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

AMBASSADOR MARION H. SMOAK

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INTERVIEW

Q: This is an interview with Ambassador Marion H. Smoak concerning his career with the Department of State. This interview is being done on behalf of the Foreign Affairs Oral History Program and the Association for Diplomatic Studies.

I wonder if you could give me something about your background prior to coming into the State Department.

SMOAK: Well yes, I'd be glad to. I was a graduate lawyer - I'll go back to early in my career - from the University of South Carolina just prior to World War II. I also had a reserve commission in the United States Army from my days at the Military College of South Carolina, The Citadel, where I graduated in 1938, finishing my law studies in 1941.

I entered the military service just prior to World War II and joined the 70th Coast Artillery, the regular Army unit to which I was assigned. Almost immediately after Pearl Harbor we were notified, that is the regiment that I was assigned to, that we were to become part of a task force; the very first one to leave the United States. We did that, and sailed from Brooklyn, Port of Debarkation on the 7th of January 1942. We were headed for, although we as individuals did not know that, the Philippines.

But the Philippines fell when we we're about halfway across the Pacific. So we, of course, could not get there. The orders were then changed, and we are sent down to Melbourne, Australia. A few days down there, and then back up to the island of New Caledonia, a French possession, in the Pacific out from Sydney, Australia to occupy this island. New Caledonia as that time being the northern most island that was unoccupied by the Japanese.

We went there, landed and I remained with the unit for a year. I then was ordered back, one of the first officers to be returned to the states after overseas duty at that time. I went up to the United States Military Academy, where I taught law in the law department, and in the afternoons and during maneuver periods with the Coast Artillery Detachment - they called it "gun-gunnery" in the old days. I remained at the Military Academy for a time after the war was over, and then elected to stay in the military for 20 years where I served at a number of posts in the United States, Japan and Europe.

Q: When were you in Japan?

SMOAK: I was in Japan from 1948 to about '52. That period. I then returned to the states. Went to the Pentagon, served a tour in the Judge Advocate General's office, then finally was transferred over to Congressional Liaison, which was a very good experience for me. I followed that by a tour with the International Affairs Division in the Judge Advocate General's department.

Q: What sort of thing would the International Affairs Section do in the Pentagon, the Judge Advocate's Division?

SMOAK: Legal interpretations under the T.I.A. series. Having to do with the body of our treaties with foreign nations.

Q: The status of forces agreements and this type of thing.

SMOAK: Yes, yes. All of this. So, without realizing it at that time, my tour with Congressional Relations and with the other divisions were excellent training for me subsequently in the Department of State.

Q: I was going to remark, that you were sort of being by chance, really, moved into this. How about your time in Japan? Had this sort of given you more of a taste for international affairs too?

SMOAK: Yes, it did. In that there I was in the Judge Advocate's Division also. First in Yokohama. I was at the time involved with matters of military justice, that is trials. The review of trials and so on. I later did get into what we called Military Affairs, which had to do with legal questions involving the local inhabitants and the occupation and that phase of it. So that, you might say, it was a matter of international law, and a very fine experience for me. In the interim I had a number of other assignments, such as Staff Judge Advocate with the 82nd Airborne at Ft. Bragg, North Carolina, and the 11th Airborne Division at Ft. Campbell, Kentucky. Interesting assignments. In those days, perhaps even today, I'm not sure, in airborne divisions, we all were required to jump on the theory that if the men jumped the officers did also. Although your work with the division may have had nothing to do with combat duty.

Q: I have a vision of you jumping with your briefcase in your hands.

SMOAK: That's virtually the way it was. So I jumped. I made a total of 58 jumps in my career with them.

So then, in due course, I finished my 20 years service with the military and elected at that time to take early retirement. I had some things that I wanted to accomplish. I wanted to try my hand at the general practice of law, and I was also very interested in politics. So, after retirement, I moved down to my native state of South Carolina, back to my hometown of Aiken, where I set up a small country lawyer's practice - a very small firm. And we just pursued a general kind of practice, mainly real estate law, and negligence cases. Those two fields primarily.

In the meantime, I got into politics down there. My father had been a very active Democrat in the state for years, and we were all raised in the Democratic party, my family. But by that time I had gotten to know Barry Goldwater very well, was very impressed with Barry's political ideas and ideals, and decided to switch to the Republican party, which I did.

We're talking now about the early '60s. There virtually was no Republican political party in the state. Oh, there was a semblance of one, there's always a skeleton of a party, but it never amounted to anything. It didn't have any candidates or office holders. They were a party, really in name only. A few people here and there filling the basic requirements of party structure and hoping to receive some benefits during Republican administrations.

I looked this whole thing over and decided they really ought to have an active two party system in the state. So, I dedicated my efforts to that cause. And to make a long story short, since they had no candidates, I volunteered myself to be a candidate and ran for the state senate as a Republican.

When we made this announcement, it was the biggest joke that came along lately, and the local press had a field day with it. But nevertheless we went out and began organizing. We couldn't possibly conduct a primary, of course. As a matter of fact, we had a tough time holding a convention to nominate candidates. But we did manage to convince at least one delegate, more in some cases, but at least one delegate from each of the 96 precincts in the district in which I was to run to volunteer to come in and be a delegate from their local to this convention in order that we could get me nominated to run.

I never will forget, it's rather interesting. We had engaged the local court house on this particular Friday night for the convention. But when we went there at about 5:30 or 6 o'clock to open it up and get ready for the convention, the place was locked up tight as a bank on the weekend. We couldn't get in, and couldn't find anybody to let us in. So, we were reduced to plugging an extension cord into the rear of the building, hanging a light bulb over a sycamore tree in the courtyard and putting table out there with one chair. The delegates came and stood up around the table, I made a speech, and was nominated by acclimation.

Well, we had a long hard political fight, which started in May and continued through to November. That particular race we lost by less than 1% of the vote.

Q: Remarkable.

SMOAK: It was a remarkable showing. We then came back two years later, and I was elected on the second try. So, I had one term in the South Carolina Senate, and have many interesting stories connected with that.

Q: Again, we had better move on to the State Department.

SMOAK: After this organizational effort for the state party, I, of course, had very good Republican credentials. Then when Nixon was elected. . .

Q: This would be in 1968.

SMOAK: 1968. I decided that I would come back to Washington, which I did while the Nixon Administration was being formed. I went to see my friend, Harry Dent, who at that time was Counsel to the President. They were still in New York, as a matter of fact, organizing, but I told Harry that I wanted to come back and do something in the administration.

There were a number of suggestions, posts like Assistant Secretary of the Army or Defense for Manpower. But I told them that I wanted to get away from Defense. Then, Strom Thurmond wanted me to go to Justice, but I had made up my mind that I wanted to go to the State Department. At any rate I was sent over to talk to Elliot Richardson, who had just been appointed Deputy.

Elliot thought I ought to go to Congressional Liaison, Congressional Affairs in State. But then he said, "Maybe you ought to go down here and talk to Mosbacher, who's just been appointed Chief of Protocol"

I did and I reviewed my personal background with Emil Mosbacher. He like it. He said he thought I had a good background, that he would like me to join him in Protocol. I liked the idea and accepted, serving for two years, ultimately as deputy. Then he left, and I became Acting Chief of Protocol for quite a while, and finally the Chief of Protocol.

Q: Well, you mentioned Mr. Mosbacher. What brought him, he was renowned as a sailor, but what brought him in as Chief of Protocol?

SMOAK: I think, you know, people generally had a very strange concept of what protocol is. And I'm sure that Richard Nixon was no exception to that. Protocol to him meant a wealthy man, who could afford to spend some money if necessary. Someone with very good social connections. And possibly someone of high visibility. Of course, Mosbacher filled all of those requirements extremely well. As it turned out he was an able administrator also. He is a very intelligent man, and he's just a very able guy, there's no question about that. He was tough, and he rubbed a lot of people the wrong way very quickly. He and I got along fine, however, I never had a cross word with him. And we did a lot of things, I hope, very well, and I think some things to help the prestige of the office as well as the purposes of the Administration.

Q: While we're on the subject, how would you describe his style of administration?

SMOAK: Very direct, personalized, hands-on type of administration. On top of everything all the time. And, as you would imagine, being at times somewhat difficult with some of the people who worked for him.

Q: So, this is very definitely not the social butterfly type.

SMOAK: Very definitely.

Q: Using that simile, I'm a professional foreign service officer, and I'm aware of the importance of protocol, and I was talking about this to my wife last night. And she's been in the trade too, and she said that protocol is the oil that makes international machinery work. But people on the outside, often they don't understand what protocol is. How did you view protocol before you actually got into the business?

SMOAK: Well, of course, I didn't know a great deal about it. I really didn't. That is, I didn't have a working knowledge of exactly what they did in that office. What the responsibilities were and so on. But I knew that it was a high-level operation that would lead one to be in on just about everything that would happen, and it appealed to me. I thought it would be a very active position, which it was, extremely active. And I thought it would keep me moving around quite a bit. I even underestimated that, because it certainly keeps you moving. I thought it would be a challenge, and it certainly was. And I really liked the work while I was there. I enjoyed it thoroughly.

I really think it's too bad, and this is an opinion that I think is largely held among professionals in the department, but the potential for a lot of fine accomplishment in protocol really is tremendous. It's not only a matter of taking chiefs of state and people of ministerial rank on almost a weekly basis, and seeing that they are handled in such a way that they are put in a proper and a comfortable frame of mind before they go about whatever business they are doing. After all, you don't want to deliver them to somebody else mad as hell because they feel they've been mistreated in some way. Or because they think they haven't gotten what they deserved, or that people haven't given them the respect they're entitled to. But there is just a great opportunity on an individual basis.

You know, when you travel with some, like the Chief of Protocol does with the Chief of State, you're with them all day, and until they go to bed at night. The entire time they're here, and if they travel around the country, you go with them. If they go to Hawaii, you go with them. And when you sit next to a man day after day for about a week, if you're good at your job,, he sooner or later is going to place some trust in you, some confidence. And he'll begin to ask you all kinds of questions. Questions about people. Questions about the Secretary of State. Questions about the Assistant Secretaries he's going to be meeting. Who is going to be at the state dinner, and who is so-and-so, and what is their influence. Where are they located. You say, it's this or that corporation - well what does it do? Where does that fit into the scheme of things? What about the governor of a state? I hear he's a Democrat, not a Republican like your president. What is his effect? Will he work with us?

So, all of this as a matter of general background, gives the individual who is in that position an opportunity to be of real influence. Influence for good, and this is something that isn't generally understood.

Buy, beyond that, the office itself is a very complicated one. And I would say that it is extremely helpful that whoever fills that position should have had some legal experience. The same goes for administrative experience. But the legal experience is very important.

My legal experience in Defense and, I think, my work with the body of international treaties that the United States had entered into in the past, those things gave me an understanding that I couldn't have gotten any other way. And I think, allowed me to have an approach to the job that was very beneficial.

Q: You had several different jobs in protocol. Could you sort of start with the first one you had, and give an idea of what your responsibilities were?

SMOAK: Yes, of course, the most obvious thing that protocol does is the representational part of it. Taking care of and handling the visits of all the official visitors. And, of course, that extends not only to visits, it extends in many cases to conferences of various types, and high level meetings. Very often protocol is called on to take responsibility for various functions on those occasions. And then, the entertaining in connection with them. Some functions in the White House, although the actual business of conducting dinners, luncheons and the like in the White House is handled by the White House staff. There's always a tendency on the part of the White House staff to reach out and take everything under its wing that it can possibly lay its hands on. Sometimes to great disappointment.

For example, I recall when Prince Charles and Princess Anne came here in 1972.

Q: That would be the son and daughter of the Queen of England?

SMOAK: Yes, that's right. They came here technically on the invitation of the Nixon children. This was something that, I guess, had never been done before. But, the invitation was extended, and they accepted.

Well, we in protocol handled that visit totally except in the White House. So, the time same to plan for the arrival ceremony. And I went to the White House and met with six or eight staff members. Everything from Secret Service to the Social Secretary, to try to plan for this arrival ceremony, which we wanted to make reasonably formal without overdoing it in view of their positions.

But President Nixon had issued instructions for some reason that he did not want to have any formal entertainment, or any formal recognition in the White House. So I said, "Well, that's fine." But, "Somewhere we're going to have to afford His Highness the opportunity of greeting the Chiefs of Mission of the 17 commonwealth countries that have missions here. Otherwise, we're going to create a great diplomatic gaffe."

"Well," they said, "the president doesn't want to have a reception or anything formal. What can we do?"

I said, "Well, let them come to the ceremony, and have them all in for just a cup of coffee. It will take 20 minutes, and what's wrong with that?"

"But, he doesn't want that."

"All right, " I said. "As an alternative, why don't we line up the Chiefs of Mission along the red carpet, and when His Highness gets out of the car, shakes hands with the president, he can then walk along, and we'll introduce all of the commonwealth ambassadors to him in order of precedence."

They thought that was a pretty good idea. So, on the way to the White House I said to Prince Charles, "Now Your highness, when you arrive and alight from the automobile, you're going to see to the right of the red carpet all of the commonwealth ambassadors, and I know that you would like to great them."

"Oh yes," he said, "I'd like that very much."

When we alighted, and got out of the vehicle, Prince Charles shook hands with the President, but there were no commonwealth ambassadors. The White House staff had seen fit to alter that plan. They put up a little roped area off to one side, around to the left, and put them all in there.

Of course, we didn't get to see them. So, after the ceremony, the president and his family, the royal visitors, my wife and I and the British ambassador, did go into the White House for a glass of teat. I was standing with the British ambassador and the President came over and said, "Now, Mr. Ambassador, " because I'm sure he saw what had happened, "At your reception tomorrow His Highness will have the opportunity to meet the commonwealth ambassadors, won't he?"

The British ambassador looked him right in the eye and said, "Oh, no, Mr. President. He will not." I was called later that afternoon and told to visit all 17 ambassadors and apologize for the oversight.

Q: Well, was this a turf problem, or were there too many cooks in the political broth?

SMOAK: Some of both I would suspect. But at least no one saw fit to let me know so that we could correct that error, and what about that? I'm sure it was a matter of great conversation between those ambassadors. And some disappointment.

Q: Well, is there or was there a Chief of Protocol for the White House? Should it be one person? This may be part of the problem then.

SMOAK: No. The Chief of Protocol is the Chief of Protocol to the President and the Secretary of State. But this is a problem. I frankly think that the Chief of Protocol should have an office in the White House and not only at State as it is now. He should be physically present, at least part of the time, on the White House staff, so that he's not looked upon as an outside by the staff members there but anyway, getting back to the question you asked. So there is the representational function that we've been talking about. Then there is the legal function involved in handling the diplomatic community to the United States, which is roughly some 16,000 people. This is the diplomatic community here in Washington and around the United States, it is the foreign representatives here to the 123 officially recognized organizations, including the United Nations and OAS and so on. The International Tuna Commission and all of the others. Keeping tabs on all of these people, publishing official lists with properly accepted

diplomatic titles and handling the various problems that come up involving all those people. And the problems range from such things as an ambassador's son hitting another car while speeding in an intoxicated condition on Connecticut Avenue, to such matters as what diplomatic titles may be recognized, which ones cannot be recognized and in what order of precedent those titles must be maintained.

Q: Well, what about the hundreds of consular posts in the United States? Do they have any supervision?

SMOAK: Yes. As a matter of record, they are supervised in the Office of Protocol. You have all kinds of special provisions and regulations to administer, such as the regulation that authorizes each diplomat to buy one new automobile per year tax free; being the liaison between this diplomatic community and the police, wherever they may be. A report may come in that a diplomat has 67 traffic violations against him, he has diplomatic immunity. Well, here's a case that has to be handled. Things of that type.

Q: Did you have problems with state governments or local authorities? You know, if a diplomat or a consular officer had a problem in Aiken, South Carolina, that the police department there would be completely at sea, and maybe not even know there was such a thing as diplomatic immunity, or special privileges for consular officers. Did you have many problems of this nature?

SMOAK: Yes, constantly. As you can imagine, diplomats are traveling all the time. They have all kinds of things happen that they are involved in. they get into all kinds of difficulties, not necessarily all their own fault. But it does happen. And, of course, to answer your question, yes, not many people out there know that these is an Office of Protocol. But they do know that there's a State Department, and somehow they'll get a call into the State Department, and routinely, it will be referred to Protocol, and we get them.

Q: How effective was your office in dealing with these local officials in various parts of the United States once they got through to you?

SMOAK: Very effective, with very little trouble. They would try to bend over backwards to be helpful. It's just a matter of human relations. Occasionally, we had things go off the track, but not often.

Q: Can you think of any particularly difficult cases of this kind, of people out travelling getting into trouble that caused you certain grief?

SMOAK: Yes, I can give you one involving a state visitor from France who came and went to Chicago at a very controversial time. I can't remember the political issue involved, but there was a group in Chicago demonstrating against the French. And he was to go to the Drake Hotel, this happened actually when Mosbacher was chief. But, as it turned out, the Visits Officer that we sent from Protocol out to Chicago to make the arrangements for this visit, didn't sense this problem at all. And furthermore, he made the

horrible mistake of not liaisoning with the local city government. This made them awfully mad. As a result, they sent no police down, no protection to cover that hotel at the time of the arrival. And the visitor was carried in a limousine to the front of the Drake Hotel. He get out and there were 2,000 people yelling and screaming, and fortunately, this had occurred after the meeting here with the President, because this broke up the visit. He claimed that somebody had spat upon him. His wife reported that someone with a big sign that he was waving hit her over the shoulder with it. It was the biggest mess you've ever seen. He went in the hotel, stayed a short time, canceled all of his plans, had his aircraft turned around and flew to New York. And President Nixon had to get out of the White House, fly to New York and go to see him. So, that was a case where our office did a poor job of handling a visit in a city other than Washington.

Q: Well, Chicago, of course, is always a difficult city, because of its diverse ethnic mix, which any head of state always has a minority there who feel some grievance against whatever country you can think of practically. Was this dealing with Israeli weapons, or refusing to send gunboats to Israel, or something like that?

SMOAK: Something like that, but specifically I just can't remember what it was. But it was an issue along those lines.

Q: Well, dealing with heads of state, can you think of any examples of particularly difficult heads of state? I'm thinking of one before your time, who was always a problem, was the President of Indonesia, Sukarno, who caused untold grief for anybody escorting him. Were there any others that you can think of who were difficult?

SMOAK: Yes, I can. Ceausescu was difficult.

Q: The prime minister of Romania.

SMOAK: Right. They all make demands, but many of these demands come from their staff and not from the ambassador here. You know, there are ground rules, as there must be, and the visits are all graded. The number one visit, of course, being a visit from a foreign chief of state.

But their staffs will often demand more than what is authorized, knowing what the rules are. For instances, in the case of a Chief of State, the visit is two days in Washington, and four days elsewhere in the United States, all courtesy of the United States government, everything paid: hotel rooms, transportation, meals, and so on, for themselves and 12 other people, plus their wives, that's 24. Now they invariably arrive with more than that, although they know what the rules area. Frequently the staffs will ask that we expanded the authorized list of official visitors. They also know, for instances, that part of the program is a state dinner in the White House and a luncheon in the Department of State. Sometimes, the staff would come in, or the ambassador will come to see you, and he'll say, "Well, I know that the president doesn't usually go to a response dinner, but I want to give a dinner, and I want the president to come. Here's a letter and I want you to present

this to the White House, and you get this approved, and the president can come to my embassy the night after the state dinner at the White House, and we're going to have a big dinner over at my embassy." Well, you have to fight your way through that one.

Or they'll come and say, "We know that you only authorize four limousines for the use of this party, but these gentlemen have all brought their wives and that's not enough, and we want eight limousines." I mean, you know, you get requests like that, any number of them.

Or they'll say, "We'd want to make a an appearance before a joint session of Congress. We want our president to speak to the Congress." And all of these things you have to take, and in a nice way you have to tell them no, to keep it within bounds.

Q: Well, I would think one of the problems if you're having a major figure, it's probably not too difficult to inspire enthusiasm, have people come by. But how do you work it when you had a president of, say of a very minor state? Isn't this a little bit hard to arouse the necessary warmth and all? I mean, both catch the attention of the president and have crowds turn out to seem them?

SMOAK: The answer to that, of course, is yes and no. But, you know, it's a matter of public relations and you can do it. And Washington is a big community, and there are people here from every country in the world. It always amazes me how many Thais you can turnout, or how many Ugandans, from any country you care to name, they're just here.

For example, something like a state dinner at the White House, if its a sit down meal, a hundred is about the maximum, and when you take 24 people, maybe 30 people in the official party, and get their counterparts in the United States government, you're up to 60 right there. And then you get the other people that should come, like the Secretary of State, the Assistant Secretary of the area of the world where that country's located, and our ambassador who's come back with him, and their ambassador. You see, this isn't generally understood, but it ends up that the president has only about a dozen to fifteen people that he can invite to that dinner over and beyond the official people who have to attend. So, that its difficult.

Q: How about getting crowds to wave flags or something when they arrive?

SMOAK: The arrival ceremony? No, it's not difficult. I don't ever remember an incident where we didn't have a well turned out group of people. Because you get the people involved in our government, the White House staff; you get people from State who are involved, you get the embassy personnel and all their families. And they, of course, invite all of their nationals. It fills up.

Q: Did you keep in touch with nationalities? Let's say the president of Yugoslavia is coming. Did you have somebody go out and get the Slovenes or Croats and the Serb community, for example? Would you reach ethnic groups?

SMOAK: Yes, we would. We do that through the embassies.

Q: The embassies take care of that?

SMOAK: They take care of that. But when a visit is coming off like that, the ambassador, at an appropriate time, before the visit, will come in for an interview. He may come for other interviews; other staff members may come and work with various staff members in protocol. But the ambassador would come one more time, and we would go over all of these things. And I would tell him about the arrival ceremony. And we should have 500 people there. And you should invite any number of people you want to attend, and invitations will be sent to them so they can be admitted.

Q: I'd like to pick up on something that you mentioned earlier about state visits, and that is the unique and influential position you can be in accompanying people around the country. I mean, it is probably a greater chance to talk to the great man or the great woman than any of our ambassadors are going to have. Did you find that you could be used with the desks with the country areas to get to you and say , "Look, we're very interested in president so and so, can you persuade him to so such and such?" In other words, were you used as a political took for foreign policy, or not?

SMOAK: No, not really. We did get briefings, of course, of the major issues involved. That, of course, is necessary to that you don't do something that is out of line. But, that is a potential that really wasn't used, and I think should be.

Q: Was this, do you think, sort of endemic to the Foreign Service Officer not focusing on the protocol function, think of it as something that only cosmetic interest, and not realizing?

SMOAK: Very definitely. Yes, yes.

Q: Do you have any thoughts of how this might be broken down, to be able to use protocol in a more efficient manner?

SMOAK: This is a point I've tried to make in a number of ways. For example, I was on the transitional team when Reagan was first elected. And I tried to write up all of these things that we've talked about, and suggested in my opinion I thought protocol was not held in the esteem it should be, and that as a consequence there was a tendency to at times appoint people who were really not experienced or competent enough to handle the job. It has been looked upon, I guess, starting back at the time when I was there, as a place where you can put wives. There's nothing wrong with women, they're as smart as men, provided they have the training. But I don't think you can just find any lady, and appoint her, because she's been written about in the press, or because she has a high level of visibility as a social leader, or the wife of a famous ballplayer or whatever. If she doesn't have some background, then she shouldn't be put in that position.

And another thing, this is a two-person job, because the responsibilities on the spouse, male or female, are great. And if there's no one to be there and fill that gap, it's not good.

Q: So, this would not often preclude, but make one very hesitant of taking, particularly the wife of some other very active man, and to give her a title and something to do, because he would be active in another field, he couldn't devote his time. Or this could be true of a Chief of Protocol whose wife is also busy in another field. How did your wife work with you on this?

SMOAK: Very well, and on all occasions she would virtually take over the responsibility of handling the wife of the visitor.

Q: That must have been a very difficult job.

SMOAK: It was. But my wife likes that sort of thing. She's a very talkative, outgoing person. Got along extremely well with them. They seemed to like her. She was very quick to sense what they might like to do. What a woman who has one afternoon with no official functions would like, what do you do with her to really entertain her, to give her a view of what the United States of America is like.

Q: Did she have any particular place or thing that she found as a particularly good way of giving the wife of a chief of state a special time?

SMOAK: Of course, they all want to do some shopping. She usually ran them through Garfinckel's. Got special attention over there, people to take charge.

Q: You arranged this beforehand?

SMOAK: Yes. And usually take them to the third floor up there, and coffee and sandwiches served, and things were then brought in to them for their approval. There were all kinds of wonderful things here to see. Kennedy Center, Hillwood was a great favorite.

Depending on what country they had come from, many of them liked the view of the homelife here. Where do people live? What kind of environment do they live in? So we used to arrange a tour, and we would show them the best section of the city and the worst section of the city. Drive them through; give them a complete view of how things were.

Q: How did you and your wife find, after years in the is business, going to National Day receptions? This must have gotten a bit long after a while.

SMOAK: Tough, really very tough. After all, when I left there were 135 accredited missions in Washington.

Q: That means 135 National Days?

SMOAK: Yes. I believe now there are 157, or maybe 158; the number expands all the time. It's hard to keep up with. So there are a lot of receptions. And that, of course, is only the beginning, because there are all kinds of reasons for the embassies to give receptions and parties. And I will say to you that I have been to many a national day reception around this town when I was the only State Department representative there.

Q: But again, you would be given no sort of hunting license to find out something, because in the Foreign Service receptions are used for time to contact somebody to find out, or to confirm something. But you basically had no real task other than to be there and to be available?

SMOAK: I never recall a single incident in which I was told the facts are the following, and it certainly would be helpful if we knew so and so. Never. Never once.

Q: This is not a very efficient way to use a government official, is it?

SMOAK: No. I think this is one point that could be strongly made. It's one of the things that should be done.

Q: You are privileged to work under a president who probably had one of the strongest interests in foreign affairs that we have made in many years.

SMOAK: A very heavy schedule.

Q: I wonder if you could describe a bit how you viewed President Nixon and his dealings with foreign officials.

SMOAK: Yes. Of course, over the five-year period that I was in that office, I saw the President on innumerable occasions. Probably next to the Secretary of State, or maybe more than the Secretary of State. I don't know, because I was there two or three times a week in the White House.

First of all, Nixon really had the capability of being president. There's no question that he was a very intelligent man. He always had his homework done. I don't know when he did it, but he was always prepared. He always read his briefing papers. He knew exactly who people were. I don't think I ever saw him forget or not know the names of the principals involved, or where they came from. And I'm not just talking about chiefs of state, I'm talking about all kinds of lesser people, diplomatically speaking, who I had to take to him for one reason or another. Little things. Like the consular corps of the United States wanted to give the President an award. A plaque, you know, in recognition of his great relationship with the diplomatic community. So, I sent a memo over there, and they said, "Sure, we'll put in on the schedule." I took several members of the group, went in, introduced them. And, to my amazement, the president knew exactly who they were,

because he'd read his notes. Where they came from, what they were doing. He was really remarkable in what way.

Q: I've had the same type of report form our officers overseas. As vice president or as president he knew what to say, he read his briefing papers, and he was well prepared and stuck to the script.

SMOAK: This in a way is an aside, but I think Nixon's great failing - he was awfully good, as we just indicated, carrying out the exercise at hand, whatever it happened to be. He knew what he was supposed to do, and he was always prepared to do it. But there was a great lack of personableness about Richard Nixon. I may times had been seated in his outer office in the morning with four or five other staff members, Mike Deaver, Ehrlichman, Haldeman. And Richard Nixon would come through on his way to the office, and he would never look one way or the other, no greeting, nothing. I always wondered why he didn't say "Good morning everyone, as he walked through. I mean, he is the president, but it would seem to me that would have been a much easier thing to do than to just walk through and ignore everyone. But that's the way Richard Nixon was.

I remember once reading an article, it was a one column article on one page, in *Time* magazine. It's funny how things like this stick in one's mind as you go through life. Little incidental things that you shouldn't remember two hours later, possibly. I even remember where I was at the time. I was on a train going down from West Point to New York, and I was reading Time magazine. There was a picture of Senator Richard Nixon. And it said, "Senator Nixon has a very strange policy, he changes his office personnel every year." And then it went on to tell about this.

And I thought, well isn't that strange. Why would a man want to do that? He barely gets people broken in so they know what they're doing, and out they go, and somebody else comes in. But I think that was true. I think that was an accurate comment about Richard Nixon. And I think he was just the type of man, he was a real loner, he didn't like anyone getting too close to him, even in those early days as a United States Senator. Strange for a politician who needs to shake hands and back-slap all over the place.

Q: You always thought he was very awkward in trying to be pals with people.

SMOAK: Very awkward.

Q: It just did not come across.

SMOAK: Not at all.

Q: How did Nixon interact with the chief of state? You would see these people on trips afterwards. And would they comment about what they thought about the President?

SMOAK: Yes. Again, they were usually very laudatory in their comments. They thought he was a great man, did wonderful things, and knowledgeable. And he was. He was on top of everything, and they were usually very impressed.

Q: Well, in going around the country; you know, we're very proud of the United States, and we sort of like to display our wealth and our vastness, and all this; how did the United States play with many foreign leaders when they went around? What sort of things were they particularly impressed with, or not impressed with?

SMOAK: Generally very impressed with the vastness of the United States, the great numbers. Not only of people, but of everything else. The Shah of Iran was vastly impressed, for example, flying from Williamsburg in a helicopter up to the White House, because you pass over so much water, fresh water. He couldn't believe there was that much fresh water in the world. He looked out the window and said, "Look at all that water." You know, just amazed.

Q: Well, did you find yourself going back to your West Point days as an educator trying to explain the really very complex American federal system to chiefs of state?

SMOAK: Yes.

Q: The role of the governors, the importance of states' legislature?

SMOAK: And especially the political system and how it works. Most of them were very interested and liked to discuss it. Wanted to know about the conventions and the two parties, the possibility of other parties, how the whole thing functioned. That was a popular subject with them.

And also the structure of the United States. Most of them were pretty knowledgeable people, and asked very probing questions.

Q: You had some major functions, I believe, when you were there that you had, if my timing is right, you had the death of three American presidents, I think. Eisenhower, Truman and Johnson. Does this put a particular strain on your work?

SMOAK: Yes. Yes. Something like a presidential funeral is a big project to handle. And we, of course, had a lot to do with that.

Q: Do you have a death-bed watch, if you hear of somebody, a president is getting ill. Do you sort of pull out an emergency file?

SMOAK: Yes, we do.

Q: What particularly is involved in a presidential funeral for the Office of Protocol?

SMOAK: To start with, who are you going to invite from around the world to come to this funeral? What level of invitees? And what do you do with them when they get here? And how are they to be handled? And who's going to escort them?

For the Eisenhower funeral we had 45 chiefs of state come to Washington, 45. And we did something unusual. When the funeral was over we put them on a plane, all 45 of them on one place, which I really thought was not a very good idea. And we sent them all up to New York to the UN. I say all, maybe there were 10 who didn't go the UN.

Q: But still, this was a lot of eggs in one basket.

SMOAK: It frightened the daylights out of me, I'll tell you. As a matter of act, I preferred to have at least three aircraft. But that was decided against. So, you know, there's just a lot of work to be done in a hurry.

Q: Well, how do these chiefs of state interact when they realize they can't be the start of the show, are they usually pretty good?

SMOAK: Yes, they are. They're very good. The chiefs of state themselves, they have to be a pretty big man, and they've gone through the fires to get where they are, and they're usually very easy to handle.

Q: Its the staff. . .

SMOAK: Its the staff that gives you a fit.

Q: This is true of American presidents abroad of Foreign Service experience. They detest the staff, but the president is fine.

SMOAK: Yes, yes. I mean, you know. . .

Q: Little men riding on a big man's coat tail.

SMOAK: Yes. But the point that I would like to emphasize, and, of course, we've raised these points throughout this interview in a number of ways, but there's just a tremendous potential there in this job. And I think the appointees ought to be very carefully selected. I'd like to see us get away from making this a solely political job, and a political appointee. But if it is a political appointee, then I think the deputy ought to be a Foreign Service officer.

Q: But probably more than just a Foreign Service officer, perhaps somebody who would be there for some time, rather than to come in and out.

SMOAK: Yes, yes.

Q: Well, did you find that your political credentials helped you, say, in dealing with the Nixon White House?

SMOAK: Oh, yes. Absolutely.

Q: How did these help?

SMOAK: Well, but that time, I had pretty impressive credentials in the Republican party. And I also have very close allies in the United States Senate.

Q: Strom Thurmond and . . .?

SMOAK: Fritz Hollings, to name two from my state. And there are others. And that was generally known. So, in the White House staff, I think, I came and went rather freely.

Someone else who had not had the experience I had in politics wouldn't find it that way.

Q: This is the argument used for certain political ambassadors in other appointments, and it's not one that is easy to discard, because political clout sometimes can be extremely important, but also knowledge is the other side, and you don't always have both.

SMOAK: Knowledge and experience, absolutely a must. That comes first.

Q: Well, did you ever go abroad? Did you ever get involved with the president when he traveled abroad?

SMOAK: I made a number of trips abroad. I did not go with Richard Nixon himself. I did not go to China, for example. I did not make the trip to England when he went. But I did go on a number of trips.

For example, I went on three trips with then ex-governor Ronald Reagan. One through Europe and the Near East, and two through the Far East.

Q: Well, let me ask a question. President Reagan came to office with a seeming lack of knowledge, and also of interest, in foreign countries. How did you find him on these trips abroad? Because these must have been some of the very few ones that he actually did take abroad. Was he receptive? How was he?

SMOAK: He was very good. Comparable I would say to the way he conducts himself in this country. Let's face it, personally he's a very nice fellow, who reaches out to people, and people generally like him. No question about that.

Q: Did you find him absorbing the problems, the different perspectives of these countries to which he went?

SMOAK: I will put it this way: I certainly think he was entirely adequate. I don't think anyone has ever said that Ron Reagan was an intellectual particularly. But entirely adequate in a practical sense.

Q: And, of course, in those days he was not going for anything but as pretty much either governor or private citizen.

SMOAK: Right.

Q: Did you have any contact with Chiefs of Protocol in other countries swapping stories or techniques?

SMOAK: Yes.

Q: How did you find most other major countries ran their protocol business? In a different manner from us?

SMOAK: No, basically like the way we operate. Generally speaking, and in many cases more importance is placed on the position than here. For example, with a country like Morocco. The Chief of Protocol is the Chief of State,, in addition to everything else. You're dealing with the man who has the greatest entry to the King of Morocco - the Chief of Protocol. He's the number one staff member. And it ranges down from there.

Q: Did you find that you could swap little hints about how to handle any particular people with your counterpart at the other end? To be sure to have a bottle of such and such cognac, or so and so likes silk pillows, and what have you.

SMOAK: Of course, that sort of thing we always had pretty well, because embassies abroad would communicate all of that to us. So, there really was no occasion for that.

Q: But there was always a flow of information coming in.

SMOAK: Yes, all the time.

Q: You also had another occasion on the 25th anniversary of the United Nations. That must have put quite a strain on you.

SMOAK: Yes, it did.

Q: That was 1970, in San Francisco? Mostly foreign ministers came to that?

SMOAK: Was that in San Francisco?

Q: Maybe it was not in San Francisco?

SMOAK: It was in New York, for the most part, I think.

Q: Maybe it was in New York. How about with the United Nations? Did you get involved with them on occasion?

SMOAK: We got involved with the United Nations whenever they had any type of function that took place here in Washington, or whenever chief of missions went in a body from here to the UN on those occasions. But, otherwise, you know they have their own staff.

Q: And there's not need for such liaison between you two?

SMOAK: Yes, there is, there is. We knew them very well. We also knew the city of New York has a protocol office. We worked closely with that staff. Atlanta, Georgia now has a protocol office, as does Los Angeles.

Q: Well, did you have much of a problem being concerned when you were bringing a chief of state, for example, who might be odious to the Jewish population, or a Communist chief of state who's got both subject people and also the strong anti-Communist group in the United States, who would cause trouble; that you have to sort of tiptoe around, work within the constraints of demonstrations?

SMOAK: Very definitely. But that's all a matter of prior planning. Meetings over a three-week period with the Secret Service. Planning out everything in finest detail. Where they're going, what routes they'll take, what they shouldn't do, where they shouldn't go. Where they have to go unannounced and so on. But that is a problem.

Q: Because of the American ethnic diversity every chief of state has a group that is violently opposed to him or her.

SMOAK: Sure. And the demonstrations are many. We have a wise rule in this country. We have the 500 foot rule, which prohibits a demonstration within 500 feet of an embassy. That's observed. And also, Blair House for example, when a chief of state is staying there, it's blocked off at the corner for a block on each side, so that people can't get too close to the door to cause problems.

Q: Well, you've already mentioned that you weren't used as you felt the protocol office could be to further foreign policy to gain information, what was your view of the Foreign Service other than this? Of the Foreign Service officers and how they operated?

SMOAK: My opinion of how they operate?

Q: Your opinion.

SMOAK: I've always found the Foreign Service to be very able and very knowledgeable about their particular area, what they're supposed to be doing, and very forthcoming and very willing to assist and help. I have no fault to find there at all.

Q: I was wondering whether you saw any particular weaknesses in their approach. I mean, you're seeing it from a different perspective.

SMOAK: Generally when we had a visitor from a certain part of the world, we would meet with the representative, starting with the country director and on up in that area to liaison and get the visit laid out properly. That was the approach. We would not only start with a meeting, and frequently I would invite them to come in when the ambassador was called in for his first session. And then thereafter, the assistant chiefs of protocol would carry out the functions at the various levels. They would come and meet with the embassy staff members. So, there was very good liaison in that respect.

Q: A question I try to ask in all these interviews, looking back on it while you were in protocol, what would you say was your sort of accomplishment that gave you the greatest pleasure, and the reverse, what was maybe your biggest frustration or disappointment?

SMOAK: The toughest visit that I had to handle was Brezhnev. Not only is a Russian visit difficult to begin with, but they deal in such great numbers. And they're awfully hard to work with, as I'm sure you've observed.

For example, we worked on that visit for three months before he came over. They were arriving on Sunday. By one o'clock Saturday afternoon they were still unable to tell me how many people would be coming. And that makes it very tough. So we went out and booked the entire Washington Hilton Hotel. We only missed by 72 rooms. They brought 572 people and the Hilton has 500 rooms. And that I guess was the greatest frustration I had to go through, that was a very difficult visit.

Q: How was Brezhnev personally?

SMOAK: He was a real politician. He was grabbing everybody and hugging them and shaking their hands. And the Russian was flying at all times. He was good. He would look you right in the fact and just give you the longer spiel in Russian you ever heard. Just like you understood every word. But the Russians were very difficult. They complained about everything.

Q: How about what gives you the greatest pleasure, satisfaction?

SMOAK: I was really able on a number of occasions to help, to be of great assistance to some of these ambassadors here in occasions when they didn't have facilities or the people, or in some few cases the ability to handle whatever they were trying to do. I knew them well, and to bring them into my confidence and have them feel I was trying to help, to do that, in a constructive way, I felt good about it.

Q: Because there are many small embassies here with not very experienced personnel, and not much of a cadre on which to draw.

SMOAK: Exactly. And there are a number of embassies that come from a part of the world so vastly different from the way we are in custom and tradition that they really need some help.

Q: Well, I want to thank you very much for this interview. It has been a pleasure.

SMOAK: It was a pleasure for me, and if I can help in some way to improve that office, to get the right people appointed and be sure we have at least somebody in there with some diplomatic experience, I think it will be a major contribution.

Q: I thank you.

End of interview