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

AMBASSADOR PAUL A. RUSSO

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INTERVIEW

Q: Mr. Ambassador, I wonder if you could give me a bit about your background. Where were you born and what sort of education and experience did you have?

RUSSO: My background has been mainly political. I was fortunate, I believe, that I found out very early in life what my interests were and what I wanted to pursue as my career. I was and still am fascinated by the American political process, especially the way our Government works, and that has always been a part of my adult working life.

I was born in Cleveland, Ohio, and went to Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio. I also did some course work at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland at the Law/Medical Center and at Georgetown University here in Washington.

From college, after a brief stint in law enforcement, I went directly into the political system. I worked for a mayoral candidate in Cleveland, where I was fortunate enough to be involved in an extremely professional campaign. It was an uphill fight and we narrowly lost, but the campaign attracted a great deal of attention in the State - the race was between Ralph Perk and Mayor Carl Stokes. After that, I went to work for Congressman Bob Taft, who was running in the Republican Primary for the United States Senate, against an incumbent Republican Governor. Once again, I was extremely fortunate because not many people would work against a strong incumbent Governor in a primary, and I was able to land a senior campaign position at an early age. Bob Taft won the Primary and then went on to beat Howard Metzenbaum in the General Election.

Robert Taft, Jr., like his father before him, became a U.S. Senator, and I came to Washington with him. Since my interests were in Presidential politics, rather than in the Senate office, I went to work for Senator Bob Dole, who had just been named Chairman of the Republican National Committee by President Nixon.

I had met Senator Dole while he was campaigning for Bob Taft in Ohio. With some help from Taft, I was able to secure a position as an Assistant to Dole. For the next two years, I held various positions at the Republican National Committee, and worked with the Republican party structures in every state.

During that period, I met then-Governor Reagan and his staff. We worked together at governors conferences and at events in California in preparation for the 1972 Presidential race. After the fall elections, I was asked to join Governor Reagan's staff for the last two years of his term in California.

I continued to work with the Reagan team into the 1976 Republican Primary campaign for the Presidency, against Gerald Ford. We fought a hard, delegate by delegate campaign, and while we came close, in the end President Ford became the Republican nominee. President Ford then picked Bob Dole to be his Vice Presidential running mate. Since I had a close, personal relationship with Senator Dole, I went back to work for him during the general election campaign against Jimmy Carter and Walter Mondale. Again, we lost.

After the election, I set up a political action committee for Senator Dole. Then, in 1979, when Reagan became a presidential candidate again, I went back to work for him, heading up the congressional relations operation for the national campaign. This time we won. It had been a long, hard journey but I was finally there - in the White House - as Special Assistant to the President for Political Affairs. I later went over to the Department of Labor as Deputy Under Secretary. I eventually left the Administration to open my own consulting firm in Washington, D.C. and very much enjoyed the private sector. In 1986, I went back into the Reagan Administration as the U.S. Ambassador to Barbados and the Eastern Caribbean.

Q: Now I'd like to go back. Obviously our focus is on the foreign affairs activity. When you were in college, in the Midwest, were you getting much in foreign affairs, or was your concentration more on local politics and that sort of thing?

RUSSO: At that point in my life, my interests were in mastering the U.S. political system from the ground up. I was especially interested in Presidential politics. We were going through an extremely troubled period in our country's history during the late 60's and early 70's. In 1968, President Johnson's decision not to seek re-election and the Nixon /Humphrey presidential race were largely about the Vietnam conflict, and the political struggle taking place in the U.S. was virtually tearing our country apart.

Q: When you came to, particularly at that time, Governor Reagan's office, did you get any sort of emanations of foreign affairs problems that would come up? I mean, the governor of California is not an unknown player in the international world.

RUSSO: Exactly. In fact, I believe that would have been my first real contact with foreign policy issues and foreign dignitaries. And, as you say, the Governor of California had a major role to play, especially at that time with the emergence of the Pacific Rim countries and the impact they would eventually have on the rest of the world. It certainly opened my eyes to a much larger world, especially in terms of economic relationships. Prior to that, my life had revolved around the New York/ Washington, D.C. establishment thinking, with the New York Times and the Washington Post being the papers that set the agenda. California is certainly not the center of that world. But California nevertheless sees itself much more as a dominant force in this country, and also in the world as a whole. There is a feeling of creative thinking and trend setting. Living in California was certainly an enlightening experience, and being part of the Governor's office was an extremely good vantage point from which to view the state and the rest of the country. California, at that time, was growing at an enormous rate and because of its impact on the country and the ideas that were emanating from there, I don't believe there was much respect for the New York/Washington corridor.

With respect to my job responsibilities; there were quite a few foreign ceremonial kinds of things that I attended with the Governor, as well as meetings with numerous dignitaries who visited Governor Reagan's office. I was able to put actual personalities with the titles and the countries. Most visitors were impressed with Ronald Reagan and California, just the pure magnitude of that state; the land mass, the economy...As I recall, we used to say, from an economic standpoint, California was the seventh largest economy in the world at the time.

Q: I recall, when President Reagan was elected, I was in Italy, and I was explaining that he was the governor of a state that had, I think, an economy that was about equivalent to Italy's.

RUSSO: That would be about right. For me, the experience out there put into perspective just where California was in the scheme of things and it also helped me to understand much more fully the tremendous resources and power the United States has in relation to other countries of the world.

Q: What were your responsibilities while you were with Governor Reagan in California?

RUSSO: I traveled with the Governor in California and was responsible for making sure that the things the schedule said were going to happen, actually did. I also traveled outside of California with him or went in advance of his trip to organize and set up the events. I was responsible for any follow up that resulted from meetings or conversations with the Governor, and I also coordinated with our security people. A great deal of the

travel outside of California had to do with the Governors Conferences and speaking events on behalf of the state parties.

Q: This is the Republican Party type travel.

RUSSO: Correct. National Governors Conferences, Republican Governors Conferences, Republican party events, major conventions. At that time, 1973 - 74, there was a possibility of Governor Reagan running for president when his term expired. It wasn't a specific, stated goal but it was a possibility that merited exploration. He had an excellent record in California, and it was felt "let's see how what he's saying will be received in different parts of the country; what is the reaction to him personally, to his message, to his style, at lets say a convention in Pennsylvania or at a state party event in a southern state," and so forth. What would the reaction be of that Eastern Establishment press we talked about earlier, to his conservative message.

I also did a lot of international travel with Governor Reagan. In the last two or three years of his term of office, he was starting to move around the world a little bit more. I accompanied him on several international trade missions representing the United States. Let's see; Nixon was the President at that point, and I remember one trade mission to Jakarta, Indonesia and Australia, with some other private stops along the way; fund-raising dinners for the Red Cross and so forth. So, primarily, my duties revolved around the Governor's travel and schedule.

Q: On these trips of the Governor, this is sort of an interesting thing. You know, a governor is surrounded by his staff and usually is concerned with things within the state. And all of a sudden here you are in Indonesia. Whereas when a president travels to Indonesia, he's got usually the ambassador to Indonesia, you know, he's got people briefing him all the time. How do you go about getting a governor sort of up to snuff? I'm talking about any governor. But I mean, in your case, how did you get him up to snuff so when you arrive in Indonesia he is able to hit the ground running and understands the place?

RUSSO: That's an interesting question for me because looking back to the time in 1986 when I was evaluating my own qualifications to become an Ambassador, one of the questions I asked myself was, could I do the job? What did I believe the job of Ambassador was, and indeed could I perform that task? I was evaluating myself to be an Ambassador for President Reagan, and I think part of my thinking process went back to some of those specific situations that I had encountered, and what I did at the time for then-Governor Reagan.

Your question was: What were some of those specifics? First of all, it would be just general briefing information: Where are you going? What are you going to be doing? Who are you going to be talking with? What are the basic issues, and what do you hope to accomplish from the meeting or event? And then what are the conflicts? What are the trouble spots? And who is lined up on which side? And so forth.

This information would be gathered from many sources. The U.S. embassy structure would be one. I always felt...well, maybe my superiors felt, that I was responsible for what went right, but maybe more importantly for what went wrong. So I never wanted to bet on just one source of information. So I would work with, say, for instance, the U.S. Embassy, but then other sources as well; for example, the local government people and the event people. And I would usually try to find another kind of source, other people to talk to, anybody that I felt might have an intelligent opinion or some specific knowledge that would add to the preparation, to prevent walking into a situation blindly, without knowing what the lay of the land was. And then putting that information into some kind of useful and organized material. The process would be to sort out what the real facts and issues were, as opposed to just opinion and hearsay, and gathering great quantities of briefing material. I think that too much information can be a real problem when you're traveling to a new country. And I believe it's important to sort it out so you're giving the Governor, or the President, or whomever, the information that is necessary, but not so much information that the major points are lost in the sheer volume of material.

Q: Everybody is briefed in a different manner; it depends on the personality. How did you brief Governor Reagan before, say, he went to Indonesia, or while you were on the plane going to Indonesia?

RUSSO: Basically, for any international trip, there would be a great deal of written basic background information that would be read by the Governor at his own pace. But I felt, with Governor Reagan as with other people I had worked for, they pace themselves, building a base of knowledge for future events, but focusing on what they are doing at the moment. The now is important. Travel agendas are usually a series of important events--this isn't the event of the month or the week or the year--so therefore they're not thinking about it in depth two or three months ahead of time. I think that the period just before an event, in a verbal briefing, is the briefing that really counts. And I say that for several reasons. One, because there is so much information available, and there are so many people available to give their opinions and information. I found myself, later on; relying on that same system with those that were working for me, that you become very dependent on specific people because of their credibility. Their credibility in gathering the right information, but also in giving information that is going to promote no agenda other than your agenda, and it's not tainted, or things aren't left out, for whatever reason.

Q: This, of course, is always one of the great problems within the United States government. It's particularly compounded both in the White House and in Congress because you have staffers who have their own agenda. And it turns into a major problem. How about with Senator Dole now? You were on Governor Reagan's staff, and then he...

RUSSO: When Governor Reagan left office in 1974, I held a series of positions; at the Republican National Committee, the Reagan Presidential Primary campaign, and then back to Senator Dole's staff, when he was picked in August of 1976 to be President Ford's running mate against Jimmy Carter.

Q: Did you get any taste of how foreign policy got meshed into a political campaign? The vice presidential candidate usually is the tough guy, with the president taking the broader view and all this. Can you think of any incidents or issues of foreign policy that you got involved in with Senator Dole in this campaign?

RUSSO: Well, in that particular campaign, his role, as perceived by the Ford White House, was to be the hard campaigner - especially on the domestic issues. Ford was positioned to be seen in Washington more, and to be "Presidential." Dole was looked upon as someone who should be able to carry the farm states, veterans, women, and one or two other groups where President Ford was having trouble. The Presidential campaign is where the strategy evolves from, and Dole really didn't have very much say about how that was being run. The plan was created by the Ford presidential campaign, and Dole was given specific assignments. His assignments were really very narrow at that point.

In one of the Presidential debates in California President Ford created a tremendous flap about the Polish not being dominated...

Q: Yes, about domination. I remember that was just really a slip of the tongue, something about, well, Poland isn't under the domination of the Soviet Union.

RUSSO: Correct.

Q: And this was, of course, at a time when it very definitely was.

RUSSO: Correct. As I recall, President Ford meant that the Polish people were not dominated but that the Government indeed was. And so that literally took on a life of its own. The comment was made in a debate and Ford then didn't clarify it afterwards and it went into several days. I seem to recall it took almost a week of valuable campaign time before the press moved on. And, of course, then the backlash in all of the states that were so rich with electoral votes, where you had Polish and Eastern European populations.

So we were doing a great deal of defending of President Ford during all of that; explaining what he really meant. President Ford was looked upon to make the foreign policy positions clear; however one issue Senator Dole did get into was the whole question of wheat embargoes. And, from a veteran's standpoint, a strong national defense was another overall theme. But the actual foreign policy I don't believe was part of the overall campaign, even from the Ford side of it. Domestic policy and the economy dominated.

Q: Yes, if I recall, it really wasn't.

RUSSO: The situation in 1976, the way Ford evolved to the Presidency, and the short duration of his time in office; he wasn't looked upon or expected to put together and carry out a foreign policy. Had he been elected, his foreign policy would have been developed.

But while he was President, I think our country at that point in history was where we wanted time to recover from the Nixon resignation. We wanted someone easy and honest to just hold the country together, and I think he did that very well. The country was looking for stability; a soft period, and I think it was a while again before people wanted to examine issues and foreign policy.

Q: Well, after the election, what happens? I mean, everybody just says goodbye and off you go?

RUSSO: Well, that's not too far off. When you lose, there isn't much to do. A little rest is in order, but after that, it's time to look around and see what you can put back together. And after a while, I think all of the players then start to think, "well, what's next?" The questions then were who would take over the Party, and who would the next candidates be? At that time I was part of the Reagan group as well as the Dole group, and the Reagan group was feeling, and Reagan himself was saying, "Well, I tried and I wasn't able to beat Ford. I'm probably too old now." I'm not sure he specifically articulated it that way, but I think that then everybody started to say, okay, we have a certain group, and it's centered around a certain philosophy. And everybody wanted to continue in one way or another. And that's when Dole became a possibility. If Reagan didn't run again, wouldn't Dole be one of the very likely people to be the Republican nominee the next time around, which would have been in 1980. At that point, Reagan had not yet made a decision whether or not to run again. I had a discussion with him at that time, and he basically said he thought he probably could get the nomination in 1980 but his question was, could he win the election? He was concerned about all the people who would have to go through the campaign again; all the lives he would again disrupt. I believe he thought we all needed to just wait and see.

Q: So what were you were doing in this period?

RUSSO: In that period, I set up the Dole political action committee in Washington, D.C., which in essence would have been the start of a presidential campaign for Senator Dole. In fact, he did end up running again; he ran in 1980 for a short period. I think Dole felt that if something happened to Reagan, then he would be the recipient of his support. But with Reagan in that race, there was certainly no room for Dole's philosophy. I went back to work for Reagan at that point.

Q: How about during the campaign of 1980, did you get involved in any sort of foreign policy issues?

RUSSO: Not very much, except, of course, the hostage situation.

Q: You're speaking of the hostage situation in Tehran, where our embassy was taken over by Iranian fundamentalists.

RUSSO: Correct. Whether or not the hostages would be released was always a major "unknown" during that campaign. And I don't believe either side--President Carter or candidate Reagan--really totally understood what impact a hostage release would have on the voters. Our campaign believed that if President Carter was able to negotiate or otherwise affect the release of the hostages; to solve that situation in a way that would be acceptable to the American people, then he would probably win re-election. He would have the gratitude and so forth of the American people; be viewed as a competent leader, and be reelected. Both sides were worried about the impact on the race all the way through. No matter what our strategies were, no matter what the issues were, that seemed to be something that we always knew could roll in and dwarf everything else from an emotional standpoint, as it should have. We believed we had the domestic issues almost totally on our side -- the economy was in horrible shape in 1979. Inflation was way up, interests rates were up, there was high unemployment -- but we felt that the international side would totally dominate if Carter was able to orchestrate the release of the hostages.

Q: There's always the term that comes up every election year: "Always worried about the October surprise."

RUSSO: Right, exactly.

Q: Could you explain what the term means?

RUSSO: Well, basically an October Surprise meant that both sides of the campaign were entering the final stretch, but from the Reagan standpoint, we felt that, okay, we have a campaign working, we have our plan, we're executing our plan, we're getting into October, and then all of a sudden there's going to be some surprise that the opposition, Carter, will spring.

Q: It's usually in international affairs or something like this, which tends to rally the country towards the sitting president.

RUSSO: Absolutely. And in the Carter/Reagan race, I think it was even more focused because of the news media. As you recall, it was an extremely emotional issue, and the media reflected that, especially television. They were covering the campaigns and counting the days that the hostages were being held. So, no matter what else the national news was, there was focus on that hostage situation. Also, there were leaks of the Carter Administration's efforts to gain the release, and that would fuel more coverage and more speculation of the impact on the race. We always felt that an October surprise of the hostages being released would have created a tremendous surge of support for President Carter. And don't forget, the race was virtually even until the last week or so of the campaign.

Q: Well, now, Reagan's elected, you are on his committee, what did you do then?

RUSSO: At that point, I went into the White House, as Special Assistant to the President for Political Affairs.

Q: Which means what?

RUSSO: Well, we had an office in the White House that worked with the political side of the Presidency, liaison with the party--the Republican National Committee as well as the state party apparatus--and interfaced with many of the more traditional aspects of a White House--the legislative side, the personnel side, and to some degree, international. I can remember getting involved, from a legislative side, with the AWACS sale.

Q: This is the AWACS sale to Saudi Arabia, which was violently opposed by supporters of Israel, mainly American Jews.

RUSSO: Correct, and this was taking place during the summer and fall of 1981.

Q: By the way, AWACS (Airborne Warning and Control System) is an early-warning airborne radar system.

RUSSO: Correct, an aircraft and a very effective tool, as is being demonstrated right now in...

Q: During the Iraq War.

RUSSO: Exactly. Back in 1981, President Reagan was adamant about selling that equipment to the Saudis. The President felt that the sale was absolutely necessary for stability in the Region. And he activated the entire White House to get the job done; using all the resources available, in addition to the personal meetings and telephone calls that he used so effectively to "persuade" Senators. As you so rightly stated, the Jewish lobby was very much opposed to the sale, and was using all of its resources to stop it. However, the President was unyielding; he wanted the sale to go through. I was part of a working group, chaired by the National Security Advisor, to help educate Senators as to the benefits of voting for the sale. We worked with the legislative side in Washington, but we also worked on the state and local level to point out to different constituencies the merits of supporting the President. The traditional lobbying side of a White House is a little more sterile, I guess, than some of the organizational work we did in the states, where our objective was to organize factions and build a coalition to offset the enormous influence that the Jewish lobby was exerting on the Congress. It was an extremely emotional time. One incident I recall that occurred during that period was the assassination of Egypt's Anwar Sadat. It was a very hard-fought battle on both sides, with a great deal of President Reagan's prestige on the line. We eventually won, by a very small margin. It was extremely close, but the Senate finally approved the AWACs sale by a 4-vote margin.

Q: What was your feeling, I mean, because later on you got into the foreign affairs side, of the White House, particularly the new people coming in? I mean, there's always a long

learning process, and foreign affairs don't fall out the way you think they should. You know, I mean, there are other people in other countries with different opinions and all. Were you aware of some of the impact of foreign policy and things, other than, say, the AWACS and all, on all of you and how you operated in your learning that?

RUSSO: Well, I think yes, the impact was felt. Foreign policy has an impact on the basic direction in which our Government is going. But for me the impact was more from a philosophical standpoint than anything else. Reagan's thinking on most issues was generally well known to me and to those who worked around him for any length of time; through the Governor's Office, the campaign years, and then in the early White House years. It was extremely evident where he was coming from, because he knew where he stood on the major issues. He's been criticized by his detractors for simplifying subjects, especially during the time he was dealing with the Soviets. I happen to believe that was one of his great strengths. He was able to look at the world in some very specific terms and with some very specific goals in mind for the United States. Many things were non-negotiable because of our interests. However, he had the confidence to follow his plan even when his advisors disagreed with him. And I think he understood very clearly that his anti-Communist stance was so well known, for so many years, that he could not be looked upon as someone who could sell-out in any way or underestimate the threat of the Communists to our system of government and way of life.

And I think that he viewed this situation as relatively simple. You have one system - Communism - that is destructive and repressive and whose intent is expansion and domination, and you have our system that is something quite different. And we had to protect ourselves from the other system. He was certainly correct in realizing that the Communist economic system would collapse. Not many could see that, and that was his motivation, in part, for ordering our military build-up. His belief in the need to be strong, and the eventual collapse of the Soviet system because they could not keep up, was the force driving a whole cluster of issues. So in essence, Reagan's foreign policy grew out of positions and beliefs he has held all of his adult life. He had articulated these beliefs all his life and they dominated his entire Presidency; even, as I mentioned, when his advisors counseled otherwise.

And his policies were also linked to the domestic economic situation. I believe his feelings and hopes from Day One were - if you could ever get the U.S. and the Russians out of the arms race, then both countries were going to have all of this money that they had been spending on this ridiculous arms race to use for better things.

His instincts, in my opinion, were exactly right, and I believe the historians will give him full credit for setting the stage for the collapse of Communism, or at the very least, the speeding up of that process. I think he wanted the Russians to realize that they couldn't outbuild us. No matter what they did, we were going to raise the ante and keep going. No matter what they did, we'd do twice as much. And at some point they were going to crash, which is exactly what happened.

This period we're in now; the Iraq war, is unfortunate for many reasons. One of them, I think, is that we weren't able to complete the Reagan cycle to see if his formula was right. I happen to believe that he was right, that after the collapse of Communism we could have then taken those dollars and all that energy and focus that are now going into the War, and solved our domestic problems; the deficit, and the rest. Really put our house in order. And that's where I think he was going.

Q: I have to say again, we're talking in February 1991, and we're right in the middle of a major war with Iraq.

The president's view, as you say, was a solid, rather black-and-white type view of the world. The State Department has to deal in everything that's gray. As you know when you got into it, there is nothing that's really that black and white, you have to deal with all sorts of things, which I think can enrage those who look at it from outside. How did you feel, and sort of the people around you, who came in and looked and here is the State Department coming and saying, yes, but we have a treaty, or we have this problem or that problem. I mean, what was your feeling towards the State Department?

RUSSO: That's another very good topic. I'm coming, obviously, very solidly from the political side. There's a traditional and very hard-fought conflict between the political ambassadors and appointees and the State Department career foreign service officers and ambassadors. I believe that the goals are different and that there is good reason for the conflict. From the standpoint of the political appointee, you have just been appointed by a new president, and especially if he is a popular president, you have a sense of mission, a momentum. There is a certain energy created from the election. The country has just said to the President and his team, by however many states, "What you have been saying is just fine with us, now go do it." On the other hand, you have the State Department that, as you say, views the world in shadows of grey, not black and white, possibly understands too much, and wants to preserve, not change.

My particular feeling is that there's a place for both kinds of people in the system. I didn't get into the hostilities with the State Department that many of the political ambassadors do. But I think that I was getting into the process about the time that the system was changing; when the role of the President, the role of an ambassador, the roles of the State Department and career ambassadors and so forth were rapidly changing.

There were several major reasons for the changes taking place, and one of the most important ones was the expanding role of the media, due to the new technology. Never before was communication so great and so fast. With satellite telephones, a president could call anywhere in the world as easily as he could call across the City. Television was increasing its impact. With CNN (Cable News Network), and the other network television, there were live, instantaneous pictures being sent from virtually anywhere in the world. And a reporter and anchorman interpreted the events as they took place.

The State Department and U.S. Embassies were once the source of all of that information, and its interpretation. It has all become less mysterious as to how they find out things, how they do things, how they negotiate things. I believe the media vastly opened up the system and the process. Yes, the State Department performs a function, but, no, the State Department isn't a very small group of almost scientists that have this little secret that nobody else knows about and therefore nobody else can get into and understand. You start to see that, well, the prime minister or the king or whomever said so and so, and, although his words said a certain thing, I don't think he meant that, because I saw him on CNN and he was smiling when he said that, so therefore he was really making a joke and he didn't mean what his words were saying. A president here in the United States, or an ambassador in the host country could be watching television, and neither one needs an interpreter, as they did in the past, through the State Department's foreign service officers. So the interpretation through a department isn't as necessary. It's not the only place where you can gather information.

A second major change that was occurring during my tenure was what I would call self-analysis by the Department. I think that the State Department, at the time I was involved, was going through some real soul-searching. I think there were several schools of thought within the Department, as I saw it, among the career foreign service officers. There were many who felt that the status of the department was falling, not necessarily because of the outside, but because of many of the things that were going on internally within the bureaucracy. Questions were raised, such as - how do you keep the best people? Is it the pay situation? Is it a retirement program? How do you keep that person who is trained for ten or fifteen years from then going off and working for X corporation that will pay him or her several times their salary to do the same kinds of things? Is the system in effect leaving only the least qualified people in career service? I think the department was going through a lot of that kind of reflection. And I didn't feel that the fight was really there between the political appointees and the career foreign service officers as it had been maybe in the past.

As I mentioned, there was a great deal of evolution going on with the system and I found that it was helpful for me to fall back on my political background, using it in this diplomatic situation. I felt that if I understood our political process and the way our leaders gain and use power, it could apply to a political situation in another country. If a prime minister is elected, he's a political person, and you can understand his motives and therefore it is not a mystery.

Q: Did you have a feel for what was coming out? I mean, you were not dealing directly, but what was sort of the White House staff impression of Alexander Haig? He didn't stay very long and seemed to get into fights that didn't seem to be necessary. I don't have much of a feel, but how did you all feel about Haig?

RUSSO: Well, Secretary Haig was, it seems to me, more combative than he needed to be in working with President Reagan and the White House staff. He really did not know the President or the White House staff well, and I believe that was a severe handicap. And I

think that he wanted to establish clearly that he was the secretary of state and therefore he was in charge of all foreign policy; anything having to do with foreign policy was under his purview. The conflict with the White House arose when it became clear that there was a very strong president who knew what indeed he was trying to do. The President is in charge of foreign policy, not his secretary of state. And while the secretary of state is the cabinet member responsible for carrying out policy and managing the Department of State, it is the President who is elected, not the Secretary of State. I don't believe that the chemistry ever really worked between Secretary Haig and the President, and certainly not with the White House staff.

Q: You very definitely felt it even though you weren't dealing directly with him.

RUSSO: Yes, the conflict was certainly there at the time. Secretary Shultz, who followed Haig at State, was much different and actually, from the President's perspective, probably should have been the first pick. Temperamentally, Shultz seemed to understand Reagan and the Reagan White House much better than Secretary Haig did. Secretary Shultz seemed more comfortable with the job; he was able to be in charge without having to have the conflict of telling people he was in charge. However, I do believe that Secretary Haig, by the mere act of being appointed, sent a strong, clear signal to the Soviets.

Q: I remember Alexander Haig was renowned for saying he was "the vicar of foreign policy," whatever that meant.

RUSSO: Well, I had a particularly hard time understanding what that meant also. It seemed to me that he was the Secretary of State. But the President was elected by a landslide, and there was no question that the country was saying, "We're changing from the Carter Administration and its foreign policy. We're wholeheartedly behind the Reagan Administration and its foreign policy; we want Ronald Reagan to do what he has been saying he will do." So I think at that time there's certainly more boldness on the part of a new president coming in. Which is as it should be, in my opinion.

Q: Yes, there are times when there's a real change, and this was one of those times.

RUSSO: Correct. In 1980, there was no question that the country said, "We are making this change." It was a drastic change in almost every category. Reagan was elected, and had the responsibility to carry out what he had said he would do.

Q: You were out for a while and then went back into the Department of Labor, or straight to the Department of Labor?

RUSSO: Straight to the Department of Labor.

Q: Did you have anything to do with foreign affairs in Labor?

RUSSO: Very little there. My specific job was intergovernmental relations, and we dealt mainly with the state and local labor situations, the state labor departments. One of the reasons that I evolved into the labor side was that, during the campaign and then in the White House, one of my responsibilities was working with the small group of labor unions that supported Ronald Reagan in 1980. And we felt, in the campaign, that while we knew we wouldn't have the leadership of organized labor for Reagan, we needed some unions supporting him. So our targets in many of the industrial states were Democrats and maybe union members, or those at least having union activity in their past somewhere. We didn't want to exclude that group by not having support by labor leaders. So, from the standpoint of dealing with the international unions, I had a touch of the flavor, but my main responsibility was domestic.

Q: Well, then why don't we move to how you got your appointment to Barbados and when.

RUSSO: After President Reagan's re-election in 1984, I left the Administration and started my own consulting business in Washington. I was out about a year and a half when the ambassadorial appointment became a possibility. It took about six months from the beginning of the process until I was sworn in as Ambassador in 1986.

As to how I was appointed; my predecessor in Barbados was thinking about returning to the United States and he had made his plans known to me, and a short time later to Presidential Personnel. I had known some of the people in Personnel, obviously, while working there and through past campaigns and so forth. The head of Presidential Personnel thought I could be a candidate for an Ambassadorship, but there was a fairly long line for Barbados. One of the people in Personnel thought that I could fill that role, and that one of the people who was on the list for that particular country could go on to a different country, and I think that's what she was trying to put together. So that whole process started evolving. I went through filling out the papers and doing all the things you do, and became a candidate at that point.

I was extremely fortunate, in the sense that I had a personal relationship with the President. Somebody who knew I was pursuing the appointment told the President that I was interested. I later learned from a Presidential aide who was with the President in the Oval Office at the time, that the President, when he learned I was interested, called the Chief of Staff, Don Regan, and told him he wanted me to be the next Ambassador to Barbados. Because of my personal relationship, I was able to jump over the entire personnel process. It certainly is the recommended way to go.

Q: Well, to sort of sort this out, the process usually is the State Department puts up a candidate or two; the political side of the White House does, and often this is sorted out sort of at the chief-of-staff level without the president getting involved in this.

RUSSO: That's correct. That's exactly how it works, in most cases.

Q: But it is the president's appointment.

RUSSO: There's no question about that.

Q: From time to time the president says, "I want so and so." And this changes the rules of the game.

RUSSO: Right. And, as I say, I was very fortunate and very appreciative. As I mentioned, the President told Don Regan, the Chief of Staff at the time, that he wanted me in that particular job. In that meeting you're describing, which is a joint meeting with White House senior staff and the State Department, when my papers were presented, someone questioned my age. Apparently, a comment was made that "well, he's a little bit young to be an ambassador." And, as I understand it, Regan's response was that he thought my age was irrelevant, because the President wanted me. And that was the end of the discussion. The papers were signed, and they moved on to the next candidate.

Q: Before you went there, what type of briefing, training did you get? I mean, you had not been an ambassador before. When did you get yourself ready, and how did the system get you ready for the job?

RUSSO: The preparation on my part was twofold. I went through a long process trying to decide, first, should I become a candidate, and indeed could I be appointed. The way I approached it was, could I do the job? I had not spent much time, if any, thinking about being an ambassador, and I had to really focus in on what I thought the job entailed. And then, was it a job that I could perform to my satisfaction and to the satisfaction of the President. I guess that is what my original thinking was.

And I tried, first of all, to read as much as I could about the area that I would be appointed to. And I tried to read as much and talk to as many people about what indeed the job was. Then I tried to honestly evaluate my own past, to try and see if I could make my past fit into the job requirements. And I suppose that there wasn't any way I could approach it other than saying that I thought that my political background matched very closely to what the job was.

I said, "all right, what have I been doing for all of my professional life?" I had been representing, for many of those years, Ronald Reagan personally. I had a fair idea what was in his mind, and had watched him in almost every imaginable situation. I believed I had a good sense of what general issues I would face. I had been though many situations with Ronald Reagan and felt I would have a very high degree of success in judging what his reaction would be in similar circumstances. And I had a very good knowledge of the staff and the people around him, both in the White House and at the State Department, so that I knew that I could work within the system.

As I talked to people, I found that the conflict between the political and the State Department bureaucracy was a major problem for political appointees. And I felt that my

past history in government would be very helpful. I understood how government worked. I understood the personnel process. I understood the intergovernmental committees, the workings of State, the workings of Treasury, the related kinds of departments that diplomatic appointees have to be concerned with. I knew the people. I knew many of the cabinet secretaries of the other departments. I knew the lower-level people; many of them. So that I had sources of information. I had people with whom I could work.

And I felt that the knowledge of the President, the knowledge of the government, and also the political side of working with political people, meaning...the islands, would be extremely helpful. There are six different countries there, all with prime ministers, and very political. And I began to feel more comfortable with the prospect of being appointed.

Q: For people who will read this in the future, you might, in rough form, say there are really three different types of people who become ambassador. One is somebody coming up through the career, the Foreign Service, side. Then somebody who basically gives a hunk of money, who often comes from really no particular political experience, they've just got money. I mean, I don't want to denigrate this, because they may come from other sources and all that, but there is no particular reason for them to bring any particular skills other than the desire to be an ambassador and having money. And then there is somebody who comes not from the career service, not from the money service, but from within the political side of the process, such as yourself, who does come with some experience in government itself, which is something that the Foreign Service doesn't have. So you came from this particular branch, which has always been one of the powerful inputters into the ambassadorial ranks, as is often forgotten about when people think of either, oh, it's somebody with a lot of money.

RUSSO: Correct. And my feeling is, after having gone through the entire process, and the experiences I referred to earlier; changes that have been taking place within the Foreign Service itself, and some of the changes in the campaign laws, that the major-contributor ambassador is becoming less and less so because of the limits -- the thousand dollar limit. There are ways to contribute large amounts of money legally, but I think that category is becoming smaller. One of the other arguments is how many political ambassadors there should be, as opposed to career ambassadors. And I think what I'm trying to say is that, after having been through it, I believe that the ratio on the political side, with knowledge; personal knowledge, and the trust of the President, should be a much higher priority than a career ambassador.

And the reason I say that is that I believe that there is too much of a gap in the career side, from who the President is and what it is that he's expecting that ambassador to be doing while he's representing the United States in another country. And I think that what's happening is, and I think this is to me a personally disturbing trend, is that the Secretaries of State seem to be plugging-in to the President and running a separate operation other than using the Department of State, because there's too much of a gap in what that Secretary is trying to accomplish for the President and what the career employee is trying to do.

Q: Well, we're talking right now, James Baker is secretary of state, who has a coterie around him, and there doesn't seem to be any connect with the State Department. You know, I mean, I find this a very disturbing thing, not for any partisanship or anything else, I just think it sounds like trouble.

RUSSO: Well, it does in a sense. And I wouldn't necessarily criticize Jim Baker. I think it was Secretary Kissinger who first began the trend of not working with the Department. If he knew what the President, President Nixon, wanted to accomplish and he knew what to do to achieve the necessary results, then it is understandable that perhaps he thought it best not to get involved with the bureaucracy, in a building where people might have fifteen, or fifty, different agendas and who don't necessarily feel responsible to an elected president. People who feel responsible to a foreign service career. The reason that this situation has evolved is that the State Department is structured so that to become an ambassador through that system, or to be promoted within the Department, you do not necessarily need to respond to a president. That Foreign Service Officer responds to what his superiors (who are also career officers) are rewarding, not what the White House is rewarding. And that gap is where the problem lies.

Looking at it from the other standpoint, from the political appointee's or the political ambassador's standpoint, if he has a critical situation to deal with in his country, what does he do? One option is to scream and yell through the bureaucracy, with little or no reaction. Or he can go directly to the Secretary of State, which a political ambassador has a much better chance of doing. Or he can even go directly to the President, if the situation is critical enough. Perhaps the situation in Iraq would have been different if a political ambassador had been involved..

Q: Oh, no doubt about this at all.

RUSSO: And he or she knows...could you possibly think of calling the President instead of the Secretary? Or would you call one of the President's aides instead of the Secretary? Or how do you deal with the Secretary?

It seems to me that we need to, I think, as a country, look at this trend and see if there isn't some better way of functioning in the future. And I think that examining Secretary Baker's reign will give some real clues, because, as you say, his tendency is to say, "I know what I'm doing; I am in constant communication with the President, so I don't need a lot of interpreters." But you've got thousands of people who are extremely well educated, who have years of experience, and we're missing the benefit of that if we're not plugging them into the system. I believe making the Foreign Service more responsive to the President would be a first step.

Q: Well, now, going back to your specific experience. After you went through the sort of self-examination, how about the system itself? Did the system get you ready for your position, or were you just sort of thrown into it?

RUSSO: Well, I think the system tried, but I think that, no, it doesn't really prepare you. But I'm not sure what could prepare you, to be very honest. Because I think the nature of the job is tailored around your own agenda and how you want to solve some broad categories of problems. There's a great deal of latitude in how you perform your duties.

There's the Ambassadorial School. I believe Ambassador Shirley Temple Black organized it after she was sent out ill-prepared the first time. When she came back, I think she said why don't we get a school together here, a seminar, with the ambassadors and their spouses, to go through a very intensive week or ten days of briefings from the appropriate people in the Department of State and the National Security Council.

As a matter of fact, when I was in the process, the National Security Council had its own school, which was, I think, in competition with the State Department's school. I understand it has since been discontinued.

But, in my mind, it was more of an academic briefing and a status briefing of sections on the world; issues, and foreign policy concepts and so forth, as opposed to what do you do when you get up in the morning, and when you go to the office, what happens, and those kinds of things. And I think that we had enough interrelations with other ambassadors and previous ambassadors and so forth, but I think that the role was defined almost in as many different forms as different speakers that we had. So I think it's very hard to specifically define what that role is. There are very specific things to most kinds of employment situations, but for an ambassador, I think there's a lot of latitude. And I actually believe that that's probably a very good thing. You're going to get some bad ambassadors, like you're going to get in any situation with people, but the ambassador, getting to that point in his career; to be appointed, brought something to the table, either from capabilities or by what some would call luck or chance. Whatever it was, he brought something, and that's something that should be preserved, in my opinion, in the posts. I don't think that the system prepares people enough. But I'm not sure that I think I could have been more prepared.

Q: In the first place, I wonder if you could describe... because when I say going to Barbados, this is just one of... Could you describe which islands you were going to represent, and what was sort of the political situation on those?

RUSSO: Certainly. The structure has since changed, but when I was appointed in 1986, the Post consisted of an island chain in the Eastern Caribbean that had six independent island nations that were all represented by one ambassador: Antigua and Barbuda, which are two islands, one country; Saint Christopher and Nevis, again two islands, one country; Dominica; Barbados; Saint Lucia; and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines.

Q: Was Grenada in there?

RUSSO: No, Grenada used to be the seventh, but was taken out of the chain, from a representational standpoint, when the Grenada invasion, or rescue mission, took place. Grenada was, and I believe still is, reporting directly to the State Department, for a lot of obvious reasons from a military standpoint.

For the most part, Barbados was very English in history and in tradition because it had been an English possession and protectorate throughout its history. Most of the other islands were English and traded back and forth over the years, with some French domination, a little Dutch. But a very high degree of democratic thinking, more Western democracy thought and parliamentary systems. The prime ministers were, in general, dynamic individuals. There was a great deal of education of the upper strata in the islands in either England or in the United States. So you might run into a cabinet officer or a prime minister who was educated in one of the best schools in the United States, or at Oxford, or both, for that matter. So it's not a place like many other smaller island chains in the world. Certainly the Eastern Caribbean is not a place where they're backward or in any sense of the word ill informed or undereducated, from the standpoint of their elected officials.

Q: Well, in the first place, was there some resentment or understanding of why we only had one embassy dealing with them? Was there sort of a general policy or thought process? I mean, did they kind of go pretty much together, or were they a very diverse group of countries?

RUSSO: There's an involved answer to that.

Q: Involved question.

RUSSO: There really were two embassies under one ambassador, which was a unique situation; the only one in the world. From my standpoint, it was very difficult, from a managerial standpoint, to run two embassies in two different countries. Two different, distinct staffs, who could not be used in the other jurisdictions.

Q: Good God!

RUSSO: That's exactly what I said. And I spent an inordinate amount of time and energy trying to close one of the embassies, to create a structure that worked from a managerial standpoint. This was at a time when budgets were starting to become a major concern. And I felt that we, as a government, couldn't justify having two separate embassies in the Eastern Caribbean.

Q: Where were the two located?

RUSSO: One was in Antigua, in the north, and the other one was in Barbados. And it was, in my mind, a nightmare of overspending, overstaffing, and, from a management standpoint, ridiculous to cover that...

Q: Was that our problem, or was it the problem because of the countries we were representing?

RUSSO: It was our problem -- we created it. And one of the criticisms I do have with the Department is that it's a horrible bureaucracy.

Q: Oh, boy, yes.

RUSSO: And one of the things a bureaucracy has to do is to sustain itself and to keep going. And if you have people being promoted up, you need more embassies, so therefore you can have more ambassadors. So, without criticizing a person, I'm criticizing a system that says if you're going to have more ambassadors, you need more embassies. Whether you can afford them or not, let's have them. And we wouldn't want to close an embassy, because then you're taking a whole group of people and putting them somewhere else, obviously. Or maybe there's no need for them in the system.

And that's one of the problems I had in fighting the bureaucracy. That took up more time than it should have, but nevertheless I viewed it as one of the mandates that I had; to try and push that mountain over a couple of inches. I tried all the while I was there, but I was never able close the embassy.

Q: With the Antigua one, did they have one subset of islands and then Barbados had another set of islands?

RUSSO: Correct, and so therefore I was the Ambassador for both. When I was in Barbados, I had a DCM (Deputy Chief of Mission) there, and a Charge' in Antigua. When I went to Antigua, the Charge' became the DCM there, and the DCM in Barbados then became the Charge'. And I also had a commercial officer in one, and a commercial officer in the other. It was double staff coverage, with the combined population of all the islands being roughly equivalent to that of one U.S. Congressional District. And, going back to what I thought my strength was, I said, "all right, if I were a Congressman and had a congressional district, how the hell could I justify all of this staff?" All of these people, to basically do a job that didn't require half of what I had. As a matter of fact, the more people, the more problems.

Q: Oh, absolutely. This is a truism, work expands...

RUSSO: Correct.

Q: Obviously you had a major managerial problem. How did you view the staffs that you had there? I mean, were they appreciative of the fact that maybe they better join together, or was everybody worried about their job, although they could be transferred easily?

RUSSO: The better ones wanted to work together, and we did form two good working units that I was very proud of. In general, the staff knew nothing drastic would happen concerning the reduction of staff because they were legally locked in, whether or not we closed the Embassy. But one or two were transferred because I felt they were setting bad examples for the others.

Basically, I was approaching the job from a management standpoint, and there were some extremely competent people in both of the embassies to help. My feeling was that if I was going to present an argument to the Department for closing an embassy, I needed to understand all of the arguments that were going to come back my way -- why I couldn't do this and why I couldn't do that. And so I needed to totally understand the consulate function in both embassies, and understand and have a plan for why it would work better if it were one instead of two.

Maybe I should go back to my goals; what I was trying to accomplish. I viewed my responsibility as, first of all, to organize whatever resources I had to promote economic development in the area. I felt that from the standpoint of the United States, why do we have an embassy there? What are we trying to accomplish? What's in our best interest? How does this all fit in with our total foreign policy picture? My feeling was that we needed democratic governments there in those islands. If we had an unemployment rate that was low enough, there wouldn't be the unrest. If people were working, they weren't going to be listening to anything Castro had to say from down the road. So I felt that it was, one, in our best interest; that it was what I wanted to devote a great deal of my time and energy and the energy and time of the embassies to.

The second was the anti-drug situation. As I was taking up my Post, the United States was making progress in cutting off, or at least diverting, the direct drug routes from Colombia straight up on either side of Cuba to our Country. And one effect of this was to push the drug trade toward the Eastern Caribbean islands.

You have to understand that the airports are magnificent, especially the airports in Antigua, Barbados and St. Lucia. The facilities for ships are equally good on most of the islands, and there is a good deal of international traffic. Everything was totally open; there was no fear of terrorism. These are tourist countries, and to encourage tourism the governments wanted open, friendly ports. They didn't want armed guards and the appearance of tight security or stringent checking of cargoes and luggage. In addition, the banking systems are wonderful, and secure. It would be a very natural shift for the drug trade and money laundering operations over into the Eastern Caribbean islands.

When I arrived in Barbados, the drug problem was not imbedded. My feeling at the time was, and still is, that a great deal of the United States' anti-drug activity and efforts are directed at problems already out of control -- after-the-fact activity. I felt that we had a situation in the Eastern Caribbean that was relatively drug free, and if we could stop it before it took hold, we were way ahead of the game. On the other hand, if we couldn't

stop it from coming in, I wasn't not sure we could ever get it out. Most of the Prime Ministers shared this view.

Q: Of course, we had the example of the Bahamas, where it had really taken root, from what I take it. I mean, from the very top on down.

RUSSO: Correct. And the Eastern Caribbean could have become exactly the same as the Bahamas for the same reasons: the excellent banking system, and excellent transportation to the United States and Europe, which are tremendous markets. Another concern was the fact that it doesn't take very much money and organization to elect a person in a small country like that. If someone dedicated large quantities of cash, you could very soon elect some very wrong people.

So I was approaching my job with two priorities; economic development and an anti-drug program. I also had a prime minister in Barbados when I arrived who was extremely anti-Reagan and anti-American.

Q: This was Errol Barrow?

RUSSO: Barrow, yes. And my first priority was to establish relations with him; hopefully suggest that he should not be attacking Reagan.

So my three major priorities were: one, establish a better relationship with the government in Barbados; two, promote economic activity for all the islands; and, three, do as much as possible in the anti-drug area, both on the education side and the enforcement side.

Q: Well, let's talk about the two before we get to Errol Barrow. On the economic side, I mean, one, the general feeling that a healthy economy is good for the United States, less unrest, but it was particularly pointed, too, because of Cuba. You didn't want to have another sort of Grenada-type situation, where sort of the Cubans could be messing around with an economically depressed people.

RUSSO: Correct. And in most of the islands, unemployment was a problem; rates that were unacceptable, some up to forty percent. And that's not a good situation from a humanitarian standpoint, but also from a political standpoint.

Q: What could you do? I mean, what tools did you have?

RUSSO: Here again, we go back to preparation. I don't believe the system can really fully prepare an Ambassador. I say that because some of our best ones have been people who have used their particular skills to solve, attempt to solve, problems that are not necessarily "diplomatic" in nature, but problems that are nevertheless critical to the interests of the United States. In my case, I tried to use the tools I had; my personal

experiences and my own friendships -- contacts in the United States -- people I had met along the way.

One example of a difference in policy that I had with my staff when I arrived was the Embassy's emphasis in certain areas. Many in AID (Agency for International Development) did not want to encourage an economy built on tourism. Well, I took issue with that because tourism is a major part of those economies, and something they know and like. It is part of their culture. I certainly understand that generally tourism may not be something that should be promoted because it's unstable, and all those kinds of arguments.

But not in the Eastern Caribbean. I don't agree with that, because it is probably one of the most beautiful spots in the entire world. Air travel is convenient; it's close to the major markets of the United States and Europe. I know people who go on vacations, I know what they're looking for, and I know it can be found in Barbados and the other Eastern Caribbean islands. And while, yes, tourism can be up and down and does fluctuate, in my mind there are always going to be people in the world with dollars to spend on vacations to an environment such as that.

So I felt that I was going to pursue that in working with the hotels (the hotel organization), the local government tourism people, and the tourism people in the United States. I felt that it was something that I was going to try to expand rather than decrease. Which was a policy decision, not at the expense of other efforts, but not to stop something that was already working and try to replace it with something that we, the United States, believed was better to do. For better or for worse, I was appointed, and I was going to do it my way.

Second, the data processing side of Barbados was worth pursuing on all of the islands, but Barbados specifically, because they had a tremendous capacity in the English language. They had an answer to one of the problems that I knew existed in the United States. I had learned that from all my political years, and from a keypunch standpoint; I think the terms have been updated since I've been involved, but we were never able to get the keypunch function of putting data into the...

Q: It's a data entry system.

RUSSO: Thank you.

Q: It was keypunch, now it's word processing, data entry--the same thing.

RUSSO: Right. I knew that our error rate was always exceedingly high, because you couldn't find an employee who would stay very long with the job if he had command of the English language. Most of the keypunch employees were either Filipinos or Hispanic; newly arrived into the United States, who took this particular job because they wanted to work but couldn't find a better job. They would leave key punching immediately upon

finding a job that could be a little higher paying and in which they could receive a little more self-satisfaction and be thought of as having a higher standing in the community.

In Barbados, their literacy rate in their native language; English, is ninety-seven percent. Whatever your measure, that is a heck of a lot higher than it is in most of the U.S. cities where you hire minimum wage workers. Another positive factor was that the one major alternative for employment would be working in the cane fields. So if you have somebody who has command of the English language who all of a sudden gets to work in an office situation with highly sophisticated machines, this person is then someone who is looked upon as a professional, or at least somebody who is higher than the field worker; and someone who has pride in himself and his work.

In fact, one of my favorite examples is... (My wife would kill me if she heard this story again because she's heard it a thousand times) American Airlines used to do their keypunching in, I guess it was Oklahoma. They decided to try an experiment in Barbados. All the ticket coupons in the U.S. that were handed in each day were flown to New York City. They were then flown out of New York directly to Barbados. Overnight, the information was keypunched into the system; then the data was bounced back via satellite to Tulsa, Oklahoma. Their error rate went down to almost nothing. They saved between forty and fifty percent on the entire operation by doing it that way. And American Airlines was very smart, too, because they took the employees that were working in Tulsa who were displaced by this experiment and worked them into their organization in other places, so that they weren't taking American jobs away.

My feeling was that this was perfect, and the kind of thing that I wanted to pursue, because of the English language as a "raw material." We tried to spread the concept as far and wide as we possibly could, for all kinds of businesses, into industries that were as dependent on that keypunch function as the airline was. And I felt this was something that we should greatly expand.

One of the other things in the economic development area was the idea of an economic union. It wasn't a term I used, but it was what I was advocating, so that the islands could more or less have an economy of scale. For example, the problem was that Saint Vincent would have a little assembly factory that would compete with the Barbados factory that would compete with Saint Lucia, and all the way down the line. And it was difficult to do business because a visa was necessary to go from island to island, plus the currency was different from island to island. American businessmen were discouraged from doing business in the area, because it was cumbersome to work with the different bureaucracies and so forth. And I felt that if they could streamline that somewhat...and I'm very happy to see what's happening with the EC '92, with the European countries, because that, I think, will be a model that will allow the Eastern Caribbean to do some similar things and will help them greatly from the standpoint of economic development.

I also focused on CBI - the Caribbean Basin Initiative. I made it a point to try and clear up some of the misconceptions with the people who were trying to use the legislation to the benefit of economic development.

And I also made it a point to work very closely with Congress in designing or altering the legislation somewhat to allow these economies to benefit from it. The concept is a good one; the actual legislation sometimes was not allowing the benefits to really come through, because of mechanical problems.

And so one of the things that I felt I could do in that regard was encourage hearings and congressional visits. And any Member of Congress that I could get down there or get to stop there, I would, and I'd say, "you know, this is a wonderful place to be, and if we could get you to come down, we'll make sure you could get a day off if that's what you're looking for, but would you take some time to have a meeting with a specific group or member of Parliament, to help explain the legislation and also its intent." I also believed the Members of Congress would learn a great deal if they listened to what the complaints were from the other side. And we had a lot of Delegations that went through there.

Q: Well, this does show that a good ambassador knows how to use congressional trips, particularly if you've got a place where people want to go to--it's a little harder to get people to Mogadishu.

RUSSO: Yes, I was fortunate to have had a good spot. But, on the other hand, I think that's another void in the foreign service; they don't focus on the importance of Congress, especially to achieve long term goals. It was always important in my background to know whose Congressional district you were in. And as an Ambassador, you can't operate politically without understanding how Congress works, and the impact it has on funding and policy. And I believe the State Department more or less just tolerates Congress. From my standpoint, I felt I understood how Congress could help me do my job. I also knew many Members, and I also felt that it was something that I thought should be part of my agenda. Not "Oh, my God, a congressional delegation's coming through here and I have to take care of them," but "What an opportunity, and couldn't I get more to come? Couldn't I create some event with this Delegation that's going to benefit these islands as well as the resulting CBI legislation?" And, as I say, I think that's a tool that a lot of ambassadors don't use enough.

Q: Well, on the economic side, after you left, did you feel that some things had been put in place or set in train that you were pleased with?

RUSSO: Yes, we focused a lot of attention on economic development, and got quite a few people working together. My way of approaching the subject was with a great deal of accountability. I wanted to know at the end of each week and each month not how many thousands of things we did or how many conceptual things we discussed, but rather did we get one person working this week, did we get one new business started this month. And we did have some successes. Yes.

The task of creating jobs in the Eastern Caribbean is tough, and it's going to take a period of time to overcome some of the traditional problems of the Region. But I certainly think it's worth it from the standpoint of the United States, not to mention what it does for those people affected.

But I feel that we made some progress, because we were looking at it from a jobs creation standpoint. Did we get one little Ma and Pa store going, or one company to locate there? And the answer is, yes, we did do some of that. And did we solve some of the problems that were evolving with new ventures? Here again, we had problems but we also made progress.

One of the cases that I read about in *The New York Times* was a small-shop owner who understood there was a great market for canaries in the United States, so he set up a small operation to raise canaries. You know, he made this small investment of whatever he needed, built the cages, raised the birds, and so forth. He then got to the point where he was ready to ship them to Miami. The U.S. Government stopped the shipment. U.S. Customs wouldn't let them come into the United States. And so he was very disappointed; very discouraged, and he felt that;

"CBI doesn't mean anything, the U.S. doesn't really believe in all of the things it says about hard work and free enterprise. I go through the trouble of setting up an operation, and they won't let me ship the birds."

Here is another horror story of a good concept and a good law, but it doesn't work, and here this fellow is with all these canaries that he can't sell.

I flew over and talked to the owner. I said, "All right, you have a fantastic idea. Yes, there is a canary market, and a bird market in the United States. Yes, CBI is going to give benefits. Why, then, can't you get in?" His answer was, "Well, I couldn't get the Customs stamp to get in."

So, after numerous visits and calls and so forth, I finally got to the bottom of it. U.S. Customs, as they should, wanted a veterinary stamp certifying that these birds were not carrying a particular disease, which, naturally, we would demand before allowing them to come into our country. Was the disease present in the Island where the birds were raised? No. And because the disease wasn't there, it wasn't something that the owner thought was important. The bird owner knew that the birds weren't diseased, so what was the problem? Once we established the fact that we needed the certificate to protect U.S. birds, we moved on to Problem #2; there was no veterinarian on the island, and the regional veterinarian wasn't scheduled to come through for another six or eight weeks. We could have solved that problem, if there was a mechanism within the island to communicate the need for a veterinarian. I know from past experiences that I could have called any number of veterinarians in the United States and most likely found one to come down at his own

expense, solve that problem, certify the birds, and then we could have helped him do whatever he wanted.

Q: Tax write-off or something like that.

RUSSO: Oh no, in the United States, we're so blessed with people who are willing to do things just for the adventure; the satisfaction of helping someone, and as volunteers. But there's no real structure for that individual to fit into our government.

One perfect example was a situation I had with the anti-drug program. Television is a major influence in the Eastern Caribbean. In fact, there's a long-running controversy because the Governments down there don't want a lot of U.S. programming. They do want some, but that's another story. For my agenda, I found out that Sesame Street was an extremely popular program in Barbados, and had been for many years. At the time, I wasn't acquainted with the Program; when it had started and the tremendous impact it has had on children. I learned that it began about fifteen years ago, and therefore had a great impact on the people now in their mid-twenties, as well as with the younger children. Everyone seemed to have a good impression of Sesame Street. One of our anti-drug projects was to air commercials on radio and television that we created locally, using volunteers. So in that regard, I called the Children's Television Workshop, the production company in New York, and explained what I was trying to do. I found that one of the women there...and I think her name is Diane, but I'm not sure if that's from the program or her real name, but, anyway, I explained what I was trying to do. I said, "You know, I think we could put together a whole program in several of the islands for you, if you would come down." I told her that what I had in mind was for her to work with some of the local television people to create some anti-drug commercials; commercials that would work locally. I told her that the facilities were not as sophisticated as the ones she was used to, but that all of the necessary ingredients were there, and that if she wanted to, we would visit some high schools as well. And that I wanted to host a major reception at the Ambassador's residence, and invite the teachers and school administrators; that sort of thing.

She said, "When? When do you want me down there?" And we arranged the trip right then and there. I was fortunate because I had a desirable place to visit but on the other hand, there are a lot of good people willing to contribute, if asked. We paid for an airline ticket, and received a tremendous service of television and radio commercials.

Q: Still, there's this feeling...

RUSSO: There is still a feeling in our country that we have a lot, that we are blessed in so many ways, and there's a willingness to share things. But you've got to be creative.

Any bureaucracy, I think, stymies creativity by its very nature. But many in the bureaucracy will help, will want to succeed, but they need help. These are rather simple examples of what can be done, and I am certain that other ambassadors, both political and

foreign service, have done things like this, and more. But my point is, as a political ambassador, I had a good idea of what the President wanted accomplished, and therefore I could be more creative if I were accomplishing those goals. I didn't have to concern myself with how many forms needed to be filled out, or was I not following a particular procedure, and did a particular division sign-off on this or that or the other. I felt that if I made the decision that this was something that was worthwhile; that it made sense for the U.S. and for the government down there, and obviously was it legal - then I was going to go ahead and do it. And if I could get the bureaucracy to come along with me, that would be fine, but if they decided not to come along, then that would be fine too. I mean, obviously, I was always concerned about obeying the law; that was part of my responsibility. But I'm not talking about laws, I'm talking about forms and...

Q: How to mobilize talent without going through all the bureaucratic procedure.

RUSSO: Correct. And usually the answer from the staff is: "No, you can't do that," or "Are you then endorsing a particular company or a specific private enterprise?" And my answer was: "I don't know, but I don't really care. What I'm endorsing is to try to get an anti-drug commercial produced and maybe save a kid from drugs, or to try and get a canary certified as disease-free so that this poor man can go ahead and sell his canaries to the United States -- as we've been telling the world that that's what we're trying to do."

Q: We talked about the economic and the drug business and all, how about the political situation? You were mentioning the fact that you arrived there and a new election had just taken place, bringing the Labor Party in, with Errol Barrow. This was a democratic Labor Party, wasn't it?

RUSSO: Yes. The Barbados Labor Party.

Q: And this was somewhat of a changeover, wasn't it, from a more conservative type government prior to that?

RUSSO: Correct.

Q: How did you view Barrow when you first got there, and then how did you deal with him up until he departed the scene...?

RUSSO: Well, first of all, our Government was concerned with Barrow's election because he was of a much more liberal philosophy than the previous Prime Minister, and also the State Department did not see his election coming. They weren't sure how far he was on the scale of going towards socialism and/or beyond. We were also somewhat concerned because Barrow was a contemporary of Michael Manley (who is now the Prime Minister of Jamaica, and who had a socialist past). Manley at that time was preparing to run against the conservative Prime Minister, Seaga, in Jamaica. Barrow and Manley were from the old socialist school. They could be an indication of a real change in attitude and approach to government in the region...maybe. The fact that Barrow was elected, the fact

that he was anti-Reagan and anti-U.S....he did not like Reagan; he was calling him a cowboy in the press, and it was more than just Reagan, it was the United States. And he was a very strong figure in their society. I mean, he was a part of their history, and he was someone who had to be reckoned with; he was not an over-the-hill type in any sense of the word. He was a political force and a very strong prime minister.

My approach to it was virtually again back to my political past. I had a number of discussions with my country team in the Embassy as well as many private discussions with those members who I really felt were "career," in the sense of being long-time State Department employees who had worked with many ambassadors, in many parts of the world; very professional people. And we all said, "okay, we've got a problem. How do we solve it?" "What do I do?" And, from my standpoint, too, I was saying, "well, this would be great, you know, my first day on the job and I've got a hostile prime minister, and the first thing I do is screw it up in some way." That wasn't exactly the way I wanted to start my diplomatic career.

So I put a lot of thought into it. I did a lot of research on who Barrow was, where I thought he was coming from, why I thought he was anti-Reagan, and why I thought he was anti-U.S. And I wanted to try to decide whether that was the same thing, because you could be pro-U.S. and anti-Reagan, certainly. I'm not sure you could be the other way around, but certainly you could be anti-Reagan.

I talked to all of the people that I could find to talk to, and that would be the country team, those professionals. I went outside the embassy as well. I went to people that lived on the island, who were not part of the structure, to find out who Barrow was. And I found out that they loved this man. This was a national leader. There was a national pride that he was catering to; that he represented. The United States was looked upon as a dominant force that was going to do what it wanted. And, from Barrow's standpoint, he was the little guy saying,

"We are somebody and we are pretty good in our own right. We've had a democracy for so many years, we have a tradition of law and order, we have all of those kinds of things. Our people can read and write. And, yes, we want to be an ally of the United States, and, yes, we want to get along with you, but we're not going to sit back and let you tell us what to do."

Okay, that's easy, I think, to understand, or at least I thought so. What was his problem with Reagan? You know, had he ever met Reagan? No. Did he read the papers and watch the international news and so forth? Yes. So he formed an opinion of Reagan, based on some things that were picked out by him in his past from news accounts and probably from some of the other leaders that he knew. I would be dealing with changing a perception.

So I felt that I wanted to go and see him then. I didn't do it immediately, because I wanted to know what I was doing and what was the purpose of it. So when I did go to see him, I

just had a talk with him about Reagan. I knew he was going to know who I was. I mean, he read the papers, and he was going to be briefed for the meeting and know that I was coming from a Reagan background. And so I decided that what I would do was approach it by saying,

"I'm here representing the United States. I believe that we should get along. It's in your best interest for your country and the United States to have a good working relationship. I feel that what I can do here during my tenure is work with your structure to try to help the economic situation, and work with you on an anti-drug program."

I went into a little of some of the things I was thinking about. I said I was very concerned about the anti-drug side; that I had seen the problem in the United States. I hoped that I could offer some help to their efforts in combating this, so that some of the things that had happened in some of our cities in the United States didn't happen there. Coordination of U.S. government drug enforcement agencies was a problem, and I knew I could help with this.

I think that I was able to establish that I wasn't coming to his office telling him, "you don't know how to do all of this." My intent was to try to establish a relationship, and then get into Reagan. I told him, "Of course, you know, that I have worked with Reagan. I occasionally read the papers and I've seen some of your comments." And I asked, I said, "Would there be some incident that might have happened that would make you not like President Reagan for some reason? Has he ever done anything to you?"

"Well, no."

"Have you ever met him?"

"Well, no."
"Well, maybe there are some things about him that you really might like if you knew more about him. It's certainly up to you."

And we started to establish a little bit of a relationship. That was the first crack at it, but it was still cold. He was a tough man, and he certainly wasn't going to be sweet-talked by some, you know, traveling ambassador coming through here. We ended the meeting. It went all right. We went on a little bit, and then, not too long after that, a congressional delegation came down.

Most of the Caribbean leaders follow U.S. politics intently, and the issues, because we have such a tremendous impact on their countries. I used to have conversations with somebody; I'd say, " A Senator introduced a bill to do this or that," and he'd say, "Oh, you mean Senator Hatch," or "You mean Senator Kennedy." They know who you're talking about.

So this delegation was coming through, and one of the events of the delegation was a reception at the Ambassador's residence. And I invited the Prime Minister, for a lot of reasons: one, I thought he should be there; two, I thought it would be very strange, from the delegation's standpoint, if they were there and he wasn't; and, three, from my standpoint, wouldn't people look unfavorably upon me if I was in a country as an ambassador and didn't have a relationship with the Prime Minister? Isn't that part of the job?

And so, through the Foreign Minister, I told Barrow that I thought he should be at this reception, for a lot of reasons. First, because of the Congressional Delegation and CBI, and that was extremely important to Barbados. And if they felt slighted, that here's a prime minister that couldn't take the time to come to a reception and say hello to them and welcome them and so forth, then that could influence their feeling when I'm trying to sell a certain line in the CBI legislation that's going to benefit Barbados. They're going to say, "Well, Barbados; isn't that where the Prime Minister doesn't like the U.S., doesn't like the Congressional Delegation, doesn't like Reagan. Well, then why don't we just let him deal with his problems by himself, if he doesn't like us."

So it ended up where he finally came to the reception; his first public display of friendship toward the United States. And it worked out well. It evolved into a rather uneventful evening, which was good. He was there, he was fine; there wasn't anything really demanded of anybody. He was polite, and the "appearance" was what I had hoped for.

At the time he was there, he had a girlfriend that he brought with him to the reception. And it's not as horrible as it sounds; he had been separated from his wife for, oh, literally fifteen years or so.

Q: I have an interview that I didn't do, but with Eileen Donovan who was down there, who talked about they used to bring their "comforts" often to the...

RUSSO: Okay. Anyway, his girlfriend was in attendance with him. And, at one point during the evening, she came up to me and said that she was having a fashion show in two or three weeks or whatever, and would I come to that. And I said, "Well, sure, send me an invitation or a ticket or whatever I would need." You know, "tell me when and where." And I didn't think too much of it that night because I was worried about other things. I wanted to make sure Barrow and everyone got along. I actually ended up liking and respecting him, but he was very capable of telling off a congressman or whomever, and of course the press was there to report on this first public event.

Q: So there was some concern.

RUSSO: Right, and so I was not a disinterested participant that evening. But the evening went fine and we went on.

Several days later, I got an invitation to a fund raiser. It was a party fund raiser for Barrow. It was the fashion show his girlfriend had talked about. However, it was an evening honoring Barrow as the head of the Party; a personal honor to him and in recognition of his past life. It was a very nominal contribution to the Party--it might have been twenty-five dollars, or what I thought was fairly nominal. And that made it a little different then, "should I accept this or not." One, I had already said I would go, but, two, when I brought it up to the Country Team, to the man, everyone said I shouldn't go because I would then be endorsing that political party and would therefore be viewed as being a participant in one party over another, and so forth. And I said, "Well, I understand that, but I think I have to go, because I was asked to go and I said I would, but, more than that, I think it's the right thing to do to establish the relationship that we're trying to establish with the Prime Minister." And, again, I was new to the system and I didn't know how big of a breach it would be to be dealing with one party as opposed to another. I thought, well, what could the consequences of something like that be? So, anyway, I decided to go. I said, "As long as I pay for this with my own personal money, I just can't see why there would be a major breach of anything." At least I thought the risk was worth it. And, as I say, the Country Team felt that it was the wrong thing to do. Anyway, I said, "Well, okay, I'm on the spot, I ultimately have to make the decision, and I'll certainly take the consequences for it."

What happened was, I went and it worked out just fine. I think the Prime Minister was surprised that I came, for one thing. I think that I pleased his girlfriend, and that was, I think, helpful. But he couldn't have been more of a gentleman. When he heard that I was coming in, he came out to escort me and my wife in to sort of a ringside table, and he made sure that he went over and got a drink or some wine or whatever it was, and that we had the little favors, and that he was acting as the perfect host.

And I believe that night did more for my relationship with him than anything else I did during the time I was there. We became pretty good friends after that, and his rhetoric against Reagan stopped immediately; his rhetoric against the United States stopped. And I don't think that I did anything more than say: "I'd like to work with you. How can we work together? You know and I know that it's in your best interest to work with us. Why don't we get rid of this rhetoric, because that makes my life miserable and I can't work with you if that's the way you're going to act." And it showed, I think, that I was willing to work with him.

But I think that was a political instinct as opposed to a career foreign service instinct. That's a self-serving story, but I'm telling it because of the instinct of where you're coming from and how you can do this. I mean, Barbados isn't the USSR, and it's not France; it's just a small country and one prime minister, but I still believe that people are people, and prime ministers are prime ministers, no matter where they are.

Q: No, I think this has often been pointed out, that somebody who comes from the really political side rather than just the money side can deal with political leaders often better than a career person.

RUSSO: I really believe that. I found that my staff was testing me and saying: "Well, is this just another political hack; the president's third cousin or whomever, or is this somebody that we can work with? And if we have things going well down here, I benefit from it as a career person." I found that it did a lot to show that, well, all right, I had a position, and I took it contrary to their advice. I didn't belittle anybody's advice. I said, "Hell, I don't know what is going to happen." But I found that they then began to use me for what they wanted to accomplish, because they felt that I could help them through the bureaucracy; help them through the system.

I really believe that in the end we've got to figure out a better way to blend the two -- political and career, if we're going to have a system that really functions. And I think that it's going to be a different system than it has been. I think the 1980s changed the playing field, and I think that it's going to be incumbent upon us to figure out how we use the media, the political and the career people in a better mix, to get a better functioning foreign policy mechanism. I think that we need to change our approach, because we are not making the best use of our resources and our limited budgets. And the way the world is moving so fast, I think we have to have a more agile system to keep up with the tremendous changes that are happening and I believe will continue to happen.

Q: Well, one last sort of major thing I wonder if you could talk about would be the consular role. I mean, immigration, Americans in trouble, that sort of thing. How did you find that?

RUSSO: I found that both rewarding and depressing. Americans in trouble were a depressing part of the job, but a part that I felt I should be personally involved in. In an island environment; in a vacation environment like that, it seems that a lot of things that people wouldn't ordinarily do at home, they do there.

Q: I was a life guard at a beach resort where people had office parties, and the things they... You know, once a year they let go, and I'm sure...

RUSSO: It's sad. I'm sure you've seen some of the things I'm talking about. It's mixing alcohol and swimming, those...I was going to say stupid bikes, maybe they're not stupid, but they're stupid when someone is drinking and not worrying about traffic and that sort of thing. Also, when deaths occurred, we had to make sure that, one, there was no foul play involved. We didn't really have problems with that; most of the deaths or severe injuries were due to just carelessness -- one or two strange cases, probably drug related, but not a major problem.

Q: You didn't have the problems that you had in Jamaica, where there was really rather violent crime against the tourist.

RUSSO: No. No. As I say--that goes back to my tourism point--the Eastern Caribbean is a part of the world that likes Americans. There is a softness to their culture that is

extremely appealing. In many ways, maybe it's because they have been isolated to a degree from the industrialized world. But it's a very nice place, and the people, for the most part, are good people. They've got crime, but not like Jamaica, and they don't resent the Americans in the violent, hostile way that you might find in a Jamaica, or even in the Bahamas, for that matter, or certainly in some of the Central American countries.

So the tragedies to American citizens were mainly self-inflicted in some way or another. And then it was talking to the families, notifying family members, bodies that would have to go through the process, and so forth.

But it's part of what you do, and I was blessed with a wonderful consul general. He had started in Barbados in his first assignment, and spent about eighteen or nineteen years around the world.

Q: Who was that?

RUSSO: Lou Mangiafico. He's in Sicily right now. Well, actually, he's probably on his way back to the United States. He's retiring in February. But his last posting was there. He was overqualified for the job. Lou had been in the Eastern European countries; he had been in every major post you could think of, so he was a very qualified and experienced person. We had a lot of good discussions and thoughtful exercises -- trying to streamline things, trying to work with the island chain. AIDS was becoming an issue. How do you handle that locally? What about testing those coming to the U.S.? -- those kinds of things.

He gave me some good advice the first week, he said, "Mr. Ambassador, what I would recommend is that when someone wants a visa, that you tell them to go see the Consul General, that you don't have anything to do with it." Which was good advice. You walk through airports or whatever and people are handing you passports because they want visas to the United States.

For the most part, you were able to help people. The U.S. citizens visiting there who did have problems were mostly victims of minor crimes, or, as I say, problems that they'd gotten themselves into. And you're there to sort out the facts; make sure they're being treated fairly. Most of the time they were. The laws function well in those islands.

One reoccurring problem was the arrest of U.S. fishing boat captains. Obviously, the area is rich with many kinds of fish. If a captain was caught fishing in the water of one of the island nations, he would be arrested, fined and maybe even have his boat confiscated. I would receive desperate calls from captains who had been arrested and were in danger of losing their boats. Their story line was usually that they were lost, the fish they had on board were not caught in illegal waters but in legal water, and the catch just happened to be on board when the boat became lost. The Captain was innocent, he was being held illegally, and the authorities were trying to take his boat away. Well, maybe. After talking with them, it usually came out that illegal fishing was a chance they were willing to take because the fish were so valuable and plentiful in the Eastern Caribbean, and the odds of

getting caught were very low. The captains were willing to pay the fines if arrested, because they were caught only a small percentage of the time. It was a "cost of doing business" for them. But losing a boat -- that was another story. They were generally good men, and when they finally told the truth, the question was "Am I really going to lose my boat? Do they have to take the boat? Can you help me out?"

But it was nice; unless it was an extreme case, you were able to help.

Q: And you were able to deal with the authorities.

RUSSO: Oh, in an excellent manner. As I say, they have a very strong tradition as far as the rule of law is concerned. They are also concerned about their long-term relationship with the U.S., and the perception of how they deal with us. And so, no; helping U.S. citizens, in this case fishermen, was a very rewarding and satisfying part of the job -- working out a compromise whereby the government could collect a fine, be compensated for the fish, punish the captain but not take away his livelihood; his boat. And we made it clear we would save the boat only once! Being blown off course, with fish on board, did not happen twice; at least not while I was there.

Q: Well, I take it that you left quite satisfied and with good feelings.

RUSSO: Yes, I did. It was a tremendous honor to represent my country in six foreign capitols. I enjoyed being in the Eastern Caribbean, and I made some wonderful friends; in the government, in the international community, as well with the people of the islands. Being an ambassador very much enriched my life, especially to have had the opportunity at a relatively young age. My wife and I will carry with us always a joy and satisfaction, and many fond memories, for having served in the West Indies.

Q: Well, I want to thank you very much. This has been very useful.

End of interview