be the extreme elements in the Sinhala community were destroying a lot of the Tamil homes, and killing people right on the street. Hundreds and hundreds of burned vehicles were all over the place, stores and factories were destroyed. It was generally blamed on some of the extreme elements in the Sinhalese community. The devastation was enormous...they just ravished Colombo, and created a permanent enmity

for the foreseeable future between the Sinhalese and the Tamil communities. The Tamils are good business people and there were a lot of Tamils in the business community, so it put them in a difficult position. The damage was enormous. In those days we were still in the old embassy. That was unusual, I might mention as an aside, when I was there in '76 they were developing plans for the new embassy. Well, I looked them over, and they looked fine. I never dreamed I would come back, but I actually came back and dedicated the building in the fall of '84. The construction was underway when I arrived in 1982. Some of the embassy people did have trouble getting to their homes, but no one was injured.

Q: What did this mean to your mission?

REED: I should mention we had a lot of Tamils working in the embassy and, of course, they were severely frightened. Actually some were so threatened that some of the senior people were allowed to come to the States. Quite a few came from our embassy, and of course, we were besieged by Tamils wanting to get out, and the consular office was swamped. This was the big impact upon us. Of course, we also tightened up security. When we moved into the new embassy security was tightened up considerably, and there was always a threat then about where you could go, what you could do, etc.

One of the biggest incidents we had while I was there was the kidnaping of an American couple, in the Jaffna area working on one of the water projects. Fortunately we were able to secure their safe release.

Q: How did that play out?

REED: Well, it appeared that extreme Tamil elements had taken them into custody. In fact, I couldn't attend a chiefs of mission meeting in India that the Vice President attended. I didn't feel I should leave the country while this was going on. The pressure became very heavy, and in fact, Vice President Bush spoke to Mrs. Gandhi about it, and I think she exerted some influence. Finally they were released to a priest of the Catholic Church, in Jaffna. I think they were kidnapped for a week or ten days. I think the terrorist felt they made a mistake because it hurt their cause. It was a very tense time.

Q: What affect did this have on AID, Peace Corps, and this type of thing?

REED: Well, it inhibited doing anything in Jaffna. We finally had to shut that project down. It even slowed down a number of projects in the Mahaweli Valley because the terrorists would make raids and some people were killed. So it did impinge considerably and cause slowdowns on a number of other AID projects. We had just about reached our peak in doing things, you know, in the dollars expended. So from then on it was all downhill, I mean, things were phasing down. I don't think to this day that the water project was ever completed.

Q: Were the sort of central government urging you to go up to Jaffna?

REED: No, no.

Q: They were avoiding it too?

REED: Yes, they became embattled up there from time to time. They had an old Dutch fort and that was surrounded a number of times. They had to use helicopters to get supplies in to them. We did get a few Americans up under very guarded conditions, but they certainly weren't suggesting Americans go up. There were also problems in Vaunuia, we had to send some Americans up. There was a priest killed, and some suspected their soldiers did it. No conclusive evidence was found.

Q: Were there any attempts on our part, or on the insurgents part, to make contact with each other just to keep the dialogue open?

REED: You mean insurgents with the U.S. Government?

Q: Yes.

REED: No, no overtures at all. I don't recall any. Of course, the agency kept us well informed of these various elements. Of course, they had a number of competing groups during that time. The LTTE, the Tamil Tiger's group, and a number of others. Since I've left, the other leader has been killed and militants were pretty much the LTTE. They are still in the jungles and carrying on the civil war. There is a feeling they have got to learn to live with violence.

Q: The Indians hadn't sent troops in while you were there.

REED: No, that came much later. They sent a new Ambassador over there to help resolve the thing, but the troops finally came in.

Q: Before this, did you feel there was any dispute within the Department of State, or White House instructions of how to treat this? Were they trying to blow this into a communist conspiracy by any chance? Or were we able to keep it as an ethnic thing, rather than a geopolitical thing?

REED: I think we did. I think their government tried to portray it that communists were providing support for the militants. They wanted us to bring in a battleship as a show of support. They were naturally very concerned. The President was anxious to get some military support, but we advised him we could not do that. Caspar Weinberger was coming in for a refueling stop, and the President wanted to see him.

Q: He was Secretary of Defense.

REED: He was Secretary of Defense at the time, and we arranged for him to meet with the President. They used every possibility to get us to influence the situation, and to help them out.

Q: We were being rather careful.

REED: Yes. We were very careful, very even handed. They wanted to buy more arms, and munitions from us, so we just had to stay within our guidelines and regulations.

Q: Did you have the feeling that the Soviets, or even the French or somebody, were trying to get some more influence on arms deals, or something like this?

REED: Well, there was talk that the Yugoslavians were selling them arms. The Soviets, I think, felt they wanted to try to avoid looking like they were supporting the insurgents. They had to walk a fine line also.

Q: So about the Vietnamese, were they playing any role?

REED: They no longer had an embassy in Colombo and I'm not aware they were involved.

Q: So Sri Lanka was being neutral but avoiding the more militant types, the Vietnamese, the North Koreans?

REED: Yes. They were trying to have a neutral posture, and were open handed with everybody.

Q: Diego Garcia was really getting built up at this time.

REED: Yes, it was.

Q: ...under Carter, but it was continuing under Reagan. Did this cause unease?

REED: You'd hear talk about it from time to time, but it didn't erupt into a major problem. They knew we had to have a base over there, we had it and nothing they were going to say was going to change that. You'd see signs, graffiti, "Americans get out," and then references to Panama and Granada, the usual leftist propaganda on the walls.

Q: How about with the Maldives? Did anything happen during that period there?

REED: Well actually, it appeared they were beginning to phase down. I made a number of trips there, and talked with the President. They did not want to get in anyone's pocket and they assured us they were not going to let the Soviets get a foothold. There were a few Soviets living there and the government kept a close eye on them.

Q: How did you find your staff?

REED: Generally speaking they were excellent. I did have the opportunity to select my own DCM. I do think it's useful for an ambassador, especially a political type, or any ambassador for that matter, to have an input into the DCM selection process.

Q: I thought this was sort of standard.

REED: No, often times they are already on the scene.

Q: How about public affairs? Was there much problem of getting our word into the papers?

REED: No. All my PAOs were excellent people. I had three during my tours, they kept good relations with the people in the press. We got our stories across quite well.

Q: Did you have any problem on the narcotics thing? Because I recall later on at some point Sri Lanka became involved with Sri Lankans outside of Sri Lanka...became involved in the narcotics business.

REED: Yes, there was some of that going on. As a matter of fact we urged them to tighten up their drug laws. We had experts come over from the States to help them on this. I remember attending a big drug session. They did tighten up their laws while I was there.

Q: Was there any feeling that Sri Lanka was sort of a way station for narcotics stuff coming out of Thailand, or Burma?

REED: Well, there were allusions of that, but I don't think anyone felt it was a major transit point. I don't think it was that bad. There was some, of course, with tourists coming in and they arrested some on drug violations.

Q: During the Carter years, human rights all of a sudden became a major thing. Did you find this was a problem for you as the ambassador?

REED: Yes, it was an emerging problem, and there were many more contacts from the Department on human rights. They became very sensitive on it, especially on the human rights report.

Q: How did you handle this? I mean, this is always a very tricky thing. Most ambassadors would almost wish the thing would go away because it doesn't help their work particularly.

REED: No, it doesn't. They had a veteran Foreign Secretary and I would sit down and we'd talk about it. We generally got along all right. We did spend considerably more time on it during my second tour.

Q: Were there any problems as you saw it, on the human rights side?

REED: Yes, after the riots we felt there were some, and we kept pointing them out to the government. We did what we could to urge them to be careful. They felt their backs were to the wall, and they became very defensive on these matters.

Q: Speaking of the fighting, obviously when you've got an insurrection like this the military takes a greater role. How were our relations through our attaché and yourself with the Sri Lanka military? And how did we view this? Was this a professional military a la the Indian military, or was this getting more political a la the Pakistani military?

REED: Yes, that's a good question. We generally felt they were pretty much a parade ground army. They were not a very effective fighting force at that time. Hopefully they have improved considerably since then. But we felt they had a definite problem as far as that was concerned.

Q: How about China? Did China play any role in the area?

REED: I'll refer back to 1976. China had given to the country a great conference hall, the Bandaranaike Memorial Conference Hall. Sri Lanka felt very close to China, and the feeling was mutual. The two countries had a rice and rubber pact. A lot of rice came from China, and Sri Lanka gave them rubber in return. So there was a very close relationship. By the time I got back the second time, we had relations with China.

Q: So we weren't looking on the Chinese as meddling particularly?

REED: No, not particularly.

Q: The Chinese did not have a community as they did in Indonesia and other places?

REED: No, it was very small.

Q: Not a merchant community?

REED: Yes, a small merchant community. It wasn't a major factor at all.

Q: How did you find the Department? Did you find much attention to Sri Lanka? Or did you feel that as long as you didn't get assassinated, or your embassy surrounded or something, that was what they wanted?

REED: Yes, I think as long as everything was going all right we weren't on the front burner. We had good response from the Department when we needed it. Overall we had excellent relations with the Department.

Q: As every administration...particularly one that has sort of an ideological center--I mean we went through it with Carter, and we went through it with the Reagan administration, they start from one position and then some events come along and eventually they usually end up at about the same place. Did you have the feeling that the Reagan policy as regards that area was changing at all? Or were they getting a little more relaxed about the "Soviet menace" or something like that there?

REED: Oh, I think they were always pretty wary. During the time I was there it really didn't change too much, it was pretty much hands off.

Q: It really came a little later.

REED: It came later. In fact I thought they were even more hands off than in my first tour. They only wanted junior officers to attend events. I think that was a mistake.

Q: Oh, that's a terrible mistake.

REED: Yes. I believe in keeping the lines of communication open.

Q: This sounds like a very petty type stuff. We're talking about, for the record, that when several of the Soviet leaders--Andropov and Chernenko and Brezhnev, when they died within about a year of each other...

REED: Yes, I would go immediately to sign the condolence book, otherwise I probably would be instructed not to go.

Q: ...this is going over to sign the condolence book, which everyone does. It's common politeness.

REED: Of course, diplomatic courtesy.

Q: And there's no point in the gratuitous, the snubbing.

REED: That's right, and I felt the same way about their functions. I couldn't see sending a junior officer. The Soviet ambassador came to a couple of my things even then which I thought was good. On the other hand, I couldn't go to his events. It was very petty.

Q: These things are petty, and often it's done at a relatively low level within our own government.

REED: Probably so. I think it's shortsightedness. I couldn't see anything to be gained whatsoever, and I think it was a mistake. I felt embarrassed frankly that I couldn't go to some functions they had. I just thought it was a mistake.

Q: Was there anything else that we haven't covered?

REED: I thought of something but it slipped my mind again, I'm trying to remember what it was.

Q: We were talking about the Peace Corps was still going.

REED: Yes, but of course once the riots started, we were very concerned about the safety of the Peace Corps volunteers. In fact we brought some of them back to Colombo for a time, and I think that has been an ongoing problem because it's pretty dangerous out in the countryside. But the program itself was going strong.

Oh, I know what I was going to mention. That is, it was very interesting that they were looking for help wherever they could get it, and they wanted to make some contact with the Israelis. It got in the press and the leftists were really complaining. The government did want to get some contact with the Israelis. So we had to interface with them, and finally they did get an Interest Section. The President wanted it, he felt there was some benefit. It was an interesting development.

Q: What were they after from the Israelis?

REED: Well, I think they felt there was some intelligence they could get as far as developing their skills in fighting the insurgents. That was it. And yet they got assailed in the press, and the leftists were all over them. But they moved forward, and the Department wanted us to cooperate, so we did. But that was an interesting aspect, I thought.

Q: Was there any pressure on us to send out our counter- insurgency specialists?

REED: Well, they wanted any help they could get, but naturally we had to be very careful.

Q: Were you under strict instructions not to?

REED: Oh, absolutely. Our government felt it wasn't appropriate. It got to the point that they wanted anything you could give them. I felt sympathetic for them, but we could not get involved. It was sad to see the problems emerge in the Sinhala and the Tamil communities. They are both fine people.

Q: You left in what?

REED: I left in September of 1985.

Q: And at that time where did you see Sri Lanka going?

REED: Well, it looked like they were going through a long period of instability as far as maintaining law and order was concerned. You almost wondered if they could ever really get it back to where it was. And another thing I'll always remember, after I came back from home leave in 1983 I saw the President and said, "Mr. President, you were moving to try to correct the situation." I'll always remember, he said, "But I didn't move fast enough," these are his words. I think they might have been able to stem the tide if they'd done more to try to assimilate the Tamils into the mainstream. Maybe I'm wrong, but I always remember him saying that. He didn't do enough, and move fast and forceful enough to show they wanted the Tamils to be equal citizens. So there was a turning point in history. If they had been able to have done that, things may have worked out.

Q: This is all over pledge allegiance to...

REED: Yes, the government demanded a pledge allegiance to the country and here were these Tamil parliamentarians put in an impossible situation. Thirteen of them resigned so the Tamils had no representation in the government. And these people were pretty reasonable, and they might have been able to work something. So there was no one in there to represent the Tamil viewpoint. There were some fine Tamil lawyers and students who tried to help and with whom I always kept in touch. However, there just wasn't enough give and take and it was too late. Maybe I'm wrong, but I always felt if they'd moved early enough they might have stemmed the tide and changed the course of history. But it was tragic and it's still going on.

Q: Well, I want to thank you very much. We really appreciate this.

REED: I hope it has been helpful.

Q: Oh, it has.

End of interview