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MORTON SMITH

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INTERVIEW

Morton Smith Sums Up His Feelings About His Total Career and His Preference for
Specialization in Single Area as Opposed to Multiple Areas of Assignment

Q: Mort, tell me in a few words what you think about your USIA career in general, good or bad, before we get into the chronology.

SMITH: Sure. This is Morton Smith. I joined the Agency in 1955, and retired in October 1994. I had a long and, I can only describe it as a wonderful career. It has been exciting, far exceeding my expectations in terms of stimulation. And occasionally, but fortunately only very, very brief periods of time, there have been some less than enjoyable periods. But they were very, very brief and I think in this respect I am probably luckier than most people in the Agency. I ended up as a Career Minister; I worked seven years at State, two different assignments at State on loan, and the rest of the time with USIS. So it was a winner. But as you will hear subsequently, I have some rather well-defined views about the future of the Agency, the future of what we call “public diplomacy” and particularly the future of the organization that carries out those functions.

Q: Can you expand a little bit on why you said that it was a winner as a career? Highlights?

SMITH: There were a number of highlights; one obviously, the opportunity to work overseas, or in Washington, on the “Far East”. The system encourages interchange among the areas of concentration. In fact there were times in the Agency’s history when you had to sign a contract with the Agency, which in effect, said that you would go with a major in one area and a minor in another area. That was, I think, obviously absurd. If you know and understand and appreciate the problems working in one part of the world--certainly a part of the world as complex as the Far East--it makes no sense to send me to Latin America, which the Agency tried to do. There’s enough difference, country by country in East Asia, and certainly enough difference between Northeast Asia and southeast Asia to warrant a career. And I can proudly say that I beat the system. Every one of my overseas assignments was in the Far East. Virtually, every one of my Washington assignments dealt with the Far East. But I attribute that to my stubbornness, and not to the wisdom of the system.

Q: And so you don’t have a problem with the general idea of diversification--getting out of one area and into somewhere else? You already said that, I think.

SMITH: Yeah, different strokes for different folks. I mean, some people do well and would welcome diversity. And I think it’s fine. I’m not at all saying that everyone should be a narrow specialist.

Q: What about this idea of “clientitis”...the belief that after so many years in a country or an area, you tend to speak for them, not for Uncle Sam?

SMITH: Well, I don't know about other people, but anybody who knows Mort Smith knows that by the end of his tour he's the most rabid critic of the country he's working in!

Q: But do you think that going for a year to Florence or some place and then back would give you a fresh outlook and you wouldn't be completely dominated by the thoughts that you had made on the spot? In other words, going in and looking freshly at a problem rather than looking at it from all the baggage you've accumulated locally?

SMITH: Yeah, sure. Change is always good but my central point is that the Far East was and is so different that even though I could say I spent almost all my career in the Far East, the fact is that I was dealing with Burma, whose problems are different than Korea's, whose problems are different than Singapore's, whose problems are different than those of the Philippines, and at different times in my career, even though I might have been dealing heavily with Korea, the issues were quite different. But the final experience that one accumulates is really, really necessary to understand what's going on. The old concept of the generalist foreign service officer who could after two or three years in Timbuktu become knowledgeable enough to get a job done reasonably well and then go to Paris and do the same thing in Paris, is absurd. The world is too complicated. And while there are commonalities, they certainly don't override the differences. In the Far East you're dealing with roughly fifteen countries and each one is really different. So after eight years in Korea, I can't say I understand Koreans. I'm smart enough to know I'm just beginning to understand the dimensions of the problems in Korea after eight years. How can anybody hope to accomplish anything worthwhile in two or three years?

Smith Discusses Value of Good Management Which Usually Originates at Field Level.
Asserts USIA Headquarters is Usually Inept and Irrelevant

SMITH: How does one avoid clientitis? Well, that's a product of management, intelligent management. You have to have leaders who understand the working environment overseas, who understand the kinds of people they have brought in to get the job done, and are smart enough to manage them. I can honestly say that most management in this Agency over the years has been abysmally ignorant. It has not equaled the level of competence of its officers.

Q: Management on the spot, on the local level or from Washington?

SMITH: From Washington. Because over the years, and this is not just nostalgia, when I came into the Agency, I was the youngest in my class and as I rose through the ranks, I rose very quickly. I was always the first in my pay grade. I was a PAO in Korea before I was forty...I'm an old guy now, so I can speak, not just from nostalgia. Over the years, I've seen the increasing irrelevance of Washington to our work overseas. This is important; this is vital. It's vital in my view of where the Agency is going or not going in the future.

Q: If Washington is irrelevant, where do you get your program guidance? Do you just make it up out of your own head?

SMITH: Yes, mostly, mostly. What I need from Washington, and I'm not saying it's a bad thing, is money and people. And quantities and qualities of them that suit my needs. I spent my last assignment in Manila, an assignment that I didn't particularly like, but I had to go, so I went. And I did some very, very interesting things there. The best thing I did had absolutely no input from the Agency, except the critical money. And when I had to get more money than the Agency would have normally given me for the special project, I was fortunate in knowing the bureaucracy well enough to know which Washington pocket to pick. But in terms of substance, the Agency had no input into this at all and didn't have to.

Q: They supported your idea?

SMITH: They knew a good idea and in that sense, it was intelligent management.

Q: But they reacted to the project, whatever it was, rather than provide the initiative?

SMITH: Right, right. I generated a major conference that was sponsored by the Council on Foreign Relations in New York on the future of U.S. - Philippines relations. I got the Agency to give us money for nine additional IVS (International Visitor) which paid the way for these nine very prominent Filipinos to attend. And then I got the Council on Foreign Relations to take care of the American participants on the American side. The ideas were all ours; we generated the concept. The Ambassador was an enthusiastic supporter. All the rest was internal. The Agency was just there saying, "Yes," great idea, saluting and giving us the money. I had to fight to get it, because it was well beyond our budget. But they were smart enough to see it was a really good idea. So, on the one hand, I see that the Agency is becoming increasingly irrelevant. That is both a criticism but it can be an asset too. You don't want them in your hair every day.

Q: You don't want them looking over your shoulder.

SMITH: Exactly. And the fact is that there is increasingly little that the Agency can do to help you. You're really on your own, which is fine. But that has implications for the organization in Washington, and for management, and for this thing we call the Agency.

Agency Policy Office Especially of Little Use. State Department Also a Hindrance

Q: Did you find guidance from the U.S. government lacking, meaningless--from "the Agency"? Who provided the input, project by project, objective oriented?

SMITH: I'm afraid, I don't like to say this because I came in as an enthusiastic USIS officer, and most of my career I was an enthusiastic USIS officer fighting the enemy, which was State. Even though I had worked for them for a while and knew them well

enough to know what they were about, I say this very reluctantly. But here, also, in the real world of working in an embassy overseas trying to get a program done, the real policy guidance came from the ambassador, if anybody gave you guidance at all.

Q: The Office of Policy was not helpful?

SMITH: Yeah, the policy shop, which even in its truncated present form, is totally irrelevant. It had nothing to offer on what I was doing out there.

Q: Is it that it's irrelevant as an office, or only the way it functioned in your particular experience? I mean if you had better people, better machinery for the transmission of policy guidance, would not the idea of "guidance from the top" be both useful and relevant?

SMITH: No longer is it relevant. We don't have vehicles any more. I mean, to me, the policy office would be relevant if the Agency was producing products. Magazines, other printed products, if the Voice was reflecting policy in any meaningful way. If the Agency's media in some way had to reflect policy. So you need a policy officer, somebody who interprets what is going on from a policy position. The Agency doesn't do that any more.

Q: They don't produce the products?

SMITH: They don't produce the products. So whom are we making policy for? Whom are we proclaiming policy for?

Q: Presumably, if you had a chat with somebody--a journalist, university professor, a politician--the substance of your conversation is the "product," instead of a magazine or a radio tape. It's your little hour-chat over a beer.

SMITH: Sure. But I get the substance of my chat out of the wireless file, out of my reading of the telegrams, classified and otherwise, texts that come through the file. So the extent that those reflect the work of the policy shop, I have no quarrel with them. But the policy shop has almost no meaning for me as practitioner in the field directly. Its major function should be to influence the Agency's media. Now, if the Agency's media aren't doing anything...

Q: ...then its function is also to influence the Agency's operators overseas in the use of media products and whatever other use they're up to eight hours a day, whatever they do. Presumably, somebody back home, somewhere, White House, State Department, USIA Headquarters, somebody tells people in the field, "Here is our overall objective, this is what we want to do." In Laos, e.g., our policy basically was "to support the King as a means of non-support for the Communist, Pathet Lao, so that his political party will prevail, i.e., anti-Communism will prevail. That's our position; now you promote it."

SMITH: You're right. But I don't need a policy person in Washington to tell me that. I read the telegrams. I understand what the telegrams are saying, I see the ambassador constantly, and other people in the mission. I am a very politicized, a very politically oriented officer. To me, a good USIS officer is the best single, internal political asset that an embassy has. However, he has to perceive himself that way. I can't say there are lots of them, but there have been PAOs and other USIS officers who think they are ivory tower intellectuals. Don't dirty your hands with politics; don't propagandize, and all this other stuff. They are welcome to their views. To me, we're propagandists. I'm not ashamed of the term; we're involved in political warfare of one sort or another. That's the essence of our business and if we can't accept that, we should go to work for some foundation or other. I'm saying that if the leadership of the Agency can't accept it, they should have the honesty to put the Agency out of business and join the Ford Foundation or whatever.

Q: Your emphasis is on the man on the spot as opposed to direction from Washington. Probably it works fine if the man on the spot is fine and has got everything just right. Isn't the danger that the guy on the spot, who is an activist, can activate the wrong things?

SMITH: Absolutely. Mistakes can be made. No question about it. And that's what management is for. I'm not saying that all management should disappear. Make sure the guy is doing it right. We have two managers: we have the local manager, the ambassador, and we have the other manager at the area office, and between the two of them there is enough opportunity for management, they have to be smart enough to do the job, which is not always the case.

Bio Sketch. Pre-USIA Activities. Entry Into USIA.

Q: For the record, can you give us a bio sketch? Tell me when and how you entered the Agency. Something about who you are, your education, your experience pre-USIA, how you came to join the Agency, what motivated you to say, "I want a job." Were you just looking for a job that would bring in some money?

SMITH: Okay. I always had interest in the Far East. I was born and raised in Brooklyn. The usual question is, "Gee, how does someone who grew up in Brooklyn develop an interest in the Far East?" And my wise-guy answer is, if you grew up the way I did in Brooklyn, you'd want to get out of there any way you could.

Q: But only to the then so-called "Far East"?

SMITH: The Far East was far away enough, and I've always had an interest in the Far East. I went to City College; I majored in history. We only had one course in the Far East; I took it. I went to Yale Graduate School, Southeast Asian Studies. I completed the two-year program in one year because I couldn't afford to stay two years, and I had no clear-cut goals except that of wanting to work in the Far East. While in Graduate School at Yale, I met a Professor of Vietnamese Affairs (this was in 1952-53). He was a great

figure in French studies of the history of Vietnam, and taught at Yale for half a year and the other half in Switzerland. I took two courses with Paul Mus and in the class was John _____. I wasn't sure whether he was working for USIA--which had just been formed at that time--or knew of it, I can't recall exactly. But he mentioned USIA. And so it stuck on the back of my mind. I didn't do anything about it. After graduate school, I was drafted. I knew I was going to be drafted, so I asked to get it over with. I thought I was going to the Far East but ended up at Fort Lewis in Washington State, where I stayed for twenty-one months. But one day--this is literally the role of happenstance in one's life--I heard on somebody's radio that the recruiter from the U.S. Information Agency was going to be in Seattle. So, I got in touch with him. That was in early 1955. The Agency sent me a plane ticket and asked me to come for an interview in Washington. I was still in the Army. I took leave and flew to the East Coast. There was no examination, no written examination.

Q: That was early 1955?

SMITH: That was early 1955. My interview was fascinating. I was a G.I. and the panel comprised of L.K. Little, who was the first Director of Personnel for the Agency, and who had been in the Old China Customs Service. The second person, I don't remember. The third person whom I do remember, however, was George Hellyer. George was the East Asia Area Director at that time and had earlier been a tea planter in Taiwan. Three substantive people.

Q: I was in Washington being interviewed at the identical time. I remember my interviewer was Russell Cox. Do you remember Russ?

SMITH: I know Russ; he was in Personnel.

Q: He was one of my interviewers for Personnel.

SMITH: And he may have been on my panel also. Anyhow, the interesting thing about the panel was that there was no written examination. George Hellyer came into the interview with some charts. Large cardboard charts. Chatting while asking me about my background and the rest of it, he showed me a chart and said, "Look at these charts for a while." He had just come from the Hill, where he gave a briefing for the House Subcommittee on the history of Ho Chi Minh's intellectual development. He obviously had noticed I had taken some courses in Vietnamese history in 1953. He asked me to talk about the relationship of Communism to Nationalism. So I talked. I don't know how long, maybe a couple of hours, and they asked other questions about East Asia. Then he said, "You will be hearing from us." On the way out (I insist on telling this anecdote), the Personnel Officer who was in charge of me (his name is Marshall Berry), was my case officer so to speak. We were in the elevator together and I said, "Well, how did I do?" He said (Marshall Berry was from Kentucky or Tennessee and had a very strong accent), "Well son, I don't think you did so well." He said, "You have a terrible accent. You

should get some elocution lessons.” For years after, I would see Marshall Berry in the halls of the Agency and we’d laughed about it.

Q: You never learned how to speak Kentucky?

First Overseas Assignment, Korea, First as JOT.
Then, Branch Public Affairs Officer at Kwangju

SMITH: This really happened. Anyhow, eventually in the fall of 1955, the Agency said I could become a USIS officer and I came to Washington for three months of training. It was interesting; I had never been in that environment. They asked me where I wanted to go and I said, “Well, at Yale I had courses in Vietnamese history. I also had to take a language and I studied Burmese, so I thought I could speak Burmese; in addition, I had other courses in Burmese history.” They were going to send me to Burma but the PAO said no. He was Paul Nielsen, who objected, not because of me, but because it was a sensitive period in U.S. - Burmese relations, and he didn’t want another person on the staff whose functions would be somewhat undefined. They assigned me to Korea. I think one of the secrets of a successful career is picking your boss, picking a good boss. Of course, you don’t pick them but anyhow in Korea (when later I did go there) as a JOT, my boss was PAO John McKnight. John had been an AP correspondent in Rome and elsewhere. A Southerner of the old school who loved language, he was a brilliant writer who wrote a wonderful book on the Vatican and insisted on good writing. I spent not quite a year in Seoul as a JOT and then was assigned to a branch post (Kwangju).

Q: In Korea?

SMITH: In Korea, but it could possibly have been anywhere in the world. At that time, they didn’t feel that JOTs fresh out of their year’s training were qualified as BPAO. Now, of course, they think just the opposite. But, they said, “Well, Okay, we’ll try it.” So I was the first JOT to be a BPAO.

After Korea, Burma. With A Short Digression On What Motivated Entrance Into Foreign Service And USIA

SMITH: After my BPAO assignment in Kwangju, I was sent to Burma in 1958. I was very fortunate to have incredibly wonderful bosses. Art Hummel was the PAO in Burma; he later became the Ambassador there, and of course, still later, in China. In Burma, I was an assistant CAO, in charge of exhibits, book programs, and visiting performers. I was only twenty-seven years old. During my second two years there, Art asked me if I would be the press attaché. At that time, there was a significant press. We had a very big program, with a staff of fifteen Americans at that time in USIS. The press activity was very active and important.

Q: Let me interrupt here and get back a minute to your entering the Agency--your recruitment into the Agency. Can you pinpoint a little more specifically your motivation?

Did you, for example, want a free trip to the Far East; did you want to “do good” in the promotion of U.S. policy? Was your motivation the urging by others or was your motivation selfish, that “This would be a pleasant thing for me to do to make me feel good?” How would you describe your motive for joining USIA?

SMITH: The easiest way to do this would be to say all of the above. These were all factors, except nobody was urging me to do it but, as I said, I always had an interest in working in the Far East, and being relatively conservative in politics--I believe that government is not a bad thing and that we should support it. But I certainly don't have a missionary approach to the job. I have met people who in our missions were sort of on a semi-religious calling.

Q: Crusading?

SMITH: There were people like that. I didn't see it that way. To me, somebody has to do the government's PR work. There wasn't any one thing. I needed a job, no question about that. I actually turned down two jobs with the CIA at the same time. They got into my background. I don't know why I picked the Agency but it had appeal in being brand new.

Q: With people your age, if the idea of Foreign Service entered your head, wouldn't you think of State first rather than CIA or USIA?

SMITH: I never thought of State, I can honestly say that. I never wanted to be ambassador but I'll have some comments on that later on because I was a DCM. But I always said to myself, if I wanted to be ambassador, I'd have joined State. But I wanted to get into a business that was intellectually and professionally rewarding. Where could you, while still in your twenties, have the responsibilities such as those of a branch PAO?

Q: Of course, I understand that very well.

SMITH: I had over thirty local employees in Korea when I was twenty-six years old.

Q: Did status have anything to do with your joining the Foreign Service or USIA?

SMITH: Absolutely not.

Q: None.

SMITH: It's never been a factor in my life. I spent a total of six years in Burma on two different assignments. Then, when I returned home, first I was desk officer, and then Policy Officer for East Asia.

Q: Let me interrupt you again and ask you a question about your Burma days. Can you relate your experience in Burma to U.S. government objectives? Not only what you did but why you did it and what you accomplished in terms of U.S. government objectives?

What were you trying to achieve in Burma? To separate the Burmese from the Chinese, the Russians, what?

SMITH: It was a highly politicized situation, particularly in the press job. I was at war with the Russians and the Chinese, and a very large significant group of Burmese communists. I got to know some of these people very well.

Q: You had an impact on them?

SMITH: I was able to influence some of them.

Q: To reflect a better understanding and sympathies for American traditions?

SMITH: No question about it. In those days we used to measure our effect. And in Burmese, I supplied them with the wherewithal. It's a long story, and I don't know all the ins and outs. Some of it was attributable to plain old choosing the right guys. I had an effectiveness in the precision of my choices, and the size of our press clippings reflect how much we were getting placed. Lots of papers were using our stuff.

Q: Did you get the idea from Washington, either then or slightly earlier, that your job was that of a warrior? How did that become the Agency's job for twenty-five years?

SMITH: Nobody told me that I should go and try to write a newspaper's editorials. It sort of happened.

Q: I remember thinking to myself at that age that you were just describing, "What the hell am I doing, what am I supposed to be doing?" And I could think of USIA on Pennsylvania Avenue with that little sign out front, "Telling America's Story to the World". That's what I'm supposed to be doing. What the hell does that have to do with Communism vs. Democracy or Democracy vs. Communism? That's what it turned into, of course, but nobody ever told us this was our job, the ideological warrior.

SMITH: It happened naturally and that was fine. It worked and everybody seemed...

Q: Did you or they assume that this is what you should be doing there?

SMITH: I might say in Burma that's where the political role of the USIS officer was very significant and very clear. We were out there, lots of people talking, lots of people every day. What about??? I sat down and had a meeting with this guy I selected, and he told me such and such, whether it was important or not. Before I knew it, I was a political operator as a by-product, a natural by-product. I didn't have to go out and seek out information.

Q: Were you supported by the State Department people in the embassy?

SMITH: Sure. I tended to bully people myself. First, with a Burmese language background. Second, with a degree in Southeast Asian studies... If you're going to argue with me... Same thing was true with Korea; I had a Korean language background and if you want to argue with me, fine. That's fine. But you'd better know what you're talking about!

Q: Did you find people in important positions who simply belittled the whole role of USIS as useless? "What are you doing fighting an ideological war; your views are unimportant." "Going around making yourself feel good." Did you ever encounter that?

SMITH: Yes I did, sure. The fact that I was as politically knowledgeable as just about anybody in the embassy I worked in, helped ameliorate that. Maybe I was the personal exception. That could very well be, but they couldn't tell me that they knew more about the political situation in any country in which I worked than I did.

Would You Recommend the Agency Foreign Service Career to Anyone Today?

Q: You regard your career as "a successful one." If you had a son who was college age and expressed to you some interest in joining USIA or the Foreign Service, would you encourage him?

SMITH: No, not any more.

Q: Would you go into that, please?

SMITH: The business has changed. First, the change in numbers were staggering. In the good old days of the cold War, in Burma, we had 15-16 Americans and budgets of real significance. But no more. That's not to say that we should bring back the Cold War to make us feel good. Obviously not. But, as I say, the nature of the business has changed. We can get the job done with fewer people than before at many posts.

Q: If the nature of the business has changed, maybe the nature of kids has also changed. The old, one-on-one, free-wheeling style that you describe would be foreign to a nineteen year old today and he would somehow prefer to fit into a currently existing situation in a different way.

SMITH: Could be. One of the things that I found so good about the Agency, and some of what I've said has been negative, one of the things I found so good about the Agency in its earlier days, is that we were not a homogenized group of people. We were an incredibly diverse bunch that came in during the "fifties and early sixties"; everything from guys just out of graduate school to guys who had spent twenty years in the movie business, to a guy who had been working for the Washington Post or the Star--a wide range of experiences came together under this Agency and for a young guy like me, with no experience except for school and the Army, it was incredibly exciting.

Q: I understand what you mean.

SMITH: Now, what do we have? Now we have guys that take the same exam as the State Department people do. And while they may have different backgrounds, they're all sort of the same type. We have too many Ph.D.s in English and Drama. I haven't done a study, but there seems to be lots of them. People's work background isn't what it used to be. The work itself has changed. Yeah, it works both ways--the nature of the job has changed and the kinds of people have changed.

Q: But you wouldn't think that your hypothetical son would find satisfaction in such a career as you had?

SMITH: One of them actually tried. He came close. He passed the written and the oral. But when you bring in fifty people per year instead of three hundred--chances diminish. I think the Agency's future is in jeopardy.

Q: I'd like to get into that later and get into your view of the future Agency. I note what kind of guidance you got and how useful was it? You've already told me it wasn't worth a damn.

SMITH: Except for the most part, right from the beginning, I was an enormous user of the wireless file. I used to take wire stories and rewrite them and use them as editorials for the leading papers. What more can you want?

Q: Sure, that's useful. And you found in your work a general satisfaction, did you? You felt that you were doing something worthwhile?

SMITH: I'm not sure you're going to find many young officers today feeling that way. I could be misreading, but I don't get that feeling at all. They don't feel they have an obligation to spend a lot of time working all those hours. I'm sorry. You don't get the wives role. That's where the whole aspect of the business has changed enormously. Wives were part of the team. The Japanese do it differently. Japanese Foreign Service wives get paid for their hostess activities. My wife, for thirty years, was doing this and she was getting nothing but an occasional thank you from me, if that.

Q: You consider your career to have been successful?

SMITH: Yeah.

Q: What things were there that you wished for, that you might have achieved or didn't achieve, since you didn't want to be the ambassador?

SMITH: Not much. I think I was most disappointed at the ending. I had some real bitches about Personnel. Personnel decisions, outrageous personnel decisions, arbitrary and wrong.

Q: Some bad examples, please?

SMITH: Particularly as it relates to my assignments. I said throughout my career that, to the extent possible, I was going to make my own assignments through the personnel system because it couldn't possibly operate to my benefit. So I made my own assignments after the initial two years.

Back From Burma--Short Stint in Agency, Then Assigned to Department of State.

SMITH: For example, in 1973, when I came back from being PAO in a very high profile place

--Korea--I finally ended up at ICS, with Hal Schneidman. But within a few months I got a call from State, from Phil Habib and Art Hummel with whom I quickly went to work.

Q: Their personnel system must have worked better than ours.

SMITH: "Why don't you think it over?" I was asked. I didn't have to think it over. I said, "Yeah," and I was there in two weeks. I have other examples. I served a diplomat-in-residence tour which I organized myself.

Digression to Survey of Successive Career Assignments

Q: Was career advancement in terms of promotion important to you as you went along?

SMITH: I can honestly say that the answer is no. I think I understand myself pretty well. People certainly furthered my career by calling me a hard-charger. I was a hard-charger because I had a lot of energy and I worked hard and all the rest of it--not because of reputation. That was never a factor. It was never a factor, simply because that was the way I worked. I worked hard and fast. It was not that I was seeking it. I can tell you honestly, if wanted to become ambassador, I could have been ambassador later.

Q: Stuck in a small country overseas in a small embassy and with a lack of guidance from Washington, it seemed to me you would tend to relate your success or the quality of your work in terms of how you were thought of by your peers.

SMITH: Yeah.

Q: And the measure of that success is, of course, promotion.

SMITH: It really was very much like a PAO club, no question about it. Because I had a lot of respect for the PAOs, or almost all of the PAOs, what they thought of me was important. Good OERs (efficiency ratings) and a bunch of promotions to me were secondary, but I'll never forget, one day, John McKnight spoke harshly to me because I

did something he didn't like, and I shaped up fast. But he was smart and perceptive. He wrote in my OER in 1956: In about fifteen years, Smith should be ready for a PAO position. I became PAO in Korea in 1971! It was the views of the PAOs that mattered to me. I had John McKnight, Art Hummel, Jack O'Brien.

Q: You were fortunate to have had good people. What would be the way you describe your early positions? Lots of moving by trial and error?

SMITH: Okay. I had roughly two years in Korea and almost six years in Burma. Came back to the Agency for about four years in Washington, D.C. at the old East Asia Office. Then in 1967, I went out to Korea again, for Language Study, and then as Deputy PAO for two and a half years, then PAO for another two plus years. Then I left Korea in 1973.

Q: I gather that you found opportunity to move into positions that you wanted. I mean you weren't blocked?

SMITH: No, I was always offered good jobs. I was young but I was lucky and had good bosses and they gave me good assignments. As PAO in Korea, I noticed that a lot of people were kind of surprised that anybody so young was going to be PAO in a place as significant as Korea, but that worked out. When I came back from Korea in 1973, as I said earlier, I worked for Hal Schneidman as one of the deputies in the old ICS organization for about six months and then Art Hummel called me on behalf of Phil Habib who was then the Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and who had been my ambassador in Korea. Their Public Affairs Advisor slot was opening in the East Asia Bureau of State and they asked me to come along and I didn't hesitate for a minute. I went over there for two-plus years, absolutely wonderful years; also, terrible years because I started working there on the January 15 and, of course, on April 25, 1975, Saigon fell. I might say, I missed one thing. After Korea, I went to the Senior Seminar for a year. I'm sorry I missed telling you that. It was a great year.

Q: If you had to tick off in single word fashion--qualities that in your experience, your opinion, make for success in the Foreign Service--specific things, like foreign language, the ability to write, the so-called leadership factor, the ability to gather people around you and lead them in certain directions. What were the technical specific qualities that you think a foreign service officer needed to succeed?

SMITH: There are different ways to succeed. To me, there are many paths to heaven. Of course, there is a lot of luck involved but its hard to generalize. In my case, I think I did succeed, but it was a product of--I wasn't a good language student, but I made maximum use of my limited capabilities. I had studied Burmese and Korean and I used what little I had reasonably well. And I worked hard. I'm not the smartest guy in the world but nobody beats me for diligence and energy. So I make up for it. I may not be a genius, but it's just like on the tennis court, I would run my opponent ragged even though I didn't have the best shots in the world. Leadership ability also is important, and it's a quality that is hard to identify, hard to measure and hard to predict early in life.

Q: The military spends a lifetime worrying about it.

SMITH: But you know, to give you an example of perceptions people may have of you that you may not be aware of. I was leaving Manila, my last post, just a year and a half ago. I went around saying good-bye to people and I stopped in the personnel office in the embassy to say good-bye there. There was a middle-grade officer at State Department Personnel, a guy whom I didn't know very well, but somebody I dealt with, so I felt that I should say good bye. He just knocked my socks off by saying, "It was a pleasure working with you, and all the rest. I want you to know that if you ever want to get into politics, you let me know where you're going to be, because I want to come and vote for you." To me that was a remarkable statement. Totally unexpected from a guy I barely knew but there was something, and I don't say this for praise but to illustrate the mysteriousness of this quality, that there was something out there and you may not even know you have it.

Q: Do you think he was right? Did you have some political instincts?

SMITH: It's not the first time. I had forgotten but John Reinhardt once wrote in an OER of mine (and John and I were good friends although I didn't really like the way John ran the Agency) that I was the best politician in the Agency. I'm not so sure he was praising me.

Q: You have to think about what that means.

SMITH: But when this guy told me that, I remembered, gee, this is not the first time that this ever happened. So there's something there, but I don't know what it is.

Return to the Department of State Experience,
and Discussion of Qualities Necessary For Program Leadership

Q: Isn't it a little dangerous to be on your own for guidance? To sort of think: Well, I've studied this, I've read that, I've kept up with the literature and the current situation. I talk to people, I've observed what's going on around me therefore I can make up my own guidance, I can determine what I'm going to do in the interest of the U.S. government. Isn't that a little risky?

SMITH: Sure, if you're too full of yourself, if you're arrogant, if your knowledge is superficial and if you ignore the guidance that is available, as minimal as it might be. Now, I'm not a fool. I would read the programs, the embassy traffic, the spook traffic, and get a sense of what is going on and then it becomes a matter of who, in the absence of specific guidance, who says "You should say such and such." There are big, big wide areas for individual variation.

Q: Sure.

SMITH: What the hell, I get paid to use my experience and my knowledge. And, quite frankly, one of the reasons I felt it was time to retire was that I felt that, hey wait a minute, I'm starting to get ambassadors out here who are not only younger than I am but who know a whole lot less than I, as well as DCMs and other people that I have to deal with. It's time to go.

Q: Time to retire?

SMITH: Let them learn and let them do it. Having had to break in so many ambassadors (three in Manila), I felt it was enough.

Q: Okay, now I'd liked to get into this business of your being a DCM, and your general ideas of the usefulness of the Agency as an agency, but I'll put that off until next time.

SMITH: Okay.

Q: Today is November 22, 1994 and this is a continuing interview with Morton Smith.

Processes of Formulation of Policy Guidance at Embassy Level.
Dissemination to Field Personnel.

Q: Mort, you said earlier that, except for the Wireless File, guidance from Washington to the field was not good. PAO's on the spot explained U.S. government policy as best they could from the field. Now, Mort, you're a pretty smart guy, widely experienced in the Agency. I'm sure you wouldn't be discussing U.S. government policy unless you were totally convinced you were expressing it correctly. But let's say you had a young branch PAO who was new to the business and sometimes given to sounding off without adequate consideration of the consequences. And suppose he was planning a seminar that would get into American military commitment to Korea, and that he had invited ranking military officers, both American and Korean, as participants. But as branch PAO, he will be regarded as the official spokesman on U.S. policy. How, in advance, do you, as PAO communicate U.S. policy to him? Test him out? How do you prepare him for his role? In fact, would you allow this young, inexperienced PAO to get himself in the position of conducting such a seminar in the first place and to invite such prominent people to participate? In any event, how do you assure that American policy will be correctly and sympathetically stated?

SMITH: Well, I think every branch PAO as well as the PAO himself and other members of the staff should look upon a discussion of U.S. foreign policy in any particular country, or region of the world, as their bread and butter. That's the essence of what we're about. So I would certainly encourage him to do so. If he didn't do so, I'd kick his ass. It's necessary. At the same time, if he's sitting down at a branch post two hundred and fifty miles south of Seoul, how do you ensure he knows what he's talking about? Well, that's why there's a home office; that's why there's a headquarters (at the embassy). You want him to make sure he's getting the Wireless File and that his attention is called to the key

stories that may be relevant to whatever subject he's discussing. We sanitize telegrams, State or other cables that we get that may be relevant. We make sure he has copies of all the Ambassador's speeches and, in this case, the public addresses of the Commander of CINCPAC, and UN Commander, the U.S. military leaders, that he has copies of all those. In fact, in our quarterly meetings, when I was in Korea, when we took the branch PAO up to Seoul, at least every quarter, we'd go through the key subjects, in terms of what our policies might be, in terms of materials that may be available that he might not have ready access to that he can refer to if he needs them. This is the essence of the business. We ensure that there is a constant pipeline of material that is running from the headquarters office to the branch PAO. And it's up to him to absorb it and to meld it into a meaningful presentation. He may or may not necessarily be a speaker; he could just be a facilitator.

Q: And would headquarters, USIS-Seoul, monitor the program?

SMITH: Maybe, depends. If it were appropriate, if it were convenient, yes. In my time in Seoul, we had a PAO, we had a Deputy, and we had a Field Programs Officer who was basically the supervisor of the branches. If one or the other of us was traveling at that time, in that case, we would. But I wouldn't necessarily require that we monitor every program that we had.

Q: You just put your trust in your people that you have trust in.

SMITH: Sure.

Q: And if the guy, in your view, didn't know what he was talking about, you'd cut off the whole idea?

SMITH: I wouldn't send him to the post in the first place. If the guy is incapable of managing, organizing and conducting a program like that, he shouldn't be there. If I made a mistake by sending him down there, I'd know about it pretty soon. And at the same time, being a branch PAO is a heavy experience for a young officer.

Q: It sure is. They may be good in one thing--maybe they can make a formal speech, write something, maybe they can deal with journalists, but not do well with academic seminars.

SMITH: Part of being the manager in the capital is knowing your people and knowing what their capabilities are. I'm not going to send anybody down on an off chance that they might be able to handle it. It's a big responsibility.

Q: I was thinking you might in your answers reflect on this idea because I imagine it comes from your own experience. If you were not 100 percent certain about the knowledge and understanding of a branch PAO, you might say, this is a situation where we want to be absolutely sure that U.S. policy is correctly stated, and the policy will undoubtedly touch on U.S. troop presence, U.S. troop withdrawal, U.S. troop cuts, etc. I

would do something like this: If the Political Officer in the embassy, "John Doe," is the number one expert on this subject, I'm going to call my BPAO in Pusan and I'm going to say, "Put Doe on your panel." Then I'd call "Doe" and say, "I want you to take part." Did that ever occur to you?

SMITH: Oh, yeah, it happened all the time. If the question was how you organize such a panel, sure that's an obvious answer. Get the DCM or the Political Counselor or the PAO, or whoever is knowledgeable about the subject. That was not the question that I was addressing. I was addressing how do I ensure that he gets the guidance. Of course, one way to get the guidance is to call people at headquarters. I'm talking about the guy who's there by himself and making sure that he gets the materials and making sure that he comes to Seoul for quarterly meetings, at which we always had briefings in the embassy. A full briefing, a political briefing, he makes a round of all the guys four times a year.

Q: Okay, thank you. You'll find that in my questions I keep coming back to policy guidance, and how you ensure that the people who speak know what they're speaking about.

SMITH: Sure, that's absolutely necessary. I share your concern.

Q: I have a concern about the line of policy guidance. Does it go from PAO to Ambassador, to DCM, to Political Counselor? Does it come to the PAO from Washington? Does it originate from Washington before any dissemination takes place in the field?

SMITH: It depends on what the issue is. If you're talking about big worldwide issues, like population, environment in the global sense, drugs, narcotics in an international sense, if you're talking about those kinds of issues, they are the guidances that generally come out of Washington. The most useful guidance comes out of Washington because they see the big picture. If you're talking about the individual country, or the region, or the country's specific issues there, your guidance and your line is within the embassy.

Q: Within the country?

SMITH: That's right. There may be an aspect of that that comes out of State, but for the most part the Agency, except in extraordinary circumstances, is not in the game of country specific policies. I would be hard pressed, quite frankly, to think of a situation where the Agency can tell me in Manila, of a specific line to take on a specific problem...

Q: ...that you couldn't do better or find out on your own.

SMITH: Working with the Ambassador, myself, the DCM and the Political Officer and whoever. I think this is one of the basic tenets, the basic facts of life in the USIS existence that...

Q: What do you do if you have a “cultural PAO” who spends all his time worrying about the Fulbright program?

SMITH: Spends all his time worrying about the Fulbright program?

Q: ...and isn't interested in international politics.

SMITH: Ship him out; send him home. He's not a PAO. To me, a PAO has to have his fingers on every aspect of the program, has to be sensitive to every aspect of the program. He may be culturally and informationally inclined himself, but he's got to know what goes on in all program areas. For example, one of the first things I did when I got to Manila, when I found out that the PAO was not on the Fulbright Board, was to tell the Chairman, the CAO, “I'm not going to throw you off the Board; you stay on the Board, but when your term is up you become an ordinary member of the Board and I will be Chairman.” To me, that is a proper role for the PAO and I did it.

1979, Under Unusual Circumstances, Smith Assigned
as Deputy Chief of Mission (DCM) in Singapore

Q: Thanks a lot, Mort, that's very good, very, very useful. Okay, now we'll get down to the subject of the day. No, we won't, we'll get down to...we'll continue with Mort Smith's experiences in field posts, and particularly, in his assignments in Singapore as DCM. Could we begin by your telling us how your assignment came about--it's a bit unusual for a USIA officer to be DCM. How did it come about in the first place? How did it work out?

SMITH: Yeah. It was certainly unusual. It was extraordinary. This would have been in 1979. I was then Director of East Asia for USIA. I had been there two years since I left State as Public Affairs Advisor in the East Asia Bureau of State. My first boss there was Phil Habib, and my last boss was Dick Holbrooke, for whom I worked for six or seven months. During that time, I traveled for him to Hanoi and with him to Paris, so we developed a very good relationship. So, one day, a few years later in 1979, Holbrooke calls me at USIA and asks if I'd like to go to Singapore as DCM. I said, “What happened?” Well, the fellow that had been there had apparently severely alienated the ambassador who was a political appointee, a former Governor of South Dakota, so much so that they had to get rid of him. They needed somebody in a hurry and somebody that Holbrooke felt could not only do the DCM job himself, but also look after the care and feeding of a highly political, highly inexperienced ambassador. At that point, after working with John Reinhardt and Charlie Bray for two-plus years in Washington, I was ready to go to Singapore. So I said, “Sure,” and that's how I got there.

Q: How did it work out?

SMITH: It worked out extraordinarily well. The ambassador had been for eight years Governor of South Dakota--a very nice guy. His background is that his family were very

prominent business people in South Dakota; he wasn't the smartest guy in the world, but he was a decent guy.

Q: Know anything about Singapore?

SMITH: He knew nothing about Singapore. Didn't even know where it was. He had a charming wife and eight sons. He found himself in Singapore dealing with the most demanding host government, intellectually. Unfortunately, the guy who was the DCM, whom I knew from State, was a very able political officer but was rather unfeeling and unsympathetic and insensitive to the ambassador's shortcomings. He apparently made no secret of his views about the ambassador through certain people in the community. Word apparently got back to the ambassador who was insecure to begin with, and became even more so when he heard of these things and eventually asked that the guy be removed. It was a matter of personal relations. I mean the care and feeding of a sensitive individual. I quickly established a good personal relationship with him. He realized that I wasn't out to do anything except help him. I had nothing to gain by being negative; I had everything to gain by being positive, helping him to do his job and put the embassy back in shape, because it was in a managerial shambles. I earned his confidence rather quickly, became his good friend and went with him to every meeting as notetaker. I wrote every telegram he ever sent; even wrote his resignation letter to the President!

Q: Did you and he get some flack because of this from the "traditional State types" in the embassy?

SMITH: Initially, yes. There were people who were very sympathetic to the DCM and some who weren't. And some generally felt that he had bad mouthed the ambassador in public, but then again, I was a USIS person. I wasn't a State person, so I didn't let that bother me. That wasn't a problem for me. I am who I am, and I've got a job to do, an important job. It was a difficult time, the Cambodian invasion had started. Singapore was the center of Asian interests in Cambodia and we had a lot of work to do. And we did it and I think we did it rather well. I stayed there four years.

Q: And you gave the ambassador as much or more political advice than the political counselor did?

SMITH: More so. I was the chief political reporter. I handled the Cambodian account which was a very sensitive one. I was the DCM in every sense of the term. The manager, the manager of the embassy, and the not only political, but economic measures.

Q: Do you think, although probably not much of a point going into this since the question is speculative: Do you think this worked out as well as it did partly because the ambassador was political and it might have been more difficult had he been a traditional State guy who had come up the ladder?

SMITH: Well, we had a chance to answer that question because he stayed for two years then resigned, and he was succeeded by a traditional, a very traditional State Department officer, someone I had known when I was at State; also, it was somebody with whom I had had a rather difficult time at a certain point in our previous relationship. In fact, when I was told that he was coming out to succeed the political ambassador, I thought, “forget it, I might as well leave because it’s not going to work.” I wanted to stay because of my kids’ education, and so I stayed and it worked out very well. We ended up being good friends also.

Q: The nature of the difficulty with this State guy--did it have to do with differences of policy, or did it have largely to do with positions? That he felt that a USIS officer, per se, not Mort Smith, but a USIS officer, had no business being a DCM?

SMITH: No. My problems with Harry Thayer preceded Singapore. They came up when I was the Area Director and he was the Director of China Affairs at State. I did an end run around him bureaucratically. Dick Holbrooke was my champion. When Holbrooke came out to Singapore to visit us and during the course of one visit told us Thayer was coming out as ambassador, we both had a very good laugh. Because we both had had the same experience. Now, the question was, “Was it going to work or not?” It worked; it worked very well, and Thayer, to his credit, I must say, was a real gentleman. I knew how he worked. He was a very meticulous, diligent guy. And he had changed his style of work to accommodate my own. And so I kept the Cambodian account. The important thing is that I was not the PAO, and I think that’s what is relevant for this exercise. You may come from a PAO background, but I would bend over backwards to ensure that our PAOs dealt directly with the ambassador. In other words, I’d want to know what was going on, but they didn’t have to go through me to see the ambassador. They had to have direct contact. And they did. I had views on what they were doing, as any DCM should.

Q: Was that easier, when you had a political ambassador than it was when you had a State guy? Easier for the USIS people to have direct access?

SMITH: I don’t think it made much difference. The political guy did not know enough of what was going on. I don’t think it made much difference. I never thought of it in those terms, as different. That’s the important thing, and clearly everybody else in my position would have done the same thing.

Q: Would you continue on about Singapore?

SMITH: I think the key was that the USIS operation had to be viewed by itself. It had to operate independently even though there was a USIS officer as DCM. Now, an interesting thing came up when Charlie Wick came to town on one of his visits. I hadn’t met him at that point. I was the Chargé during his visit. He could never figure out why the Chargé was a USIS officer.

Q: Would the DCMship in Singapore have worked out with another more traditional press-oriented USIS officer as DCM rather than you?

SMITH: Well, I was very press-oriented as a matter of fact, but I also went with a cultural background. So I think more important than anything was personality. Personal characteristics.

Q: The rapport between DCM and Ambassador?

SMITH: Yes.

A PAO Is Better Equipped Than the Usual State Department Foreign Service Officer to be a DCM. Reasons. Then Why So Few PAOs as DCMs?

Q: Beginning with the thought that we've all heard expressed, that in the case of the traditional people in State who become ambassadors--that it wouldn't occur to them their number two could or should be a USIS guy. They think of USIS as being off on the side somewhere. Did your ambassador not think that way because he did not have a bureaucratic background?

SMITH: The fact is, that anybody who has been a reasonably good, or good PAO, is better equipped to be the DCM.

Q: I'll have to ask you why?

SMITH: Because he's had, unlike anybody else on the embassy staff, he's had exposure to the widest range of activities to manage, as a PAO. He's had fiscal responsibilities. He's had administrative responsibilities. He's had political responsibilities. He has had programming; he has been involved in political and economic programs and knows the USIS world obviously, the cultural and media world. If you look at the DCM as sort of a chief executive officer under the chairman of the board, the PAO is the guy who's by far the best qualified. I mean the standard traditional political officer knows very little about anything but political affairs. But what has he managed beyond that?

Q: Okay, this being so, and assuming that there are others, several others, many other USIS PAOs who have comparable abilities, why do you think there aren't more USIS DCMs and ambassadors, while you're at it?

SMITH: Well, there are a lot of reasons. If you look at it in terms of blame, I would lay the blame on two doorsteps, one is the State Department and one is USIA.

Q: Well, State would resist it but what does USIA do?

SMITH: State resists it because those are the top jobs in the mission. The USIA resists it as well. I know we got into this towards the end of our last tape. I don't know how much

was actually recorded, but the Agency has never been serious as an institution about seeking DCMships or ambassadorships for people. The Agency's general position, as seen by Personnel, has been, "Well, it's up to you guys; you guys can work it out. We in the Agency won't stand in your way." But the burden has always been on the individual. If you know an Assistant Secretary, or you know a Secretary of State or somebody high up enough to influence personnel choices... The exception, of course, is minorities. If you look at the list of Agency personnel who have made ambassador, you see a very large list of women, which is great, but it's a separate issue. But my hobbyhorse has long been that the Agency owes it to its people to make available every opportunity to rise to the very top of our profession. If we define our profession as the Foreign Service, as the Foreign Service Act of 1980 does, in the widest sense, those from all Foreign Service agencies should be drawn upon to fill the highest jobs. The Agency should do justice to its people by making available Agency candidates for every DCMship and every ambassador's job for which there are qualified Agency people.

Q: It's like within the State Department hierarchy.

SMITH: That's right. The DCM and ambassador positions are not State Department jobs. I'm sorry. The law of the Foreign Service Act of 1980 says they are not State Department jobs, but Foreign Service jobs. Are we in the Foreign Service or are we not in the Foreign Service? And I think that this is very important because we are not giving our people a fair shake, the maximum opportunity to rise to the top. They are highly qualified, they come in through the same examination process as the State guys, they know that we have different career paths which lead to the same goal. I'm not saying that there would be X number. I'm not saying there should be quotas, but I'm saying that when you have qualified USIS officers, they should be given every opportunity to be considered with State Department candidates.

Q: I could expand your argument along these lines, and (maybe I'll be wild enough to try and do it) that there shouldn't be any distinction by agency. When you're in the Foreign Service, you're in the Foreign Service. USIA officers can become political counselors and DCMs, and a State guy can become PAO and that would be a good thing. Do you feel that way?

USIA is Probably Destined to Disappear as an Agency and be Absorbed by State.
Since Agency is No Longer What It Was, Does It Make Any Difference?

SMITH: Well, now you're touching on what I think is coming, namely, the amalgamation of the Agency and State. I really feel that the Agency's days are numbered.

Q: Okay, so let's go into that: This idea that, there shouldn't be any distinction between a USIA person and a State person, and that, maybe, there should simply be, a Foreign Service with full transferability and assignability back and forth, in which case, the idea of having a separate USIA wouldn't make as much sense, but rather the idea that you wouldn't see a State and USIA coming closer together, the ultimate result being a large

agency probably being called the U.S. Foreign Service. As opposed to what, as a practical matter many people think would happen, namely, USIA amalgamation into State with State remaining a distinct organization.

SMITH: Well, I think that the reality is that if there is any amalgamation, it's going to be on State's terms. In other words, State will survive, but the question is whether there is any need for the Agency as a separate entity. I came to this conclusion very reluctantly. I really did. I remember arguing, when I was at the Senior Seminar in 1974, with Art Hummel, who as a speaker at the seminar, indicated his view that the Agency should merge into State. I always had been vigorously against it, always a USIS chauvinist in a sense. I did, up until very recently, believe that it should remain independent because we had something separate and different to offer. But we are no longer offering that. The budget, the kind of leadership we've had, all has conspired to make us less different and less useful as a separate entity. All that separateness has done, quite frankly, is create a much larger administrative managerial bureaucracy that is non-productive. Absolutely. We are doing less and less for people in the field. There are going to be fewer products. There's going to be less and less material from Washington, so you have fewer goodies to play with. What do we need all these people back here for? A big bureau, a monstrous M bureau. Personnel duplication, triplication of personnel functions is shameful. Why do we need so many personnel managers? I say this because over the years the size of our overseas staffs have diminished. We don't have the mass of people we used to have overseas, but we still have an enormous tail back here in Washington. We don't need it. Also, amalgamation, of course, could put us into State with a kind of interchange ability with State officers. It would be much easier once you're in the system than if you're in a separate agency trying to get into the top of the system.

Q: Somebody else might put it a different way. That, because of the smaller size of USIA and its specific function, it would not be joined with State but swallowed up by State, and State being the larger and stronger agency, would keep for itself the responsible, prestigious, higher paying positions and dole out to USIA the lousy jobs.

SMITH: I don't share that thought--for one, it seems to me that amalgamation should not be the absorption of one agency by another, but rather, sort of a merging of activities so the whole function becomes an integral part of State. It is not a foreign body being absorbed by this big amoeba. But I must say that a part of my thinking would mean that VOA and BIB, which have been joined, would be hived off into a separate broadcasting entity, which is the way that it's going anyhow, and let's get rid of this fiction that the Voice of America is part of USIA. It's been a long time since the Voice has been part of USIA. In fact, I've got lots of war stories about that. It just doesn't work that way. So then, you've got the Voice separated, the broadcasting functions separated. Then, I think one has to ask what is the educational function in the Agency? It could very easily be part of a foundation or some other semi-academic, scholarly kind of function. The Fulbright Foundation can become a separate entity.

Q: Are you saying that cultural and educational exchange becomes a part of State?

SMITH: I think not. I think, obviously, that that was tried once, and I think that the time has passed. CU was a bastard child--was always uncomfortable so close to policy. I think that it would be a great mistake to try to put it back that close to policy. But let's give the exchange people what they have always wanted, namely, a certain measure of autonomy as with the broadcasters.

Q: Or a certain measure of private sector.

SMITH: Yeah, privatization. Yes, that's right. And maybe as a place for the Arts and Humanities endowments and other U.S. government funded arts and humanities to be joined in some U.S. government foundation like a British Council or whatever you want to call it. And so, what do you have left?

Q: You have the press information function.

SMITH: Which has a natural connection to the policy apparatus in the State Department. Because when you're functioning overseas, let's face it, if you're in the press game, you're even going to be functioning, if you're doing your job right, as the ambassador's spokesman. You have to be close to the ambassador and so we've been operating schizophrenically quite frankly in a somewhat schizoid manner. We haven't been intellectually honest with ourselves.

Q: So, of course, what you're saying is, you think it would probably be a good idea for USIA to shunt VOA off on an independent side and cultural affairs, educational affairs also off somewhere semi-independent and the rest of the Agency function to be brought under State.

SMITH: With a glorious send off. I mean, we won, okay. We've won, we celebrate our victory and we go out of business. Certain functions continue, and they do so in different ways. That's the Stanton Commission Report twenty years later.

Q: I know this has been said many times, but the idea that prevailed, it seems to me over these years, is that USIA could not have this grand send off. Could not say, "We've won." They would have to say, "We've lost."

SMITH: That's bureaucratic. I don't see it that way at all. I would have ten years ago. I don't see it that way at all. The job at the Voice, there are some very good jobs, namely, the country language services. One of my great disappointments was that we couldn't attract more quality USIS Foreign Service types to be language service chiefs. We couldn't even find one to be the number two man at the Voice, the Deputy Director. My niche at the Voice was unique; was Deputy Director for Modernization. I didn't want to be anything else. I was not in on the normal chain of command except that we had so many changes of command that I ended up running the place. But there was a Deputy Director's job and we could not find a senior USIS officer to take it for a number of

years. We ended up first with Mel Levitsky, and later Bob Barry, both from State. And we actively tried to get USIS senior guys but they didn't want it. To me, that was a great mistake. A shortsightedness of my colleagues. One, they're good jobs; they're very responsible jobs and there is a lot of work involved. Two, institutionally it would've continued the relationship between the Agency and the Voice. As fewer and fewer senior Agency people took the jobs in the Voice, the two institutions got farther and farther apart.

Q: What, as the Agency is now constituted, are its big jobs in Washington? The area directors?

SMITH: Area directors. It depends on what level you're at. Middle grade officer--policy officer in an area, desk officer; senior people--area directors, or deputy associate directors, those are important jobs.

What Form Might Agency Assume As an Important Part of State?
Smith More Optimistic Than Others About Its Status in State.

Q: Getting back to your idea of questioning the existence of the USIA as a separate agency. In order to make it, to amalgamate it, merge it with State, how would you change the personnel system?

SMITH: Well, I would: One, eliminate about eighty-five to ninety percent of the number of people required to service X number of people in the personnel system. We don't need a separate managerial system. I'm talking about money; I'm talking about the administrative services. What happens when you have a separate organization is you create a separate support structure. This benefits very few people except the GS-15 and SES of the Agency.

Q: Do you see USIA functions becoming a Bureau of the Department?

SMITH: It could. It could become the public affairs/information bureau. Sure, that would make a lot of sense.

Q: Would that mean the Agency work would just be one other bureau among many, and therefore, lost, swallowed up, given a role of unimportance?

SMITH: No. I think that depends on the leadership of the bureau, as it depends on the leadership of USIA. I mean, let's face it, in the Washington scheme of things, the Agency has had its ups and downs. In recent years, we haven't had many ups in terms of prestige and power in Washington. We might be better off having a good strong Assistant Secretary or Under Secretary for Information and Public Affairs within State, and not having people who were not taken seriously--even in a separate agency.

Q: Back to the business of you looking at the Agency and its Director, looking downward throughout the Agency. What about the business of the Agency Director speaking for the Agency, looking upward in the Washington hierarchy to the White House; the Agency's current work, so-called public diplomacy, whatever you want to call it? Wouldn't it be better promoted with a separate, strong head rather than with an Assistant Secretary or with nobody in particular? With the function being absorbed by State?

SMITH: I think we've been independent since 1953 and we've had more misses in terms of our failure to gain recognition than we've had successes. We have very rarely been involved at the start of major issues. This has not helped us, except when we've had powerful leadership like with Ed Murrow or Charlie Wick for different reasons and in different ways. But the first two years of Charlie were extraordinary in terms of the clout this Agency had. We've had other people who had no clout and were not taken seriously and the Agency wasn't taken seriously. I don't know if we're losing much. The function, the information, in fact, is carried out from State in its own way. After all, their daily briefing with the press is a significant public affairs/public diplomacy event to the White House and the world.

Q: To audiences abroad as well as to the White House.

SMITH: Every day, it is a major event. They're in the public diplomacy business and it's an artificial division. It really is. In the last years in the Bush Administration, Baker was Secretary of State, they had the rule that nobody, including ambassadors, could make a public statement that could be played back to the American public, to the American media, without first having it cleared at the State Department. That meant that everything, literally everything, the ambassador said publicly had to be cleared. It was cumbersome and it was unreal and never worked right, but it meant that every goddamned word had to go back to the State Department. We were losing what autonomy we had. I spent a lot of my time arguing with somebody at State who happened to be a USIS person I knew. But still, she was working for State and she had her State bosses.

Q: If USIA were to move back into State one way or another, one can argue that USIS officers who moved into State would be termed "crumbs" and put in unimportant positions. And one could also argue, and this would be worse, perhaps, that the public affairs function would be downgraded and made an unimportant part of State. What guarantee is there for people who believe in the importance of the public affairs function that it would survive in a merger?

SMITH: The way I look at it is there are no guarantees in life. One way to do this is, if you had to, you can write into whatever legislation and executive order that creates this new organization, certain provisions that would provide for the undiminished importance of our function in some specific ways.

Q: Are you serious? Would you want to continue arguing that in a merger of the traditional USIA and State functions, that they would merge into a new organization

rather than be swallowed up by an existing Department of State? Is it realistic to think that that could ever happen?

SMITH: It's as realistic as the new organism created when CU and USIA merged. Obviously, the stronger and the bigger organism is going to swallow, but it could be affected by the tiny poisonous shrimp!

Q: And the larger organism is not going to change. It's just going to have more people.

SMITH: It's going to have more people. Now the question is, how do you ensure that those people are giving our people access to the opportunities in their system? That's a product of management--that's a product of legislation, executive orders, if you have to be that explicit. On the other hand, even with the new Foreign Service Act of 1980, which says that senior people should be drawn from the Foreign Service as a whole, we haven't had that happen, so that's a tough nut to crack. But if you had an Under Secretary who was running the thing and was committed to those goals, he'd have a better chance at getting it done in State than he would outside.

Q: Why do you think the myth, if you want to call it that, of a separate identification for USIA continues? Bureaucratic inertia or what?

SMITH: That's part of it. I mean there's legislation that would set up a new U.S. government broadcasting body. The Director of USIA is one man on the board. I think we should not look upon it as a defeat or loss of prestige or anything like that. It's a recognition of the new realities in the world. Our people should be proud to join whatever organization has been provided, and the new organization should give our people equal opportunity.

Q: Well, you in your own career--you're a public affairs type, if I may say so, and you moved up, and you spent your entire career in one public affairs function or another. In a merged organization with State, the new entrants who believe strongly in the importance of "public diplomacy" enter the State Department, knowing that once they were accepted as a Junior Trainee, they were going to be stamping visas and going to economic courses and getting a branch PAO's job, then be assistant agriculture attaché, and then be fifth political officer, and so on. The function and the attraction of the public affairs function for such people would be lost in this big three-ring circus.

SMITH: That's a serious consideration. I think it can be handled though. You'd have cones. Everybody so inclined could develop his specialty. The visa line thing is terrible. I don't know how you find your way around that one, but I think it might be worth the price to pay, if at the other end of a career, you had equal access to the top jobs.

Q: Do you think area director jobs as they now exist in the Agency would be abolished?

SMITH: Probably, but not necessarily.

Q: I mean, you couldn't have two area directors, one the assistant secretary..

SMITH: But, you see, they used to have, for example, when CU was in State, you would have area directors at CU. If you had a Public Affairs Bureau, you could have individual directors, sure. What I'm trying to do is bring the function closer geographically and conceptually to policy makers. Also, I'm trying to ensure that public diplomacy practitioners are given equal opportunity to rise to the top of the Foreign Service. I never thought I'd say this ten years ago, but the Agency has changed so much. Everything has been cut, the staffs have been cut, the kinds of things we used to send out have been reduced so much that the Agency, to me, is increasingly irrelevant to our work overseas. Obviously, I'm the oddball officer, but I operated for the most part without any reference to the Agency except for them sending the budget. I needed the money, and people I needed, but what else did the Agency ever do for me?

Q: Did you get books to present?

SMITH: I could have gotten them through private sources, which is actually where they came from. I don't know how many books we did get in the Philippines. We drowned that country in books. They sunk beneath the sea; they lost some of their seven thousand islands because of the weight of the books.

Q: Where's that, in the Philippines?

SMITH: Yes. Zillions of books over the years. Where are they? I saw some of them in old warehouses out in small towns, boarded up, boxes and boxes of American books.

Q: Is it fair to say that you view the political and policy functions of the Agency and its people as vastly more important than the cultural educational function?

SMITH: I don't think I ever said that.

Q: You talked about the primacy of the job, PAO and his training instruction of his branch PAOs in political terms, policy terms, not in ...

SMITH: ... Because you premised the question on a policy seminar.

Q: No. You're right, you were answering my question.

SMITH: No, I see them more or less equal. You can't do one without the other. As I said, I went out of my way to make sure that the PAO would take the Chairmanship of the Fulbright Board because I think it was important that the cultural activity not view itself as something separate from the rest of the organization. In Manila, it was particularly difficult because they were separated geographically. They had moved the whole cultural

office out of the embassy, so you had the geographic separation. But the PAO had to be part of the cultural process.

Q: I'm running out of questions, but the microphone is yours. You obviously have some strong thoughts. Any other revolutionary thoughts like merging with State?

Mort Smith's Closing Observations

SMITH: I don't know if its that revolutionary any more. Quite frankly, I'm just amazed that these people who talk about reorganizing the government haven't focused on this more directly, and, maybe they have, and I may not be aware of it. It's no great stroke of genius to see that as something that deserves more serious consideration.

Q: Well, I think that they would have also to think more about reorganizing the commercial functions, the economic functions into State, more so than the information function, because they're bigger and stated as being more important in the broad scheme of the bureaucracy.

SMITH: The Agency should not continue existence just because it exists.

Q: Of course.

SMITH: Bureaucrats particularly, managerial types, are very skillful in devising rationales for their continued existence. I don't know what the numbers are, but there are too many people managing too few people. If you talk about where does the work get done, where does the actual work get done, you look at administrative support and managerial support, and personnel support. You've got the Agency structure, you've got the Voice structure, which is parallel. Well, the Voice they say has certain special needs, and it does, but it doesn't need a whole special function. In addition to that, now then, you've gotten into engineering--what used to be--what is now engineering, is co-equal with VOA, that used to be part of the VOA--they have their own administrative office too. And then you get down here, this is the project division. They have their mini-administrative office. It seems to me, administration is one of those functions which can be and is, and can be more highly digitized, and probably you can seriously reduce the number of people we are using--very highly paid people around who do nothing, literally nothing. (That's neither here nor there.)

Q: Who are the people in the Agency who do the Agency's work?

SMITH: That depends on how you define the Agency's work. It seems to me that, if we're a foreign affairs agency, that's certainly a part of our work, but the guys in the field are the guys that do the work and the people that most directly relate to them, their desk officers, I was a desk officer, that was one of the greatest jobs. You have a master out there had that to be served. You had to do things for him, you had to find materials, you

had to get people in contact, and you had to meet people coming back on grants, and look after them. I don't get the feeling that that's done as much as it used to.

Q: No, it isn't. Your concept of the desk officer is, if I may say so, old fashioned. It's the old-fashioned desk officer of years ago. And maybe the old fashioned field officer as well.

SMITH: So, my point is that if it is passé and no longer relevant to the needs of today, that's fine. I'm not arguing that we should go back to the past. I'm saying we should go forward.

Q: Okay, now as a technical, practical matter, how does the government go about it? Does it organize its study team to repeat what Frank Stanton did fifteen to twenty years ago?

SMITH: We can always form a committee. And that would take a look at the information functions--sure, that's one way to do it--a blue ribbon committee..

Q: ...to recommend the Agency go back?

SMITH: A blue ribbon commission to study the international information activities of the U.S. government and to decide how they should reflect current world realities. People that feed off of it. I mean, we've got the Commission on Public Diplomacy and they have a stake in the separateness. Although it shouldn't be the separateness of the Agency, it should be that the Commission on Public Diplomacy should have a function even if public diplomacy is totally in the State Department--they should be looking at it functionally. I don't necessarily equate the Agency with public diplomacy. That's the problem I have with the Foundation for Public Diplomacy thing.

Q: Public diplomacy is a lot of things that go on in a lot of places.

SMITH: To me, it's common sense. The information age is upon us--we can't escape it. What you do and say publicly has an impact on your policy, before, during and after. You should take this into account as you develop policies. You can't ignore it. What people think is important. You can't ignore it. All that is part of having to do with USIA. In one sense, it has to be done, and we need intelligent people to do it.

Q: It doesn't need an agency?

SMITH: It doesn't need a separate agency to do it.

Q: Okay, on that point, which obviously is the most important and most interesting that we've discussed, I'll bring this to a close, unless you have a final shot at this time.

SMITH: No, I don't take shots.

Q: Okay, thank you very, very much, Mort.

Addendum

Q: Was there any assignment you had that was even more unique than the ones recounted earlier?

SMITH: The five years I spent at the Voice of America between 1983 and 1988 certainly fit that description. At the end of my Singapore tour USIA asked that I return to Washington to establish the Office of Chief Negotiator for the VOA Modernization Program. This was a high visibility effort to upgrade the international broadcasting capabilities of the VOA and the BIB (REF/RL). It was an ambitious program of more than 1.3 billion dollars to build new relay stations and modernize existing stations so as to better penetrate the Communist world. It had the highest priority in the eyes of USIA Director Wick. The funding was “no year money”, unusual in the normal Washington scheme of things.

Those who dreamed up the program (actually starting in the Carter Administration) had little understanding of the complexities both diplomatic and technical that would be required. I personally led negotiating teams to Korea, Israel, Thailand, Greece, and supervised similar efforts in Belize, various Caribbean nations, Botswana, and probably a few other I have forgotten. We had some successes and some failures. The Israel project was very high profile and the agreement was signed at the EOB with President Reagan in attendance.

During this assignment I also was asked to become the VOA Deputy Director and often the Acting Director.

End of interview