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

WILLIAM W. THOMAS, JR.

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy
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INTERVIEW

Q: Today is May 31, 1994. This is an interview with William W. Thomas, Jr., which is being done in his home in Vienna, Virginia on behalf of the Association for Diplomatic

Studies and I am Charles Stuart Kennedy. I wonder if you could tell me about your background--who your parents were, your early upbringing and education.

THOMAS: I am from North Carolina. My father was a civil engineer. I was educated in public schools in North Carolina and Georgia and received my A.B. from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Q: What were you taking at the University of North Carolina?

THOMAS: As an undergraduate, I majored in political science and international studies. As a graduate student I majored in political science and economic theory. My dissertation topic was international law of land warfare in the American Civil War. While in graduate school I was taught political science and modern European history.

Q: What put you on to international relations?

THOMAS: I have two uncles who were in the Foreign Service, both of them connected with Brazil. Also, at the end of the l9th century, my wife's uncle was vice consul in Shanghai, at the end. He brought these woodcuts back from China.

Q: I see you have them around. Were stories about your uncles told in the family while you were growing up?

THOMAS: Oh, yes. My father wanted me to go into the Foreign Service like Uncle Henry. I didn't take it seriously at the time, but when Joe Ballantine came from the Department of State as a recruiter, I decided that the Foreign Service would be better than teaching. I took the Foreign Service exam in 1950.

Q: You were born when?

THOMAS: 1925.

Q: Did you get caught in World War II?

THOMAS: I served a year in 1944 as an infantry private in the 86th division.

Q: Where did you serve?

THOMAS: In the United States. I was discharged for medical disability late in the year. My division went to on south Germany and the Philippines. It's fortunate for me that I didn't go with them because my replacement got killed.

Q: You got out when?

THOMAS: In 1944. Then I went back to North Carolina to finish my undergraduate work.

Q: All the time you were doing undergraduate and graduate work, you sort of had your eye fixed on the Foreign Service?

THOMAS: I was thinking mainly of teaching, but they don't pay very well in the teaching business and paid much worse then. When I compared the Foreign Service to teaching, the Service looked very good. I applied to Georgetown in 1945 and was accepted, but St. Thomas scared me off.

Q: This is St. Thomas Aquinas?

THOMAS: Any of the St. Thomases. Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas were their great emphases in those days, they have gotten much more modern since.

Q: They had the School of Foreign Service, Father Walsh's school.

THOMAS: Right. But I preferred to continue my studies at the University of North Carolina. Then I took the Foreign Service exam in 1950..

Q: When did you come into the Foreign Service?

THOMAS: In 1952. They were picking us up fairly rapidly then, but I was delayed when I failed the physical exam. I was admitted on a waiver.

Q: Did you get training when you came in?

THOMAS: We got three months training at FSI from April to August, 1952.

Q: Could you give me a feel for how the training was at that time?

THOMAS: The old training office was in SA-6, on C Street where the main diplomatic entrance to the Department is now.

Q: It was an apartment building?

THOMAS: Right. Hot and shoddy. They were already planning to tear it down to make room for construction of New State.

Q: What type of things were you getting exposed to?

THOMAS: They taught us some things which seemed peculiar at the time and seem even more peculiar now. They taught us which corner of a calling card to turn down when you pay a call. We thought that was very amusing. An ambassador's wife (I can't recall her

name) gave a lecture on etiquette. During the lecture she stopped and seemed to have a series of spasms. Someone brought her water, and she straightened up and went bravely on. We learned later that she had had a small heart attack.
A very good linguist named Henry (Haxie) Smith, taught how to approach linguistics. He was excellent at introducing us to general foreign language studies through scientific linguistics. This was very helpful with my lessons in Thai.

Ambassador Nelson T. Johnson, who had been our first ambassador to China, who came and told us what the Foreign Service was like in the bad old days. He was fascinating. He told a story about his first assignment when they announced who would be going where and he got Manaus. He went to the desk in charge of the assignment and said, "I would like to discuss this assignment with you." And the official said, "I thought you would. How do you like your new post, Manaus?" "Frankly," Johnson replied, "I have some problems with it. I presume I have two choices. One, is to go and the other is to submit my resignation." The official said, "That is not quite right." "Oh, I have another alternative?" "Yes, you forgot suicide."

Q: It certainly has changed, you had to go where you were assigned.

THOMAS: Well, in those days you had to pay to get there. When Ambassador Johnson was assigned to China, he had to borrow money to get to Shanghai.

Q: What was your class like? Could you give a feel for the class?

THOMAS: There were 25 officers, two of whom were women. The average age was about 26. Though many officers were from northeastern schools, I didn't feel out of place at all. It was a good cross section of recent graduates in international affairs. The group was pretty internally consistent.

Q: Did you have any particular feel of how you all approached the role of the United States, and the American diplomatic Foreign Service in that at that time?

THOMAS: That was one thing that they somehow avoided discussing. I was a little surprised at the time that they stuck to details more than to general principles. Ambassador Elbridge Durbrow lectured us on a couple of these things.

Q: He was an old China hand.

THOMAS: I think of him more of a Vietnam hand, but he had more than one Far Eastern tour.

Q: Did you get anything on consular work?

THOMAS: Yes, we did. For example, the latest decisions on the McCarran Act which was brand new at that time. We were the first Foreign Service class trained to implement the McCarran Act.

Q: It was both an immigration and nationality act.

THOMAS: Though it was severely criticized, actually it was a good deal better than the hodgepodge it replaced. It was considered to be a great improvement from the point of view of the consular officer which is what my first job was. It made things a little more precise for the consular officer.

Q: Your first assignment was where?

THOMAS: Bangkok.

Q: Was there any premeditation on your part?

THOMAS: Absolutely none. When they gave us a form to fill out, I asked for Western Europe, and I got Bangkok. At least I had heard of it. One of our classmates was assigned to Penang, which he had never heard of.

Q: You served in Bangkok from when to when?

THOMAS: From 1952 to 1954.

Q: What was the situation in Thailand when you got there?

THOMAS: We had an extraordinary career ambassador named Edwin Stanton. He was a China hand from a missionary family. At that time that meant nothing to me, but I found out later that it meant a good deal to people who had dealt with him. Fortunately for him, he wasn't involved in Ambassador Hurley's criticism of the embassy reporting from Chungking. Early in the war, Stanton was imprisoned by the Japanese. After he was exchanged, he was assigned to Vancouver as Consul General, so he was safely out of trouble.

Q: It was Patrick Hurley's attack on China Hands?

THOMAS: Right. In Thailand, Stanton was a quite remarkable ambassador in a way that I didn't really appreciate at the time. He sort of had things in his pocket politically. The liberals all came to us, the conservatives all came to us.

Q: Did you have much contact with the ambassador? You were a junior officer. Was it a big embassy?

THOMAS: No, it was not a big embassy. We thought it was a big, but we didn't know what big meant.

Q: Did you have much contact with Stanton?

THOMAS: Not a lot, although it was adequate. For example, when instructions came from the department to cancel the French Ambassador's wife's American passport, I thought I had better consult the ambassador on that. He invited her over to tea and said, "Would you mind sending your passport back?" The French Ambassador had come along and he spoke up and said that it was perfectly all right with him since she had a perfectly good French diplomatic passport. It turned out that she also had a Swiss and an Italian passport.

Q: You were doing consular work?

THOMAS: Most of the tour. The first three quarters of the two year tour I did consular work and after that I did economic/commercial for six months.

Q: What was the thrust of consular work while you were there?

THOMAS: There wasn't a hell of a lot of it. We had about 600 Americans residents in Thailand at that time, most of them living in Bangkok, and roughly as many tourists on given day. There were a few Chinese refugees, some from Macao with Portuguese passports, trying to go to the United States. A few Americans married Thai. At that time, the Thai had little interest in going to the United States, which has changed since then. Students would go for a year and come back and say, "I can't stand the food."
During the tour we were involved in the Korean War. The Thai were asked to send a battalion, but that wasn't my business.

Q: What was the Thai political situation like, that you saw at the time?

THOMAS: We thought of things being unstable, but actually they weren't, considering the neighboring countries. There were leftists in Thailand who were said to be stirring up the peasants in the northeast and there were smugglers in the north. We worried about the Vietnamese after the Dien Bien Phu defeat. There was talk of a Viet Minh invasion but nothing happened.

Q: This was 1954.

THOMAS: Right.

Q: Was there the feeling that the North Vietnamese Communists, at least those who were fighting at Dien Bien Phu, might turn on Thailand?

THOMAS: The Thai worried about it and our military worried more about it. We didn't have much of a military presence in Thailand at that time. We had a small MAAG, as we called the Military Assistance Advisory Group. They weren't very big or active by later Vietnam standards. At Vietnamese embassy receptions in those days we drank a toast to the Emperor Bao Dai.

Q: What was your impression of the Thai bureaucracy you had to deal with?

THOMAS: The foreign affairs bureaucracy was a privileged class, and mostly came from the royal family or others wealthy families. They were generally very good diplomats, and they took good care of us and the foreigners living in Bangkok. For example, the King, who was born in Boston, made a house available for our ambassador in 1945. And part of this was due, I thought, to very subtle handling by the ambassador.

Q: As a consular officer, did you have any dealings with the Thai government?

THOMAS: Yes. I learned enough Thai to conduct routine business in Thai, and that was a big help at lower levels where little English was spoken. Anytime we wanted help in investigation, police were very helpful, and Thai officials were helpful on passport and visa matters and some shipping matters

On the personal level, the first house my family and I lived in was rented from a senior judge who later became prime minister. And Thai people, government or otherwise, always were willing to be contacted and befriended.

Q: As economic/commercial officer, what was going on in Thailand at that time?

THOMAS: We had gotten interested in Thailand's economic relations with Communist China and one of our big concerns was how to tell Thai mung beans from Chinese mung beans so we could stop the Chinese trade in mung beans.

Q: A mung bean being what?

THOMAS: It's what you make bean sprouts out of. This was one of the first thing I did in the Foreign Service and that I thought was silly, bean counting in both figurative and literal senses.

Q: Were you able to tell the difference?

THOMAS: I couldn't at first, but there were those who could and eventually we were able to ship Thai mung beans to San Francisco.

Q: If you couldn't tell the difference then there would have been problems?

THOMAS: If we couldn't tell the difference, they were presumed to be Communist and couldn't be imported. On the other hand, we were trying to buy tin and tungsten smuggled out of southwest China across into Thailand and paying an exorbitant price for it.

Q: We were trying to buy it?

THOMAS: We were trying to stockpile scarce metals for strategic purposes.

Q: So we were telling Thailand not to trade with Communist China, but on the other hand, if we wanted something we were willing to buy it.

THOMAS: Right, and nobody in Bangkok asked any questions about it.

Q: Were there any American commercial developments in Thailand at the time?

THOMAS: There were old prewar firms like Getz Brothers, Standvac (Standard Vacuum Oil), Shell, and Texaco. Shell was considered to be British then, but it was 40 percent British and 30 percent American. Getz Brothers, an American trading company, operated out of both San Francisco and Hong Kong. American President Lines had monthly ships going to and from Bangkok. American International Underwriters and Bank of America were there. And that was it. Very little really.

Q: There really wasn't much going from Thailand to the United States.

THOMAS: We bought rubber from Thailand and we were very interested in buying rice to ship to areas recently liberated-- Japan, Okinawa, Singapore, South Korea, etc. Tin, rice and rubber was about it.

Q: Was the silk industry much at that time?

THOMAS: Jim Thompson, who revived the Thai silk industry, was an old OSS officer. You have heard of him?

Q: Yes, he was an American entrepreneur after the war who suddenly disappeared at one point.

THOMAS: The tamest of the many rumors was that he had been eaten by a tiger, but nobody ever knew. He was running a silk company which wasn't very active when I first got there, but by the time we left, it had proved to be a big success in New York and European markets.

Q: Were you married at the time?

THOMAS: Yes, my wife and one child went with me. Sara was pregnant and we had a child born in Bangkok some three months after our arrival.

Q: How was life in Bangkok at that time?

THOMAS: I thought it very pleasant, although a lot of others didn't. Our second house was an old three-storied teak house which was a piece of royal family property that the embassy had acquired. There were no screens and bats sometimes roosted in the bedroom, and wild birds in the dining room. It was very open. An occasional snake in the bathroom, and a seven foot monitor lizards in the yard. I thought that was very exotic. As there was no PX and no commissary, we lived entirely off the local economy. This led to closer relations with the Thai.

Q: Did the war, which was coming to a halt against the French after Dien Bien Phu in north Vietnam, intrude much upon how we operated in Bangkok?

THOMAS: Not at all. Not to the consular and commercial sections, at least. The ambassador worried about things, but it really didn't get in the way of my business.

I forgot to say that Ambassador Stanton left three quarters of the way through my tour. He retired with poor health. And wild Bill Donovan took over as ambassador. He had been a Brigadier General in World War II.

Q: This was OSS Donovan?

THOMAS: The fighting 69th Medal of Honor Donovan and the OSS Donovan, the same man.

Q: Now here was the activist supreme.

THOMAS: He certainly was.

Q: He would seem like a rather exotic bird in Thailand at that time.

THOMAS: He was a very generous, considerate man. He took a long term view of Thailand and spent about half of his tour outside the country, visiting other areas in the Far East. He was interested in China, but we didn't have diplomatic relations with China at that time. He certainly was quite different from his predecessor. I enjoyed and liked him, but I think he had bigger goals in mind than Thailand.

Q: Do you have any feel for how he went over in Thailand as far as his dealing with the Thai officials?

THOMAS: He tended to deal more with the generals than Stanton had. Stanton had been in Thailand seven years and knew a wide range of people. I think Donovan, who himself was a military man, chose to concentrate his efforts on the generals, who ran most of the country.

Q: At the time you were there Thailand was run by generals?

THOMAS: Yes, generals, civil servants, and Chinese business people.

Q: How did we view the Chinese at that point?

THOMAS: The Thai for a century had had a very clever policy of openly assimilating Chinese. If a Chinese was extraordinarily successful in any business, he was given a title and a Thai name and expected to conduct himself as a Thai from then on. Bangkok was and still is a Chinese city. This was before I got into the China business so I don't really know much personally about the Chinese group at that time. Except that there were a lot of them and the generals tended to marry the rich daughters.

Q: What was the feeling about the Thai army?

THOMAS: Ambassador Donovan worked closely with them as has every ambassador since.

Q: You left Thailand in 1954. Is that right?

THOMAS: Yes.

Q: Then you set off on what was to be the focus of your career.

THOMAS: Yes, quite by accident. I was assigned after Bangkok to Hong Kong as a visa officer. I got back to Washington and my personnel counselor said, "Your assignment has been canceled, could you come see me tomorrow morning and we will discuss the next assignment?" The next morning I went to see him and he said, "So-and-so is going to be in Hong Kong for another year so we have to think of something to do with you. How would you like to study Vietnamese?" My wife had had a premonition saying that there were two places that we don't want to serve in, South Africa and Vietnam. So, I said, "No, sorry, my wife doesn't want to go to Vietnam. What else have you got?" He said, "Would you like to study Chinese?" This, I think, was a result of my having learned more than a smattering of Thai. Thus I was chosen for the group that would reopen the Chinese language school in Taiwan. So he said, "China it is." And I was assigned to 27 months of language training, which is a little longer than they have done since and I think a very good idea.

Q: Where did you go for the training?

THOMAS: To Taichung in Taiwan. The old language school had been in Peking. The Taichung school used the old fashioned Chinese study methods, which emphasized individual study with a reliance on rote. I found this very satisfactory, though some students didn't.

Q: What was the setup? In the first place you opened the school on the island of Taiwan.

THOMAS: In the small city of Taichung, which had 200,000 people at the time. It is a Japanese city really. Japanese colonial people had set up a city with straight roads instead of the usual Chinese hodge podge. Most of the language students lived in the Japanese houses that they had left behind.

Nicholas Bodman, a professor from Cornell, headed the school. He assembled a good group of teachers, all of whom spoke Beijing Mandarin. (The second year, he added a teacher of Taiwanese.) In addition, he brought in a number of highly qualified lecturers. Throughout my time at the school, we were viewed with some suspicion by the local government because we read some Chinese communists texts, the "Thoughts of Chairman Mao," for instance. When we set the school up, the Taiwan government was told that we would be using Communist China texts, and they agreed. But again and again they disagreed after we thought the problem was settled.

Q: How many students were in the first class?

THOMAS: About eight. The second class had about 12 and later 15.

Q: How did your class work? How were the instructions done?

THOMAS: We had two groups of people. Some of us were new to Chinese, and some people like Paul Kreisberg and Bill Gleysteen already knew some Chinese. Gleysteen was a missionary child and grew up in Peking. Kreisberg had studied Chinese at Columbia and already knew written Chinese better than spoken. (We had a USIS officer who had been in Shanghai as a child, but his first language was pidgin English, not Chinese. His only Chinese was a stream of cuss words in Shanghai dialect.)

The emphasis was on small classes, two or three. We started off with a U. S. Army text in the Yale Romanization system of Mandarin Chinese.

Q: This is having a dialogue every day, learning the phrases for that dialogue?

THOMAS: Right. It is an enormous amount of memory work, an ancient Chinese system to keep foreigners from learning the language, we sometimes thought. By overcoming the Chinese objection to not starting with Chinese characters, we made much more rapid progress than if you follow the Chinese system. And it worked out very well. I could really speak Chinese when I got through with my 27 months.

Q: In your instruction from the Chinese instructors, did they have any sort of point of view that they were pushing at you?

THOMAS: Essentially, when they were given an opportunity to express a point of view, they would express either their own or the government's, and their own was usually not too different from the government's. There was one guy there who was considered a leftist, but really he was just an eccentric.

Q: In those days you had a very tender, sensitive set of Chinese didn't you?

THOMAS: They were a little nervous about dealing with us. They weren't sure we were tamed yet, but we actually were.

Q: How did your group look at the two Chinas and that situation at that time?

THOMAS: My own policy goal was eventually to be able to serve someday in Peking. We studied the Peking dialect. I think most of the others either tacitly or openly wanted the same thing, though some were interested in staying in Taiwan or Hong Kong. I thought that would be a little restrictive.

Q: At that time our policy was controlled by domestic U. S. domestic politics adamantly opposed to recognition, having any connection with Communist China. How did you all feel about this?

THOMAS: When you choose a field as your line of work, you are more interested in it and sympathetic towards it than you would otherwise be. And I think knowing incomplete facts about China is better than knowing nothing at all. Since our work in the Language School was to find out as much about Chinese language, history, politics, geography, military as possible, we became involved with it. That didn't mean that everybody said, "Let's recognize China."

Q: That was really a political decision.

THOMAS: It was a difficult political decision. We learned over the years that the bureaucrats proposed improved relations with the People's Republic of China discovered that nothing happened. And the eighth floor had a way of seeing to it that things didn't get to the top of his inbox that he didn't want to see. His assistants made this arrangement. They knew what would go and what wouldn't.

Q: What was the feeling about the Kuomintang government and Chiang Kai-shek in Taiwan? In a way you are free floaters. You are there but you...

THOMAS: We didn't fit into the system, but they noted what we did and didn't do. Merely studying Taiwanese dialect "made a political statement."

Q: What was your feeling about all this. There certainly was a

liberal/conservative clash over Chiang Kai-shek in the United States that sort of permeated anybody who was interested in foreign affairs. Was he a kind of corrupt warlord type, or was he the saint of both the anti-communist...?

THOMAS: I don't think Chiang himself was corrupt, but others were. And the Kuomintang certainly had a lot of corruption in it. But, if you examined the people one at a time, I think you would see that they weren't as bad as the press in the United States made them out to be.

Q: We tend to see things through the filter of the media and academia.

THOMAS: They had to file a story, and sometimes there was no story there.

Q: Did you get any feel about how the Chinese were doing with the Taiwanese?

THOMAS: Yes. In addition to Mandarin I and one other person in the school studied Taiwanese dialect, which is quite different from Mandarin. But that was with the hope that I would get an assignment in Taiwan since the mainland didn't seem to be opening up any time soon. Eventually I did get an assignment as chief of the political section in Taipei. To some extent this may have labeled me as pro-Taiwanese. Later, I did get an assignment as chief of the political section in Taiwan. At that time the Taiwanese were trying to expand their political control of Taiwan. They did not succeed until several years after my last tour in Taiwan.

Q: How were you all viewing taking Chinese as a career? Here is this huge land mass which is closed to us. Did you think it was going to open up soon?

THOMAS: I think as we moved towards our next assignment, we viewed it as more eventual than we had initially hoped. I thought China would open up in four or five years, but it wasn't that close. I finally got to mainland China in 1975.

Q: Roughly 20 years later.

THOMAS: Primary assignments for the Chinese graduates were in the consulate in Hong Kong studying the mainland. We were in the colony and the mainland was over there, you could see it but couldn't think of going there.

Q: While you were at the language school, were people from the embassy coming telling you what our policy was, what we were doing, etc.?

THOMAS: Embassy officers would come down just for an excuse to travel. The ambassador came once. The DCM came once. This was in two years. We really weren't indoctrinated very much. If somebody was trying, he failed.

Q: You were expected to do your duty when you got out.

THOMAS: If your work is in Taiwan, you do Taiwan work, if your work is mainland, you work on the mainland.

Q: In Taiwan did you get out and around at all?

THOMAS: We did pretty well. I got a trip by boat to Hong Kong from Taiwan. We went to the off shore islands, Quemoy and Matsu, in a Chinese plane. We climbed the mountains, some about 13,000 feet, and walked around. It was interesting for such a small place.

Q: Did you get any feel, while you were on Taiwan, about how the Taiwanese felt about the Chinese?

THOMAS: Oh, yes. It was obvious there was friction between the two groups, in spite of the ROC's attempts to conceal the fact. This improved as they lived together, but there had been a serious riot in February 1948 in which a great number of Taiwanese were killed by mainland troops. That was still a sore point when we left in 1954 and after that.

Q: Was Karl Rankin ambassador?

THOMAS: Yes, Karl Rankin. In 1954, there was an incident which showed sensitivities between the Chinese and the United States. That was a very unfortunate business which was prompted by our military trial system. An American soldier had shot a Chinese prowler, he said, and killed him with a 22. At the time there was no status of forces agreement. The soldier was tried an American court martial and whisked out of the country. A Chinese group, perhaps with government backing, held a memorial in front of the embassy and it got out of hand. They sacked the embassy and did a lot of damage. They also destroyed several language students' personal effects, stored for shipment from the embassy.

Q: So you finished your training when?

THOMAS: In 1957.

Q: And then where were you assigned?

THOMAS: To the political section in Hong Kong as a publications procurement officer.

Q: You were there for how long?

THOMAS: A year and a half.

Q: What was a publications procurement officer doing?

THOMAS: Buying publications, mainly Chinese newspapers, for prices that varied with the scarcity of the paper and how badly they thought we wanted it.

Q: I would have thought we would have had something equivalent to a subscription or something.

THOMAS: We did, but in those days foreigners were allowed to see only a few specially edited Chinese publications.

Q: Not in Hong Kong?

THOMAS: They were not allowed to bring them across the provincial border into Hong Kong. So, theoretically, at least, foreigners weren't allowed to see them and didn't.

Q: Well, how did you get the things?

THOMAS: By paying in Hong Kong dollars. If we asked for the Nanking daily, the vendors would say that the price is so-and-so and we'll see if we can get it. And eventually they would turn it up. If they were successful and we didn't have other sources for the paper, we would buy it and say that we would like it whenever it came out again.

Q: I would have thought that this would have been a CIA operation, and that it would have been a joint American-British type operation.

THOMAS: We inherited the organization from a similar one in Shanghai. We discussed these matters with the British because we had decided earlier to make this an open operation. It was too difficult to keep it classified, damn near impossible. So what we could get on subscription, we got on subscription.

Q: Did somebody up in the China watcher office say we want this or that? How did you get your orders to go out and find?

THOMAS: Orders mostly came internally. The publications procurement office put out a mimeographed report every day called "Survey of the China Mainland Press." It also put out a monthly report, "Extracts from China Mainland Magazines." The publications procurement officer ran the translation section as well as buying publications.

Q: Was this a joint translation section with the British?

THOMAS: No. They had their own. Our publications were given wide distribution in Hong Kong and Washington.

Q: When I was in Belgrade, the British and Americans had a joint translation service on the Yugoslav press.

THOMAS: We had a very active interest in the Chinese newspapers beginning with the Korean War. The British subscribed to our "Survey of the China Mainland Press," but we did all the work.

Q: The British had a small embassy in Peking, didn't they?

THOMAS: Yes.

Q: Did you have the feeling they were getting much out of it?

THOMAS: Oh, yes. Having done the publications procurement and translation program myself and studied the Chinese mainland for several years, I was still boggled by what I saw when I made my first train trip from Hong Kong to Peking. You see so many things from a train window that you don't see in the newspapers. A once a month train trip into China would have been very valuable in 1958 for showing what life in the countryside was like. When we arrived in 1975, China was still so closed that any trip was productive. The Chinese had the habit of putting up the latest slogans--and therefore policy--"big character posters" which were readily visible from the train.

Q: And the British were travelling back and forth.

THOMAS: Yes.

Q: Were you able to tap into this? Did the Brits share their impressions with you?

THOMAS: Yes. We were very close.

Q: You were running the translation service which would be a full time job. So procurement officer, was that...?

THOMAS: Well, the procurement was for the translation service. Everybody read our translations. It is a lot easier for us to read English than Chinese. We had a great Chinese staff who did the translations. It took a lot of boiling down.

Q: Did the Chinese succumb to the Marxist jargon syndrome? Certainly when I was in Yugoslavia and anybody who has dealt with Soviet affairs, there were five hour speeches. Did they tend to run off at the mouth and use phrases.

THOMAS: Their speeches were not as long as Castro's. They were much more reasonable about that, maybe an hour. But they used a semi-intelligible jargon which had to be specially learned. The leaders were deeply into literary and historical illusion.

Q: Was it a matter of reading between the lines?

THOMAS: Yes. For instance, in 1977, if you read "criticize Lin oppose Confucius", which was one of their slogans, it really meant to criticize Zhou En-lai. You would learn this very quickly or it might be too late if you said the wrong thing at the wrong time.

Q: So it was like a whole world of Alice in Wonderland.

THOMAS: Yes, words mean what I say they mean. The Chinese also got involved in not only fooling us, but in fooling themselves. For example, they predicted giant harvests in 1960 when as a matter of fact the whole country was starving.

Q: What was your picture of China from your review of the press?

THOMAS: We got a very distorted view. The Chinese were apparently not trying to mislead us directly, but they were reporting news in a way that would mislead any reader who didn't know what was going on in China to begin with. The Great Leap Forward was nothing of the sort and it wasn't until years later that we found out the full extent of the famine in China in 1959-60, when 25 million Chinese died of starvation.

Q: But this was not apparent?

THOMAS: No, they were telling how much they grew last year and this year and what they would be doing next year. It was simply fiction because they were afraid to tell Chairman Mao that his Great Leap Forward was a disaster.

Q: I understand this is one of those things that happened in the local cadre and nobody wanted to be outdone.

THOMAS: If you are a Chinese cadre and are faced with a boss who says that the Center tells me that we have to increase grain production by 30 percent again this year, you don't say, "Hey, that's impossible. Don't you know anything about rice?" The easiest thing for the low-level bureaucrat to do is to fake the statistics, and that is what they did. At the upper level they didn't find out about it until much later, say a year or two, when the granary turned out to really be empty.

Q: How about our local staff, the Chinese who were doing this? They must have been very astute people picking up the various nuances.

THOMAS: We brought a lot of them down from Shanghai when we closed our consulate there in f1949. We had had a translation section there. They were really good. They could type a translation in perfect English faster than I could type. A first-class group.

Q: And they could sort of smell things, I would assume.

THOMAS: They could, they were experts on China as well as translation.

Q: Looking at China this way, was there still the feeling of "Gee we really need to get in there and get an embassy going at some point," or was it a matter of saying that it really didn't make any difference what we did with China at that time?

THOMAS: Neither of those points of view would be quite accurate. In the 1940's, the communist Chinese were involved in a rebellion that we had no control. The fact that it was so big and complex made us not even consider some things that we would think of say in the case of Bosnia or Rwanda.

Q: We are talking about two trouble spots right now in 1994 where there are local rebellions and civil war and intervention by the United Nations.

THOMAS: At one time in 1945 when Secretary Marshall went there, he took a look at China and decided that the problem was too big. It is out of control. I think that was a very correct decision. We didn't "lose China" because we didn't have China.

Q: How did you, and perhaps your colleagues, view the "Chinese Communist threat" at that time, during 1957-59?

THOMAS: In 1958 there was considerable tension over the possibility of getting into a scrap with the Chinese over the off shore islands. Remember it played some role in the 1960 Presidential campaign.

Q: Yes, it was called the Formosa Strait crisis.

THOMAS: Right. The interesting thing about it was that China's military movements weren't as severe as their military language, their posturings, and their "severe warnings." At the time they were having very serious internal troubles. At the time we thought they were more dangerous than perhaps they actually were. But, if this is China's "500th serious warning", it had to be taken seriously. China was a big country with a lot of airplanes. They were also very cautious, which we didn't fully credit at the time.

Q: Did we feel that China was an expansionist power at that time?

THOMAS: One of the ways of looking at it was that the Chinese were going to get involved in Vietnam. We had a group of China scholars who warned that China, having gone into Korea the way it did, would have to go into Vietnam. It turned out the Chinese didn't see it quite that way. They thought the circumstances were different. The real Chinese invasion came after we had left.

Q: Who was consul general when you were there?

THOMAS: Everett Drumwright. He died a couple of months ago.

Q: He is one of the major figures in China policy in the early post-war years. What was your impression of Drumwright?

THOMAS: He was consul general most of the time I was there. He had a lot of China background. He was a nervous man. He was sympathetic to the Kuomintang and friendly forces in Taiwan may have hoped that they would regain control of China. In Hong Kong there were no serious problems when I was there. Things were in pretty good shape.

Q: You left and went where?

THOMAS: I went to Cambodia as economic officer but with special responsibility for the Chinese population, who were a major factor in the economy.

Q: You were there from when to when?

THOMAS: From the end of 1958 to the spring of 1961.

Q: What was the political situation in Cambodia when you arrived there in late 1958?

THOMAS: Prince Sihanouk claimed that there had been an attempted coup with an American participating in it. Therefore, the situation for the embassy was quite bad at the time. It was dangerous for officials even to speak to us. In 1959, Prince Sihanouk received Zhou En-lai as a state visitor.

Q: What was the embassy like when you arrived there?

THOMAS: It was small with a small military mission, and an AID mission which was fairly active, with some good small projects. There were a lot of French still in Cambodia, about 5,000 French there who came there because they had to get out of Algeria. They felt that Cambodia was very receptive to French. We had a few American businesses there...Standvac. We occasionally had an American ship coming in, but very occasionally.

Q: Who was the ambassador at that time?

THOMAS: First Carl Strom, and, a year later, William C. Trimble.

Q: How was the embassy run?

THOMAS: It wasn't a very active embassy, and during Strom's tenure, we largely lost contact with Cambodian officials. Strom worried about Vietnam a lot.

Ambassador Trimble was a European specialist, and Cambodia was too rural for his tastes. Politically, he was a fish out of water, but administratively, the embassy ran smoothly. And Trimble had an excellent DCM, C. Robert Moore. I was one of two economic officers and also the embassy's Chinese language officer.

Q: This was part of our pattern, wasn't it, to put Chinese language officers all around the periphery of China to keep an eye out. In that role, as a Chinese language officer, what were you doing?

THOMAS: In that role, we reported, for example, on PRC movement, such as a survey team looking for iron ore near Angkor Wat. We also did ordinary political reporting on the Chinese community, which was quite large. There were about four or five hundred thousand Chinese in Cambodia, a country with a total population of three to five million. And the city of Phnom Penh was half Chinese. The government allowed the Chinese to have their own school and Chinese newspapers.

Q: How were they looked upon. At that time there was some unpleasantness going on in Malaysia wasn't there?

THOMAS: It was called the insurgency.

Q: There was essentially a Chinese insurgency going on in Malaysia at this time.

THOMAS: Yes.

Q: How did we view the Chinese community in Cambodia at that time? Did we see this as a fifth column from Communist China?

THOMAS: We were pretty well informed on who was who in the Chinese community. We had a lot of friends there. Taiwan had had a bank there, though it closed the week I arrived. There were Communists in Phnom Penh and in the countryside. I took a trip with a Cambodian friend up to the northeast near what later became the Ho Chi Minh trail and walking the street I heard somebody say, "Long live Chairman Mao" in Mandarin. In a minute the voice said, "The People's communes are good." It was a myna bird that somebody had taught to say these things in Chinese.

Q: How did we view Sihanouk at that time?

THOMAS: Sihanouk was a complex person. It was difficult keeping up with his changing positions. Although he had abdicated, he was still, for practical purposes, the king. He had the support of most of his officials, though sometimes that support wavered. There were people in his government who wanted closer ties with us, but Sihanouk played both sides against the middle. Sihanouk's aloofness baffled and distressed Ambassador Trimble.

Q: At this point we were reaching a real crisis in Laos and everybody was getting very edgy about southeast Asia, weren't they?

THOMAS: Well, yes, but as usual the things on the ground didn't seem as bad as they seemed in Hong Kong and Washington. Cambodia got very little press. France-presse was about the only active press agency. Well, the Chinese had reporters in Cambodia, but they stayed away from us.

Q: In that whole area, we were going through a phase that may continue on, but certainly in Laos...did you have the feeling that the CIA was a power unto itself there?

THOMAS: Not in Cambodia at that time.

Q: You didn't have that feeling that they were off running in their own little shows?

THOMAS: If they were, but they concealed it pretty well. It was quite different from Laos when I was there.

Q: Yes, Laos was basically a CIA country.

THOMAS: Well, there were a lot of conspicuous American military and semi-military in Laos.

Q: Was there any pressure that you were feeling that was coming from Washington that you have to do this with Sihanouk or do that?

THOMAS: We received the usual telegrams instructing us to raise subjects of interest to the U. S. at "appropriately high levels" or at "the highest possible level", which usually meant Sihanouk, given the assumption that he made all the important decisions. Sometimes Washington instructed the embassy to do things which we thought were not the wisest course.

There were temptations to be activist. Vietnam was very strong on being activist. In some cases they asked us to do things that I presume we didn't want to do. But as a general economic officer I wasn't involved.

Q: What were some of the economic/commercial things?

THOMAS: Very minor. There were some American exports. Sihanouk liked to make movies and buy cameras and other equipment. We imported rubber from Cambodia. Cambodian rice exports competed with ours, but we still bought Cambodian rice for Asian countries which depended on us. We shipped the petroleum products that Cambodia needed. We suspected that some of it was going into the mountains on the Vietnam border, but this was very difficult to pin down.

Q: Was the Cambodian economy self-sustaining?

THOMAS: Yes. Rice for export. They produced beer. Rubber for export. A few things like sapphires and cardamom. It really wasn't a very active economy, compared to Thailand.

Q: What about our relations with South Vietnam at that time?

THOMAS: There was a substantial Vietnamese minority living in Phnom Penh and maybe half a million in the whole country, many scattered around the Tonle Sap, the big lake in the middle of the country. Some were pro-Viet Cong and some were pro-Catholic. The South Vietnamese had an embassy in Phnom Penh which was very active. They were also accused by Sihanouk of involvement in the same "attempted coup" he had accused us of be part of in 1958.

Q: Did you feel a real dislike between the Vietnamese and Cambodians at that time?

THOMAS: There was evidently more than I thought there was. Several years after I left, a mob sacked the Vietnamese cathedral, and throughout the country many Vietnamese were massacred.

Q: How about events in Laos? Were you watching those at that time?

THOMAS: No, we weren't paying much attention,. Relations between Cambodia and Laos were distant, and we thought Cambodia was much more important than Laos. I changed my view later when I was assigned to Laos.

Q: When did you leave?

THOMAS: I left Cambodia in 1961.

Q: So now you had the Kennedy administration in.

THOMAS: It came in while we were in Cambodia.

Q: Did you get any feeling while in Cambodia about the new administration coming in?

THOMAS: Averell Harriman came and paid us a visit. He was Assistant Secretary for East Asian Affairs then.

Q: Did you get a feel of how the visit went?

THOMAS: It went all right, as we had predicted in the embassy. Bill Sullivan and Mike Forrestal came with him on the trip.

Q: Did they see Sihanouk?

THOMAS: If they hadn't I would have heard about it. I can't see Sihanouk missing the opportunity to talk with the new administration.

Q: You didn't feel that with the Kennedy administration coming on and being activist and all any sort of blow torch being put to our activities in Cambodia as compared to before?

THOMAS: No, I think it was a successful visit and nobody got any mistaken ideas about it. I presume Harriman told them how important Vietnam was to us.

Q: Well, then in 1961 you moved to the next place.

THOMAS: I went to Ann Arbor for a year's economic training.

Q: This was all of 1961 and 1962?

THOMAS: The l961-62 school year, August to June.

Q: What were you studying?

THOMAS: Chinese economy with Alexander Eckstein and some international economics.

Q: Here you were back in the academic world and dealing with something that you had been studying in the government world. Did you find that there was a different view, different approach?

THOMAS: Different approach more than a different view. The view was "Gee, I wish we knew more about this." But generally speaking, to me, the academic world was highly theoretical and tended to get away from the facts. They have peculiar ways of expressing themselves. This is what they call rigor, I believe.

Q: Their own jargon I guess. Did you find the course useful?

THOMAS: Yes, it let me know what people all over the world, including Russia, thought was going on in China.

Q: At that time were we picking up the famine?

THOMAS: Yes, CIA economic analysts had picked it up by then. We didn't have any data on it in the academic sense, but we had a general idea that the economy had taken a bad turn. It was pretty clear when we were in Cambodia that there was severe food shortage in China. Whenever we went to the post office, we saw crowds of Chinese wrapping and mailing packages of oils and other high caloric foodstuffs.

Q: Was the Great Leap Forward still in swing when you were in Ann Arbor?

THOMAS: They were cleaning up after it. In 1961 they had a decent crop and in 1962 they were nearly normal again, but still hungry.

Q: What about industry?

THOMAS: We had a lot of trouble in separating what the Chinese were saying from what was actually happening. The Chinese statistical system was destroyed by the habit of exaggeration in the Great Leap Forward. They continued to claim that a lot of things were happening which weren't. But by this time industry had begun to get back to normal.

Q: What was the feeling at that time about China? Was it an obsolescent industrial organization?

THOMAS: In 1962, China's economy was more primitive than obsolescent. The Chinese tried to make it sound better than it was, and we accepted their figures for lack of anything better.

Q: I think there is often the tendency that you can't perceive your enemy to be too weak.

THOMAS: That is right and was a factor, I think, in dealing with China. If he is your enemy he has got to be strong, otherwise we would be wasting our time. The case of China was unusual in that we overestimated the Chinese economy for several years running.

Q: After Ann Arbor in 1962, where did you go?

THOMAS: I went to Laos, to the AID mission.

Q: How did this come about?

THOMAS: Because I got assigned to Mali and didn't want to go. I was assigned there because they were short a French language economic officer. I wangled my way out of it. They were just reopening the AID mission in Laos and this was going to be a Kennedy-Khrushchev show place of how peaceful co-existence could work. It didn't happen that way.

Q: Until when were you in Vientiane?

THOMAS: From 1962 to 1964.

Q: What was the political situation when you arrived?

THOMAS: Very uncertain. At first it looked good. Within the first two or three weeks that I was there, I went up to the Plain of Jars, the ruins up in the mountains, and met the

number two man in the politburo, Phoumi Vongvichit. No American had met any of the Communists before. He was coming down to Vientiane for his first visit since co-existence had started. The Chinese Chargé d'affaires, who had been stationed in the Plain of Jars, also came for his first visit to Vientiane. Things were so uncertain that they put a company of Lao troops outside our embassy, which we considered an intrusion, but one we would put up with. It stayed that way until the Communists took over Vientiane. It was a very odd situation and had a lot of elements of instability. For example, we woke up one morning and there was machine gun fire in our back yard. I called the embassy and said, "There is machine gun fire in my back yard?" "Go and see what they are shooting at." Like a fool I went. I said, "Who are you shooting at?" They said, "General Amkha." I said, "Okay," and went back and called the embassy to tell them. They said, "Oh, we knew that." That made me rather irritated as I felt I had risked my life for my country and they knew it already.

Q: What was this?

THOMAS: This was a coup d'tat attempt, one that you may have read about. Ambassador Unger went to the coup headquarters at Prince Souvanna Phouma's house and told them that something was wrong, there was no coup d'tat so forget it and come to a cocktail party. And they called it off. It was amazing for Unger to be successful in a long shot like that. I was very pleased for him.

Q: What was AID doing at that time?

THOMAS: My job as financial adviser was stabilizing the kip, the local currency. This was a joint effort by the U. S., the U. K., France, Japan, Australia, and the IMF. It was a successful operation in that the kip stopped falling. Looking back on it, it was outrageously expensive and whether we got our money's worth or not is still a little difficult to see. But compared with Vietnam it was small potatoes, and the Lao kip stayed more or less stable until the communists took over in the '70's.

Q: One has the feeling that Laos was always in crisis but things never seemed to collapse.

THOMAS: If you are lying flat already, you can't collapse. Things just kept on going. I got back years later and it wasn't as different as I had been led to believe.

Q: There were all these offensives on the Plain of Jars, etc. How seriously did we take these various troop operations?

THOMAS: Oh, for those involved they were quite serious. The real fighting was in the hills between the communists and the Hmong. A hundred miles away Vientiane, we saw very little of it. There were several occasions when someone tried to start something, and there might be gunfire for several hours. At the eclipse of the moon, there was even more gunfire when they shot to save the moon from a carnivorous rabbit.

Q: What was your impression of what we were doing with our aid there?

THOMAS: It was a very complex operation and I didn't know all of it even though I was in the AID mission. I was in the Center because my work was with the National Bank and the Ministry of Finance, and the head of the AID mission liked to keep his fingers on the money end of it. Compared to Vietnam, our economic program was effective and not too expensive. A lot of the construction aid program had to do with supplying paramilitary units in the mountains and building roads that didn't stay built very long. And building airstrips all over the country. That was very active but I had nothing to do with it.

Q: Were the Soviets involved?

THOMAS: The Soviets were there in some numbers, but not very conspicuous. I am sure they watched us very carefully, but we didn't see much of them.

Q: In your dealing with the financial work, were you involved with allocating funds or help to one segment of the political spectrum as opposed to another?

THOMAS: Our role in the budget was not to allocate funds but to keep a strict cap on the deficit. It was clear who were our friends and who were not. We allocated funds through the Lao budget and people in the budget office who were the friendly. Actually the budget office was run by an old Corsican, Papa Buonacorsi, a former French colonial clerk. He was employed by the Lao government to keep the books straight and do his best to make sure that the funds went where they should.

Q: It was known in government circles that CIA had very large operations, comparatively, going in Laos. Were you familiar with any of those?

THOMAS: I was not familiar with them although I knew they were there. I heard stories, as all the foreigners did. I had my own program to run.

Q: Did they sort of intrude? Did you find yourself saying, "Don't worry about that, we'll take care of that?"

THOMAS: No, it was a cooperative group, due perhaps to Win Brown and Len Unger. The people I dealt with were very helpful. I didn't feel I was in competition with them or anything like that. The ambassador had things under control.

Q: Could you talk a little about Leonard Unger as ambassador?

THOMAS: He was very active, very smooth, a great language man. By the time he got to Laos he was fluent in Thai and learned Lao very quickly, which is an extraordinary accomplishment. I have told you about his calling the Lao coup off, saying "You can't do this," and they saying, "Yes sir." I thought he ran a pretty good mission there. He had a

regrettable habit, however, of working late, sometimes until ten o'clock in the evening, expecting his underlings to stay at the office on call until he was ready to go.

Q: Was there any Chinese influence there? Were you able to use your Chinese at all?

THOMAS: I read the Chinese business newspaper from Thailand. The only Lao newspaper was a small mimeographed sheet, about four pages, called Lao-presse. The Communist Chinese had a bookshop on the Plain of Jars which I visited once. There were Chinese communists in Vientiane, but we didn't have contact with them. Though we didn't have formal contact with the Chinese embassy personnel, on one occasion I was seated next to the charge, Yue Dai-heng, and had a friendly conversation. Overall, my French, Thai, and Lao languages were more useful to me than my Chinese.

Q: What was your impression of the Lao government?

THOMAS: There was corruption. They made sure they got the basics done, but they shaved the edges. We thought they ought to have a larger budget office but, for their own reasons, they wouldn't enlarge it. I assume that they didn't want too much foreign intrusion.

Q: You left there when?

THOMAS: In 1964.

Q: This was just when our real build-up was starting in Vietnam. Did what was happening in Vietnam intrude at all upon what you were about?

THOMAS: We watched it with great interest. For one thing, it helped us to get AID funds, since our program was so small in comparison to Vietnam. We had no funding trouble for our program which was about $30 million a year.

Q: What about North Vietnamese? Were you aware of their presence?

THOMAS: Vietnamese regulars occupied strategic points throughout the country, including in Vientiane. Also, there was a small North Vietnamese population, many of them Catholics, who had lived in Vientiane for some time. Some of them, of the Thai Dam tribe, came out after Dien Bien Phu with the French and just settled in Vientiane, the most convenient place they could get to. The North Vietnamese had a large embassy there, and an astute ambassador. They were always very polite to me. When I first got there in 1962, the South Vietnamese still had an office there but they left not long after.

Q: When you left there in 1964, where did you think Laos was going at that time?

THOMAS: I expected little change. And it didn't collapse until Vietnam did.

Q: Why don't we stop at this point and put on the tape where we should pick it up next time. Where did you go after Laos?

THOMAS: I went to the Taiwan desk in the State Department.

Q: All right, we will pick it up in 1964 on the Taiwan desk.

Q: Mr. Thomas you were mentioning that you had a few things to say concerning Bill Donovan when he was ambassador in Thailand in 1954.

THOMAS: General Donovan started out by reshuffling the top portion of the embassy and not accepting some of the counselors and section heads suggested to him. He took Howard Parsons, the economic counselor and made him DCM. Donovan made it very clear to all that he had strong White House connections, which he did, and had no compunctions about using them to overcome opposition in the Department.

Q: How did this affect people in Bangkok?

THOMAS: I had been pleased with Stanton, the previous ambassador, and had some qualms about Donovan. But things turned out very well. He did things that you wouldn't expect. The Foreign Minister gave a formal dinner for him with a string quartet which played a suite of music Donovan had heard before but I hadn't. He said to me, "I have been watching you. I know they always play Dixie when they go through this particular dinner and know you are from the South and I wondered if you would stand up when they played it." It was a joke he was hoping to play on me, but it didn't work because they played Dixie when I was standing up anyway. Not that I would have gotten up.
He made trips while he was there to several places in the area. He spent more time out of Thailand than he did in Thailand. He went to Angkor Wat in Cambodia and was so impressed with it he got a plane and sent the entire embassy in to Angkor Wat to see it. It was a very nice thing to do. He was thoughtful on things like that.
Mrs. Donovan was taken to a shooting tournament and was asked if she would like to take a shot, thinking she would turn it down. She said, "Oh, I would be delighted." It turned out she outshot everybody in the tournament. At the time I thought this was real shooting, but I learned later in East Asia that scores tend to vary according to rank. She didn't necessarily beat everybody in the tournament.

Q: But she was a good shot anyway.

THOMAS: Good enough to pass.

Q: How did you find Donovan related with Thai officials?

THOMAS: As I said previously, he tended to deal more with the military than the civilians. He did all the proper things, but decided that the power in Thailand was with the military, which it was. So, in addition to dealing with the minister of foreign affairs, he dealt directly with the military at the top level. This included the Prime Minister, Field Marshall Pibun Songkram. Pibun was suspicious of the United States because he had been on the Japanese side during World War II.(Some other people in the government had been in the Thai embassy in Tokyo during the Second World War and provided us with intelligence on the success of our bombing there.) All in all, Donovan had very good relations with the Thai and gave us greater access to the Thai military than we had had before.

Q: Is there anything else you want to say about Donovan?

THOMAS: No, I think that is all.

Q: Okay, let's pick it up where we left off last time with you returning to the Department of State from 1964-70 in two different jobs.

THOMAS: The first one was economic officer on the Taiwan desk. The other was economic special assistant for East Asian Bureau.

Q: In the first job as economic officer for the Taiwan desk (1964-66), what were our economic concerns with Taiwan?

THOMAS: There were two and one was only partly economic. We wanted their assistance in what was left of the Korean War. We were still thinking about things in Taiwan Straits terms. We had some operations going on in the Straits that we wanted their cooperation with. It was not formal economic aid. We worked out a system of giving them economic assistance, which in a sense paid for their military cooperation.
We decided about the time I was on the desk, to phase out economic assistance to Taiwan. Taiwan's economy was growing. We had an enormous amount of local currency accumulated. There was a program setup to sell commodities in the market and use the local currency accumulated for spending for programs we liked in Taiwan. We had a very successful economic system going on there, largely due to some extraordinary economists that they had. They managed rapid growth of 10 percent or more for ten years in a row. One of the things I worked on there was a program having Taiwan Chinese use assistance in growing rice as a political means of getting recognition, in Africa primarily. They did not want to lose their seat in the United Nations. There were a lot of countries who were not pro-Taiwan and the People's Republic of China was having great success at that time in overcoming Taiwan's entrenchment in the United Nations. I visited Africa to see how the program was going, and it was going well. Taiwan knew exactly how to cultivate rice no matter what the country was.

In Taiwan, the Joint Commission on Economic Reconstruction and Rehabilitation was a program of domestic economic development, mainly land reform and rural investment.

Again due to the high quality of Taiwan's own economists, the program was immensely successful and was a key factor in control of inflation.

Q: There was always the idea that eventually so-called Nationalist China would take over Communist China and all...

THOMAS: It didn't seem realistic to me. We had an important difference in what we did and what we said. The same thing was true of China. Taiwan people would say "Guang Fu Da Lu," which means "gloriously reconquer the mainland." And on the mainland side they would say "Women iding dei jiefang Taiwan," "we definitely must liberate Taiwan." In fact, except for two outbursts in 1954 and 1959, things were very peaceful in the Straits. For example, Americans took a trip by plane to Quemoy, which was supposed to be the front of an actual shooting war. What they were mainly doing was shooting propaganda shells at each other. The ships going back and forth, up and down the Straits had arranged it so that they never conflicted with Chinese mainland ships going up and down the Straits. They worked out a modus vivendi where they could say one thing, make warlike statements in Taipei, Peking and Washington, and actually have a fairly smooth relationship in the Straits.

Q: Did we see Taiwan as being a viable country? Were we looking towards that?

THOMAS: There again, it was important that you forget the mainland and treat Taiwan as Taiwan. It was quite obvious that Taiwan had a viable economy and they proved it in terms of...their main problem was overheating rather than lack of development. When I first went to Taiwan in 1954, it was a very poor place. When I returned, briefly, in 1964 it was a very different place. If you treat Taiwan as China, they obviously couldn't have controlled the poverty and economic collapse that had occurred in China in the late 50s and early 60s. China was not viable economically in the sense that it is now. It was always possible then, but they were having local fights among the People's Republic of China's leaders...the Cultural Revolution and the Anti-Rightists Campaign. Things were going very badly in China. As long as Taiwan was separate, Taiwan had no problem. George Marshall made the right decision in 1946 that we should stay out of mainland China. The decision to hold on in Taiwan was made after the Korean War started. There were Americans who wanted us to assist Taiwan to recover the mainland. But we found out in Vietnam what the problems of ground war in East Asia involve. The problems in China would have been on a much larger scale.

Q: When you were in the Department...this is the Vietnamese War, Lyndon Johnson administration...what was the attitude towards Taiwan at that particular point?

THOMAS: It was short term. We needed Taiwan's cooperation with a big air base we built in the middle of Taiwan, Senator Knowland's "unsinkable aircraft carrier". This base was used for shipping to Vietnam. There was a small group who thought that we should base our future on the People's Republic of China, the mainland. Rusk had been burned by the fall of China.

Q: He was Assistant Secretary for Far Eastern Affairs in the late 40s.

THOMAS: He was not interested in improving relations with mainland China. He said he had other things in his tray at the time. He was very good at making sure that what he wanted bureaucratically happened. There were a few people in the Department who felt we should look a little beyond the Vietnamese War, which was very hard to do in those days. Essentially they got nowhere until after the Nixon election of 1968.

Q: Was the China lobby under Senator Knowland in earlier days a dormant group?

THOMAS: No, they were quite active. Though the more radical ones were beginning to die off, such as Paul Myron Anthony Linebarger, who used to come to Taiwan in the '50's. He would go to KMT meetings wearing a Sun Yat-sen robe. They were still there. Another one, Walter Judd, died just recently.

Q: Oh, yes, Representative from Minnesota.

THOMAS: He had been a China missionary and was a very intelligent. Though committed to the Republic of China, he was smart enough not to say anything outrageous. Walter Robertson, a relative, probably an uncle, of Pat Robertson, was still active and vocal.

Q: He was assistant secretary during the Eisenhower administration.

THOMAS: Right.

Q: A very strong supporter.

THOMAS: And, Walter McConaughy, who became our ambassador to Taiwan. I think he is still living in Atlanta.

Q: Did you and your colleagues find yourselves sort of keeping your heads down and doing the day-to-day things?

THOMAS: During the Vietnam War there were plenty of day-to-day things to do involving China. There was an assumption that North Vietnam, China and the Soviet Union were all on the same wave-length. This turned out later not to be true and I expect on closer examination we would have discovered that much sooner than we did. Eventually as the war in Vietnam wound down, we discovered the Chinese and Vietnamese had been at each other's throats several times.

Q: In 1967 you moved?

THOMAS: Moved upstairs to the fifth floor.

Q: Doing what?

THOMAS: Economic special assistant for Far East, which was a new position. To coordinate our regional economic policies in East Asia, which at that time had a lot to do with South Vietnam. The AID program was dominated by Vietnam.

Q: What were your main concerns?

THOMAS: The Vietnam AID budget was the biggest. It was successful in that it kept South Vietnam's inflation under control. And there was some funding connected with it that amounted to paying for the Korean troops that were in South Vietnam. There was also a war going on in Laos connected with Vietnam. We thought at the time that we had a big deficit problem, though we have learned more about big deficits since then.

Q: What was the payment for South Koreans troops?

THOMAS: Essentially all the expenses of the troops the Koreans sent to Vietnam were paid for by the United States through the Vietnam economic aid program.

Q: How did you find the planning for Vietnam? Was it a realistic one, or were we throwing money at it?

THOMAS: In a sense, economically things worked out. The military foundation, which the economic program required, wasn't always there. Immediate short-term problems, particularly with Lyndon Johnson as President, always dominated whatever you were trying to work out. If you had a long-term plan, say, for the organization of the city of Saigon, you discovered that it had to wait, unless you could call things by one name and actually do another.

Q: If Johnson all of a sudden decided we wanted to support the Montagnards, for instance, all of a sudden everything moved over to the Montagnards.

THOMAS: Yes, equipment, funds, and personnel. Planning tended to be short term. If Johnson said to support the Montagnards, then we would support them. Sometimes it took a couple of years to get a program started and by the time we got it ready, the need for the program was either over. Getting the proper budgeting, planning, and personnel for all of these programs, which were very large, required very talented and complex administrative arrangements, which AID personnel good at. One of the heads of Vietnam AID was Jim Grant, an old China hand who later became head of UNICEF. I used to have an office next door to him. Every morning at seven o'clock they would telephone Saigon to see what was happening, just to keep in touch and let Saigon know what was going on in Washington. As phone connections were bad, there was a good deal of shouting. Considering the circumstances under which it worked, it was not a bad program.

Q: Did we see something like ASEAN beginning to develop?

THOMAS: We did and it was usually connected with project like a dam on the Mekong River. It took a big program to attract people's attention. The Mekong Dam was one program that we never got involved in. We had enough programs of our own, and anyway the dam would have been too near the fighting for a large investment. In any case, it was eventually dropped once some engineering flaws were found in the first study.

Q: Then you moved to Taipei again in 1970-73.

THOMAS: In the embassy this time.

Q: What were you doing?

THOMAS: I was political counselor.

Q: Who was the ambassador?

THOMAS: Walter McConaughy.

Q: He was one of the major characters in the Far Eastern affairs establishment in this period.

THOMAS: He was consul general in Shanghai when we had to move out. By all accounts did an extraordinarily good job in getting Americans out of Shanghai region when they had to be moved with dispatch.

Q: How did he run his embassy?

THOMAS: He ran it primarily through the DCM. We had two military groups, a military aid group (MAAG) and a branch of CINCPAC, which covered the Taiwan Straits problems, not that there were very many.

Q: Since you were the political counselor, what was the political situation on the island at that time?

THOMAS: Taiwan was changing rapidly. They had a base for rapid economic development. They had infrastructure and they had trained, talented people.

Q: We were talking about the political situation there. In this 1970-73 period did we feel that the Kuomintang had pretty well gotten the Taiwanese and the mainland Chinese to reach an accommodation.

THOMAS: In those days there was a pretty clear distinction between the Taiwanese Chinese local population and the mainland Chinese. They were quite separate, though the

500,000 Chinese troops in Taiwan meant that there was a great surplus of males from the mainland, and they began to marry Taiwanese women.

There was unpleasantness. In 1947, there was a big riot in Taipei and many thousand Taiwanese were killed. It exacerbated the already poor relations. Taiwan, when I was there in the '50's, was an effective police state and to some extent this was still true in the '70's

The Joint Commission on Rural Reconstruction sponsored an agricultural development program which aimed at bringing the mainlander government and the Taiwanese peasants together. The JCRR's program was financed by American economic aid and by the exports of Taiwanese agricultural products. Former Japanese industries, such as the sugar industry, were turned over to farmers. Rural bonds were sold at a special rate to Taiwanese farmers. Agricultural land reform turned over land to the people who farmed it, and increased the popularity of the mainlander government with the Taiwanese farmers.

Even though the mainlanders, who ran the government, were not always very subtle about running things, the Taiwanese knew where the soft spots were and were able to get along with the mainlanders through their representatives, rich Taiwanese mainly.

We used to worry about the Taiwanese independence movement, but they turned out to be more canny than we gave them credit for and worked out arrangements with the mainlanders which have been very effective.

Q: When you say mainlanders, you are talking about the mainlanders living...

THOMAS: This is always a problem. I'm talking about the mainlanders living in Taiwan, who were primarily military. The mainlanders on the mainland proper were having troubles of their own and there was talk of conquering Taiwan, but in fact there was no action. It was very difficult to get people to look at the facts rather than what appeared in the newspapers, and that is true for both sides of the Straits and for both sides of the problem in the United States.

Q: While you were there, did the embassy play any role in trying to improve relations between the mainlanders and the Taiwanese on Taiwan, or had this been pretty well worked out by then?

THOMAS: It hadn't been worked out. The mainlanders wanted to keep control of the government and were very sensitive on this subject. We had to be subtle about it. Each time a foreigner got too close the Taiwan independence movement, we would hear about it in no uncertain terms from the government. But sometimes these things work out because of what we don't do rather than what we do. And" hands off" turned out to be the thing to do.

Q: Did Congress interfere at all?

THOMAS: No. Generally speaking we had enough problems in the early 70s with Vietnam and didn't want to mess with a successful relationship. Taiwan is pretty good at handling Congress on its own.

Q: What about the "Nixon shock," visiting the People's Republic of China?

THOMAS: You mean the announcement by Nixon that Kissinger had been to China and that he, Nixon, was going to go himself.

Q: Yes, how did that play out?

THOMAS: That was a real shock to the Taiwan government. I was quite surprised frankly.

Q: There had been no sort of intimations?

THOMAS: No, but remember, Nixon and Kissinger's hallmark was secrecy and they were good at it. I would have expected Taiwan to know about it before I did, that would be par for the course. In this case, they were completely caught off guard.
So was I, and so was everyone else at the embassy, including the ambassador.

Q: What happened the day this came out?

THOMAS: For several weeks before the Shanghai Communique announcement, the Youth Corps had been having demonstrations, almost certainly government initiated, in front of our embassy. They were protesting about three tiny rocks called the Diaoyutai in Chinese, or Sengaku in Japanese. When we relinquished control of Japan, we didn't mention these insignificant islands, which are closest to Okinawa, but not really close to any place in the East China Sea. The islands are of interest to bird watchers, but they have no economic significance,. Nevertheless, the Youth Corps came and demonstrated and threw rocks and called out, "Don't give our sacred land to the Japanese." As far as we were concern they were already Japanese and had been for years. But after the announcement of the Shanghai Communique, there were no more demonstrations. That was the first reaction we got from them. They didn't want to get off on the wrong foot with us when we were initiating a new policy.

Q: This means it was controlled by the government, doesn't it?

THOMAS: Oh, certainly. And it was not the first time. There was a demonstration in 1957 which got out of hand. They sacked the embassy in Taiwan, and destroyed nearly everything in it. Wee were worried because we didn't want another demonstration to get out of hand. And should there be a demonstration over our recognition of the PRC, it would be much more serious than the minor Diaoyutai demonstration.

Q: As political counselor were you called in? Did you get instructions from Washington how to explain the new policy?

THOMAS: There were no instructions immediately. Washington was still quite secretive. It was a little difficult getting people to believe it the first few hours. We had been told to listen to the radio at 11:00 for an announcement that would be of interest to us. This we got from the Taiwan desk in the Department. Sure enough, there was news of great interest to us.

Q: Did somebody come out?

THOMAS: We had a fairly large congressional group, 20 or 30 people, headed by Carl Albert, who was speaker of the House at the time. That was to show our support for Taiwan while we were implementing the new policy.

Q: What was our line? That things wouldn't change?

THOMAS: The general idea was that we would continue to support Taiwan. Our line was that the Shanghai Communiqué made this clear.

Q: This is after Nixon had visited.

THOMAS: The Shanghai Communiqué was signed the last day of Nixon's visit. Then things became much more clear. By that time we had a chance to work out the Taiwan end of the communiqué. The arrangement has worked since then and for anything to last that long it has to be considered a success.

Q: What was the reaction of the Taiwanese government when they found out?

THOMAS: It was a real shock to them. I wasn't called in immediately it was too important a matter to be handled at my level.

Q: How did the ambassador react to this?

THOMAS: He said he would like to have some time by himself to think and could we just let him work it out for a while, and that is what we did. Eventually we got instructions from Washington that told us in not very specific terms what our temporary line would be. The long term wasn't worked out actually until the Nixon visit. We knew better than to try to anticipate Mr. Nixon.

Q: At that time you very definitely had the idea that the shots were being called from Washington?

THOMAS: Oh, there was no question about it.

Q: You were in Taiwan during the Nixon visit?

THOMAS: Yes.

Q: I take it that this was followed very closely, everybody watched it on TV and all?

THOMAS: The TV coverage was carefully selected in Taiwan.

Q: Besides this, did things change for you during that period?

THOMAS: I expected a great freeze and that nobody would speak to us and a lot of other things, but none of them happened. The military continued to seek out our military, the economic people continued doing what they were doing. Essentially there was no overt change. People listened more carefully to us when we spoke, trying to find things there that probably weren't there. But it was much less than I anticipated. The director of North American Affairs, however, did not believe it when we told him we had not known in advance, and he was hurt that he had had no warning.

Q: By this time, had you more or less gained the impression that Taiwan, as a whole, was really going its own way, despite the political rhetoric? That it was developing into a viable nation state.

THOMAS: That oversimplifies it a bit. Taiwan was already a viable nation state in a sense, but they were always very careful to not say that they were. There again, you have a difference between what is actually going on and what they say is going on. We were very careful, for example, to give them full support in the United Nations, though we got beat the first time it came to a vote after the Nixon announcement. One of my primary technical jobs as political counselor in Taipei had all along been to find out a way of getting support for Taiwan in the UN.

Q: How would one do this?

THOMAS: We would send comments to Washington that we had no role at all in the embassy except to make suggestions to the Department for what the Department was telling USUN to do. Once the Nixon announcement was made, the end of that program was obvious. We had already had a tie vote back in the early 60s and PRC misbehavior during the Cultural Revolution only postponed the inevitable.

Q: Chiang Kai-shek was still in charge, wasn't he?

THOMAS: Yes, he was, in a broad sense.

Q: How did we view Chiang Kai-shek at the time you were there and Madame Chiang Kai-shek?

THOMAS: She is the only one still alive of the 1911 revolution.

Q: Was he a spent force by that time?

THOMAS: Not in Taiwan he wasn't. He was very much an active force. He had his marbles in place. He was very careful in running the island in a way that everybody understood that he was the boss and anybody who got out of line would be quickly and severely punished. For example, next to our language school in Taiwan back in the '50's, there was a general--Sun Li-jen--under house arrest whose main crime was being seen as too close to the United States. He was not released until after Chiang Kai-shek's death.

Q: What about corruption?

THOMAS: To me, it wasn't really important, economically or politically, having been in Cambodia and Laos where it is had a major negative effect on the economy. What corruption existed in Taiwan was economically minor.

Q: Is there anything else you want to cover about your tour in Taiwan before we move on?

THOMAS: No, I think we have gotten the most important thing clear: what you do and what you say are not always the same and sometimes much better not the same.

Q: That is many times the case.

THOMAS: Taiwan is not the only place that holds true.

Q: Including the United States, for example. Well, you came back to Washington then for a short period of time, for about a year.

THOMAS: For two years. First I went to the National War College.

Q: Where did you go after the National War College?

THOMAS: I went to the USUN for the four months of the General Assembly Meeting, where my main work was on Cambodia. We succeeded in protecting the Cambodian seat and Prince Sihanouk in the UN.

Q: What was the challenge?

THOMAS: It was a Communist Vietnamese challenge to Sihanouk and his government and eventually they took over. But that was a useful assignment because it got me for the first time out of the Far Eastern area into the rest of the world. It was very educational.

Q: You certainly were a Far Eastern hand.

THOMAS: No question about it.

Q: What were you doing at the UN?

THOMAS: I was an advisor to the East Asia part of the mission and tried to work with the Cambodians, with the Japanese, with whatever Africans were friendly to Sihanouk, and he had quite a following among the Africans, which is always a little surprising to me.

Q: Well, he cultivated them and was also flamboyant, which I think appealed to them too.

THOMAS: He did very well. He knew what he wanted and worked very closely with us. His people inquired daily what our plans were and let us know what their plans were. This was very important in keeping two active delegations coordinated.

Q: During this four month period you were working there, was Sihanouk pretty much a steady force to keep things going, because, as you say, he is still alive and in power.

THOMAS: He has prostate cancer.

Q: But did he kind of hold to the course while you were there?

THOMAS: Yes. He was a pleasure to work with. He knew what his strengths were and where he would be wasting his time and where people would be helpful in a minor way when they couldn't be helpful in a major way. It's very subtle in the UN on issues of that sort. I found it a very enlightening experience, particularly the part of getting away from East Asia, although I ended up working mainly on East Asia.

Q: The ambassador at that time was John Scali?

THOMAS: Yes. He was not as active as, say, Jeane Kirkpatrick and I saw very little of him. We had a staff meeting every morning on what the day's problems were and they were all worked out pretty well. But he was not as active as George Bush, for example.

Q: Then you took off again back to your old stamping grounds except on the other side of the Straits, you went to Beijing.

THOMAS: Right, as economic counselor.

Q: From 1975-79. At that time did we have an embassy?

THOMAS: We had an embassy which was called by another name. It was the United States Liaison Office. It was very small. We had about eight non-administrative

personnel. No military program, no economic program, no cultural program. Whatever we did we had to call by another name, which I was used to from Taiwan.

Q: Well, what were you doing?

THOMAS: We were doing normal embassy work, without the terminology . It was a pleasure to work in a very small outfit like USLO, as we called it. Bush was a good administrator.

Q: This is George Bush?

THOMAS: Yes. He was an extraordinary administrator. USLO was a very tight knit little organization. Instead of marines, we had State Department security personnel. Originally there had been marines, but the Chinese objected to some of their behavior--for instance, they had given a party at what they called the Red Ass Saloon--and the marines were asked to leave. We had to avoid a situation like that coming up again.

Q: How did you deal with the Chinese government?

THOMAS: Very distantly. The first time I got instructions to go to the Ministry of Finance, I didn't know where it was. It was an unmarked building because the Chinese at that time were not marking buildings. They thought it was too sensitive for foreigners to know where the Ministry of Finance was.

Q: How did you get there?

THOMAS: I asked the driver, of course. If he didn't know, he would ask somebody who did. The Cultural Revolution was a very peculiar time.

Q: Was the Cultural Revolution dying at this time?

THOMAS: It was winding down, but it wasn't obvious that it was. It was clear, though, that the political situation was unstable because the old leaders were dying. In l976, Zhou En-lai, Zhu De, and Mao all died. In the summer, there was the disastrous Tang Shan earthquake, which some superstitious Chinese thought foretold a change of dynasty.

Q: Was the Gang of Four still in power?

THOMAS: As the old leaders passed on, a group around Jiang Qing tried to take over the leadership and for a few months they were very much in power, though finally they failed. It was a very unstable time. Just at the end of Bush's tour, Deng Xiaoping came back and delivered the funeral oration for Zhou En-lai. Shortly afterwards, Deng was out of power again. Foreigners were under tighter travel restrictions. Foreigners couldn't travel anywhere without permission, and for cities other than Canton, permission was often not

granted. In l976, my daughter-in-law, who is from Shanghai, asked for permission to stop and see her Shanghai relatives on the way south from Beijing, but permission was denied.

Q: It was a liberal center in Chinese terms wasn't it?

THOMAS: In Chinese terms, no, in no way liberal. It was the headquarters of the Gang of Four. Three of the Gang of Four were Shanghai people.

Q: Were you and the rest of the embassy going out and reading wall posters and other things like this?

THOMAS: Yes.

Q: This was the time of the wall posters?

THOMAS: When we first arrived in 1975 there weren't many wall posters. They were more common later on, and they were of great significance. We would take a different route going to work every morning riding bicycles mainly so that we could see if there were any new signs up. We found out that Hua Guofeng was Chairman of the Party by going through a hospital courtyard and looking at all the new signs that were up.

Q: Who put up these signs?

THOMAS: We thought it best not to go out at night in those days and so we never saw any signs being put up, but occasionally you could see something. The people putting up the signs would do it late at night and in a place where they were protected by their own people.

Q: So it was little enclaves of Party people.

THOMAS: Not necessarily. The party was at war with itself, and there were different factions within the party putting up posters. But later on, groups outside the party also put up posters. People felt they had enough support to do this without too much risk.

Q: Were you looking at Beijing as being divided into quarters or something where you would see one type of wall poster in one place and another type in another place?

THOMAS: No, the areas were chosen because of their convenience or because of their significance to the poster site. For example, the posters for the big 1976 Qing Ming demonstration for Zhou En-lai were put on and around a monument to the heroic dead in Tiananmen square which had Zhou En-lai's calligraphy on it and therefore everybody would know that this was support for Zhou En-lai. The poster became more open in their criticism of the authorities, especially Jiang Qing. During one night, the authorities removed posters and flowers from the monument. Next morning, police armed with axe handles began chasing the demonstrators from the square. In the struggle, the

demonstrators set fire to a police station. There was a lot of damage but there were very few foreign reporters stationed in Beijing so the demonstration got almost no international press coverage.

Q: What were we seeing from the wall posters? Was there a power struggle going on?

THOMAS: Yes, and it was very clear, and that is what the wall posters said. There was frankness in the wall posters that we hadn't seen before. The year 1976 was very prolific in wall posters and we got a lot of political information this way and through no other way.

Q: Did we very much feel that we were there as more of a listening post than anything else at that point?

THOMAS: We had connections with the Chinese but they were very carefully chosen on both sides. It was a tenuous arrangement. The restrictions on us were no different from restrictions on other foreigners. It was a relationship we were afraid could be easily ruined. In fact, it was less delicate than we thought, but I think it was the right thing to be very careful in our arrangements.

Q: Part of the time you were there was during the Carter administration. Did you see any change with them?

THOMAS: No, the problems remained the same and our response to them remained the same. Carter came in with full recognition as the goal and achieved it.

Q: Did recognition come while you were there?

THOMAS: Yes.

Q: Did that make any difference?

THOMAS: Yes, it did. It made a bigger difference than was immediately apparent at the working level because the Chinese were wary of us and of their own government. But there was a big difference. The mission changed from a liaison office with a small staff to an ordinary embassy with many more people. Aside from recognition, China was becoming more open. The gang of four had been overthrown, the Cultural Revolution had ended, Deng Xiaoping was securely in power.

Q: While you were there, was human rights at all on the agenda or was it just not a viable thing?

THOMAS: Planning for approaches on human rights was on the agenda but remained on the back burner. It was not nearly as “viable” as it is now. Senator Jackson and Congressman Vanik visited Beijing. They concluded that the human rights situation was

basically improving. If you look back to the Cultural Revolution days, there has been an enormous change.

Q: Were you getting any particular view of how the Chinese viewed the Soviet Union in those days?

THOMAS: Partly through our relations with the Soviet Embassy. They were fascinated, of course, by the assignment of Bush to the CIA. We had relatively close relations with the Soviet embassy for a few months.

Q: When did you leave? In 1979?

THOMAS: Where did I go after that?

Q: To Hong Kong.

THOMAS: That was a short assignment.

Q: But basically you went before things turned sour again with the Soviets in December 1979.

THOMAS: From our point of view in the embassy, relations with the Soviets and the Chinese were relatively good. We were working on the same wave length. The Soviets were still extremely nosey about what we were doing with China and obviously from their point of view it was very important.

Q: Was there the feeling that we were trying to play China against the Soviets?

THOMAS: Yes, in a sense.

Q: Did you have any feel for that at all?

THOMAS: My field there was not the Russians except for Soviet trade and they were reasonably open about that. Russia published foreign trade and foreign exchange statistics. But they were a suspicious bunch. I think the Russians thought we were trying to play one against the other, and I think everybody else in Beijing thought we were too.

Q: On the trade issues, one of the persistent American visions in has gone on for two hundred years and that is the tremendous market that China will offer. Here you were as we open up our first embassy. How did you see trade with China and the prospects for it at that particular time?

THOMAS: From 1898 to 1922, my great uncle was with the British-American Tobacco Company in China and proved that the idea of selling the Chinese one cigarette each so you will sell a zillion cigarettes does work. The trade problem now is very different from

the problem we had then. The main problem of trade with China in the 1920's was poor trade organization. At first, the communist Chinese had ideological problems with trade with the United States. Those were overcome by the power of the dollar. Later on, they had administrative problems in handling trade with a major economy. They are better organized now. They feel their main problem is trying to keep inflation in check.

Q: Were you there for the overthrow of the Gang of Four?

THOMAS: Yes, I was.

Q: How did that play out from your perspective and our embassy's perspective?

THOMAS: I was in Moscow when Mao Zedong died and came back on the next plane, not that my presence was required. It was obvious that there was great tension in Beijing. Mao's funeral was an extraordinary thing. There were girls lying down on the catafalque keening in the traditional Chinese fashion. Mao was all waxed up. But the political tension was very strong. It was very obvious in the streets. It wasn't until well into the next year that Deng Xiaoping really got things under control.

Q: Again we were pretty much a passive observer of this?

THOMAS: Oh yes, with a billion people in China and an office of 20 or 30.

Q: Well, I had to ask the question.

THOMAS: It's a fair question. Just because the answer is obvious doesn't mean the question shouldn't be asked.

Q: Well, you left there and went for a short tour in Hong Kong. What were you doing there?

THOMAS: I got an offer of a better job and took it.

Q: You were in Taiwan again from 1979-81. What was our representation there?

THOMAS: There again I got one of these half horse and half donkey jobs in the American Institute in Taiwan, which did unofficially much of the same work the embassy had done in the past. Things had changed a bit because our friends in Taiwan had the same problems they had earlier with the addition of doubts about the steadfastness of the United States in its relations with Taiwan. The economy was very strong and they took advantage of it to attract more investment and tried to attract American businessmen in a way they hadn't bothered to before. The Taiwanese decided that their differences with the mainlanders in Taiwan were of secondary importance. The Taiwanese felt that they should cooperate with the government. The government still ran things and included the same people who had been in charge my previous tour in Taiwan. But the Taiwanese

were obviously outliving the mainlanders and the Legislative Yuan who had run things since 1945 were no longer an effective group to take charge for Taiwan's future.

Q: By the time you got there had the Taiwanese, the new people coming in, were they sort of comfortable with the situation by this time?

THOMAS: By the time I got there they were beginning to get used to the situation. When we closed the embassy it left a great gap. The embassy was in temporary quarters. We had begun negotiations for a non-diplomatic replacement, the American Institute in Taiwan. We had to negotiate much more than when we set up the embassy in Beijing, because Taiwan was not prepared for it, although they expected something of the sort to happen. Initially the relation was a shakier relation than it had been. The military sales program had to have a separate organization. The Department of Commerce had to have a separate organization. Over the years it turned out to be much more like an ordinary diplomatic mission. By the time I left the problems were mostly worked out and Chuck Cross had good relations with the Taiwan government as Director of the American Institute in Taiwan.

Q: Was this just a matter of getting the bureaucracy to respond?

THOMAS: Ours or theirs?

Q: Both.

THOMAS: Well, it was a matter of both. In some cases they responded very promptly. Financial matters for example were never any problem. We sold some of our real estate for million of dollars. Property we had had for years. The old consulate in Japanese days. That worked out. Some other things were much harder to work out. But, by the time I left Taiwan, they were used to it, had established a relation with us, and didn't think we were trying to sell them down the river. There were some things that still bothered them, but they had accommodated themselves to the new situation in a very effective way.

Q: Had their rhetoric changed as far as the mainland was concerned?

THOMAS: It changed more in quantity than in quality. In other words, they just didn't say some things they used to stress. The major change had come with the death of Chiang Kai-shek died In 1975. Changes which had been delayed were adopted under Chiang Ching-kuo and C. K. Yen. By the time Li Teng-hui took over, a basic democratization of Taiwan had begun.

Q: Well, you left there to go to a very difficult post.

THOMAS: Difficult in some way but not in others. Laos is a very pleasant place in spite of the lack of modern conveniences.

Q: You went to Laos where you were from 1962-64.

THOMAS: Yes, but in a very different job.

Q: What were you doing?

THOMAS: I was Charge d'affaires..

Q: Which meant what?

THOMAS: It means you run a very small embassy. We had eight Americans. The main job there was to keep the post open. Our main problems were yellow rain, MIAs, Bo Gritz-type Rambos...

Q: Could we go through each? What was yellow rain?

THOMAS: Yellow rain was an accusation that the Communists in Laos were dropping poisonous substances and even testing them on the ground in northern Laos. People went to Thailand to refugee camps and claimed that they had been poisoned or that whatever disease they had was due to poison. They got a lot of publicity for it. I had serious doubts about it then which became much more serious when I got out. The evidence for the existence of such yellow rain was very flimsy and once it was challenged, no one could come up with answers.
MIAs was a much more serious problem.

Q: MIA means missing in action. What was this problem?

THOMAS: The problem was that when the fighting stopped in Vietnam, there were a number of American prisoners of war in Vietnam and Laos and a couple of Americans who were in Vietnam of their own volition. We had been unable to account for a large number American service men missing in action. Some of these are known to have disappeared at sea. I think it is most unlikely that any of them are alive. There is a much smaller number of people whose whereabouts are still unknown whom we have been trying to find for ten years now, since 1974, and not all of them have been accounted for. At first the Vietnamese wouldn't have anything to do with us on it because Nixon in the last throes had promised several million dollars worth of aid...I think one of the roundest sums was a billion dollars. The Lao at that time were under Vietnamese control and there were grave doubts whether any of the Americans were still alive. Some of them, including Senator McCain, were returned a good deal worse for wear. This was in accordance with an agreement we signed with the Vietnamese. The U. S. position at that time was that there were more alive than we had official word on. A number of servicemen had been shot down in Laos and never heard from again. Some of these people were obviously dead, but how many is another matter. There was a very active lobby looking for Americans. Many people thought that there were live Americans still imprisoned in Laos and Vietnam, but the hope for this has faded with the years.

Q: What were you doing during this 1981-83 period?

THOMAS: We periodically went to the Lao government asking their help in accounting for missing Americans, and we asked for their help in recovering remains of dead Americans. As time passed, more and more the emphasis came to be on recovering remains. Towards the end of my tour we got a group of MIA association families to come to Laos, to fly by helicopter to a remote area and to look in bomb craters, and they actually found some human bones in them. Since I left Laos things have moved much faster. The new generation of Lao government officials is more willing to work with us than their predecessors.

Another very important program is the Vietnamese exchange. I was allowed to go up to the Plaine des Jarres with a Congressman and have a look. We didn't see anything we hadn't seen before, but it was nice to be able to go up and show a member of Congress the bombed out countryside.

Q: How did you find the Laotians? When you arrived there you said they were beginning to change, but was it difficult to deal with them? I am talking about the government.

THOMAS: As people they are extraordinarily pleasant and easy to deal with. They don't stand on ceremony at all. They don't always do things the way you would like them to but you can't be too particular. Personally I found them very much like they had been during my first tour there. However, their cooperation with us was not everything that could be desired. They had some very good people and I imagine they are more important now that the older people like Prince Souphanouvong have died.

Q: You said your job was mainly to hold open the embassy?

THOMAS: Yes, and wait for better days, which have come. It was a fairly obvious policy but a sensible one. Things have gotten much better under my successors.

Q: What was your problem with the Rambo types which I assume could be termed as soldiers of fortune?

THOMAS: Yes. We had problems with one American in particular who claimed to have been in Laos wandering around in the forest. He possibly was, but it was by no means certain that he was. There were others. I think there were more stories than people. Anybody could say that he had been to Laos and get it printed in the press somewhere.

Q: Did you find yourself having to swat down these stories all the time?

THOMAS: I think Bangkok was doing most of the swatting, that is where the stories were coming from. They could go to the bars and find the guys who were pushing the stories, whereas we were in another world.

Q: Well, what kind of a world was it? Were you pretty well restricted? What did you do?

THOMAS: Compare Laos and China, they are two so-called Communist countries. In China if you invite people to dinner they would say, "Sorry, it is inconvenient." In Laos if you invite people to dinner they would say, "I would be delighted," They would be late, but they would be there and behave very politely while they were there. The Lao were easy to get along with but not easy to accomplish anything administratively with. But fortunately we had a large embassy left over from the old days which we were able to keep.

Q: So you were a small staff with a huge embassy?

THOMAS: We had a huge house from the days when there were a couple hundred Americans in Vientiane.

One other thing on the MIAs that keeps the story alive. We had one story of a man named Garwood, an American who stayed on his own initiative in Vietnam. We used to get reports that he had been sighted in such and such a place...an American black has been sighted. That kept things alive until he finally got fed up with Vietnam and left. The other thing was the Japanese from the Second World War who stayed in the Malaysian jungle until 1990. These were very real people and from 1945-90 is a long time. But it kept things alive in Laos which otherwise might have died a natural death.

Q: Were the Vietnamese running things at that time?

THOMAS: I had that impression. They had an intelligent and very well informed ambassador who had been in Laos for several years. We felt at that time that the Vietnamese were running things. They had a large embassy there and a military group outside of the city. When I went to the Plain of Jars there were Vietnamese troops everywhere, many of them speaking Lao. So when things changed in Vietnam, it automatically meant things changed in Laos for the better. They have gotten much more comfortable about cooperating with us on the MIAs, people or remains.

Q: Then, you left there in 1983 and went back to the UN.

THOMAS: That was a between tours assignment. I had several months in the UN and also in Personnel as a Senior Assignments officer. That was a very enlightening assignment.

Q: How so?

THOMAS: Just in how the Department works and how people act. I wish I had done it ten, twenty years sooner.

Q: It gets one to know the system.

THOMAS: It certainly does.

Q: Then, off you went to China.

THOMAS: I opened the Consulate General in Chengdu.

Q: From 1985-88 you were consul general there. Where is Chengdu and what were you up to?

THOMAS: Chengdu is in southwest China. The consular district had 170 million people in it. It includes Sichuan, which has a 100 million people, plus Yunnan, Guizhou and Tibet. Tibet is the largest in area but has only about 2 million people. We had had an office in Chengdu during the Second World War who was in charge of procurement for our air force, which was bombing Japan with B-29s.

One of the most active parts of the areas politically in China terms was Tibet. The Tibetans always considered themselves very separate and the Chinese considered them separate as far as any actual contact was concerned. But they got to the point where they were shooting at each other and the Chinese took very stern measures with the Tibetans who were defiant and would, therefore, give us some active reporting to do.

Q: What were you hearing about Tibet from there?

THOMAS: The surprising thing was that the Chinese and the Tibetans agreed on what was going on and that there was suppression going on and it was not a safe place for foreigners to be. The Chinese wouldn't give visas to foreigners except for large groups which were carefully controlled. This came at a time when Lhasa had opened its first Holiday Inn which always seemed to be very odd, but it could have made money if tourism had not been interrupted by the riots.

Q: How did you get reports of what was happening up there?

THOMAS: We sent people up there as often as we could and talked to people who came out. An occasional Tibetan would come out and talk to us, but that was very unusual. The Chinese would publish a lot more than they had before, and we were a little surprised at this. Once we had recognized Beijing, we were able to subscribe to their local newspapers which contained a great deal of information some small and remote places.

Q: How about the local authorities? How did you find them in Tibet and the rest of your consular district?

THOMAS: As usual in China, the biggest problem with the local authorities is bureaucratic. They are highly bureaucratic and their bureaucracy doesn't always mesh

with ours. Sichuan has a history going back to the second century AD and considers itself very separate from the other Chinese. But we got a good reception. Tibet was not an active issue until we got to human rights discussions, and then that was and is a very active issue. The Chinese essentially wished we would leave them alone and let them run their own business.

Q: Then you moved to Beijing?

THOMAS: Right.

Q: From 1986-90. What were you doing then?

THOMAS: I was the science counselor.

Q: Which meant what?

THOMAS: We had quite a large scientific exchange program. Official exchanges, like earthquake management. This sounds a little silly, but it is a very active program. As far as the science end of it is concerned, having gone through an 8.2 Richter scale earthquake in 1976, they had a lot of experience to offer us.

Q: What happened?

THOMAS: Well, 375,000 people were killed. We felt it in Beijing quite strongly. It came at a time when the political tensions were very high. The peasants said that something awful was going to happen and sure enough Chairman Mao died in three weeks. The earthquake program was a very active program then.

Also during this tour in Beijing, the second Tiananmen Square riot occurred.

Q: This was the one in 1989?

THOMAS: Right. Exchanges dropped off quite sharply and later ran into budget problems. They haven't fully recovered. As far as the Chinese are concerned they liked them very much and found that they were very valuable.

Q: Are these mainly students coming to the United States?

THOMAS: Students, post-docs, mostly graduate students. I have noticed in the scientific literature since I have gotten back, that the number of Chinese names as principal authors of scientific papers are a lot more numerous than they used to be.

Q: This is a time when the personal computer has started to come on line, were the Chinese able to respond to this?

THOMAS: They are extremely good at it. Their main problem was having money to invest. Our main problem was piracy of copy righted software, and that is still a problem. They reacted very rapidly to it. They are particularly good at software and have software companies. I notice there is one of their companies, Stone, which advertises regularly in the New York Times in their weekly computer pages.

Q: How did you deal with the problem of piracy?

THOMAS: We negotiated at an increasingly high level on the problem saying that we would withdraw Most Favored Nation treatment if they didn't stop pirating our computer stuff. This was big business. Book piracy in the old days was fairly small potatoes, but since computers have gotten involved in it, it is much bigger.

Q: How did they respond?

THOMAS: They had not given us a satisfactory response by the time I left, which was in the fall of 1990.

Q: How was Winston Lord as ambassador?

THOMAS: He is an expert, has a Chinese wife. She was born in Sichuan, so we were delighted to have them come down and pay us a visit. It worked out very well. He wasn't there for the whole time. Jim Lilley took over in 1989.

Q: And how was he as ambassador?

THOMAS: He was fine. Another China hand. He was born in Qingdao when his father was in China with Stanvbac. He spoke good Chinese.

Q: Could you tell me how the embassy reacted to the Tiananmen Square incident?

THOMAS: Well, the Tiananmen Square business first began as a reporting matter for the embassy. We took turns on going to Tiananmen to see what was going on and who was there.

Q: These were basically student demonstrators?

THOMAS: Mainly students, a few others. Embassy personnel went down to have a look on a regular schedule. It came for the Chinese at a particularly unfortunate time because Gorbachev was visiting.

Q: Which was the first visit of a Soviet leader in decades.

THOMAS: Yes, it was a major event for them and it was pretty well spoiled by the demonstrations. While the students were occupying the square, the government stationed

soldiers all over town. They brought trucks in full of soldiers and stationed them at a major intersection outside our apartment. We watched out our window as demonstrators surrounded the trucks. Sometime after midnight personnel carriers and tanks drove up the main avenue toward the square and the army trucks followed them, dispersing the demonstrators.

When things got out of control and they were bringing troops in in the middle of the night and started shooting in Tiananmen Square, and many other places all over the city, things got quite dangerous. You have young, green troops with automatic weapons at one point shooting at the apartments we were living in. So, we thought it best to move people and Washington agreed. We got all of the Americans out as quickly as possible. This was not only happening in Peking. In Chengdu there was a riot and they attacked the building the consulate was in. There was much less trouble in Shanghai. It was a little hard to predict which areas were going to be troublesome. Things haven't fully recovered since in relations with the Chinese.

Q: One has the feeling things are in a state of suspension almost waiting for the new leadership to come in.

THOMAS: Don't hold your breath. I find it rather difficult myself to figure that Deng Xiaoping can be 90 and still in full charge, but that is all I hear from anybody. I am a little out of touch now.

Q: When you left China in 1990, how did you feel American-Chinese relations were at that time?

THOMAS: There again you have to separate facts from news stories. I found coverage of China very confusing and one of the problems is that the press and television have to have a story and they overwrite the stories and make an issue of something that need not be an issue, except that it is Thursday and they have to get something on the six o'clock news. This is a real problem. One of the advantages of the US Liaison Office in Peking was that the foreign press did not have to be "fed" every day because they simply were not there and when they were there, there were few Americans and we could cultivate them in our own way.
When you get to real reporting, the reporting on the Tiananmen massacre, it was different Everybody did a good job on it. But there was plenty to report and people didn't have to puff stories up. CNN did a particularly good job.

Q: What did you feel about the Chinese students in technology who were coming to the United States? Was there sort of the feeling behind this that we are really in our own way creating a whole new group of people who are in the long run going to have a tremendous affect within China?

THOMAS: In the old imperial China, there was a policy of training high quality students abroad and bringing them back to work in China. That is still one aim. But now Chinese

studying science and technology abroad are part of a worldwide modernization which is already changing China.

We get something in exchange in that we send people to do research in China. For example, a team spent a winter in Tibet observing the lives of Tibetan nomads.

A lot of Chinese who come here don't go back, but that happens in all exchange programs.

Q: And we certainly come out ahead on this, getting bright people.

THOMAS: Well, there are people who don't think so. I have the feeling that we get a net gain. But there are a lot of people who are very suspicious of all these A students coming in from China.

Q: Well, why don't we stop at this point.

THOMAS: Very good.

Q: Thank you very much.

End of interview