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

YVONNE THAYER

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INTERVIEW

(Begins in middle of statement by Ms. Thayer)

THAYER: My father was the eldest son of six kids.

Q: So you have a lot of uncles, then.

THAYER: And a lot of aunts. My father was the second of six; my mother the tenth of 11.

Q: Good heavens. So what was your grandfather doing?

THAYER: My paternal grandfather Percival Ernest Thayer, known as Percy or PE, was a banker in St. Paul. His father, my great grandfather came to the Midwest from Connecticut. According to family lore, he was a purveyor of fine teas and coffees. Our line of Thayers descended from brothers Richard and Thomas Thayer, who came to America in the 1630s from Thornbury, England. They helped found Braintree, Massachusetts in 1640. There are lots of interesting Thayers, like Sylvanus Thayer, the founder of West Point.

Some years ago at a family reunion we asked my then 82-year-old father what life event or experience made the biggest impression on him. He immediately said the Great Depression. My father was born in 1918. His banker father did all right but he as a schoolboy saw many of his neighbors and classmates going through terrible times, desperate, losing everything. He was always thrifty and responsible about money. He was never in debt, never lived beyond his means. He instilled that in us kids.

Q: And your father, what did he do?

THAYER: My father went to a Catholic military academy for high school, then college and law school. When America entered the Second World War, he volunteered for the army but was turned down because his eyesight was too poor; he was nearly blind in one eye. He wanted to serve so he joined the FBI, which took lawyers and accountants at the time. He ended up staying through a full career.

Q: So he was with the FBI the whole time?

THAYER: He joined the FBI in 1942 and went from St Paul to Boston to Norfolk and finally Baltimore where he met my mother. She was 21 years old, from Little Rock, the tenth of 11 kids. After a year at Marymount College in San Antonio, with the war on, she was sent to Baltimore to help an older sister whose husband had joined the navy and who was expecting her first child.

Q: Let's go on your mother's side then. What do you know about them?

THAYER: My father's side is English-Irish, descending from English Thayers on the paternal side and Irish Catholics--Ryan, Egan, Fitzgibbon--on the maternal side. My mother's father was a Swiss immigrant, Anthony Metrailer. He immigrated to the United States in 1898 from Sion in the Swiss Valais when he was a teenager, joining his sister and a cousin who had come earlier to Conway, Arkansas. Papa, as we called him, was a shoemaker. He became quite prominent in Arkansas. He was written up in a book for making custom shoes for people with deformed feet and for declining payment from people who couldn't afford shoes or shoe repair. I have one of his lasts among my souvenirs, and a shoemaker's bench. Papa was soft-spoken and industrious, very Swiss. He built a Victorian-style farmhouse in what was then rural Little Rock for his large family, surrounded by cows, chickens, vegetable gardens, and fruit trees. It was near the zoo. When we went to visit as children, we would hear the lions and elephants bellow at night from where we slept on the upstairs sleeping porch. We heard many a tale of escaped big cats. Papa bought land and helped build homes for several of his daughters to raise their families nearby. My grandmother Henrietta Ruff, of German descent, was progressive for her time. Before having eleven children into her 40s, she was a telephone operator, one of relatively few women to work outside the home. Both my grandparents lived into their nineties, in the family home, playing pinochle and tending to dozens of grandchildren. My mom was the only daughter who ended up leaving the South. She lived in Baltimore and then came to Minnesota with my dad.

Q: Now on education, on your father's side, where did he go before he went for a law degree?

HARTY: My father went to St. Thomas Military Academy in St. Paul for high school and later got his bachelors' and law degrees at the University of Minnesota.

Q: And your mother?

THAYER: My mother had one year of college—this was always a big issue for her. Of the eleven kids, three of her four brothers went to Notre Dame and became prosperous engineers and land developers. My mother was the only one of the seven sisters who begged Papa to send her to college. She went one year to Marymount College in San Antonio, Texas. Her younger sister, my aunt Rose, told us later that their father opposed educating his daughters, thinking they would not be content staying at home as mothers and wives if they got an education. My mother lamented that girls had limited opportunities compared to their brothers. In her world, girls got married and had large families. Thus my many cousins.

Q: Well then, your mother and father, how about, speaking of large families, how many children did they have?

THAYER: I'm the second of seven, five girls and two boys. My youngest sister Jill, a deputy attorney general in San Francisco, is 18 years younger than I am.

Q: Well now, did you grow up in Baltimore?

THAYER: We left Baltimore when I was nearly two. My Dad's youngest sister got polio and he was helping her and his mother so he asked for a transfer back to Minneapolis. We moved into a small house in suburban Richfield and attended parochial schools. As the family grew to five then seven kids, my parents built a larger home in Edina, a nearby suburb known for the quality of its public schools.

Q: And he was with the FBI then?

THAYER: My father stayed with the FBI until retirement. He and I would say we retired at the same time. I was leaving my job at Newsweek magazine in 1973 to marry a Foreign Service officer when my dad retired from the FBI after 30 years. His last case was at Wounded Knee, the standoff between the Lakota Indian tribe and federal law enforcement on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota. He found the ordeal stressful and demoralizing. My father was thoughtful and well-read. He closely followed current events and told interesting if discreet stories about law enforcement and the FBI. He was fairly taciturn, formal in that 1950s way, and had a wry sense of humor. His friends called him "The Judge" in respect for his views and careful way of thinking and speaking. After the FBI, he joined a family practice law firm in a small town west of Minneapolis. Some years later he and my mother retired to Bella Vista, Arkansas to be closer to her family.

Q: Well now, let's talk about your, basically your first memories of growing up. What was it like?

THAYER: In Richfield we lived in a small house with a breezeway, crabapple trees, a sandbox and swing set in the backyard. Our mom stayed at home, cooking, cleaning, raising kids, sewing doll clothes. Dad went to work, mowed the lawn, washed the car, and cleaned the garage on weekends, occasionally nipping down to Al's for a beer. My older sister Ellen and I shared the attic bedroom. We were always very close. She was my anchor as I went on to live and travel abroad. She lived in Paris for four years but for the most part she lived in Minneapolis. She taught special ed, then computer learning, got a masters' degree in leadership. Ellen reads and travels widely, speaks beautiful French, keeps up with world affairs, and is an exemplary aunt to lots of nieces and nephews. As often happens with the first born, she took on a lot of responsibility for the younger siblings, freeing me up to go off and do other things. We've always been best friends.

Q: Well then, how did the family work? You know, I think it's sort of almost like Cheaper By the Dozen or something. How did this- what were the dynamics of the family?

THAYER: It was pretty much the classic 1950s life. My father went to the office in the morning and came home at 6 or so at night, read the paper until dinner was served. My mother stayed home with the kids. We all had chores, helped with dinner, minded younger siblings. We lived in the suburbs and went to public schools, joined the Brownies, walked to the library. We biked and swam in the community pool in the summer, ice skated on the pond in winter, played Parcheesi on the screened back porch. I recall we were the last family in our neighborhood to get a tv. I wrote for the school newspaper and was active in Spanish Club, directed a school play, joined the National Honor Society. There weren't competitive sports for girls in those days, but I played on the school girls' tennis team and in summer tennis tournaments. I volunteered as a Candy Striper in a local hospital. I earned my own money by babysitting, working at neighborhood tennis and day camps, and selling sweets in a Kroger's bakery. In the summer we would go swimming and sometimes water skiing on local lakes. Like good Minnesotans, my parents would occasionally rent some rustic cabin in the woods where we'd swim, fish, fight off mosquitoes, and eat ice cream.

Q: Well, I take it your family was Catholic then? How Catholic was it?

THAYER: Solid Catholic, I'd say. Certainly every Sunday we went to church. We attended religious instruction classes, took all the sacraments, confessed our sins. We didn't eat meat on Friday until suddenly that was no longer required. Traditional observant Catholic.

Q: Where did the family fall politically?

THAYER: My parents were not politically active when I was young, as I recall, but they leaned progressive. My dad voted for Adlai Stevenson. Hubert Humphrey, Gene McCarthy, and Walter Mondale were the Minnesota political heroes of that era. Minnesota has Scandinavian, Polish, and German stock, and is known for its high level of civic participation and public services, strong public schools and colleges, recreational facilities, parks, help for the disadvantaged. My mother eventually got involved with the League of Women Voters, performed in community theater, and other activities.

Q: Farmer labor and all that.

THAYER: Minnesota has a conservative side, witness Jesse Ventura, Michele Bachman, its rural counties. My parents didn't talk a lot about politics but they were open-minded and empathetic and passed those values to us. Our Catholic upbringing promoted the idea of shared responsibility for the poor and unfortunate, with special collections and spaghetti supper benefits for the disadvantaged, refugees, disaster victims. We had to eat everything on our plates, just think of the poor starving children in China. Minnesota is a state with hard-working immigrant stock, active churches, and a generous public sector. It was mostly white when I was young, but welcoming to others. My parents thought Minnesota was a good place to raise a family, living in the suburbs with good schools and safe neighborhoods. Drugs were not an issue; at least I had no exposure or knowledge of it.

Q: I take it that there weren't any, at least a noticeable sort of ethnic division sort of in the area where you were or anything like that.

THAYER: It's fascinating to see Minneapolis now with its large populations of Somalis, Ethiopians, Vietnamese, and Hmong as well as many more African Americans and Latinos. Edina where I grew up was known as a wealthy suburb, very white at the time, probably still mostly so. We didn't live in the country club part of Edina and we didn't have a fancy house, but we understood we were attending good schools and fortunate to be part of the middle class, that we had opportunities and responsibilities derived from that. Edina was next door to St. Louis Park which produced a lot of prominent Jewish high achievers: Tom Friedman, the Coen brothers, Norm Ornstein, Al Franken. I identify proudly as a Minnesotan.

Q: Well, for you now, were you much, particularly as a small kid, were you much of a reader?

THAYER: I read as much as I could get away with. My older sister would come back from kindergarten and sit me down at a desk to teach me what she had learned. I was her student. By the time I went to school, I'd gone through many of the lessons with her, so I was usually well prepared. And of course we played games, like Dale Evans and-

Q: Roy Rogers.

THAYER: Right, Roy Rogers and Dale Evans.

Q: These are a cowboy star and his wife.

THAYER: Right. I was always tagging behind my sister and her friends, wanting to play with the big kids. Usually I was assigned to play Tonto or Trigger (the horse), or whatever sidekick they needed or no one else wanted to be. I learned to stand up for myself, but also to be useful, agreeable, adaptable in groups in order to be included.

Q: Well, did you- were you attracted to books or was this- were you more sort of active in other things?

THAYER: We read whenever we could, it was the most peaceful time of the day. Frankly there were always lots of chores in a big family. I liked the outdoors and made any excuse to go outside. We biked, went swimming, ice skating, occasionally snow and water skiing. I loved to go horseback riding. Eventually a younger sister bought a horse. There were times when I would binge read if I found a topic or author that I really liked.

Q: Do you recall any of the ones that really grabbed you?

THAYER: I read a lot of the Oz books, Laura Ingalls Wilder, Nancy Drew. Later I read historical fiction.

Q: Well, anyway, no, it's always interesting. I'm not saying that sort of one of the qualifying preparations for the Foreign Service for women that I've talked to seems to be universally Nancy Drew.

THAYER: Is that right?

Q: Yes. There's hardly one that hasn't gone through the whole series or most of them, yes.

THAYER: Nowadays kids go see the movie.

Q: I saw it with my wife. She wanted to see it. It was fun.

THAYER: The independent young woman who had a life.

Q: Yes. How did you find school?

THAYER: School was fairly easy for me. I give my sister credit. I was generally well-prepared because I always wanted to copy whatever she was doing and she shared everything with me.

Q: How much older was she?

THAYER: She is 14 months older than I am. She worked hard in school and I was the beneficiary. So I felt prepared and confident about school. In the early grades, I went to St. Peter's Catholic school, run by the Sisters of St. Joseph. There was a certain mystery about nuns and what they were really like. I remember once when we were outside, a gust of wind blew up the veil of my first grade teacher Sister Agnes. I spotted a bit of her hair for a moment and I remember being astonished that she had hair and wondering if I would be struck down as sinful for seeing her hair.

Q: Well, were the nuns that you were acquainted with, were they the nuns in caricature, in a way very strict teachers and all that or was it a different group?

THAYER: I remember Sister Agnes as playful and gentle. The nuns loved teaching and we wanted to please. We moved to a bigger house my parents built in Edina when I was in fourth grade and I went to a large public elementary school.

Q: Well then, how did you find the transition to public school?

THAYER: It was fine. There were lots of kids in the neighborhood and we met up at the bus stop. I had friends and enjoyed school and after school activities.

Q: By the time you got to high school were there any particular subjects you were particularly good at and ones that you weren't so good at?

THAYER: I was fascinated by math and biology. I remember dissecting a king crab that a classmate's pilot father brought in from Alaska. But I was really drawn to history, English, and languages. I wrote for the school paper in middle and high school. I was an officer in the Spanish club and the pep club. I liked theater and found my niche in directing and working backstage. I directed a one act play for a competition that won an award.

Q: Okay. Well then, do you recall any of your teachers that particularly inspired you or particularly, you know, pushed the right buttons or not?

THAYER: I was encouraged by my English teachers, especially the one who supervised the newspaper. I can't recall her name. We wrote reports and short essays and I appreciated feedback on how I had explored some personality or conflict in a creative way. It was reassuring that someone thought your insights were worthwhile.

Q: Well, you went to high school from when to when? When would that have been?

THAYER: I was in high school from 1963 to 1966. In 1965 when I was 16 I went to Brazil as an American Field Service exchange student for a year. That year had a big impact on my life, directing me toward a career in journalism and ultimately the Foreign Service. After my year abroad, I hadn't completed some civics requirements for graduation, so I went on to the University of Minnesota as a non-grad.

Q: Let's talk a bit about- Well, before we move to Brazil, in high school, was it a big high school?

THAYER: Edina had a big high school, the senior class was likely around 500.

Q: What was the dating pattern at that time?

THAYER: Dating pattern?

Q: Or was there one.

THAYER: Some people went out on dates, but many of us went out in groups, to football and basketball games, movies, Lincoln Del for reubens or ice cream, occasionally dances. For a time, I went out with the kicker on the football team and some guys on the tennis circuit. I was 16 when I went abroad for a year. When I came back at age 17 I was different from my peers at Edina. Girls in Brazil, Latin America in general, typically have a big coming out party at age 15 and then start to dress and "date" in earnest, though generally with a chaperone. By the time I returned from Brazil, I was 17, more mature, self-aware. By then, too, we had driver's licenses and were more mobile. I got swept into the international student crowd and started going out with exchange students. I went to proms with a cheerful thin Swedish fellow Stellan from my school and a shy, intense Brazilian from a near-by boys' school. I also began to date some college boys. One was an AFSer who went on to be a Rhodes Scholar and judge in Massachusetts. So I entered a different world beyond my old high school.

Q: Okay, how did this Brazil thing come about?

THAYER: My mother. I was always looking out for things to do, but my mom, who had led a fairly protected life, wanted us to have bigger lives. Or she was looking to have vicarious experiences through us. The American Field Service exchange program was very competitive at my school and she urged me to apply. There were a lot of applicants and multiple interviews until four finalists were selected. I applied for AFS like I applied for other things, not thinking too much about it since it seemed so foreign and beyond reach. Then one day I was in the bathtub and the phone rang. The AFS selection committee asked my mom why I wasn't there for my interview. It turns out they had forgotten to notify us but said, since everybody's here now, can you come right away? So I got there in five minutes, hair still wet. I guess they decided I showed a certain amount of grace under pressure by showing up so fast. A few weeks later I was announced as a finalist and shortly after that I was matched with a Brazilian family.

Q: Who sponsored that?

THAYER: American Field Service.

Q: It's always been a tremendous program for years.

THAYER: It goes back to just after the war. I am very grateful to AFS for opening the world to me. I've been donating money for years, and now I volunteer and occasionally host foreign students.

Q: One of the men I interviewed was scheduled to go to Germany and it fell through with American Field Service and they sent him to Argentina, to Mendoza or some place like *that, and was, I mean, he'd been a German major but he kind of liked it there and eventually came back as ambassador, Jim Walsh.*

THAYER: Good for him.

Q: It's interesting how they pushed him that way. Well, okay, where did you go in Argentina, I mean Brazil.

THAYER: I went to Porto Alegre, the capital of Rio Grande do Sul, the southernmost state of Brazil. I joined a wonderful family, with two sisters about my age, Marilene and Marise do Amaral, their parents, and our adored grandmother Avo. The father was the most eager to host an American student. He was a textile salesman and avid ham radio operator with great curiosity about the world and big ambitions for his two daughters. I remember sitting with him for hours at his ham radio, listening to stations in Europe and the U.S. The mother was kind and reserved. I became very close to our grandmother. No one spoke English and I arrived not speaking a word of Portuguese. I was 16 and clueless, had never been on a plane. Before I left for Brazil somebody gave me a tiny thumbnail dictionary, an inch or so square. You've seen them? I still have mine.

Q: Oh yes, postage stamp type.

THAYER: When I arrived in Brazil in January 1965 we went straight to the beach town Capao da Canoa where the family spent the summers. I remember thumbing through that tiny dictionary every day on the beach, memorizing word after word, as much as I could. It was hard. You don't know anything, you can't understand anyone, you can't say much. You either adapt or you don't.

Q: Well, how did you find life down there?

THAYER: Life was very different. It was a smaller family. We lived in a modest single-story cement middle row house on a busy street in the city. I shared a bedroom with Marilene and Marise shared a room with our grandmother. There was no central heating or air conditioning. In the winter we would iron the sheets to warm them up before going to bed. The food was different. The mother or grandmother shopped every day and Avo did most of the cooking. There was always a pot of black beans and rice on the back of the stove, hot pepper sauce on the table. We drank coffee with milk every day, which seemed very grown up to me. We were given wine, watered down, with meals. It was all new and fun. After doing well in school for so long, I was frustrated that I was not able to understand better what was being taught. Classes were not like in the U.S.; there was more rote and memorization. I remember taking a class in Hellenism. I thought it wonderful to be studying Greek literature in southern Brazil, though I confess I couldn't understand very much of it.

The social life was totally different. Girls typically celebrate a large fancy coming out birthday party at age 15 or 16 when they begin to dress and behave more as adults. I was naïve and inexperienced compared to my Brazilian sister and other classmates, who dressed, primped, used makeup, and flirted well beyond my range. Eventually I got the hang of it. Everywhere we went we were chaperoned, usually by our grandmother. I at least was grateful for that. At one point I was elected Miss Pio XII, my high school's "sweetheart". I had to wear a long gown with a banner and promenade around. My Brazilian mother had a seamstress make me a long dress of seafoam green silk and my grandmother taught me to embroider little white raffia flowers and beads at the neckline and hem. Wearing a long dress and sash, having my hair done up, make-up, and a manicure was unlike anything this Minnesota girl ever did. Eventually I made a number of public appearances on radio and tv to promote AFS and talk about life in the United States.

Q: Did you get any feel for Brazilian life? You know, sort of what were the forces that were going on at that time? I think it's probably under military dictatorship at that point, wasn't it?

THAYER: The military took over in 1964, so I was there in the early years of the dictatorship. I don't remember talk of politics, or I simply wasn't aware. Porto Alegre is distant from the capital city Rio and the center of politics. I'm sure people were all very cautious. Brazil was an ambitious country, large, proud, and competitive with its neighbors. Southern Brazil was settled by mostly Europeans, many Italians and Germans, who worked in agriculture, wine-making, and light manufacturing. My classmates were diverse. My sister Marilene's boyfriend, who she later married, is Lebanese. Middle Eastern Christians immigrated all over North and South America during various periods. I eventually met presidents of Argentina and Ecuador who were of Lebanese and Syrian descent.

Relationships with boys in my view were relaxed and uncomplicated, at least mine were. I went to a girls' school but we socialized easily at dances and parties. Male friends would drop by the house, pile us in the car for a drive and ice cream, congregate at the beach and social clubs.

Q: Were you by the beach there?

THAYER: Like many others, my middle-class family had a summer house at the beach. Summers were hot and few homes had air conditioning. Married women rarely worked outside the home. Wives and children typically spent the summer at the beach and husbands came on weekends. Activities centered on the beach in the morning and the beach club in the evening. Family members of all ages joined in.

Q: Was there a daughter from the family in the United States at the time?

THAYER: Both daughters were in Brazil when I was there. The next year, my Brazilian sister Marilene went to North Carolina as an AFS exchange student. She came to visit me and my family in Minnesota. I lost touch with them for a number of years but we are in contact now and I look forward to going back to see them.

Q: Well then, when you came back you basically missed a year of high school? Was that it?

THAYER: I was gone from January through December 1965 so missed the last half of my junior and the first half of my senior year in Edina high school. I remember vividly rejoining the dozen or so American exchange students who lived throughout Brazil for the 1965 year program. We met up in beautiful Rio de Janeiro for a last few days before heading back to our various homes in the U.S. in December. The Brazilian equivalent of Life magazine did a cover story on us, showing us strolling down Copacabana Beach under the title “the most happy ambassadors”. I remember feeling an incredible sense of freedom and pride, to be walking on the beach, speaking Portuguese, and honored as a goodwill ambassador from my country. I vowed then that I would find a way to come back to Brazil some day before I died. Five years later, life brought me back to Brazil as a journalist. So at age 22, my life’s goal was fulfilled. The rest has been frosting.

Q: It’s all over; there it is.

THAYER: Going to Brazil was life-changing. Brazilians are lively, emotional, and diverse, quite a contrast from my reserved white suburban Minnesota roots. It seemed unreal. I wrote long letters on flimsy blue air-grams to my family, detailing my life in Brazil. I also wrote an occasional column on my experiences for my high school newspaper. It was a good link with home and opened me to the world of journalism as a career choice.

Once back in Minnesota, my high school decided that although I had good grades and enough credits I couldn’t graduate because I hadn’t completed a required two-semester civics class. I was away in Brazil the fall semester of my senior year when it was offered. So I petitioned to enter the University of Minnesota as a non-grad. I had to declare a major and find an advisor who would accept me as a non-grad. I chose journalism as my major and the dean of the University of Minnesota journalism school Mitchell Charnley agreed to be my adviser. Charnley was a popular and distinguished professor with a bushy white mustache and thick black glasses. He’d written journalism textbooks, taught media giants like Eric Sevareid and Garrison Keillor, and won many awards. He was deeply committed to journalism as a profession, which he saw as the linchpin of a democratic society. He was inspiring and helpful. I got a few merit scholarships, a job at the university newspaper, and together with summer jobs, was able to pay my way through college.

Q: So you went to the University of Minnesota from, was it ’66 to ‘70?

THAYER: I graduated in December 1969 after three years and a quarter. I paid my way mostly by working at the University of Minnesota newspaper, the “Minnesota Daily”. It served an enormous campus, maybe 30,000 students. I did a bit of everything. I worked as a reporter, St. Paul editor, night editor, copy editor. I worked hot type and wrote headlines, often late into the night. I took classes in journalism, history, economics, psychology, art history, and languages. I was in a bit of a hurry. I had vowed to get back to Brazil before I died, remember. I worked hard, but had plenty of fun too. Once a Dutch friend took me to a private party for Andy Warhol. It was hosted by a wealthy beauty salon owner and art collector in his Mount Curve mansion overlooking the Mississippi River. Warhol was wrapping things in cellophane around that time. He had wrapped the rotary phone, a vase, and various other things in the house, including, as I recall, his friend Viva, who appeared in several Warhol films. We left that party at dawn. We'd go polka dancing, check out the music at the Electric Fetus record store, eat pancakes at Al's Breakfast in Dinkytown.

Q: Okay, this was the height of the Vietnam business on campus. How did it hit the University of Minnesota and you?

THAYER: Vietnam was a big part of our life. The papers and tv news were full of stories about Vietnam. Guys we knew or were dating were suddenly drafted or signed up for the military. People debated long into the night the merits of the war, LBJ, Robert McNamara, body counts, deferments, conscientious objector status. Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, and other musicians were protesting the war in action and song and we sang along. Dylan was a local legend. Born and raised in northern Minnesota, he got his start playing in little bars near the "U", not long before I went to college there. Opposition to the war grew from many directions. At first, college students got deferments, so we knew few who went. Many young men stayed in college to keep their deferments. I dated a grad student from New York City who started a master's program in geology and later joined the Peace Corps, in large part to keep his deferment. Grounds for deferments gradually tightened up and anxiety and opposition grew. Just before I graduated in December 1969, the lottery was introduced, and young men's fate was decided by chance. We talked endlessly about what kind of impact the war and draft were having on people's choices and lives. There were many rallies, discussion groups, sit-ins against the war. I covered them as a journalist, writing about different groups' anti-and pro-war positions and activities. One sit-in in the president's office lasted for several days and forced the administration to cancel military recruiters. I attended services at the Newman Center, the Catholic youth center on campus. It had endless debates about the war and options for those opposed to the war, how to avoid the draft, go to Canada, or register as conscientious objectors. We learned a lot about the Quakers. For a long time it seemed that if your government makes these decisions, to go to war, send young people to war, that it should know what it is doing. Supporting your government was the patriotic thing to do. Part of growing up is realizing that governments don't always know or do the best thing or the right thing. We need to question and seek to understand what is happening and why. I learned that we all have civic duties and responsibilities and that democracy requires being informed and holding leaders accountable.

Q: Well, were you able to kind of look at the groups that were- say, some of the anti-war groups and maybe some of the pro-war? Hard to be pro-war but I mean, the anti-war groups, did you see some of these as being sort of young people getting, you know, doing an apprenticeship in manipulation and you know, turning into professional demonstrators and all. Did you have that sort of thing there?

THAYER: People were profoundly concerned by the death counts, the war's dragging on despite the rosy scenarios our leaders were selling us, veterans coming home with terrible injuries, the thousands of civilian victims, rumors of secret wars, bombing Laos and Cambodia. A fellow I dated in sophomore year enlisted and sent me letters about his training, his army mates, and going off to war. When he came back he refused to say anything about what he saw or did in Vietnam. I was influenced by the churches' denunciation of the war, the stories of civilian deaths and displaced refugees. A telling moment for me was when my FBI agent father came to see me on campus. I was living in a freshman girls' dorm, writing for the newspaper, generally around and about. After catching up a bit he somewhat awkwardly asked me what was going on around campus. He eventually worked up to asking me if I could keep an eye on who was doing what on the anti-war scene. Only gradually did I realize he didn't want to say out loud what he was asking me to do, which was basically to inform on anti-war protestors and leaders. He sort of asked me and I sort of let the question pass. I never once told him anything, and he never asked again. I think he never expected or even wanted me to tell him anything. The FBI at the time was collecting information and harassing American citizens for their anti-war views and activities. I sensed my father wanted nothing to do with that. A few years later he was assigned to work on the 1973 occupation at Wounded Knee on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, another controversial operation that he had misgivings about. Shortly after, he chose to retire from the FBI. I had just returned to the U.S. after finishing up three years as a Newsweek correspondent in Brazil. We joked that we had both retired at the same time and it was time to try something new.

Q: Yes you were saying you recall having long discussion with your father.

THAYER: My father was proud of his service with the FBI but also occasionally conflicted about some of the ethical issues that came up. He was there during the McCarthy period, the Alger Hiss case. I could tell he found it extremely distasteful to be asked to check up on American students protesting the war. It wasn't that we had many long, deep conversations about it but I remember being struck by his concern over certain law enforcement tasks required by our government. It made me realize we need to understand what is going on in our name and get involved, make up our own minds.

Q: Well, did you get any feel for his attitude towards J. Edgar Hoover?

THAYER: My dad was intrigued by J. Edgar Hoover. J. Edgar had a powerful personality and agents knew he was the one who made the FBI into the powerhouse it became. Hoover had flaws, but my dad described him as fair. He told us Hoover opposed the incarceration of Japanese-Americans during World War II. Hoover hired quality people, set high standards (agents had to be lawyers or accounts, with college degrees), and established rigorous training, dress codes, and oversight. He trusted his agents to do their work without micromanaging and engaged them personally. He sent my parents a letter congratulating them when I was born. My sister still has hers. My dad described Hoover as creating a cult of personality at the Bureau. There was a strong esprit de corps in the FBI, and I think my father felt great pride for a long time that he was picked and in the select company. But there were times when he had doubts about what the FBI was doing, and how Hoover was making use of the FBI. My mother used to say that my father complained about the paperwork and politics and bureaucracy of his job, he much preferred being out working on investigations. Younger agents sought him out as a mentor. I remember young agents stopping by the house, neatly dressed in dark suits, talking about their work, promotion chances, personalities in the FBI. Just like we all do. He would bring home wanted posters with mug shots of grim, hollow-eyed women and warn us to behave, to take care not to end up like them. When he retired and eventually moved with my mom to her home state of Arkansas, he kept in touch with old colleagues and for a time headed the local FBI retiree group. He also broke out of the constraints of being a federal agent. He started writing op-ed pieces and letters to editors. He wrote about local concerns and his opinions about national and international issues. Once freed of the conservative FBI dress code, he started wearing bright blazers and plaid pants. He seemed liberated and eager to express himself in ways he couldn't before.

Q: Often retired military people do the same thing.

THAYER: Oh, is that right?

Q: Yes. You know, sort of to get away from the-
Well, so you graduated, got your degree from University of Minnesota when you were what, 20 years old or something?

THAYER: I was 21; it was 1969.

Q: And how did you get back to Brazil?

THAYER: I graduated in December 1969, Phi Beta Kappa, summa cum laude, spent Christmas with my family in Edina then flew to New York. I'd had a summer job in 1969 as a paid intern at The Wall Street Journal in Atlanta. A colleague there invited me to stay with his family in New York after graduation to find a job. I should add that in the summer of 1968, my sister and I hitchhiked through Europe. It was sort of the thing to do back in those days, hitchhike around Europe. Some people bought VW vans to travel around in but we thumbed rides. We spent three months traveling around Europe during the crazy summer of 1968, with student protests and demonstrations everywhere.

Q: Well, did you hit France during the '68 thing?

THAYER: It was an amazing time to be in Europe. At home, protests against the Vietnam War were in full force, along with the civil rights movement, feminism, rage against the system. Abroad, the peace movement, labor and student strife, and de-colonization were rocking many countries, especially France. We arrived in London and worked our way around England, Stratford on Avon, over to Belgium, up through Sweden to see a friend, then Denmark, Germany, Austria. We visited Metrailer relatives in Switzerland, including great aunt Yvonne in Geneva, my grandfather's cousin. My mother named me after her. Tante Yvonne was tall and beautiful. She had been a model and her husband was a piano tuner. They fed us long elegant meals with salad compose', cheese boards and good wine. We saw more Metrailer relatives in Sion and the mountain village where Papa was born. They filled our backpacks with sausages and cheese and we traveled on over the Alps into Italy and down to Rome. From there we followed the Mediterranean through Italy to France, Monaco, and Spain before working our way back up through France and finally Paris from which we flew home. We hitch hiked with local folks and met up with students in youth hostels, stuffing ourselves on the road with grapes and baguettes. I did my best to manage the various languages and guide books; Ellen found the best bakeries. Student uprisings were reverberating throughout France and of course we were constantly questioned about Vietnam and civil rights at home. There was a palpable feeling that the world needed change and our generation would have to make it happen. We flew back in time to move into a house with two other girlfriends in Dinkytown and start classes.

That next summer, in 1969, I got an internship with The Wall Street Journal in Atlanta. I had won a William Randolph Hearst Writing Award and few other journalism awards and was inducted into the college honor society for journalism Kappa Tau Alpha, which helped. Working at the Journal's Atlanta bureau was an eye-opener. I did a lot of spot reporting and research into mainly business and economic topics but was encouraged to propose story ideas and write stories. Eventually three of my pieces made it onto the Journal's front page.

One was a report on a big rock festival scheduled for July Fourth weekend at the Atlanta Raceway. The first Atlanta International Pop Festival featured Janis Joplin, Jimmy Hendrix, Led Zeppelin, Joe Cocker, Blood Sweat and Tears, Creedence Clearwater Revival, and other big name bands, an unusually large event for its time. Some weeks later these same bands headlined what became the iconic rock festival at Woodstock in upstate New York. At the time I proposed writing about the festival, the Journal's New York bosses questioned why a rock concert would interest their mostly business-oriented readers. I countered that it was new, big, and a good human interest story. They finally agreed. I got my press credentials and ended up spending the whole weekend at the raceway. Crowds estimated at over 100,000 people surged to the event: teeny-boppers, boomers, rockers, kids, infants, all crammed together on chairs, blankets, and towels. Temperatures rose into the 90s. Clothing was optional, food and sanitation were in short supply. The smell of marijuana permeated everything, along with rotting watermelons, suntan lotion and mosquito spray. Local officials used fire hoses to splash the crowd to cool off. The event was deafening and crazy but largely peaceful. I was very conscious of being there as a journalist and fervently hoping I wouldn't get busted for being in the wrong place. One of the guys in a group I was interviewing started zoning out on drugs or something, and we all piled off in a van to bring him to a hospital. I remember thinking, oh oh, I'm here for the Wall Street Journal, my dad's an FBI agent; what am I doing here? We made a quick stop at the hospital to check him in and took off, wheels squealing. It was a wild weekend to say the least. I remember getting a telegram, an old-fashioned yellow Union telegram from Journal editors in New York asking me to clarify something I had written in the piece. I quoted a big sign saying "don't combustible." The editors said they didn't understand; shouldn't it read "don't be combustible"? It took awhile for me to explain that it meant "don't come bust-able", don't come doing anything that might get you busted by the cops. I thought it hilarious that they didn't get it. They did keep it in the piece. The great thing was the staid Wall Street Journal had a front page story on a blow-out rock festival with huge name bands and overflow crowds, and a couple of weeks later Woodstock exploded. Woodstock became a legend. But it happened in Atlanta first.

Soon after that, I proposed going to Miami to look into the large numbers of Cuban exiles resettled in Miami and how they were changing the city and its politics. This was 1969, ten years after Fidel Castro took power in Cuba which led many Cubans to leave. Eleven years later in 1980 would come the famous Mariel boatlift, the mass migration of thousands of Cubans into the U.S. that focused national attention on Cubans in Miami. I spent a week in Miami interviewing Cuban and local leaders, drawing on whatever Spanish I learned at college and my Brazilian Portuguese. My piece ran on the front page and was one of the first stories in the national press on the Cuban diaspora in Miami. Cubans exiled from the island through the early 1960s were establishing themselves in enclaves throughout Miami. They had taken over Eighth Street, turning "Calle Ocho" into a vibrant "little Havana" with shops, cafes, and clattering domino games. They were rapidly building political influence that would eventually dominate the city. As we saw, Cubans came to wield huge influence in Florida and increasingly in national politics. It was a great summer. I remember being in Miami watching Neil Armstrong walk on the moon. We felt such pride. I still have a copy of the July 21, 1969 Miami Herald cover story under an eight-inch headline: MAN WALKS ON THE MOON. I felt free and purposeful and excited to get on with life.

Q: Well, what were you getting out of the Cuban community in Miami at the time? Mas or-?

THAYER: Jorge Mas Canosa. Mas Canosa became the most prominent anti-Castro activist but he didn't establish his exile organization, the Cuban American National Foundation, until 1981. In 1969, I was basically trying to get to know what was going on with all of these Cubans, how they were managing in exile, establishing businesses, ties, and power bases. I spent time with Cuban writers and journalists, shopkeepers and musicians. They explained that the Cuban upper crust came out in the early 1960s disillusioned with Castro. They were devastated by the Bay of Pigs debacle in 1961 and the U.S. failure to dislodge Castro from power.

Q: Yes, Bay of Pigs.

THAYER: They knew by then that getting rid of Castro wasn't going to be quick or easy. Refugees and exiles often come with the idea that their enemies are going to be defeated and they will go back to their old homes and lives as quickly as possible. By 1969, the Cubans in Miami had realized that wasn't happening any time soon. Now it's been, what, 50 years and the Castros are still in power. Castro took over Cuba in 1959, I wrote my piece for the Journal in 1969, and Cuba is still under the Castros' thumb well into this century.

Q: If you'd been able to do something we wouldn't be in Iraq today. You know, it's probably due to you that the Cubans turned towards the support of George W. Bush and Iraq and all this and so-

THAYER: I tried to understand and write about the Cuban emigres' motivations and impact. I recall feeling back then that these were very smart people with strong backgrounds, determination, and resilience who could have enormous influence well beyond their numbers. History proved it so.

Q: Well, did you find yourself, I mean, here you are in your very early 20s and you know, Janis Joplin, Jimmy Hendrix, the Cubans and all, you know, all these are kind of fun, you know, looking at these but did you find yourself developing a sense of political sensitivities and all? I mean, looking at these things as more than sort of the exotic thing to describe but, you know, where is this going?

THAYER: I can't say I could articulate then an overall intellectual framework or view of the world. Or my place in it. I remember being curious why things were the way they were and what motivated people. From my Minnesota Catholic upbringing, I felt a responsibility to serve, to contribute to some greater good. I wasn't a protestor type. My perspective was more as a journalist, curious about the foibles and behaviors of individuals and governments and institutions. I wanted to understand why and how things worked. And I wanted adventure.

Q: Well, from your description, I mean, here you are, I keep coming back to you're a young person in the very early 20s and yet you're getting on the front page of a major newspaper. I mean, I assume that by this time, I mean, you were- you already established your real credentials as a journalist, hadn't you?

THAYER: After I graduated from college in December 1969 I went to New York. I was there in time for New Year's Eve, saw the ball drop in Times Square. The widowed mother of one of my WSJ colleagues in Atlanta lived in a huge gorgeous co-op on East 64th Street. He told me I should stay there if I wanted to find a job in New York. I applied at Newsweek and rather quickly got a job as a reporter-researcher in the economic/business section. Larry Martz was my boss. I remember thinking I should not overstay my friend's hospitality as I looked for a place to live so after a few months I moved into the Barbizon Hotel for a few weeks. The Barbizon was then a fading but still prominent “women only” dormitory hotel for young working women. Aspiring actresses, models, and writers, like Grace Kelly and Joan Didion, had passed through there. The rooms were tiny and spartan, containing little more than a single bed and a lamp. The twin mattress was so flimsy that I put mine on the floor for support. But it still had a genteel façade and a swimming pool and was walking distance from Newsweek headquarters at 50th and Madison.

Q: Oh, yes. Famous Barbizon. That goes back to the ‘20s.

THAYER: Definitely back to the ‘20s. It was a strange experience. I had moved from a gorgeous bedroom suite in my friend’s mom’s East Side co-op--where I could have stayed, they were very gracious—into this famous but decrepit dormitory hotel, sleeping on a mattress on the floor, eating peanut butter and crackers. I don’t know why but I wanted to be on my own, so I took the opportunity to live there for a couple of weeks. I remember loving the freedom, the thrill of walking through Central Park, buying pretzels from street carts, browsing in bookstores, coming upon free concerts and plays. I loved New York, there was always something going on. After I started at Newsweek, I house sat for a colleague with twelve cats on the upper West Side. I turned out to be not so fond of cats. Soon after, another Newsweek colleague Elaine Sciolino and I moved into an apartment at 85th and York on the Upper East Side. Elaine was a pretty, ambitious Italian American journalist from upstate New York. She became a top New York Times reporter, Paris bureau chief, and writer. Her Italian dad from Buffalo would send her electronics and gifts that would show up in unmarked boxes at the front door. So I was living this magical 22 year old life. I had interesting friends and roommates. I was dating the editor of Newsweek’s sports section, hanging out with writers at the Lions Head (where it seemed everyone but me was doing drugs), spending weekends in Saratoga and Lexington, heady stuff in those days.

Q: Well tell me, where did “Newsweek,” when you were there, how would you describe it? Where did it fall in the journalistic spectrum?

THAYER: The newsweekly Time was bigger and Newsweek was trying to catch up. Newsweek was owned by the Washington Post, headed at the time by owner Katherine Graham and editor Ben Bradlee. They were seen as more liberal, cutting-edge. At the time, both newsmagazines were typically male dominated. All the Newsweek editors were men. Women were researchers and support staff. I was hired as a reporter-researcher in the business/economics section, presumably because of my Wall Street Journal background. We did a lot of fact checking, research, tracking wire services, and clipping newspapers. I also reported for stories around Wall Street and New York. Much of the news reporting came in from correspondents all over the country and the world. Newsweek had a talented staff of writers and a big international section. People in the field mostly proposed and reported stories, and writers in New York wrote the pieces. This was in 1970. Times were good, and Newsweek had, compared to today, a large stable of foreign correspondents and stringers. I was thrilled to be working for a news magazine with national and international reach. I realized only years later that the famous women's class action suit against Newsweek for gender discrimination was happening just as I arrived there in 1970. I moved on to Brazil as a Newsweek correspondent that fall and missed the historic case.

Q: Well, there was Timespeak. Did "Newsweek" have its own particular style or was it a little more straightforward?

THAYER: Newsweek sought to push the envelope. It was hot on Time magazine's heels in terms of developing readership and advertising revenues. Time had its famous covers. Newsweek showcased stories and compelling photographs, in-depth articles about Vietnam and civil rights. Newsweek promoted itself as lively and progressive, appealing to a younger audience.

Q: Well, in those whole period of time, while you were doing this, did the civil rights movement intrude, well, I won't say "intrude," but I mean, did it cross your radar very much or not?

THAYER: Certainly people in Minnesota and at my University were very involved. They would go down south, march, engage in the politics and debate. My mother was from Arkansas and I occasionally spent part of my summers as a kid visiting my grandparents and relatives in very segregated Little Rock. Minnesota when I was growing up was white, largely Scandinavian, German, some Polish. Brazil of course had many blacks and mixed race but Porto Alegre where I lived was mostly white, southern European. We came to have black friends and classmates in college, but civil rights was less on my radar than the Vietnam War and related political upheaval. The assassinations of Martin Luther King and then Robert Kennedy, national protests and the burning of cities, the disgrace of LBJ (Lyndon Baines Johnson) were national tragedies we all experienced. One of my older cousins was working with Robert Kennedy and was with him the night he was killed. That made a big impression on me. She became a lawyer and civil rights activist.

Q: Well, how long did you work for "Newsweek"?

THAYER: As I was finishing college and before starting at Newsweek, I had applied for an Inter-American Press Association grant. The IAPA promotes journalism and journalism training in the Americas by providing grants for educational exchanges and sabbaticals. It usually goes to experienced mid-career journalists to undertake some longer-term project or research. I had proposed to write about Japanese influence in Brazil. Maybe few applicants applied to go to Brazil. At any rate, at age 22 I was offered a yearlong IAPA grant. It was a dilemma. I had just started at Newsweek and loved it, but suddenly I had an opportunity to go back to Brazil. Which had been my life's goal.

It seemed an opportunity I couldn't pass up. So I decided to take the grant and requested leave from Newsweek. As it turned out, Newsweek's longtime Latin America bureau chief stationed in Rio was being transferred. His replacement was a Brit, John Barnes. John wanted to live in Argentina because he spoke Spanish, not Portuguese, and thought Buenos Aires would be more civilized. Brazil was still a military dictatorship and the fastest growing economy in Latin America, but the bigger political news story at the time was in the southern cone. Socialist Salvador Allende had been elected president of Chile, and political and economic turmoil in Argentina was growing, attracting American attention. Newsweek arranged that John would set up the bureau headquarters in Buenos Aires and I would cover Brazil as Newsweek's "principal correspondent". I found a tiny furnished apartment on Copacabana Beach piled high with boxes of inherited Newsweek office files. I worked out of my apartment and filed copy through the Reuters news agency downtown. Besides my IAPA grant, I was paid a monthly stipend by Newsweek to generate story ideas and reporting, as well as payment by the column inch for what I wrote for Newsweek.

Q: Huge country. What was going on there at that time?

THAYER: In the early 1970s, OPEC (Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries) was formed, pushing up the price of oil. That led to massive amounts of petro-dollars sloshing around in international markets looking for places to invest, and one of the biggest was Brazil. Brazil had a brilliant finance minister, Antonio Delfim Neto. I wrote a story about him and the surging Brazilian economy for Newsweek; he was on the cover of the international edition. Delfim Neto was a charmer of the first order. He traveled the world seeking huge international investments in Brazil, hydroelectric power, oil exploration, petrochemicals, aviation, the auto industry, agriculture, construction. Brazil was building its new futuristic capital Brasilia and negotiating with Paraguay and Argentina to build the gigantic Itaipu dam. Brazil at that time knew no bounds.

Q: I've heard that so many times.

THAYER: Brazilians are hugely proud of their country. It is and will always be the country of the future, so the saying goes. Brazil was taken over by a military dictatorship in 1964. When I arrived back in 1970 the military government was generating massive public works projects, building dams, investing in aviation and automobiles, launching a nuclear energy program.

Q: Yes, this is a major thing between Argentina and Brazil. I mean, it looked like a nuclear rivalry was beginning.

THAYER: At the time there was a big rivalry. Later, they were both broke and it abated somewhat. Brazil and Argentina often competed for leadership in the region, both economic and political. During my time there, Brazil was soaring. In 1972 Brazil started building the Trans Amazon Highway, a 4000-kilometer road slicing across northern Brazil. The idea was to open up the remote Amazon rainforest to settlers from the drought-plagued northeast, and to link the region with the rest of Brazil and to Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru. There were visions of vast farms, pasture land, timber and mineral wealth. It was a disastrous decision. The rainforest has only a thin layer of arable soil and trees that generate a good share of the world's oxygen. So road building and tree cutting led to erosion and ecological collapse. Farms failed after one or two harvests, and the anticipated mineral resources never materialized.

Q: You're putting up about an inch to represent about a layer of an inch of soil and the rest, of course, is sterile.

THAYER: At that time there was little attention or discussion about environmental issues. The focus was all on growth, investment, grand gestures, grandiose employment and housing schemes for the country's poor. Building roads led to deforestation, erosion, and misery for hundreds of thousands of failed colonists. It turned out to be a monumental disaster. But at the time it was a big deal.

I took several extended trips to the Amazon. On one trip I accompanied a dozen or so Brazilian college students from the major coastal cities of Rio and Sao Paulo to the Amazon. Some years earlier, Brazil's military government had tossed out USAID and the Peace Corps, saying it could handle its own development free from American influence. In 1967 Brazil created a sort of domestic Peace Corps called Projeto Rondon in which university students spent their summer vacations carrying out social and health projects in poor rural Amazon villages. It was fascinating, even funny to see pale, preppy college students slog through the jungle inoculating cows and pulling teeth. I proposed and reported a cover story on the Amazon for Newsweek. The cover was titled Brazil: Conquest of the Amazon. It looked at expectations and challenges of the new highway and Brazil's opening up of the Amazon.

Besides working for Newsweek, I did some freelance work, mainly business articles for the American Chamber of Commerce, and some photography. Every quarter or so John would come up from Buenos Aires to catch up on what was going on. A fun, fast-talking Brit, he had a million ideas and schemes. At one point, we talked of launching a South American version of the "International Herald Tribune". The Paris-based Herald Tribune compiled European and U.S.-centered articles from the Washington Post and New York Times for English-speaking audiences. We thought there might be interest in a South American version that would focus on news of interest to Latin American audiences and businessmen. After all, Brazil was an economic powerhouse and political turmoil was rocking South America, like Allende in Chile. We printed up a mock paper, pasting articles we cut out of the Washington Post, the Wall Street Journal, and the New York Times, to test what kind of readership we might get. Newsweek found out what we were doing, thought it crazy and verging on copyright infringement, so that ended that.

Q: During this time, I mean, did you find being the representative of "Newsweek," that must have given you a certain status in Brazil, didn't it? Or did they know- or could you parlay that?

THAYER: Except for my friends at Reuters, the venerable Jane Braga, I didn't spend much time with other journalists. Or embassy folks. I operated fairly independently. I did snag press credentials to get into Carnival balls and that was fun. My arrangement was to submit weekly story ideas and proposals to Newsweek and other publications. If one was accepted, I was on my own to report and write it and get paid after. I wrote a bunch of human interest pieces. I interviewed Brazilian race car driver Emerson Fittipaldi and soccer star Pele who was trying to make a comeback by promoting soccer in the U.S. I wrote about the inaugural Capetown-Rio yacht race. I spent a weekend with actress Mary Martin at her ranch in Mato Grosso.

Q: Not Mary Poppins.

THAYER: Mary Martin. Peter Pan.

Q: Mary Martin, yes.

THAYER: Yes. She and her husband had retired to a farm in Mato Grosso in central Brazil. She did a lot of knitting and wrote a book about it. I went out for the weekend and wrote a piece about them living in the bush. I wrote human interest stories one day and about hydroelectric power plants the next. I remember wanting to write about the political situation and being frustrated by Newsweek's lack of interest. Brazil had been under a military dictatorship since 1964. Everyone knew the military exercised tight control, censorship was tight, and people were extremely cautious. Protests would occasionally break out but were quickly put down. I would propose story ideas in hopes of getting the go-ahead and travel money to report on the political situation, human rights, and censorship, but Newsweek didn't bite. Once I wanted to follow up on a lead about some young people who had been picked up for criticizing the regime. Newsweek wasn't interested so I went down to Sao Paulo on my own. I was supposed to meet a contact in a public place, wearing a trench coat with a copy of Newsweek in the pocket. I waited a long time but no one showed up. I look back now and feel badly that I didn't pursue those kinds of political stories more. I remember thinking at the time how Newsweek and the American press and government were fixated on the elected socialist President Salvador Allende in Chile, while Brazil, now nearly ten years into a military dictatorship, was seen as an economic, not political, story. Of course, Kissinger and Nixon were in the White House. They seemed fine dealing with military dictators, as long as communism and protests were put down.

Q: Well, okay, now while you were there, let's talk about your connection to the American government, State Department, consulars, embassies, public affairs offices, etc. Did you have connections? I mean, you know, I mean working with them or not?

THAYER: It didn't occur to me to go to the U.S. embassy for leads or information. Except for one time when I had to write something about forestry, wood and wood exports. I got an appointment with the embassy's deputy commercial attache. He was out that day due to an accident so I spoke instead with his boss, the commercial attache. I ended up marrying him.

Q: Who?

THAYER: My husband Randy was an American diplomat, born in Ecuador, son of an American diplomat. He was an economic-commercial officer on his third tour, after serving in Senegal and Lisbon. So instead of returning to New York and Newsweek after my IAPA fellowship year I remained two more years working as a journalist in Brazil.

Q: Well, while you were working for "Newsweek" in Brazil, did you get any feel for the Brazilian media? I mean, what was it like?

THAYER: The Brazilian media was cowed and cautious. Growth, investment, and economics were the story of the day. The local media was under the thumb of the government, along with everything else.

Q: The interesting thing that I find is that I've done these interviews and all, many people have put the Brazilian diplomat service as being a very fine professional service, one of the best in the world and all that, yet when you look around it, except in parts of Latin America, Brazil doesn't seem to have any influence, particularly, for a country as big as it is and I'm sure within Latin America it does but even there it just doesn't seem to rise to the surface very much.

THAYER: Brazil is known for having a skilled, well-trained career diplomatic service. It has served as guarantor in several negotiations and treaties, and is active in multilateral and regional fora. Brazilian diplomats are selectively chosen and undergo intensive training for several years, unlike American diplomats who often get relatively little training once hired. Still, Brazil tends to look inward. It is the perennial country of the future.

Q: And of what I gather too they're all pretty well recruited from sort of the same class, which means they're well educated and all but they do come from the, you know, the upper class and all.

THAYER: Brazil has a wonderful mix of races, but there's definitely a class structure and persistent racism. College kids like the ones I accompanied to the Amazon were mostly from the wealthier educated classes. They were known as "filhos de papa", daddy's boys. They lived the country club life, went to the best schools, were often given cars as soon as they were old enough to drive. Most of those in Projeto Rondon were earnest first year dental students or agronomists or veterinarians or doctors. Being dropped by truck or boat into destitute little jungle villages to pull teeth or inoculate cows seemed traumatic for many of them.

Q: Well of course, American kids, for the most part, are used, every once in a while going out and roughing it, more than I think than in many other societies. You know, they're supposed to get out and dig ditches or do something and so-

THAYER: American kids?

Q: Well, I mean, at least in my era, certainly.

THAYER: Oh yes, in your and my time, sure.

Q: Although the Peace Corps does very well still.

THAYER: It's a good thing to expose privileged kids to the realities and hardships of their country. Especially one as large and diverse as Brazil. It was class conscious then, and probably still is.

Q: Well, did you find- You were based in Rio, is that right?

THAYER: I was based in Rio, yes.

Q: Well, did you find that- How did Sao Paulo fit into this?

THAYER: Sao Paulo was the industrial capital of Brazil, a sprawling polluted city with a population in the millions even then. Now it's got about 30 million people, I think. Sao Paulo was the center of coffee production, and most of the industry, automobiles, petrochemicals, manufacturing. It also had a very dynamic cultural life with brilliant theater, art, and restaurants. Rio was beautiful, with lovely beaches, gorgeous people, and great fun but Sao Paulo was the economic, intellectual, and cosmopolitan center of Brazil. Wealthy people lived in gated villas and suburbs. I went down occasionally to report on business and economic issues. Once I saw a play, Cemetery of Automobiles. It was staged in a gigantic warehouse set on a huge pile of wrecked cars. I've never seen anything like it. Everything was done on a grandiose scale. Another time Randy and I went to Ouro Preto where the legendary Living Theater was developing and performing avant garde street plays they called The Legacy of Cain. Founders Julian Beck, wife Judith Malina and 11 others were jailed on marijuana charges and later deported after a huge international outcry, with the help of Randy's consular services.

To fulfill my fellowship I wrote a long paper on the influence of the Japanese in Sao Paulo. Japanese poured into Brazil around the turn of the century, mainly around Sao Paulo to work in the coffee industry, later in the auto and other industries. Brazil has over a million people of Japanese descent who have contributed enormously to Brazil's success in manufacturing, agriculture, and design.

Q: Was Brasilia beginning to sap away at Rio or had that happened yet?

THAYER: When I was there, nobody wanted to live in Brasilia. Most of the legislators and government workers stayed in Rio as much as possible. At first they would reluctantly go to Brasilia for a few days each week, then longer. Eventually the government required persons with jobs based in Brasilia to live there. Over time housing and amenities improved in Brasilia. I went there for work but never lived there. I don't know if people still slip back to the coast as much as they can. Brasilia has artificial lakes, endless prairies, spectacular sunsets.

Q: Well, you know, Rio today, of course, one is- and Sao Paulo the gangs and all that were a real problem.

THAYER: Life in the favelas, slums, particularly in Rio, has gotten very brutal. When I was there, it was dangerous but picturesque. We'd leave wallets and jewelry at home, but would wander up around Botafogo and up to Corcovado, go to the samba schools in the favelas.

I was doing a lot of photography in those days, occasionally selling pictures. I never had a camera stolen but stealing cameras and bags was common in parts of Rio, including Copacabana. Photography led to my breaking my front teeth. We had bought a class in dark room photo processing from an Embassy marine guard at a benefit raffle. He and I were working in a little darkroom in the embassy basement on a hot, stuffy afternoon. I stepped out to get some air but ended up passing out on a marble stairway and smashing my face. The emergency doctor on call did a great job sewing up my bloodied mouth and chin. I joked that I was lucky to be injured in a country known for its plastic surgeons so later I could get the scars removed. The doctor was indignant that I thought I would need a plastic surgeon. He insisted the stitches would never show, and he was right. As it happened, when we raced me off to the emergency room, we'd left a full frame portrait developing in the darkroom, along with blood everywhere. A friend salvaged the picture, so we had a blow up of my face and my real teeth that the Brazilian dentist copied to cap my broken teeth. We still have the picture.

Q: This is tape two, side one with Yvonne Thayer.

Anyway. Today is the 28th of September, 2007. Yvonne, we're on a dental note right here. Did anything- do you recall, is there anything else we should cover? We're talking about Brazil, aren't we?

THAYER: Right. I was in Brazil on a fellowship and working for "Newsweek" magazine. Brazil was in an exciting period, with lots of money, lots of petro dollars floating around.

Q: I can't remember but let me ask the question. The petro dollars, these were the dollars generated in, basically in the Middle East but in Nigeria and other places. There's a lot of money floating around.

THAYER: These were the heydays of OPEC. The cartel of oil producers from the Middle East, Venezuela, and northern Africa were able to increase prices considerably, and reap vast profits.

Q: They were looking for places to invest and I think Brazil would be an obvious place.

THAYER: Right, the biggest country in South America.

Q: Well how long were you in Brazil?

THAYER: Three years that time 1970-73, after my student exchange year in 1965. My fellowship was for a year. I expected to return to Newsweek, hopefully in the foreign news bureau. As it was, I met someone.

Q: They get in the way all the time.

THAYER: They do, don't they? It always wrecks my story when I mentor younger women about joining the Foreign Service and I have to admit I joined because I met a guy. He was the economic/commercial officer in the embassy in Brazil.

Q: What's his name?

THAYER: Randy, Randolph Reed. His father was a Foreign Service officer, Harry Reed.

Q: Is that R-E-E-D?

THAYER: R double E-D, right. I rarely went to the embassy, but I happened to meet Randy, a single dad with two sons, Mark and Sean. Eventually we got married and I became a stepmom to two young boys.

Q: So then. Where did you go- when and where did you go?

THAYER: I continued working in Brazil as a Newsweek correspondent and on other projects for two more years. When we got back to the U.S. in 1973, I wanted to stay in Washington so Newsweek arranged for me to interview with Ben Bradlee at the Washington Post. The Post owned Newsweek. Watergate was in full swing and Bradlee and the Post were famous for publishing the Pentagon Papers. It was exciting but I got married instead. I went with my diplomat husband to Mozambique and became a dependent spouse for a time.

Q: Mozambique. You were there from when to when?

THAYER: We arrived in Mozambique in January of 1974. A few months later, the Portuguese military overthrew the fascist dictatorship in Lisbon.

Q: Yes, I was going to say, this is an important year.

THAYER: The Carnation Revolution. So everything changed. Randy was assigned to the U.S. consulate-general in Mozambique. The consul general Hendrik Van Oss departed soon after our arrival so Randy was chargé for a long time. Mozambique was an overseas colony of Portugal. Many former African colonies had by then gained independence from European countries, but Mozambique and Angola were still fighting for independence from Portugal. American diplomats were restricted from going to contested areas and communication with the outside world was limited. As a dependent spouse, my options seemed limited. Until 1972, married women were barred from serving as Foreign Service Officers. Dependent spouses were linked to their husbands' careers and evaluated. I started to teach first and second grade in a private English language South African primary school. The students were from all over the world, mostly offspring of businessmen, diplomats, and overseas Portuguese.

Q: Okay. Well let's talk, I mean, here you are, you're not just sort of a housewife, you're a trained reporter. What were you seeing? I mean, what was your impression of what you- were you in the anti-colonial mode, you might say, rooting for the Africans to take over or how did you feel about this? And then, tell me what you saw.

THAYER: When we first arrived in January, Mozambique was in the midst of a war of independence. The Mozambique Liberation Front (FRELIMO), led by Samora Machel, fought against Portuguese rule, aided by Tanzania and other newly-independent African states. The capital Lourenço Marques was less affected as it was protected by the Portuguese army and security forces. But fighting was often heavy outside of the capital. Whole sections of the country were off limits to foreigners, including diplomats. There were few places we could go and few journalists. One exception was a fearless young journalist Robin Wright from the Christian Science Monitor. Robin traveled around southern Africa covering independence movements. She stopped in a few times to see us and report what was happening in Mozambique. Robin went on to a stellar career as a foreign correspondent and prolific writer, with special focus on the Middle East. Later that summer, Consul General Van Oss was replaced by Peter Walker and his wife Pam. The Walkers had years of experience in Africa, plus four kids away in various colleges and boarding schools. Peter was fun and open-minded. I had opportunities to travel inside Mozambique where accredited diplomats couldn't go and he backed me up.

Q: Could you sort of act as a stringer for "Newsweek" at all?

THAYER: My sense at the time was that the constraints put on dependent spouses could make working as a journalist unwelcome to the Department. Married women had only recently been permitted to be officers, and gender roles were still in place. I had taken and passed the Foreign Service exam a week before I got married, and didn't want to put either of our careers at risk. Beyond South Africa's struggles with apartheid and oil-rich Angola's fight for independence, American interest in sub-Saharan Africa seemed minimal.

Q: Well, let's talk a little bit of Lourenço Marques. What was the life like there at the time?

THAYER: Randy had served in West Africa and liked Africa a lot, and of course I soon fell in love with Mozambique, the people, the sea, our little mission. It was one of those idyllic Foreign Service posts where a handful of people become very close and share exciting times. We were living through a war for independence that gave birth to a new country. Pam and Peter had a lot to do with my embracing the Foreign Service and the diplomatic life. I admired them and their marriage, their service, their humor and kindness, their appreciation for foreign people and cultures, their support for their children away at school.

While Lourenço Marques, LM as we called it, was largely calm, we knew the fight for independence was growing closer and more dangerous. FRELIMO attacks were steadily moving southward from safe havens in Tanzania and enclaves in the north into central Mozambique, the key port city of Beira, and northern outskirts of the capital. FRELIMO already held most of Gorongosa, a spectacular game park previously popular with South Africans and other wealthy visitors. Sometimes we would drive out of the capital, maybe to the beach, and would be stopped by random groups of kids with guns. They would make a show of stopping the car and ordering us out to inspect it. Sometimes they set piles of tires and trash and brush on fire and forced cars to funnel off-road, looking for handouts.

Mozambique didn't have oil like Angola, Portugal's other large African colony, but it had fertile land, agriculture, fish, cashews, coffee, tea, sisal, and some minerals. It also exported labor. Mozambicans worked in South Africa's mines, sending back remittances to family members with a percentage paid directly to the Mozambican government. Mozambique was poor but didn't experience famine or the degree of misery suffered by other African countries.

LM's markets and shops were run mostly by Indian immigrants. They were usually well-stocked, though diplomats would make regular runs to Swaziland for things like butter, milk, and fresh vegetables. The few restaurants served Mozambique's famous giant prawns, chicken piri-piri, and classic Portuguese fare. LM's sprawling white modern hotel, the Polana, was the place to meet up with businessmen and visitors and get their take on what was going on. A large number of overseas Portuguese lived in LM, some second and third generation. Many said they felt greater affinity to Mozambique than they did to Portugal. There were also professionals from South Africa and other African countries who had chosen to live and raise their families in Mozambique instead of racially-divided South Africa.

Q: Well, how did the news of the revolt in Portugal, it wasn't the Salazar regime; it was the successor to the Salazar regime, which had been around for a long time. And when it *essentially collapsed and the young military officers took over, how did that impact on where you were?*

THAYER: Largely non-violent, the Carnation Revolution took us by surprise; at least those of us who were far away in Africa with limited communication. Unlike in Angola, the new Portuguese government fairly quickly decided to cut its losses in Mozambique. Mozambique had agricultural and some mineral wealth plus a good income from exporting laborers to South Africa's mines, but nothing compared to Angola. Angola was the jewel in Portugal's overseas empire, rich in oil and diamonds and other commodities. Portugal and others, South Africa, Rhodesia, the Soviet Union, Europe, and the U.S., jockeyed to influence what was going on in Angola. In Mozambique FRELIMO was the one dominant revolutionary group, led by Samora Machel, the son of a middle-class native farmer. Machel attended Catholic missionary schools in Gaza Province in central Mozambique and then nursing school in LM. He became the top commander in the ten-year fight against colonialism. On the way he transformed FRELIMO from a broad revolutionary front into a Marxist party, influenced by Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere.

Q: He was sort of the darling of the European socialists.

THAYER: This was the mid-1970s with the Cold War playing one country off the other. Nyerere was lauded by European socialists; he hadn't fallen into the hard-line Soviet camp. The U.S. had a fairly good working relationship with Tanzania. When the Portuguese worked out an arrangement, signed in Lusaka in September 1974, to grant Mozambique independence and transfer power after a transition period, Machel was the uncontested leader. He was welcomed by the U.S. and others, but he rebuffed western overtures as backers of fascist Portugal, and sided with the Soviets. He proclaimed the independent People's Republic of Mozambique on June 25, 1975.

Q: Yes, the way ______ in Angola would cause- results are still there today.

THAYER: I went to a program recently about the rehabilitation of Gorongosa National Park after years of devastation and war. The effort is being funded by American billionaire tech impresario Greg Carr, also founder of the Carr Center for Human Rights at Harvard, who I met a few times. The Mozambican ambassador and economic minister told me that Frelimo's decision to keep Portuguese as Mozambique's main language and the centralized education system was crucial in helping Mozambique's multiple, feuding tribal groups to bond as a nation. Mozambique benefitted in the early days from Portugal's fairly benign approach. There was general agreement that FRELIMO was the rightful heir to the country, and it got the support of the world, including the U. S. and western democracies. During that transitional year, a provisional government was set up where FRELIMO administrators shared duties, or shadowed Portuguese government officials under a FRELIMO prime minister. It didn't go all that well. FRELIMO learned little or rejected much of what the Portuguese sought to teach. Rumors of purges, firings, confiscation of assets, white flight, and nationalization of businesses, property and schools ran rampant. Many whites left. There were a number of attempts by small groups of Portuguese and other white settlers, aided by white-ruled South Africa and Rhodesia, to thwart the transfer of power. Once an anti-FRELIMO group took over the local radio station and some office buildings for several days. We would hear sporadic gunfire, sometimes while at work teaching or out shopping or playing tennis. Pam Walker and I would look at each other across the tennis net during sudden bursts of gunfire and try to decide if it was better to stay put or try to get home. When confined to our homes, we communicated by radio until the coast was clear.

Q: Well, how did this, this obviously raised the consular general to being an embassy.

THAYER: Daily life went from a fairly quiet existence in a consular backwater to sharing in the birth of a new country. We lived in comfortable white-washed homes with gardens full of avocado and mango and citrus trees. Asian immigrants ran most of the commerce and small shops. The few tourists that came went to local markets and waterfront restaurants for shrimp and chicken piri piri. I learned to make samosas and escabeche and Portuguese dishes with bacala, salted codfish, seafood, and potatoes. Every once in a while an American ship would stop in and we would visit or host the officers and crew. Sometimes they would bring us iceberg lettuce. I recall ex-pats complaining that it was impossible to find peanut butter and marshmallows in Africa, and thinking how ridiculous, here we are surrounded by the most wonderful tropical fruits and fish, who needs peanut butter. I was teaching first and second grade in the local English language primary school, traveling when I could, and had started taking piano lessons. Life was pleasant.

Once a weathered Englishman showed up in a 32-foot sailboat. We became pals during his weeks in port and he invited a few of us to sail from LM to Durban on South Africa's east coast. We got exit stamps in our passports and set sail after a long liquid farewell party. The next day a vicious storm hit the Indian Ocean. It was so powerful even the oil tankers moved closer to shore. The rickety sailboat lost a sail, the rudder broke, the flares got soaked, and stray fishing nets got caught in the prop. Two of the crew spent hours in the rough, shark-infested water to cut away the nets. It took us a day to limp back to LM, where the Portuguese customs officer refused to allow us to re-enter Mozambique since we had stamped out but came back without checking into another country. After hours of delays and pleading, they allowed my husband, the American consul, to negotiate our entry.

I was fortunate to travel to parts of Mozambique where consular officers were not able to go. Once I accompanied a Portuguese banker friend on a business trip to the port towns of Beira, Inhambane, and Porto Amelia. We visited vast plantations of tea and cotton, sisal and coconut. Laborers lived in beehive-shaped huts, some painted with brightly colored murals. We visited the colonial ruins and white-washed villages on Mozambique and Ibo Islands where the women dressed completely in white, their faces covered with a white paste. I visited Quirimba Island, known locally as Gessner Island, where the German Gessner family had operated huge coconut plantations since the 1920s. Nearly everything on the self-sustaining island was made out of coconut trees and coconut shells, including dishes, cups, clothing, bags, fuel, poles, thatch for the walls and roofs. Even the toilet flush was operated by coconut shells on a gravity-driven chain dumping water into a reservoir tank. I was one of the first people in years to visit Gorongosa Park, a formerly high end game park which had been closed during the war. Park staff had continued to maintain the park guesthouse despite attacks and occupation by FRELIMO forces. I was the only guest at the time and saw lions, zebras, elephants, giraffes, and rhinos up close. Soon after, Gorongosa suffered even worse devastation during the 15-year civil war when the staff fled and many of the animals were killed or starved.

Throughout the transition year, Portuguese and other white settlers were split. Some did not want to have anything to do with a new black African government. Many sold off everything for a song, took what they could carry and left the country. Others felt at home and committed to stay in Mozambique. People would ask us desperately what we would do in their shoes. We, as American diplomats, explained that the U.S. Government favored de-colonization and independence for African states, and that we hoped for a good relationship with the new country of Mozambique. We would support Mozambique and hoped everyone would live in peace. As it turned out, these hopes were overly optimistic. The new FRELIMO government quickly embraced the Soviet Union and its system, nationalized property, schools and clinics, confiscated rental and other properties, and discouraged private enterprise. Many overseas Portuguese who remained lost just about everything. Our Portuguese neighbor Mario and his wife were defiantly optimistic and decided to stay, stopping in nightly to see us for updates and a strong gin and tonic. After a few difficult years they left, first for South Africa, then Portugal, gifting much of their property to the U.S. embassy, and taking with them only what they could carry.

As June 25 Independence Day approached, we in the American mission remained hopeful that the U.S. government would be invited to the independence celebrations. Peter Walker had left Mozambique on medical leave with Pam and Randy was chargé. I was still teaching at the primary school. Along with all schools, it had been nationalized so the Mozambican government was paying my salary. Eventually it became obvious we were not getting an invitation, nor were the British, Germans, French, or any western government. Samora Machel wanted nothing to do with the west, he had thrown in his lot with the Soviet Union. A few days before independence, Randy, on behalf of the U.S. government, sent a congratulatory letter to the new government. Its response was to order us and other western diplomatic missions to get out of Mozambique within 48 hours. As Randy and our government grappled with what to do, Iowa Senator Dick Clark was visiting his friend President Nyerere in Tanzania. Nyerere told Samora Machel that he was making a mistake to exclude and antagonize the U.S. and urged him to invite Senator Clark, a longtime friend of Africa, to Mozambique.

So suddenly Senator Clark and his small party arrived in LM. Randy and I went to the airport to pick them up. So did a large, high-ranking Mozambican delegation. As we were under expulsion orders from the government, we stayed largely out of sight, literally hidden behind potted plants, signaling to Senator Clark that we were there and would meet up later. We were hopeful that things would blow over and we didn't want to provoke any backlash. So we played a cat and mouse game where the U. S. delegation participated in an official program put on by the Mozambican government and the U.S. consulate arranged a side program, beyond the 48 hour expulsion deadline. U.S. Representatives Cardiss Collins and Charles Diggs, both African-Americans, attended Independence ceremonies for the U.S. Ultimately the Mozambican government revoked the expulsion of the entire U.S. mission but as a face saving gesture, they insisted the charge', my husband, leave, as they did with senior officials of other western countries. They gave us a couple of weeks to depart. I hated to go and was distressed at being ordered to leave. Later I came to find there's a sort of PNG (persona non grata) Club, a not insignificant number of diplomats who have been PNG'd for political reasons over the years.

Q: Yes, Frank Carlucci is.

THAYER: Exactly. I loved living in Mozambique. I spoke Portuguese, was teaching school, taking piano lessons, making friends, and exploring the country and its people to the extent I could. Then suddenly it all ended. We boarded a small four-passenger cargo ship and headed around South Africa. We stopped at Walvis Bay to pick up canned sardines for export and made our way across the Atlantic back to the United States. I spent much of my time on the ship typewriter documenting our Mozambique experience. I recently found those notes. I will have to write them up for the history project.

So we arrived back at the State Department in the summer of 1975. In December 1973, just before leaving for Mozambique, I had taken the Foreign Service exam. In those days the exam was always given the first week in December. I learned in Mozambique that I had passed the written exam. While on an R&R trip in 1974 I went to Washington to take the oral exam, for the economic cone. In those days you picked a cone and were tested for that cone. The system has changed so many times.

Q: It goes back and forth.

THAYER: I opted for the economic cone because I had done a lot of economic reporting and thought the work would be useful and interesting. I was told the same day I had passed the oral exam and to keep in touch, then went back to Mozambique. When we got back to the United States a year later, I called the Department and explained I had passed the written and oral exams and was unexpectedly back in Washington. They said an orientation class was starting soon and they would sign me up. I didn't know anything about a roster or where I may have been on it, but I was in the right place at the right time. I joined the November 1975 A-100 class.

Q: Do you recall any of the questions that were asked to you during the oral exam?

THAYER: They were interested in my Newsweek and Brazil and Mozambique experiences. The economic questions seemed complex. I had signed up for the economic cone based on my business reporting but my entire formal economic training was Econ 101 in college.

Q: Samuelson.

THAYER: Exactly, Paul Samuelson, the basic course we all took. I was a journalism, humanities and languages major, with little training in economics. Some time after the oral exam, one of the examiners pulled me aside and said, you know, Ms. Thayer, your answers to some of the economic questions were a bit thin. But you delivered them with such self-confidence that we thought you'd make a good diplomat.

Q: A good bluffer.

THAYER: Yikes. I fretted whether that was what he meant. He later told me my answers were not that bad. The exam seemed mainly to see how quick you are on your feet. I remember that in both the written and oral exams there were a number of questions about contemporary American life and culture, including TV shows and movies that I didn't know much about. I had lived abroad and missed things like the Brady Bunch and Monty Python.

Q: What was your husband doing in the State Department?

THAYER: When we got back unexpectedly that fall he got a job in the Economic Bureau. He preferred living abroad to working in the State Department so our intention was to go overseas as soon as they could find a posting for us. My A-100 class was wonderful. Some of my colleagues were on second or third careers, some were recently out of college. At 27, I felt like one of the older ones. I was married to a diplomat. I had lived in Brazil and Mozambique, worked abroad as a journalist, spoke several languages. My classmates were eager to know what diplomatic life was really like. It was great to be with people like us who were excited to live and work abroad.

Q: Well, where were they from, what were they like? At least your impression of them, in your class.

THAYER: Ours was a large class, with Foreign Service, USIS, and USAID officers. The Foreign Service contingent was about 60. Most were men but there were a number of women, although few married like myself. One was 22 and had just graduated from college in upstate New York. We represented a cross section of people from different states and different educational backgrounds, but with little ethnic or racial diversity. Some like me had gone to state schools, others to Ivy League schools. Some like me had bachelor's degrees, others had graduate or law degrees. Some had had previous careers, as accountants or teachers. A fair number were assigned to the Middle East and many went to Africa. I was one of the few assigned to Latin America, to Argentina. I lost touch with most of my classmates, but we reconnected later near the end of my service. At the time Foreign Service careers tended to be focused on geographical regions. Later

Kissinger came along to shake things up and moved people into primary and secondary specializations.

Q: You graduated in ’75 and whither?

THAYER: My husband was working, but keeping his eyes open for a transfer. I started work in December, off cycle for the Foreign Service, in the Cultural Affairs Bureau. My job was to administer the International Visitors Program (IVP) for Latin America. Embassies nominate future foreign leaders for IVP travel grants to learn about the U.S. and build relationships and good will. One grantee was a new Brazilian congresswoman, Ivone Botelho. Coincidentally we had the same first name. Botelho was one of the few women legislators in Brazil which was still under military rule. Since I spoke Portuguese and wanted to learn more about the program, I proposed I accompany her as the interpreter-escort. I managed to test high enough to get FSI approval to serve as official interpreter and arranged to escort her for two of the four weeks of her trip. We started the trip at Williamsburg, which was a nice way to begin an exploration of America and American history. We continued on to Baton Rouge, Santa Fe, and finally Los Angeles where I departed and another interpreter-escort took over. Typically we would arrive in a town and be met by a host community welcoming group. We had a whirlwind time going to people’s homes, universities, the mayor’s office, rotary club, local businesses, whatever the community organizers arranged to suit the guest’s background and interests. We did several press and media events. It is an impressive program and interpreting day and night is exhausting. I have great respect for interpreters, especially simultaneous interpreters.

Q: How was your lady responding to what she saw during the time you were there? Do you think it was a useful program?

THAYER: I am a huge fan of the program. A few weeks of shared experiences with a potential foreign leader can build understanding and goodwill for America that can last a lifetime. I think it is very short-sighted to reduce these small, low-cost exchange programs and lose out on such benefits.

Q: Yes, I think this is a secret tool.

THAYER: I later had another IVP with an attorney general that proved very beneficial to U.S. interests.

Congresswoman Botelho had never been outside of Brazil. She was very curious, asked lots of questions, and charmed everyone. Americans in these settings are terrific, hospitable, generous, open. She was astounded to learn about American philanthropy, volunteerism, diversity, our free press, civic participation, and what seemed like a relatively classless society. Brazil is a country of great diversity, yet the United States embraces diversity more as a creed, central to our national identity. She was impressed to see and experience America.

Q: How did she respond to sort of the African American situation in the United States? Because Brazil, you know, touts its colorless society but I'm told it really isn't and I was wondering how did you observe her seeing, particularly seeing Louisiana or someplace.

THAYER: When we were at UCLA, this was early 1976, she remarked about the students she saw mingling together, black kids, white kids, Hispanic kids, sprawled on campus grounds, walking arm in arm. It clearly made a big impression on her, to see so many people of different colors and backgrounds hanging out together. Santa Fe was different, more Hispanic.

Q: Well then, you were doing this program; you were there also during the- were you back in time for Watergate, or Watergate and all that happened while you were in Mozambique?

THAYER: Watergate was happening while we were away in Brazil, then Mozambique. Communication was limited in those days, and the political turmoil at home felt unreal and remote. I had interviewed with Ben Bradlee at Newsweek in the fall of 1973, around the time Spiro Agnew resigned and the Saturday Night Massacre. I remember admiring Bradlee and "The Washington Post's" courage and persistence in breaking the plumbers' story with accuracy and urgency. I was proud of being a journalist, seeing the press do the necessary and responsible thing for our democracy.

Q: How long did you stay in Washington before they- you were off again?

THAYER: Randy worked out a tandem assignment for us to go to Argentina in the summer of 1976. Married women were barred from the Foreign Service until 1972, so tandem assignments were still new. He went as an economic officer. I had joined the Foreign Service as an economic officer, but couldn't work for my husband, so I was assigned to be the junior political officer. I arrived in Buenos Aires in July and Randy followed in September. The Embassy was in an old brick bank building downtown, surrounded by traffic, noise, and pollution, walking distance from the Plaza de Mayo and Casa Rosada presidential palace. A new embassy with security setbacks was being built in the residential Palermo neighborhood near the city's central park.

Republican Robert Hill was ambassador when we arrived. Appointed by President Nixon, he arranged to stay on after Jimmy Carter's November 1976 election until his daughter's wedding the next summer. Raul Castro, a lawyer and former governor of Arizona, was named to replace him. It turned out Raul Castro was the law partner of the father of my soon-to-be daughter-in-law Laurie Rogers. Laurie grew up in Tucson and attended the University of Arizona with my stepson, Mark Reed. They married and went on to become psychiatric MDs at Dartmouth College.

I was assigned as the junior political officer in a four-person section under Political Counselor Wayne Smith. Wayne Smith was a tall, affable Texan known for his opposition to U.S. policy towards Cuba. He was a terrific boss, supportive, good-humored, comfortable with delegating. He gave me a lot of encouragement and space to do my job. As Wayne neared the end of his tour, he was hopeful Carter's election would bring an opening toward Cuba. He left Argentina the next year to run the Cuba desk and then headed the newly-opened U. S. interests section in Havana. Now long retired, he still works on Cuba out of the Center for International Policy in Washington. We met up in Havana recently when I was working there on the refugee program.

Robert Steven was the deputy, an experienced, thoughtful mid-level officer who helped show me the ropes after a tough tour in Pinochet's Chile. Tony Freeman, who passed away recently, was the labor attaché. Tony was a funny, astute, well-connected New Jersey native, deeply informed on political and labor issues. On a previous tour in Argentina, he had married a lovely Argentine woman, Eliza. All my colleagues were hard-working, dedicated diplomats, fluent in Spanish. I couldn't have asked for better role models.

As the junior political officer, I had the internal affairs portfolio which included covering political parties and internal developments, students, media, and opinion-makers, as well as human rights. In 1975, Congress, led by Minnesota Congressman Don Fraser, passed legislation creating a human rights bureau and coordinator position in the State Department. The law required regular human rights reporting and an annual human rights report on all countries receiving U.S. aid. Other laws conditioned U.S. votes on arms sales and export and loan credits on countries' human rights performance. As a fellow Minnesotan, Fraser's leadership made me proud and we kept in touch for a number of years. Once Jimmy Carter became president in January 1977, he elevated human rights as a centerpiece of U.S. foreign policy. Civil rights activist Patricia Derian was named Coordinator, then Assistant Secretary for Human Rights. She immediately focused on Argentina and the southern cone.

Q: I was wondering, at this point could you describe the situation, political, particularly political but also economic situation in Argentina when you got there in '76.

THAYER: Political and economic conditions in Argentina, like in Chile and much of the region, were deteriorating rapidly since the early 1970s. I first saw it on a trip around South America some years before, in 1973 when we were leaving Brazil. That summer, Randy, my sister Ellen, and I traveled from Rio through Uruguay, Argentina, Chile, Peru, and Ecuador. After visiting Randy's family in Quito, he left for the U.S. and Ellen and I continued overland through Colombia, Panama, Central America, and Mexico. It was an eye-opening trip. Every country was in turmoil, starting with Uruguay. Ellen and I arrived there from Rio by bus amid street violence and martial law.

Q: Yes. I mean, this was, I mean, real problems there when they took Amoras?

THAYER: The Uruguayan government was fighting leftist opposition groups which erupted in street fighting, battles with university students, heavy police and military repression, and ultimately martial law. The university was shut down. Several days later we arrived by bus in Argentina on the day President Juan Perón, who had been ousted in a military coup in 1955, returned from exile in Spain with his new wife Isabel. Randy flew in that same day. Isabel had been a dancer. Peron's beloved first wife Eva Peron had died of cancer in 1952 in Argentina. When Peron arrived at Ezeiza airport in Buenos Aires that June day, clashes between his supporters and the opposition turned into a bloodbath. Information was blacked out, to this day no one knows how many people were killed. Eventually Peron was reinstalled in the Casa Rosada as president of Argentina.

We left a tense Buenos Aires by bus to Bariloche in southern Argentina, and crossed the frozen mountain lakes by sled and trucks in snow chains to Puerto Montt in Chile. Ellen and I had no trouble entering Chile, which was then under Socialist President Salvador Allende, on our tourist passports. Randy, however, was traveling on his American diplomatic passport and was scrutinized for hours before being allowed to enter. We arrived at the home of some American embassy friends in Santiago in time for the June "tanque-aso", the first open military uprising against Allende. That Saturday, June 24, we were driving up the mountains to go skiing in Portillo. Halfway up, we saw U.S. Ambassador Nathaniel Davis' car racing back down the hill. When we arrived at the ski resort we learned the military had rolled out the tanks in a coup attempt. It was quashed. Later that September, General Pinochet led a successful coup resulting in the death of President Allende. On that June visit in Santiago we saw angry crowds, marches, housewives banging pots and pans to protest Allende's economic policies. These led to a collapse of the currency, spiraling inflation, empty store shelves, and resort to black market bargaining and surreptitious exchanges of food and goods in back allies. Our friend knew which unmarked vans and which bells or whistles in her neighborhood meant black market meat, food, or household goods were available that day. She had five kids at home and like others, rushed to buy in the street whatever black market supplies were available.

After Chile, we continued to Peru where political protests had brought martial law and military units into the streets. Finally we arrived in Ecuador which was convulsed with student and indigenous worker protests. So this little jaunt through South America was a hands on course in political turmoil. Randy flew back to Washington for work and Ellen and I took a bus to Colombia. We hitchhiked from Bogota to Cartagena, where we met some folks and went sailing through the Caribbean on a catamaran. Colombia was the one relatively peaceful country we saw in South America. I remember later telling some Colombian officials during the worst of the 1990s civil war about our 1973 hitch-hiking trip through Colombia, and how I was looking forward to the day when I could do that again. We continued our 1973 trip without incident through Central America and into Mexico. Things soon turned bad in Colombia and Central America too.

Back to Argentina. Perón had returned with Isabel in the summer of 1973. He died in July 1974 and Isabel, who had been named vice president, succeeded him. She had a rocky relationship with everybody, including the military and deeply fractured Peronist party. Political repression escalated, including torture, kidnappings and censorship. Leftists attacked government and military buildings, kidnapped wealthy persons for ransom (including our landlord), and murdered government officials. The military and police in turn targeted guerillas and then increasingly anyone suspected of leftist or opposition leanings, in the name of fighting communism. It became known as the dirty war. After considerable upheaval, Isabel was overthrown in March of 1976 and replaced by a military junta: Army Lt. General Jorge Videla, Navy Admiral Emilio Massera, and Air Force Brig. General Orlando Agosti. I arrived three months later.

Q: Well, when you got there what was our- how would you describe the ambassador and the embassy, what you were picking up, you know, as a junior officer? What was our attitude towards this military government in Argentina?

THAYER: Ambassador Robert Hill was a Dartmouth grad and five-time Republican ambassador from Littleton, New Hampshire. He stayed on as ambassador under President Carter until mid-1977 and died a year later. The dirty war in Argentina was in full swing when we arrived. Falcons with no license plates cruised through Buenos Aires, openly snatching people off the street. Thousands of mainly young people, students, journalists, priests, and activists were imprisoned, tortured, and "disappeared". Among the country's clandestine detention centers was the notorious Navy Mechanics School, an imposing building on the major thoroughfare Avenida del Libertador whose basement was known to be used for detention and torture. Bodies would be found dumped in vacant lots, sometimes with hands bound behind their backs, signs of torture, bullet holes in the back of the head, partially burned, or blown up. Once a field of bodies was dynamited. Bodies or live victims were dumped out at sea from airplanes or helicopters and occasionally bodies or body parts washed up on shore. Estimates of disappeared persons run as high as 30,000 or more, though the Argentine government claims around 9000 disappeared.

The local press was heavily censored and mostly silent. Two publications which wrote about the atrocities and disappearances were La Opinion and the English-language Buenos Aires Herald. British-born Herald publisher Bob Cox was arrested and forced into exile. Soviet-born La Opinion publisher Jacobo Timerman was detained in April 1977, tortured, and eventually acquitted then long confined to house arrest. The U.S. worked tirelessly on his case, in close contact with his family, both in Buenos Aires and Washington. President Carter intervened on his behalf. Artist and pacifist Adolfo Perez Esquivel, who founded the non-governmental Service, Peace and Justice Foundation in 1974, was snatched in April of 1977, tortured, and held without trial for l3 months. When his daughter called to report his disappearance, I immediately alerted the ambassador and we moved urgently to clarify his whereabouts and pressure for his release. Fortunately he surfaced quickly but was jailed and mistreated for many months. Perez Esquivel won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1980. Lawyer Emilio Mignone's daughter Monica disappeared in 1976, after which he dedicated himself to human rights. He worked closely with the embassy on her and other disappearance cases, founding an organization to advocate for the disappeared.

As the embassy human rights officer, I was responsible for much of the reporting, correspondence, and visitors dealing with human rights abuses. Bob Steven and I coordinated the November visit of Massachusetts Congressman and Jesuit priest Robert Drinan and Amnesty International to Argentina where they presented the government with a list of missing persons. The Political Section's local assistant Blanca Vollenweider, an Argentine national of Swiss origin, helped me document my meetings with relatives of disappeared persons. I met with the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, mothers of disappeared persons who marched silently around the square each week, dressed in white and carrying posters of their missing children and relatives. I had regular meetings with political counterparts of other embassies, UNHCR representative Robert Muller, the International Committee of the Red Cross, Papal Nuncio Pio Laghi and his deputy Monsignor Kevin Mullen to share information and coordinate lists and demarches to the government.

In October 1976, in response to diplomatic pressure, the government created the Foreign Office Working Group (FOWG) to address our queries concerning human rights and disappearances. We arranged to submit names of missing persons and persons held without charge to the government for it to verify and report back. Many weeks I walked over to the Casa Rosada to drop off lists of missing persons reported to us. Government responses were tardy and evasive, mostly implying individuals had chosen to run away or drop out of sight. The workload grew and everyone in the Political Section worked on human rights. Wayne provided updates on developments and individual cases at country team meetings. Tony followed cases involving labor activists, who were severely targeted. The ambassador and charge' delivered demarches on human rights to top government officials. We sent a steady stream of spot reports, analyses, media reports, and memoranda of conversations to Washington. I began writing regular human rights round-up reports to keep Washington updated on developments and individual cases.

Soon after Jimmy Carter was inaugurated president, he appointed Patt Derian as the new Human Rights Coordinator. Within a month she came to Argentina to see for herself.

Q: Patt Derian, P-A-T-T.

THAYER: Right. Married to Hodding Carter.

Q: Who was the spokesman for the State Department. They weren't married at the time. They were good friends.

THAYER: Patt chose to make her first trip even before confirmation as Human Rights Coordinator to Argentina in March 1977. We took her to meet with officials, journalists, families of disappeared persons, and others. She had tough talks with members of the junta, interrogating Navy Admiral Massera about disappearances and disposal of bodies and reports that the Naval Mechanical School basement was used for torture. Patt had a way of looking down her nose in a long, withering stare when questioning others. She listened intently to people, fixating on their faces and words, alert to any discrepancy or weak excuses. She was fearless, at times condescending, in making her views known. U.S. law required the Department to report on and hold governments accountable for human rights abuses. She was the second to hold the Human Rights Coordinator job and the first as Assistant Secretary and she had to develop and implement policies others found uncomfortable. The policy was controversial and she got a lot of pushback. Certain countries in other parts of the world were essentially off limits, Iran, for example.

Q: I was in South Korea at the time, which also was, you know, we had a problem with North Korea there and so we weren't messing around.

THAYER: Who was the famous South Korean that everybody knows so well?

Q: Park Chung Hee. No, no.

THAYER: That's not the name I remember. There was a South Korean who for years was the outspoken face for human rights there. Kim Dae-Jung.

Q: Yes, and he was almost killed.

THAYER: He became president and received a Nobel Peace Prize.

THAYER: The summer of 1977, Bill Hallman replaced Wayne Smith as political counselor and Bob Steven was replaced by Tex Harris. Raul Castro arrived as the new ambassador that fall. Tex was another tall, imposing Texan with a giant personality. Besides human rights, we were concerned about Argentina's nuclear ambitions and pressing it to ratify the Treaty of Tlatelolco, establishing a Latin American nuclear weapons free zone. We also had significant economic and trade interests with Argentina and a heavy consular workload. Henry Kissinger under Nixon and then Ford had his own southern cone realpolitik and was, according to reports, essentially quietly condoning repression as a necessary evil in the fight against communism. This incensed Ambassador Hill. Numerous foreign nationals had been caught up in the violence, kidnapped or killed, including several Americans, a Swedish woman, French and German citizens, foreign priests, and dozens of Uruguayan and Chilean refugees. Several prominent Uruguayan opposition leaders who had sought refuge in Argentina were killed, reportedly by Argentine agents, and political refugees were forcibly returned to the countries they had fled. These events demonstrated complicity among security operatives in the region, later described as Operation Condor.

Q: Weren't some nuns killed too?

THAYER: Yes. Also priests, lay workers, church-affiliated youth. The Diocese on several occasions published names of disappeared persons and lodged protests but seemed ambivalent about how far to go. General Videla was seen by some as a moderate who opposed the blatant killings but who was weak and unable to constrain more brutal officers. The junta insisted Argentina was at war, an internal war. Large parts of the country, whole provinces, were under military control and off limits to travel. We embassy officers were bound by those restrictions. One place we were allowed to go was Mendoza, center of Argentina's wine growing region. On a rare trip outside of Buenos Aires, we went to a wine festival in Mendoza as part of Randy's economic/commercial job. It was very hot and we were seated with other foreign diplomats on bleachers under the blazing sun for hours. At one point I fainted, actually toppled over as it turned out into the arms of the Russian ambassador. He propped me back up and I recall his wife saying kindly that I could be pregnant. Turns out she was right. Our son Scott was born that August.

Q: Well did you, you know, for much of the Foreign Service and I certainly know this in Korea, the whole human rights thing was looked upon a bit askance and the Europeans thought we were out of our minds, we're meddling in other people's business and it was the duty of diplomats to observe and report and not to get mixed up and we were in a- particularly under the pressure from Patt Derian and from Jimmy Carter and actually from our congress, which had talked about making human rights, of course- Did you find, was there resistance within our embassy to what we were doing? How did that manifest itself?

THAYER: When Tex Harris came in late summer of 1977 to replace Bob Steven, he and I essentially switched jobs. I had my son Scott on San Martin Day, August 17, 1977. Maternity and family leave were unknown at that time, so I was back at work within a month. Tex had a law degree and was an exuberant, take charge personality. He had a close relationship with Patt Derian, and was keenly interested in human rights. So he took the internal affairs portfolio and external affairs passed to me. Human rights remained all-consuming. Tex had the lead but Tony and I continued to work and report on cases and issues. As you experienced in South Korea, parts of the world were clearly not subject to the same level of scrutiny on human rights as others, a double standard we recognized and felt some discomfort with. But Congress and President Carter had spoken and we did our best to carry it out. When Carter's pick Raul Castro replaced Hill as ambassador that fall, he had different ideas about human rights reporting and enforcement and clashed with Tex.

On the external affairs side, which I now headed, a new crisis erupted. Argentina threatened war with Chile over control of the Beagle Channel, specifically three tiny islands in the channel on Chile and Argentina's far southern border. In early 1978 an international arbitration awarded the three disputed islands to Chile. Argentina promptly rejected the ruling. At the time there was keen interest in the law of the seas. Multilateral treaty negotiations had been going on for years, involving territorial claims, rights of passage, sea resources within a proposed 200 mile economic zone, and claims on Antarctica. Technological advances had enabled drilling in the North Sea, exploding interest and profits in deep sea oil exploration. Potential value of microscopic sea life and krill as a food source, fertilizer, and fuel was sparking a lot of interest. Argentina's claim on the Malvinas Islands—Falkland Islands to the British—was seen in that context, as well as its claim to the islands in the Beagle Channel. Possession of these islands would bolster Argentina's claim to a larger slice of the sea and its riches, and by extension, Antarctica.

At the time Argentina's military government was increasingly beleaguered, widely criticized for human rights abuses and desperate to show economic improvements. Many speculated that Argentina's bellicose reaction to the Beagle Channel decision was intended as a diversion.

Q: Always a nationalist issue.

THAYER: Something to rally folks around the flag. There was a lot of saber rattling, charges of Chilean incursions and firefights on the border, exchanges of threats and warnings from both sides. I reported on the issue, which grew increasingly contentious. I traveled to Chile to consult with U.S. embassy counterparts there. Our political counselor in Santiago was Bob Service. Bob was the son of John Service, the China hand who was hounded out of the Foreign Service during the McCarthy era, a shameful story. I don't know if you've interviewed Bob Service.

Q: I have.

THAYER: I admired Bob a lot. I remember going with him to a dingy hole-in-the-wall bar where Pinochet critics would meet in a secluded back room, in secret since Pinochet was carrying out his own crackdown on students, journalists, and the opposition. Chilean repression didn't reach the level of deaths and disappearances that occurred in Argentina but it was brutal and lasted a long time. Many Chileans fled the country. Many blamed the United States for Allende's overthrow. Pinochet was furious about Argentina's reneging on the Beagle Channel decision and subsequent attacks. As tensions escalated, I had a hand in classic diplomacy, working with officials to get Argentina and Chile to step back from war over the Beagle Channel.

Q: But did we have, I mean, obviously we had great concerns worldwide on the law of the sea, maybe to make sure that our navy had free passage through various straits and things like this. Did we have a position that we were pushing that ran counter to the Argentineans or the Chileans?

THAYER: We mainly did not want the two countries to go to war. And we wanted to maintain momentum on the law of the seas negotiations. I recall Eliot Richardson working on that treaty for years, initially with strong U.S. support although later we distanced ourselves and, as I recall, ultimately signed but never ratified it.

Q: It's the usual thing where essentially we all agree, we have it on disarmament and other things; it never gets ratified but we abide by it.

THAYER: Argentina's goal was to gain territorial control, economic benefits and political prestige, and to shore up its long-standing claim to the Malvinas. Our economic section followed the economic aspects. My focus was on the conflict. After weeks of threats, Argentina mobilized on the Chilean border and prepared to occupy the islands. Chile sent in troops as well. Chances for miscalculation and fatalities ran high. By that time we were working closely with the Vatican and various allies in both countries to avert a clash and find a way out. Both countries are predominantly Catholic, and the Vatican has special influence. The papal nuncio in Argentina, Pio Laghi, was a charming skilled diplomat who later became the first Vatican ambassador to the U.S. when we established diplomatic relations in 1984. The nuncio in Chile was Angelo Sodano, a sturdy no-nonsense Italian who later became the Vatican's Secretary of State. We met up again twenty years later during my time as deputy chief of mission to the Holy See. Argentina and Chile were persuaded to submit the issue to the Vatican for mediation, and tensions subsided. Cardinal Sodano later told me in the Vatican that countries often appeal to the Pope to mediate disputes but the Church rarely agrees; this was one case where it did. Not long after Argentina's defeat in the Falklands War, the Vatican completed its mediation and a treaty was signed in 1984 with Argentina conceding the islands to Chile but retaining navigation and economic rights.

Q: I'd like to go back to the time you were dealing with human rights. You know, I've interviewed Tex and he was talking about at a certain point he was ending up, he's a very large man, and standing out on the, was it the Plaza Revolution?

THAYER: The Plaza de Mayo?

Q: Yes, and people would come up and hand him notes and petitions and all that. Did you get involved in any of that?

THAYER: Human rights was an all-consuming issue at the embassy well before Tex came in the summer of 1977. Laws requiring human rights reporting and conditioning votes on human rights grounds were passed in 1975. I was assigned the human rights portfolio when I arrived in Buenos Aires in 1976 and contributed to that year's first human rights country report. U.S. foreign military sales financing for Argentina was already slated to be cut on human rights grounds and Argentina had responded by rejecting FMS credits. We stepped up compiling information from relatives of disappeared persons, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, and other human right activists, La Opinion, the Buenos Aires Herald, labor activists. I went regularly to the Casa Rosada to deliver lists of names of missing persons for government follow up, although responses were unsatisfactory and vague. I worked with the nuncio's office, especially Deputy Nuncio Monsignor Kevin Mullen, and with other concerned embassies, representatives of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, and the International Committee of the Red Cross to develop and share information on disappearance cases, craft demarches, and explain U.S. policy. UNHCR monitored the situation of thousands of political exiles and refugees, mostly from neighboring Uruguay, Paraguay, and Chile, and worked hard to resettle abroad those in danger in Argentina. The U.S. took 200 as I recall. The government revived a program "Right of Option", allowing Argentines convicted of political crimes to opt for exile abroad over jail time in some cases. Our consular section administered that program, essentially granting asylum. We took some cases, but not many as I recall. Carter's taking office in early 1977 heightened attention on human rights. Patt Derian visited Argentina in March 1977 and made a forceful case for human rights. When Tex arrived later in 1977, he built on those contacts and developed close ties with the Mothers group and others. I recall going with him, he a giant Texan and me a 5'2" new mom, to follow up on human rights leads. Once we met with some mid-level navy informants who confided about torture in the Navy Mechanics School. Tex was reporting heavy stuff, and became well known for his persistence and energy. Labor Attache Tony Freeman also had extensive sources through his labor contacts and did a lot of reporting. So did Legal Attache Robert Scherrer. All of us were involved.

By this time the embassy had moved out of the downtown office building and into a large new building surrounded by a high iron fence and grassy set back in Palermo outside of downtown. People lined up outside the embassy; one long line of persons seeking visas and another to report disappearances and human rights violations. It was heart-breaking. And frustrating to feel there was little we could do beyond document their stories and press the government for answers. Some questioned what the U.S. was doing, taking a high profile and prioritizing human rights over other issues. The new U.S. ambassador Raul Castro apparently felt that way. Tex's conflict with the ambassador grew, as I'm sure he described. He took the brunt of it as he was directly involved and had direct access to human rights officials in the Department.

Q: Well, did you feel under any danger that all of a sudden there would be either an assassination or an attack or anything from right wing forces, quasi government or anything like that? Did you feel any concern of that?

THAYER: I don't recall feeling any risk. A USIS officer had been killed in Argentina some years before. There were times in Mozambique and El Salvador when I was very aware of being in a dangerous situation. But not in Argentina. Although I should say, the apartment we rented belonged Italian industrialist and FIAT head Oberdan Sallustro who was kidnapped for ransom and killed by the ERP (People's Revolutionary Army) in 1972. We rented it for a pittance since no one else would take it; Argentineans being superstitious about such things. Our neighbor in the apartment below was a previous military junta president Gen. Alejandro Lanusse and the Israeli ambassador lived on the tenth floor. Both had security details. I expect these days the security conscious State Department would not have approved such a lease.

Q: You know, it doesn't have to be, you know, you have, will somebody rid me of this troublesome priest type of occasion or something. I mean, these are guys with money, I mean with guns.

THAYER: During our time there, there were bombings, raids, and firefights where civilian bystanders were killed. A military movie theater was bombed, killing families and children. As we pressed the Argentine government on abuses, it was quick to point to horrible things going on in the rest of the world, like the Cambodian genocide and slaughter in Africa. U.S. law required arms sales and votes on exports and international loans to be conditioned on human rights performance, and Argentina thought it got the brunt of it. The government insisted they were saving their country and us from a communist takeover, and we should have been appreciative.

Q: Well, was your husband, he was working in the economic section, which is, you know, obviously a little bit more less freewheeling. This was a freewheeling operation at this point, and was he saying hey, be a little bit careful, maybe you're overdoing this? I would think he'd be getting this from his colleagues because you were sort of upsetting the apple cart there. Diplomatic relations, you know.

THAYER: Were there people within the embassy who didn't like how things were playing out? No doubt. Ambassador Castro had different ideas about human rights policy and clashed with Tex over implementation. As time went on, I was working more on external affairs and other issues, so I was less caught up in tensions over human rights policy and its implementation. Patt Derian visited at least once more. Financing for military equipment and military training grants had largely ended, due in part to congressional amendments. Votes for EXIM financing and other loans competed with other U.S. interests. Deputy Secretary of State Warren Christopher chaired the Christopher Committee which reviewed controversial cases and made final decisions. Some major commercial loans were postponed or blocked, further straining relations. My experiences in the embassy were positive. Bill Hallman was a thoughtful, compassionate person. He went on to be political counselor in El Salvador during that painful war. I think he retired early and went to work for a Catholic charity.

Q: Yes, well this often happens. You know, you're a junior officer, because I think Tex, in the interview, when I interviewed him, mentioned that, you know, he was- Of course Tex is a little bit literally bigger than life and also his actions. He's kind of a flamboyant character.

THAYER: I wasn't privy to the dynamics between Tex and the front office. He had a direct line into the Department. But Tex did catch it. He weathered that storm and became a hero to many in Argentina for his strong position. He was featured in a television documentary and his career rebounded. Tex went on to a distinguished career with AFSA and in South Africa. He received major honors for his work, including from the State Department and from Argentina.

Q: What about Patt Derian? You were there when she came in? How did she strike you?

THAYER: I was her control officer when she first came to Argentina in March 1977. She was unflappable. She could flash a withering sideways look that said she didn't believe a word you were saying. Argentine officials would go on about how people disappeared because they'd run away from some lovers' spat or family quarrel, which was ridiculous, or they'd say they had to save the country from communism. Patt would listen intently, and then roll her eyes. I suspect there were gender issues as well. She was dealing with the military, and they didn't like being talked down to by a woman. I think her position was somewhat undercut by where she had influence. You'd hear that Patt Derian wanted to go somewhere or do something and the Department said "hands off". So there was a sense she was given free rein in the southern cone, but kept largely out of places where bigger issues were at stake.

Q: Well she was, I mean, it's very interesting. You know, she was offered two jobs; one was be the chief of protocol; can you imagine that? Or this human rights, which included some other things. I mean, she took this- I mean, it wasn't as though Jimmy Carter said oh, you're going to be my human rights person. I mean she was offered a State Department job and she grabbed the human rights one.

THAYER: Yes, I heard that.

Q: But she was breaking a lot of crockery in the corridors of the State Department because she got herself onto clearances; you know this is part of State Department thing, and so when the ARA at that time, it's now WHA, was sending up some report maybe to congress or something, she said well, we have to get- I have to get clearance. And just by doing this she was making policy because she wouldn't clear something. I mean, it was a very interesting equation there, of how somebody can operate.

THAYER: As you say, she was not the least bit shy. It seemed that she was restricted to certain places where she was permitted to influence policy. Though I'm sure it wasn't for her lack of trying. I think Argentines thought that somebody in the State Department had decided to let her have Argentina as the place to confront the government and cut off sales and loans because the Department had to be seen as complying with the law. Argentina was the one to take the hit; it wasn't important enough politically to get a pass.

Q: Well you know, I was in South Korea and of course, I mean, we were concerned with the fact that you have an extremely strong North Korean army poised within 35 miles of our embassy, and you had a dictator in South Korea who, as dictators go, was not too awful. I mean, there were problems but he had restored the South Korean economy and things were happening but he also had a very strong army and this was very important to us and we didn't want to seem that upset.

THAYER: No doubt there were many considerations. Argentina felt it was doing God's work by stamping out leftists. They believed previous U. S. administrations supported that, and suddenly we were being critical.

Q: This is tape three, side one with Yvonne Thayer.

Yes, you were saying, I mean, Argentina felt they were sort of doing God's work.

THAYER: Combating communist influence in the region.

Q: And things were, I mean you know, it took ______ in Uruguay, there had been some efforts in Brazil. I mean, our ambassador Burke Elbrick had been kidnapped, this was some years earlier, but it wasn't a benign time and Allende had been getting increasingly sort of leftist oriented and all so I mean, it was-

THAYER: It was a rough time. The dirty war was at its worst from '76 to '78, then less so into the early 80s. In Chile, Allende had been overthrown and Pinochet ruled Chile with an iron fist. Chileans were seen as more conservative, disciplined, deferential to power, while Argentina was feeding upon itself. The Montoneros and the ERP (People's Revolutionary Army) armed revolutionaries used bombings and kidnappings and murder to provoke the government. There were no clean hands. I guess Pinochet felt that he had saved Chile from communism and certainly the Argentineans thought they had, so why were they being punished. Later we watched the communist threat roil Central America. During the Reagan years, defeating leftists and communism was the number one national security issue. After the Soviet Union fell, it faded away. Today we think of other threats. But defeating communism was the defining issue of those times.

Q: An issue that- during the mid '70s when you were there, you came into the Foreign Service at this time, were you feeling at all a male/female, a gender issue, as you would call it, within the Foreign Service?

THAYER: People often ask me what it was like being a female diplomat in Latin America. I can say this with absolute clarity, that never in my career in Latin America did I feel any question or demeaning of my professionalism as a woman. Latin America has had female presidents and senior officials, more than the U.S. in many cases. My experience was I was a professional diplomat and was seen and treated like one. I however was aware of being female in the U.S. Foreign Service. Married women were barred from being officers until 1972 so the number of women officers was still relatively small when I joined. It wasn't always easy, especially as a female officer with children. I would never countenance harassment nor did I experience it but there are ways to pressure or diminish women. I had one boss in the Department who regularly insisted we come early or stay for meetings beyond closing time and be openly critical if we had family commitments even well after hours. I probably imposed unnecessary pressure on myself too. For example, when I discovered I was pregnant I was anxious not to have it show or become known. I did not want to be seen as needing special attention or favors. Political officers were expected to work late, to get out, see people, write up reports on our discussions and meetings. There were no computers or email then, so everything was typed, cleared, retyped. We all worked hard and I was concerned that I not be seen as unable to do my part. This was likely self-inflicted, as my male colleagues were unfailingly supportive. I remember I wanted to take a Lamaze breathing class for the birth of my first child. I found a class in the early evening, but it was across town and I would have to leave by closing time.

Q: This Lamaze breathing thing came after me, you know, I just sort of sent my wife away three times and she came back with a child. But now you have to participate.

THAYER: Well, we were in that transition stage because my husband did not participate either. I signed up for the last class in the evening. I always got there late and alone, it was exasperating and exhausting. Then my friend Tex, and I tell you, it's one of the many reasons why I love Tex that his wife Jeanie got pregnant the next year and wouldn't you know, Tex would leave the office in the middle of the workday to go with his wife to Lamaze class. He would come back after the class and finish work. I wished that I'd had his self-confidence. My male friend didn't miss his Lamaze classes and I could barely make it to mine. Things are better now.

I really liked my colleagues. We were a good team. I was still working on human rights, but increasingly busy with the conflict over the Beagle Channel.

Q: Were we concerned that something might trigger a war? What was, you know, from our attachés, what were you getting from our people; what would happen if they did it? It sounds like an improbable place to have a war.

THAYER: Both countries' military forces mobilized on the border. Argentina threatened to invade the Beagle Channel islands.

Q: Up in the mountains and cold.

THAYER: It would have been a mess. I've worked on a number of border disputes, like the Peru-Ecuador fight over the Amazon, which saw periodic mobilizations and skirmishes. Chile and Bolivia long clashed over Bolivia's desire for access to the sea. Somehow the Latins, for all of their machismo, don't have much appetite for war. They know better. I think Chile and Argentina were relieved to have someone help work out a solution.

Q: Did the Malvinas/Falklands. you know, it's the one that happened. Did that, was that just, at the time you were doing this, was that just rhetoric or?

THAYER: As part of my external affairs portfolio, I proposed to visit and report on the Malvinas/Falklands situation, which was evolving in a relatively positive way at the time. Though Argentina later went to war over the Malvinas in 1982, after I left.

Q: Haig was our secretary of state so it was probably '81.

THAYER: Before I left Argentina in 1979, I proposed to visit the Malvinas and report on developments there. There had been a warming of relations between the UK and Argentina, maybe because Argentina was having enough trouble with its own internal problems and Chile and wanted to reduce tensions with the UK. Argentina and the U.K. had agreed on a number of confidence-building measures, like weekly and then bi-weekly flights from Comodoro Rivadavia in Argentina's Patagonia Province to Stanley, the capital of the Falklands, to bring fresh fruits and vegetables and facilitate travel to the mainland. The British provisioned the islands by bringing in food and supplies by cargo ships a few times a year, but that meant there was little fresh food and vegetables during much of the year. The Falklands are swampy and mossy, largely peat, so not much grows there. They did have sheep. I think around 200,000 sheep. And penguins, stunning king and gentoo penguins. So the population when I went to the Falklands was 200,000 sheep, a million penguins, and about 1,900 persons. The British always insisted they would do what the people there wanted and the population, mostly British, wanted to remain British.

At this particular time, Argentina was using the carrot approach, facilitating direct travel and trade with the islanders, for example. Some of the Falklands residents sent their kids to school in Argentina, English language schools, since schooling in the Falklands ended at high school. It was much cheaper and more convenient than sending kids back to England for schooling. There was also trade and some intermarriage, so enabling direct flights to Argentina was an attempt to woo the population to view Argentina more favorably.

So I flew off to Stanley from Comodoro Rivadavia. I spoke to a good number of people about life on the islands and their views of the situation, Argentina's easing of communications and transport restrictions, residents' ties to Britain. At the time the local British population was declining rapidly. Young people were going off to school and not coming back. Older people who had lived there forever were questioning whether the population would become too small to be viable and the islands would revert back to Argentina by default. Among the people I met for a pint was a British former marine named John. He had married an islander and stayed behind. John described the bleak life on the islands and its history of privation, shipwrecks, and family intrigue. He had drawn a huge pen and ink map of the islands surrounded by remarkably-detailed famous ships that had wrecked on the islands over the years. He gave me a copy and thanked me for telling the Falklanders' story. I wrote the last air gram of my career describing all this. Someone later said it was likely the last air gram ever sent to the State Department, since by this time Department communications systems had been upgraded, rendering air grams obsolete.

My long air gram described local conditions and attitudes and the gradual rapprochement underway. Alas, I did not predict a war would break out, which happened, a few years later. By that time I was in Rome. Someone who worked on Argentina at the time said that an FSO had traveled to the Falklands and written a long report about it. So when Congress and the Department were scrambling to deal with the "whoever-heard-of-the Falklands" War, someone unearthed my air gram and the Department could show it had not neglected the issue entirely. I think the report was entered into some record, maybe the Congressional Record, and there was talk about whether I should come back to testify. I was probably the last officer to have visited the Falklands, maybe the first too. But I wasn't called back. And I hadn't predicted the war anyway.

Q: How about at that time, your other country of love or something, Brazil; was there anything going on there? A little later you got into this stupid atomic thing but- nuclear thing but was anything-

THAYER: Right, the rivalry between Brazil and Argentina.

Q: Was anything going on at that time?

THAYER: In the late '70s Brazil was ambitious and growing. It was focused on building the immense Yacyreta dam with Paraguay and Argentina, part of which was impacted by our human rights policy. It also built the Itaipu dam with Paraguay, the world's largest generator of hydroelectric power. Both Brazil and Argentina had nuclear ambitions but Argentina was broke. They sparred over financing and ecological impact issues. Our goal was to get them to ratify the Treaty of Tlatelolco, and its protocols, creating a Latin America nuclear-free zone. They finally did in 1994, 26 years after signing the treaty.

Q: Well anyway, the fact that nothing really sticks out in your mind means that it was probably relatively quiet.

THAYER: Argentina was in a rough place, politically and economically when I was there. There was a time when Argentina was wealthier than South Korea. After the world wars, its meat and agricultural exports soared. But Argentina never quite fulfilled what everybody thought would be a great future. Political chaos and cronyism took a heavy toll. Brazil, a giant with huge potential, also went through boom and busts, and fitful relations with the U.S.

Q: I was interviewing somebody who was saying they were there in Brazil not too long ago and nobody came from the United States, you know, there were no top level visits. I mean, when the president, when Lula was inaugurated they sent as a government representative our special trade representative. You know, I mean, this is very insulting.

THAYER: Latin America seems to have fallen off the map these days, with U.S. attention focused on the Middle East, and somewhat on Asia. But then so has a lot of the world, I'm afraid.

Q: Well anyway, this is probably a good place to stop. And so we're talking about 1979, you had a son, daughter?

THAYER: My son Scott was born in Buenos Aires in August 1977.

Q: In 1977.

THAYER: Our tour was wrapping up in 1979. I took my trip to the Malvinas/Falklands and we left that summer. Those were the good old days when you could take a ship. We--Randy, one-year-old Scott, and stepsons Mark and Sean--left Buenos Aires by ship and went around the Cape of Good Hope. I was sea sick and wouldn't take medication because I was expecting a second child. My husband had family in Ecuador so we ended the trip in Guayaquil. We spent some time with family in Quito before returning to Washington and onward assignments to Rome.

Q: So we'll pick this- and you went to Rome, too, obviously, with the job.

THAYER: We got a tandem assignment to Rome. Randy was assigned to the NATO War College and then the economic section and I to the commercial office in the embassy. I had entered the Foreign Service in the economic cone, but my first job overseas was in the political section and Randy was an economic officer so I couldn't work for him. At about this time the Commerce Department created the Foreign Commercial Service (FCS), splitting the commercial function away from the State Department. I spent the late fall in Italian language training at FSI and later at the Commerce Department for training as assistant commercial attaché.

Q: Great. So we'll pick it up then.

Q: Today is the 21st of August, 2008. This is with Yvonne Thayer and we are in, what, the fall of '79 or so? Any you've come back to Washington and they're trying to turn you into a commercial officer or what are they doing?

THAYER: I was in the economic cone and needed to take an economic job. My husband was assigned to be the economic officer in Rome but first to the NATO War College south of Rome in January 1980 for six months. My job in the commercial section was opening up in the summer of 1980 so I spent six months on leave as a dependent spouse. In the meantime, I had our second son, Kevin on December 24, 1979 in Arlington Virginia, Two weeks later I started commercial attache training in Washington. That was a busy time. When I was in Italian language training that fall I was the only student in the class. I had six to eight concentrated hours a day of Italian. I used to pace or sit on the floor because it hurt to sit in a chair. The Italian teacher urged me to take the exam early. I think FSI passed me so quickly because it was afraid I'd have this baby during class. Kevin was born on Christmas Eve, a week after I took the exam. Right after the holidays, I started the commercial attache orientation program at the Commerce Department. I carried my two-week-old son in a straw shopping basket from Argentina. It worked fine for the first few weeks and then less so.

Q: Just to give a feel for the times, how did you feel and what were you getting from your colleagues about- this is when the commercial service was being taken over by the Department of Commerce, and was this considered a good thing, a career opportunity; what was the thought?

THAYER: The State Department was dismayed by this development. State felt it was being chipped away and that the implication was it was failing to represent U.S. business interests abroad as effectively as it should. In any event, the Commerce Department was keen to create its own corps of commercial officers instead of relying on the economic/commercial officers in the State Department. My new boss was Raymond De Paulo, a long time Commerce Department official of Italian descent. De Paulo was a West Virginia native, eager to differentiate himself from the State Department. The commercial attache under him had transferred from State to Commerce when FCS was created.

Q: Who was that?

THAYER: Sam Sterritt, a tall, spare, amiable fellow. I was assigned as the assistant commercial attaché. Rome was wonderful. We arrived in January, 1980 and lived for six months in EUR, a futuristic suburb south of Rome built by Mussolini where the NATO War College was located. Randy went to classes and I basically went into mom mode. I had a two year old and a two week old. I remember that time very fondly, being free to be with my kids, study Italian, take walks, and read the local papers over cappuccinos in the local café. It was a pleasant time.

Soon after we arrived, my predecessor in the commercial job I was assigned to, coincidentally a friend from my Foreign Service class, asked for a favor. She came to Rome with a dependent spouse who had had trouble finding a job and settling in. After a year or so he had gotten a job in the American School that he liked and he didn't want to leave. She wanted to extend her position as assistant commercial attaché for a year and I, having arrived with two little kids, was fine holding off for a year. So we agreed that I would request a year postponement and she would request an extension. We thought it made sense for both of our families. The State Department told us it was impossible, our careers would never survive. Nonetheless, we went ahead and made the request, putting our families' well-being first. Nowadays I think the Department is more amenable and flexible regarding family situations. She became an ambassador, to Cape Verde, and my career included being a DCM, so we didn't do so badly after all.

Q: You know, but it does go to show, I mean, for somebody looking at this, don't believe anything personnel tells you.

THAYER: That's probably good advice.

Q: Because things change. What they're trying to do is to make everything work then and not cause problems and so they will tell you, you know, the conventional wisdom, which they probably dreamed up themselves and then the best thing to do is to plow ahead. I mean, if you're doing something that's obviously stupid, that's it, but a mild adjustment of timing and all it's no big deal.

THAYER: We talked about this before. Married women officers were still fairly recent. The idea that an officer would be managing a career and moves and a marriage and a family, people weren't used to that. Everything was supposed to be subordinated to needs of the Service, fill those slots, pack those bags, check those boxes. We had to push to make things work. I realized I had to start thinking about the choices I would have to make. My career planning, such as it was, shifted from checking off the boxes to succeed in the Service to balancing career with other factors in my life.

Q: Alright. Well, let's talk about the embassy first. Who was the ambassador and sort of what was the spirit of the embassy when you got there?

THAYER: The ambassador in Rome was Maxwell Rabb. Rabb was a bigtime Reagan Republican and generous fundraiser from New York. He, his wife and several lovely daughters were very pleasant and active on the social scene. They hobnobbed with film stars and the celebrity fashion world of Rome which heightened the embassy's profile. We worked in the Palazzo Margherita on the Via Veneto, one of the most beautiful historic buildings in Rome. It was humbling and thrilling to work in such surroundings.

Q: Well, how was your boss, the commercial counselor?

THAYER: My boss was eager to make his mark in this new organization, the FCS. He treated me well. But he didn't treat everybody well. I'm not sure what guidance the Commerce Department provided, but he chose to keep his distance from other embassy offices, especially the economic section, so his adjustment to the mission wasn't all that smooth. I was married to the economic officer so I had ties into the rest of the embassy. But he kept largely to himself.

Q: Well, did he- he was of Italian extraction?

THAYER: Yes.

Q: Sometimes this, in fact often it doesn't work to the advantage and if somebody comes from an Italian extraction speaking some peasant dialect and they want to get out and display the fact that, look at me, I'm an American diplomat now and, you know, the powers that be in Italian society don't look upon this with a great deal of favor. Was this a factor in here, with him or not?

THAYER: Could be. I know what you are talking about, especially having come from Argentina. Argentineans of Italian and Spanish descent often saw themselves as European, who just happened to be in Latin America. They considered Europe the motherland. Yet when they went to Europe, they did not fit in or feel accepted or appreciated. Their language, culture, and dress did not correspond with present day Italy. Maybe he felt defensive because he did not choose his own Commerce Department team. FCS was set up quickly and many hires were transfers from the State Department, like Sam, the new commercial attaché, and me who was seconded from State. Sam was a good guy, hard-working, deferential but the two of them did not get along well. The boss could be critical and demeaning. Fortunately my Italian was good and he appreciated my work.

Q: Well, how would you describe Italian/American relations at the time?

THAYER: The relationship was good, though Italy was having a rough time politically and economically. Italy was going through its "years of lead", beset with social unrest, the Red Brigades, political violence, and economic turmoil during the 1970 and 80s. The 1978 murder of former Christian Democrat Prime Minister Aldo Moro was one of a rash of bombings, kidnappings, and assassinations of judges, police, journalists, trade unionists, academics, and students. In 1981 American General James Dozier, head of NATO forces in Verona, was kidnapped then later released. Unemployment was high, inflation worsened, and stagflation plagued the economy through the mid-1980s. Ambassador Rabb was affable and well-connected. He had good access throughout Italy We had military bases around the country, and shared goals to contain communist influence.

Q: You were there from when to when?

THAYER: I was there from 1980 to 1984.

Q: Well, let's talk about the commercial side. What were you up to? What were you doing?

THAYER: The purpose was to support American businesses and trade. Rather than cultivate local Italian contacts, our clients were American businesses. The Commerce Department stepped up export promotion activities. We had a trade center in Milan. We worked with U.S. companies to set up trade fairs, connect with Italian buyers and counterparts, clarify local economic and trade rules and requirements. The economic section handled things like bilateral aviation and trade negotiations. We worked mainly with American and Italian companies. The job involved a lot of social events and travel. I went to Milan and Torino in the industrial north where most Italian businesses and manufacturing are centered. De Paulo liked to travel and was gone a fair amount of time. Sam and I dealt with embassy staff and administrative issues.

One of my projects was to help a prominent Italian pasta company select a location in the United States to build a pasta factory. This firm imported shiploads of hard winter wheat from the Dakotas to make durum wheat pasta for Italian and international markets, much of which was sold back to the U.S. They wanted to build a factory in the United States to manufacture pasta, build their brand, and save on the shipping costs. It was a big initiative for them. We were very close to a deal. They had selected a site in upstate New York, home to a lot of Italians, and had worked out most of the financing and other details. Then suddenly the son of the owner of the firm was kidnapped. The family paid an undisclosed but big ransom and the whole deal was put on the back burner. U.S. policy was not to negotiate with terrorists or kidnappers so they didn't discuss it much with us. Some years later the firm did set up a factory in the United States.

Q: Well, when you were talking to American business people, did you have sort of a basic briefing about dealing in Italy?

THAYER: We constantly briefed visitors, groups, CEOs, business journalists, trade associations, you name it. We had an overall political/economic briefing on the country and its regions, and then tailored the briefing to our clients' particular interests. The economy was struggling but there was growing interest in business ventures and trade. Italy was putting resources into the mezzo giorno, the impoverished southern part of Italy, to counter complaints by the people and the opposition. Mr. De Paulo was interested in that.

Q: During the '79 to '81 I was consul general in Naples and you know, we had the feeling that Rome would just as soon write the whole area off, you know, including both the Americans and the Romans from Rome north. I mean, we felt sort of-

THAYER: There was an attitude that the south was backward and immune to progress. I don't know if that has changed much over the years.

Q: We had a bad earthquake there at the time, too.

THAYER: Do you remember Mr. De Paulo?

Q: I think I had left by that time. I left in June of '81. I was wondering whether- Italy, you know, is a difficult place. If you offer- if you set up a firm, whom you hire makes an awful lot of difference, because once you- people are hired it's hard to get rid of them if they don't work and all. Did you find yourself getting involved with explaining hiring practices and the culture of Italy and all this?

THAYER: Italy was known as a difficult place to invest. The Americans we saw weren't so much interested in setting up businesses in Italy as exporting to Italy.

Q: Did you find, were there problems with sort of the Italian political structure? I mean, they had a large communist party there; did they cause problems or was that strictly- it didn't spill over into the commercial side of things?

THAYER: Italy had a powerful Communist party, though not pro-Soviet. It was critical of American capitalism so likely some politicians had reservations about a U.S. push into their economy. We didn't work to influence Italian economic policy so much as assist and promote American companies. Economic policy would have been handled by the economic section.

Q: What was your impression of American industry enterprise in moving into the Italian market?

THAYER: Expanding trade and overseas markets, particularly in agriculture, was the U.S. mantra then. Italy's economy had flourished before the downturn and it had a large and discerning consumer base. Aiding U.S. business was smart politically too.

Q: Well, how did you find the Foreign Service nationals there? I would think in your section they would be particularly useful.

THAYER: The Foreign Service nationals were top notch. We had four or five women and several men who were very professional, well-connected, and proud to represent the United States. Sector specialists would research and develop marketing strategies for U.S. product lines and companies, in manufacturing, agriculture, energy, hospitality, fashion. They had a high profile and participated in a lot of outside social and business events. We had a fairly large section, with a travel budget, entertainment budget, and program budget. If someone showed initiative they would be encouraged to run with it. There was little sense of hierarchy among American and local staff.

Q: Yes. Well, this, of course, is the way it should be.

THAYER: Exactly.

Q: How did you find sort of the Italian governmental structure? Was it a basic inhibitor because commercial laws, labor laws and all that or wasn't it much of a problem?

THAYER: The commercial attaché and the economic section dealt more with Italian officials. My role was mainly to assist and research opportunities for American business people.

Q: How about the American Chamber of Commerce? Is this a pretty powerful group from your perspective?

THAYER: The Chamber was very active, as were other Italian-American institutes and associations in fostering ties between the two countries. Before I went to Italy I was invited to several events with prestigious, politically-connected Italian Americans. They were mostly business people active in cultural and political circles, with considerable influence in our Congress and the Administration. They had a significant voice in selecting the American ambassador to Italy, for example.

Q: Did you feel comfortable in your relationship with the Department of Commerce?

THAYER: Yes. De Paulo was complimentary of my work. I wasn't involved in their personnel or promotion system.

Q: Efficiency reports.

THAYER: De Paulo encouraged me to convert to the FCS. Converting was an opportunity for those of us in the shrinking economic cone. He remained in Rome for a number of years, as I recall, enjoying entertaining, travel, living well.

Q: Well then, in 19, was it ’84, you left?

THAYER: I left the Commerce job in ’83, fulfilling my two year assignment. My husband wanted to extend his three year tour for a fourth year. We loved Rome. We had a nice garden apartment a 20 minute walk from the embassy, good friends, and family living in Tuscany. Fortunately a new opportunity opened up.

President Reagan created two new embassies in Rome. The U.S. permanent representative to the UN agencies (mainly the Food and Agriculture Organization/FAO) was elevated to the rank of ambassador in 1983 and the president’s representative to the Holy See in 1984. Millicent Fenwick, former congresswoman from New Jersey, was named ambassador to the FAO, and the President’s friend William Wilson became ambassador to the Holy See. Their backgrounds were interesting. Wilson was eager to have his position upgraded from personal representative to ambassador plenipotentiary to the Holy See, like his diplomatic counterparts. For a long time there was opposition in the U.S. to establishing diplomatic relations with the Holy See. It was seen as incompatible with separation of church and state and fueled fears of Papal influence on the large number of American Catholics. John Kennedy’s election as the first Catholic president was a big deal. By the 1980s this was less of an issue. Reagan Republicans thought such an overture to American Catholics would be advantageous politically. As for Millicent Fenwick, she was the beloved, irreverent Republican congresswoman from New Jersey who had sacrificed her safe congressional seat for a senate run at the behest of the Republican Party. She was said to have been the model for Lacey Davenport, the feisty pipe-smoking congresswoman in the Doonesbury cartoon.

Q: A cartoon by Garry Trudeau, yes.

THAYER: Although they both claimed otherwise. Still, the plain talking, independent -minded Millicent Fenwick attracted attention wherever she went. Reportedly Fenwick reluctantly agreed to run for the Senate from a safe congressional seat on a Republican pledge that if she lost she could have any ambassadorship she wanted. When she lost, she asked for the embassy in Rome. Influential Max Rabb was not about to leave, so the fix was to elevate the job of permanent representative to the UN/FAO in Rome to ambassadorial rank. The U.S. representative to the UN/FAO had long been a USAID officer, working in the USAID section of the embassy. Suddenly Fenwick arrived, a new Ambassador, requiring an official residence, office, and staff. A USAID officer was assigned as her deputy and I came on board to serve as her political advisor. In effect, I was her resource on political issues and the link to the U.S embassy to Italy. Millicent Fenwick was fascinating, a quick study, tireless worker, passionate, funny. I had just come from an office that had split from the State Department not altogether comfortably. Here suddenly was a new embassy. Its connections to the “big embassy” (the U.S.

embassy to Italy) and the resources of the political, economic, and information sections were unclear. Part of my job was to serve as liaison to the larger U.S. mission so she could avail herself of those resources. .

Q: How did she deal with people?

THAYER: Fenwick, a tall, thin, former model, was gracious, but blunt and determined. She read widely and was unfailingly well-prepared. Nothing stood in her way. She was professional and supportive with me. I negotiated a slightly reduced workweek and reduced salary but I was always available when needed and she called on me a lot. I was comfortable in several languages and enjoyed the diverse people and issues of the FAO and UN agencies. She often traveled outside the country. I filled in when she was away.

Q: Did you get any feeling for, I'm sure you did, the food agency? It's part of the UN, isn't it?

THAYER: Yes, indeed, the UN Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO).

Q: You know, I mean, you're in the UN apparatus and you know, for some people this can be fascinating and for others it's exasperating. What was your impression of the UN apparatus as it pertained to the FAO?

THAYER: The U.S. wanted to replace the head of the FAO. Lebanese diplomat Edouard Saouma was first elected as director general of the FAO in 1976 and eventually served three terms, until a major reorganization in 1993. The U.S. felt that too many educated third world diplomats were living high in Rome in a top-heavy, bureaucratic organization with little to show for it. Mrs. Fenwick initially put pressure on Saouma but later seemed to acquiesce in his leadership. She would travel to FAO and IFAD (International Fund for Agricultural Development) and WFP (World Food Program) projects around the world. She loved going deep into Africa and finding wonderful little examples of appropriate technologies to empower and feed communities. One of her favorite stories was about the ecological circle, where corn was planted in the fields and tilapia fish and ducks were stocked in ponds: the ducks would eat the corn, the fish would eat the duck droppings, the fish remains would be used to fertilize the fields, producing more corn to be fed to the ducks. She was passionate about harnessing agriculture to alleviate poverty. Our office had access to agriculture experts who knew a lot about crops and rotation and inputs and that kind of thing, as well as USAID development experts who explored both large and small scale agriculture production as a path out of poverty. The U. S was a major donor to WFP, mainly in the form of excess U.S. farm commodities, and to the other international agencies. Fenwick got enormous satisfaction helping to alleviate famine and humanitarian crises by quick allocation of resources.

Q: Well, how did you find living in Rome?

THAYER: My father-in-law, Harry Reed, was a Foreign Service Officer with long ties to Italy. He'd been consul general in Naples, as well as in Angola and Mozambique before independence, and had retired to Rome. He and his wife Fran lived in a charming penthouse in the Palazzo Lepri near the Campo di Fiori. When we arrived, they had just moved from Rome to a centuries-old stone farmhouse on the estate of Il Calcione in Tuscany. The property had been in the hands of the Marquese della Stufa family for nearly 500 years. We attended the della Stufa's celebration of the 500th anniversary of their acquisition of the estate. So we spent many long weekends and holidays at their home in Tuscany. It was called La Fornace, the "Big Oven", where bricks were made on the estate.

Q: Oh how wonderful.

THAYER: My in-laws knew a lot of Italians. We roamed the countryside, buying antiques in Monte San Savino and jugs of local wine and freshly-pressed green olive oil from the local cooperatives in Tuscany. They took us to the Palio, the horse races in Siena, also Florence, Assisi, Montalcino and other villages around Tuscany. It was lovely.

Q: Well, did the concern over intermediate missiles in Italy send off shock waves around the- impacted on you all?

THAYER: President Reagan's military build-up and plan to install intermediate range nuclear missiles in Italy under NATO exacerbated already tense relations with the Soviet Union. Along with terrorism attacks, plane hijackings, and proxy conflicts in the Middle East and Central America. My jobs were not directly related to those issues. I did see a bit of history up close. In June 1982 Reagan made an extensive trip through Europe, including Rome and Vatican City. Preparation for presidential visits consume embassies for weeks. I was assigned to be the site officer for Quirinale Palace, home of Italian President Sandro Pertini. President Reagan was meeting with Pope John Paul II in the morning and coming to the Quirinale for a meeting and lunch, along with his wife Nancy, Secretary of State Alexander Haig and his wife, and a large delegation. For weeks, as liaison officer, I escorted White House and State Department advance teams, Secret Service, security and communications personnel through the Palace, setting up communications, emergency facilities, and staging rooms.

Q: This is the president's-

THAYER: The Quirinale was Italian President Pertini's residence, an exquisite palace several blocks long dating to 1583. I came to know many of the nooks and crannies of the magnificent palace. One of my jobs was to know where the bathrooms were so if anyone in the delegation had to use the facilities I could discreetly move them as quickly as possible. It was funny. Over the years and various modernizations little closets and bathrooms were tucked in here and there, underneath staircases and stairwells. One small bathroom was behind a huge heavy tapestry. I brought Secretary Haig there at one point. It was not a good trip for Haig. When the President was shot in '81, Haig made the ill-fated “I’m in charge here”, which upset many people, along with other things he was doing. Rumors were rife that Haig’s days were numbered. At the Quirinale, the President, Mrs. Reagan, and others were visibly ignoring Haig, who was trailing behind with his wife in the rear. We knew then he wouldn’t last long. Sure enough, a few weeks later, Haig was sacked.

Q: And the White House really had it in for Haig.

THAYER: It hit me how when you fall from grace in the White House, how quickly and thoroughly you can be frozen out. It was chilling to watch Haig trying to keep up and White House aides literally cutting him off. We had been so professional and discreet with our preparations, but there was nothing discreet about the delegation’s treatment of Haig.

Q: Well then, at least you didn’t get caught in the crossfire against Alexander Haig.

THAYER: Certainly not. I did what I had to do, escorted the president to the facilities without a hitch. Reagan was smiling and gracious. He had arrived at the palace very late. His aides and security people were going crazy, waiting for him to emerge from the Vatican. Word later was he had fallen asleep momentarily while with the Pope.

Q: You mentioned the bathroom facilities. I interviewed one man who went with the delegation to Moscow on some disarmament thing and he had to go to the facilities and so he sort of pointed the way and he came out and he was lost. And here he was in the Kremlin wandering around, you know, and felt, you know, he didn’t want to open the wrong door or do anything but there was nobody there to tell him where to go.

THAYER: Well, that does not happen, presumably, to the president of the United States. At least not on my watch. So that was my moment with President Reagan.

Q: Well then, in ’84 you left.

THAYER: Right, our tour was up and we went back to the United States.

Q: So what did you come back to in ’84?

THAYER: I was assigned to the El Salvador desk. I spoke Spanish. I was interested in Latin America, had lived in Brazil, served in Buenos Aires, and knew some people in ARA, the Inter-American Affairs bureau. By this time the conflicts in Central America had been going on for some time. From Rome, I was distantly aware of the violence, assassinations, the murder of Archbishop Romero in El Salvador, the battle between the Sandinistas and Contras in Nicaragua. Central America was Reagan’s foreign policy crisis of the 1980s, culminating in Oliver North and the Iran-Contra scandal. Coming from Italy, I knew that the Europeans for the most part did not support U.S. intervention in Central America. They saw the small impoverished countries in Central America as the latest proxies to play out the U.S.-Soviet rivalry. At the time, though, the Salvador desk was where the action was.

Q: Yes, it's now disappeared.

THAYER: It was strange coming out of Europe with the focus on Soviet missiles and arms talks, Lebanon and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, to see how much official U.S. attention and treasure were concentrated on Central America. Knowing the Americas a bit as I did, it seemed disproportionate. But there we were. The desk had grown from one to three Salvador desk officers in the Office of Central American Affairs, the busiest office in ARA if not the Department. I arrived with some skepticism about U.S. policy but was excited to be dealing with the hot button issue of the time. Our kids were four and six when we came back. We set about quickly to find a house, schools, day care, transportation. At one point we were carrying three mortgages. My husband started his job in the Africa Bureau's regional economic office.

The Salvador desk was one of some 50 or so State positions designated for extra duty pay due to the heavy workload and long hours. It was very demanding. We were seeking to curb the violence in El Salvador, counter Soviet influence, end the civil war, salvage the economy, hold elections and build support for a newly-elected government, and mitigate the refugee problem. The whole region was in melt down: El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua were grappling with civil war, assassinations, kidnappings, death squads, and repression. Honduras, Mexico, and Costa Rica were not at war but were impacted by the violence, refugee flows, and economic wreckage. Congress was skeptical and passed several laws restraining executive actions, including barring military assistance to Guatemala and later to the Contras in Nicaragua. We provided military aid to the Salvadorans and eventually all but ran their war, even with Congress limiting the number of U.S. military advisers in El Salvador to 55. After my experience with Argentina's dirty war, I was appalled by the extent of human rights abuses. El Salvador's Archbishop Oscar Romero was assassinated in 1980 while celebrating mass. A scorched earth campaign killed or forced tens of thousands to flee, including nearly a thousand unarmed civilians killed in the village of El Mozote in 1981. One of my ARA colleagues Carl Gettinger had managed to flush out Salvadoran national guardsmen responsible for murdering four American nuns in El Salvador in 1980. They were finally put on trial and convicted in 1984 just as I arrived on the desk. The U.S. Ambassador to El Salvador Bob White was drummed out of the service for demanding justice for the nuns. The White House dismissed accusations of Salvadoran abuses, calling the victims leftists. It was a mess. I had a hard time justifying some of our actions in the region. The White House was driving the policy and much of its implementation through NSC staff, the military, and CIA, including covert actions that subsequently became public, like the mining of harbors, funneling weapons to the Guatemalan military through cut-outs, arming the Contras.

Q: Had the Ollie North thing broken by this?

THAYER: No. I started in ’84, and Iran-gate hadn’t broken by then. I liked traveling to the region and admired the Salvadorans. They are a resilient, long suffering people, desperate after years of grinding conflict. I went there several times, once as part of the presidential observer delegation in 1985. Christian Democrat (CD) Jose Napoleon Duarte had been elected president in 1984. In 1985 his party was contesting parliamentary elections with the military-backed right-wing ARENA (Alianza Republicana Nacionalista) party. Today it’s common to field official election observers but our delegation was one of the first.

Q: Yes, we weren’t doing it before.

THAYER: Today teams routinely observe elections through IFES (International Foundation for Electoral System), the national Democratic and Republican Institutes, the OAS (Organization of American States), European Union, African Union. But at the time, it was fairly new. With El Salvador’s history of violent and stolen elections and tensions between the parties so raw, there was a lot of anxiety about how these elections might go. It was the closest I came to thinking I could be killed on duty.

Our bipartisan observer delegation included a number of congressmen and staff. I was assigned to accompany the elections committee representative from the Christian Democratic (CD) party. Normally we had a driver, but no security. The committee had scheduled a press conference at the Sheraton Hotel for the evening of election day. As the balloting progressed, preliminary results showed the CD in the lead. We got word that ARENA was becoming increasingly anxious that the CD, having won the presidency, not win the parliament. Rumors were rife that ARENA would find a way to obstruct or invalidate the vote, that it would create some conflict or demonstration and demand a halt to vote counting or refuse to accept the results. The CD committee representative and I went to the scheduled press conference, ominously located in the same Sheraton Hotel where some USAID workers had been machine-gunned to death several years earlier.

We got to the hotel around dusk. Nobody else was there. The idea was to have enough international observers around that no one would dare disturb the process. But the hall was dark and empty. We wondered if we had mistaken the location, if there had been an electrical outage. We finally found some hotel staff who said ARENA representatives had refused to come to the press conference. ARENA was threatening to pull out of the elections and provoke some kind of a coup d’etat. The two of us looked at each other and bolted for the door. We had no bodyguards. We raced to the parking lot and slammed the jeep into reverse. This was before cell phones, we had no way of communicating with anyone. I remember jumping into the front seat, locking the door. There were other cars in the parking lot, some people in motion, but the lights were out and no one spoke. It was very dark. I recall thinking that if ARENA wanted to wreck this election, killing the CD representative to the electoral commission would be a good way to do it. Along with a U.S. diplomat election observer. We raced to the election headquarters in the dark. A number of other people were there, along with several observers, looking exhausted and dazed. The ARENA threats looked serious. The embassy and our observer delegation quickly issued strong statements about the integrity of the elections and called on ARENA to respect the vote. After some long tense hours, ARENA stood down.

On another trip to El Salvador I traveled to various military units and displaced persons encampments. I remember being dropped by helicopter near a rural hamlet where the Salvadoran military was fighting the guerrillas. Several Salvadoran soldiers ushered me into an open field surrounded by tents. They looked all of 16. They sat me down on a log for a military briefing. A paper map was tacked onto a tree branch and the commanding officer used a sharpened stick to point out which villages they thought the guerrillas controlled or were hiding in and which trails they were using. It felt like Vietnam. It was a bush version of the Pentagon briefings, except the Pentagon has air conditioned meeting rooms, power point, and laser pointers. I remember thinking how carefully the Salvadorans followed their U.S. military training and quantified the state of the war, providing statistics on kill ratios and the number of villages "pacified".

Q: You were mentioning that you, during the time you were mentally qualifying your regard for our policy there.

THAYER: I was working long hours on the Salvador desk, along with fellow desk officers covering Guatemala, Nicaragua and the rest of Central America. We dealt with a steady stream of visitors, congressional delegations, hill staff, military and intelligence officials, journalists, non-governmental organizations, think tanks, and academic experts. Congress was critical and demanded briefings, testimony, answers to the unknowable. We often trekked up to the White House, the Hill, and the Pentagon to confer on critical issues: budgets, arms transfers, personnel, programs, embassy security. The administration had limited U.S. military advisers to 55 in-country which had to be constantly mediated. Everything required reports, decision memoranda, updates, biographies, read-outs, briefing books; occasionally we'd squeeze out a think piece. Church groups, solidarity groups, and media folks requested meetings and briefings, often to criticize U.S. policy in the region.

I came to see the Salvadorans as fodder for us to foil Soviet inroads. Their nightmare civil war fueled by U.S. and Soviet competition. We were playing out this proxy war on the backs of miserable peasants struggling with poverty and a lack of education, jobs, and justice. As reports of illegal U.S. activities surfaced, I felt increasingly uncomfortable. I voiced my concerns. I didn't feel criticized by my colleagues so much as, hey, this is where the action is, here's where careers are made. After so much effort, why squander it. We had impressive ambassadors in the region: Tom Pickering in El Salvador, John Negroponte in Honduras. I thought the world of Tom Pickering, he did a lot of great things. After dealing with human rights abuses in Argentina, I was disturbed by the human rights violations going on, our arming and training of militaries who attacked civilians, wiped out villages in Guatemala and El Salvador. I liked and respected my colleagues. I just felt I was on a different page.

I decided I should get out more and report back how Americans outside the Washington bubble saw the situation. The Bureau's public affairs office was always looking for speakers to sell U.S. policy on Central America. There were constant invitations from church and women's groups, foreign affairs groups, rotary clubs, high schools and colleges. It was time-consuming and not fun. They begged us to volunteer to speak. So I did. My task of course was to represent the official U.S. position. I had my official talking points, charts, and justifications. But I could also report back to the Department how the public was viewing U.S. policy. So off I went. It was illuminating to be the punching bag.

Q: You know, did you feel that this was a replay of Vietnam or were these people making- were the points that they're beating you up with good points or was this more emotional or what?

THAYER: They made some reasonable points, and they were emotional. The years of grinding fighting and civilian casualties in Central America were becoming increasingly controversial. Congress and the media were asking more questions. Many who attended my talks were well informed about what was happening on the ground. By this time too, some of the policy's excesses were coming out. Things were happening in Nicaragua and Guatemala that shouldn't have, that I could not speak about. It wasn't like Vietnam, where U.S. soldiers were dying. In Vietnam, hundreds of thousands of U.S. troops fought and 58,000 died. In El Salvador and Central America, the number of American casualties was low, largely because Congressional oversight kept deployments low. It wasn't so much an issue of Americans being killed. But a lot of Salvadorans and Nicaraguans were being killed, mostly civilians. Some people look at Central America and say, great job, we kept the Soviets out without the conflict spilling over into a superpower confrontation. But for the people living through it, it was really bad. It brought negative consequences that continue to this day. One of my hardest speaking engagements was to my hometown.

Q: Your hometown was where again?

THAYER: Edina, a fairly prosperous, probably largely Republican suburb of Minneapolis. I started by introducing myself, a hometown girl, graduate of the University of Minnesota. Then I went through my State Department-provided talking points. My mom and some friends were in the audience. I think my childhood pediatrician who did voluntary medical missions in Central America was there. Everyone listened politely. When I finished, the first person who stood up to ask a question glared at me, shaking her finger nearly in my face: How can you live with yourself? How can you sleep at night? I'd spoken to total strangers and been asked plenty of rough questions but it was my hometown that really laid into me.

Q: Well did you get, I mean, there were several things going; one was this is sort of, you might say, the right wing in American politics, we've got to squelch communism where it is, but there is the other side of the equation were the people who, you know, were overjoyed with the Sandinistas and they sort of glorified, they really thought the

Sandinistas were, you know, like sliced bread, I mean, wonderful people. Did you find yourself dealing with that, those others?

THAYER: The speaking engagements were set up by the State Department in response to requests from groups from all sides. Some church groups, solidarity groups probably had leftist sympathies; others were conservative. I think most just wanted to hear from their government what was happening and why. When issues become polarized it becomes very difficult to talk about them.

Q: Well, did you feel the State Department was sort of becoming the tool of the White House? You know, in a way we're repeating and we'll come to that later on the whole Iraq thing, but did you feel like sort of the State Department leadership was being pushed around for political purposes and our support there, or was there something of value that we were trying to do in those areas?

THAYER: Foreign Service officers are part of the Executive branch, confirmed by the Senate, pledged to honor the Constitution and execute the policies of the elected Administration, however the president defines it. My colleagues and I carried out the Administration's policy regardless of party. But U.S. foreign policy was becoming increasingly politicized, manipulated for domestic political purposes. A policy under one administration is suddenly reversed or tossed out by the next administration, which sees or chooses to interpret things in a different way. Scoring political points counted more than working toward solutions. Central America eventually erupted into the Iran-Contra scandal. That opened a door for President Oscar Arias of Costa Rica and others to launch the Contadora peace process and wind down the wars.

Q: Can we set something up for the next time? I'll just put at the very end where we want to pick this up. You've talked about your trips and all but will you talk about how sort of, as the scandals began to unwind on the Central American and El Salvador desk, how that affected your operation, and also about how your colleagues felt about the situation; were you sort of muttering in your beer if there was something that passed for after hours or something like that or were you each fighting your own lonely battle of conscience or not? And we'll talk about those.

THAYER: Good topics.

Q: Well today is the 26th of August, 2008. This is an interview with Yvonne Thayer and we are, Yvonne, we left this the last time, we were talking about you were dealing with, well basically you were one of the three El Salvadoran officers, and I was asking you, how did your colleagues, not just the other two but the ones dealing with Central America, feel about our policy there? Did it- I mean, was this sort of, okay we'll do it because we're the president's people or were there true believers or skeptics or, you know, just workmanlike approach? How would you describe it?

> THAYER: My State Department colleagues were smart, hard-working, collegial, and politically savvy. They went on to very successful careers. Central America policy seemed mostly dictated by White House neocons to stamp out leftists and communists, like in Argentina, with little concern for human rights. Central America was the major foreign policy issue in the mid-'80s. There was a lot of high level interest from the front office, White House, Congress, and the media. We knew the president was personally invested and it was our responsibility to execute his wishes. That was our job. My personal views and discomfort grew over time. Things were happening that shouldn't have, leading to the scandals that came later. I requested a transfer after a year.

Q: Well, in a way there are a couple of sides to this, and I did not, what I know about it is what I read in the papers but there were no good guys in this business, from what I gather; I mean, it wasn't as though you had agrarian reformers, i.e. the communists who were going to come out of the hills and turn El Salvador into a peaceful, prosperous country or something. I mean, they were-

THAYER: Indeed. Leftist guerrillas were backed by Cuba and the Soviet Union. The immediate Cuba threat had been blunted after the missile crisis. Still, Fidel Castro, encouraged and supported by the Soviets, could contest or complicate U.S. interests in Central America as well as in Angola and elsewhere. Playing out our differences with the Soviet Union in Central America, Africa, and the Middle East was less dangerous than direct conflict between super-powers, but these proxy wars hurt vulnerable people and left long-lasting scars. Castro, Gulf princes, African dictators, and others played us off masterfully for decades.

Q: Were you there during any of the, I mean, did the Iran Contra and Ollie North and all that, was that going on while you were there?

THAYER: It was beginning while I was there in '84 but became public later, in '85-'86. The White House was running the show, led by ambitious, unconstrained people who relished pulling the levers of power and making a name for themselves. As you say, there were no clearly good guys. The militaries in Central America historically protected a handful of wealthy oligarch families that dominated El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua. The guerillas were involved in bombings and assassinations and kidnappings, getting arms from wherever they could. Citizens had legitimate long standing grievances, grinding poverty, corruption, lack of services which were exploited.

Q: Well, let's get back to you; what were you up to?

THAYER: I requested a curtailment from the El Salvador desk after a year. I was married and had two sons in elementary school. The Foreign Service was undergoing a major overhaul of the personnel system. In 1980 it created the Senior Foreign Service and an up or out system, requiring officers to opt in for consideration for promotion and to retire if not selected for the Senior Service within a certain number of years. My husband….

Q: He was a Foreign Service officer.

THAYER: He was a Foreign Service officer. His career was going well and Department career counselors produced a lot of positive statistics about chances for promotion, so he opted in. Then as the years went by and he wasn't getting the jobs or promotions he needed, anxiety set in. Other things made it difficult too. The mandatory retirement age was raised and political appointees increasingly filled senior-level jobs, reducing expected promotions and openings. Impacted officers filed a lawsuit that went on for years. It was discouraging, on top of long workdays and scrambling to parent children. Randy's last opportunity for promotion was in '87, and when that didn't happen he "ticked out".

My asking for a curtailment, from a high profile country desk job no less, was definitely not seen as a smart move. But the Department came through with a Pearson assignment. Pearsons are opportunities to work outside the State Department for a year, on the Hill, in academia, think tanks, or state agencies. I was nominated to be director of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (CEIP) Face-to-Face Program. CEIP was a non-partisan think tank on Dupont Circle, run by Thomas Hughes. A spirited, intellectually-stimulating place, CEIP had a stable of distinguished policy experts in arms control, nuclear proliferation, immigration, terrorism, China, the Middle East, South Asia, and the Soviet Union. They produced papers, studies, task forces, op-eds, appeared on talk shows. CEIP published "Foreign Policy" magazine, a younger version of the venerable "Foreign Affairs" magazine. The Face-to-Face program director was typically a Foreign Service officer on loan to the Endowment. The job was to set up and moderate lunches and dinners with VIPs to discuss foreign policy issues with selected guests. Guests were mid to senior-level foreign affairs policy-makers and stake-holders in the State Department, Pentagon, CIA, National Security Council, Congress, Hill staff, as well as media, academia, and think tanks.

Face to Face ran prestigious, well-funded events and invitations were sought after. I liked having a budget and running my own program. Along with a few interns assigned to me, I researched issues of the day and developed topics and lines of questioning. The goal was to stimulate honest free-flowing discussion among practitioners, analysts, and disseminators of policy ideas. I sought to set up events that would help clarify the complexities of pressing issues, the role of Congress and the media, the interplay of departments and agencies. I started in the summer of 1985 and ran the program for a year. It was a great experience. Former INS (Immigration and Naturalization Service) Commissioner Doris Meissner was at CEIP heading up a study group on immigration. She participated in a program I ran with Ambassador Diego Acensio and Wyoming Senator Alan Simpson. The Simpson-Mazzoli immigration bill was signed into law in November 1986.

Q: Simpson. From Wyoming.

THAYER: Yes, Simpson was an irreverent, colorful person. Tall, thin, folksy. We did several programs on terrorism. I invited my friend from Mozambique days, journalist Robin Wright, to speak. An expert on Iran and the Middle East, Robin was later hired by the Endowment as a terrorism expert. The head of the National Security Agency, Lt. Gen. Bill Odum, came to that program. After seeing my guests out, I was about to call a taxi to go home. He offered me a ride in his armored limo with its seatback and armrests full of buttons, screens, and receivers. It felt very James Bond to pull up in front of my house in that car.

During that time, 1985-86, Gorbachev was in power, signaling he wanted a better relationship with the U.S. Some of the irritants from the U.S.–Soviet rivalry were beginning to wind down. By then, too, the Iran-Contra debacle was emerging as an embarrassing scandal. Deputy National Security Advisor Bud McFarland and NSC aide Col. Oliver North went to Iran in May 1986 with a cake shaped like a key and a bible autographed by President Reagan to secretly sell weapons to Iran and use the profits to help the Contras in Nicaragua. Both actions were illegal; Iran had been designated a terrorist state and Congress had denied further funding of the Contras. Once the scandal came out, there were multiple congressional investigations and the Reagan Administration welcomed a peace process led by Costa Rican President Oscar Arias.

Q: Well, one of the things that, as I've been doing this for the last 20 years or so, is very obviously the tremendous divide between, you might say, the academic community and the Foreign Service community. You know, foreign affairs and foreign policy magazines come out and other things but the people who are kind of doing foreign policy don't have time to read them, or, I mean, there doesn't seem to be much contact, and what you're talking about is at least get people together for meals and somebody to talk, it allows us an interchange that just wouldn't happen otherwise, isn't it?

THAYER: I worked hard to get rising Foreign Service officers and congressional staffers to CEIP events, people who might otherwise not have an opportunity to meet in an informal private setting. Many Hill staff wield real power in the name of their congressional bosses, and appreciate being invited by name to invitation-only events. Occasionally Members of Congress came. When Georgi Arbatov, a Gorbachev confidant who headed a leading Soviet think tank "The Institute for US and Canadian Studies" came with a team, we got lots of calls from Congress and others seeking invitations. Arbatov's group came to Washington to foster dialogue and exchanges with U. S. experts. Among those in Arbatov's group was Roald Sagdeev, a prominent Russian physicist. Susan Eisenhower came to that event. She eventually married Sagdeev, in 1990. I can't remember whether they first met at Face-to-Face.

Q: She was the granddaughter of Dwight Eisenhower.

THAYER: Right. Our events were off the record. Endowment interns took notes but we kept the proceedings confidential. Intern Jamie Rubin from the Arms Control Association (ACA) took notes once; he later became Secretary Albright's spokesperson.

Q: Well now, did the Carnegie organization represent, you know, there are think tanks that are sort of holding places for the party out of power and all; Brookings is on the democratic side, American Enterprise is for the Republicans out of power; you know, that type of thing. Did Carnegie fit in there or was it somewhat different?

THAYER: CEIP was established and funded by steel magnate Andrew Carnegie as non-partisan but it was generally seen as center-left. CEIP President Tom Hughes didn't want it to be seen as a holding tank for progressives, though, and he recruited scholars and experts from different backgrounds. Dmitri Simes headed up the Russia program at CEIP and later ran Nixon's Center for National Interest. CEIP later opened a center in Russia. The Arms Control Association, a non-partisan organization to promote understanding and support for arms control and nuclear nonproliferation, was co-located with CEIP. Republicans in general seemed dubious about arms control agreements or negotiations, as an undue constraint on U.S. power. Reagan, however, and Gorbachev concluded the landmark INF treaty and the foundation for START, the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty. ACA did a lot to build support for those treaties.

Q: Well, did you get any- were you able to sort of keep your ties with the State Department while you were doing this?

THAYER: I dealt with State Department people every day. I wanted to open as many doors as possible. My time on the Salvador desk left me concerned about insularity and group think at State and I saw Face-to-Face and CEIP programs as intellectually and professionally broadening. Face-to-Face was well-funded and well-regarded for its outreach and big-name recognition. We worked to increase the number and variety of programs, the level of speakers and guests. Researching topics and potential speakers and guests was a good opening to talk to experts throughout State. I enjoyed the freedom, the variety, the networking. And the expense account.

Q: Oh yes. Well then, you did this for a year?

THAYER: It was a one year Pearson assignment. I went back to State in '86. Normally you start looking at the bid list about a year in advance so a few months into the Carnegie Endowment job I started looking at job openings for the next summer. I knew I was staying in Washington as my husband was facing retirement and considering next steps. I felt some reluctance to be swept back into the State Department, where I had had misgivings about our Central America policy that was now blowing up with the Iran-Contra scandal. I felt we had done a lot of damage in Central America and I wanted to, well, find a way to make amends.

This led me to a job with the Refugee Bureau. The Assistant Secretary was Harvard professor Jonathon Moore, a rumpled, spirited advocate in the collateral world of refugees. Refugees is a functional bureau in the Department, not seen as "career-enhancing" like the regional bureaus. Except for the front office, most of the

Refugee Bureau staff worked in a nearby annex in Columbia Plaza, across the street from the State Department. The Bureau manages assistance for refugees through the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), non-governmental organizations, and other agencies. The main goal of refugee work is to resolve the conflict or persecution provoking their flight so they can return safely to their country of origin. Too often, however, danger persists, often for decades. So the Bureau works to develop other solutions, by assisting refugees and host countries, obtaining some form of legal residency or work status for refugees in the host country or, as a last resort, resettlement in the U.S. or some other third country. The U.S. has been a major recipient of refugees from the start, from the Vietnamese to Soviet Jews, Africans, Cubans, Bosnians, and more recently Bhutanese, Burmese, Colombians, and others.

Working with Jonathan was challenging and uplifting, despite the tragedies involved. The Bureau felt less hierarchical, more results-oriented. New ideas were welcome and everyone had a say. I thought U.S. policy in Central America was damaging and contributed to refugee flows, so I welcomed the chance to head up the Latin America refugee assistance portfolio. That meant going back to El Salvador and other Central American countries affected by refugees. I visited refugee camps, managed U.S. assistance to the UN and non-governmental agencies, drafted testimony and budgets. I negotiated with governments and international partners to ensure that the U.S play a positive lead role in refugee assistance and policy in the region.

Q: Well, you did this from '86 to?

THAYER: I did it from '86 to '88; a regular two year assignment.

Q: Okay. Well, let's talk about- In the first place, what was the role while you were there of the High Commissioner for Refugees down there in that area?

THAYER: Refugees are defined under the 1951 UN Refugee Convention as persons who flee their countries due to a well-founded fear of persecution for race, religion, nationality, and membership of a particular social group or political opinion. Originally it referred to European refugees after World War II. The 1967 Protocol added refugees from any part of the world. UNHCR is the lead international agency responsible for assisting refugees, operating camps and programs for refugees. The Europeans considered Central America and its refugees as basically a U.S. problem. They didn't have direct interests or nationals involved. For the most part, U.S. voluntary agencies actually ran the refugee camps, including Colomoncagua and Mesa Grande for Salvadoran refugees in northwestern Honduras. Nicaraguan refugees fled to Honduras and Costa Rica. Guatemalan refugees settled along the southeastern Mexico border area of Chiapas with help from UNHCR and local Mexican assistance agencies. Some of the most vicious counterinsurgency campaigns were in Guatemala, where revolutionary violence festered since the U.S. helped overthrow the elected Arbenz government in 1954. Congress and the Carter Administration curbed then barred arms sales to Guatemala starting in 1977 on human rights grounds, although Guatemala largely got around it by secretly getting arms from Argentina, Israel, and others. Guatemala destroyed and burnt down entire indigenous villages, whose inhabitants were either killed or fled elsewhere, mostly to Mexico. Left-leaning Mexico alternately welcomed then discouraged Guatemalan refugees out of concern for their influence on Mexico's own restive indigenous populations.

Q: Yes, I mean, it was part of the old Zapata group that I'm-

THAYER: Indigenous Mexicans were energized by the mostly Mayan Guatemalan refugees. The Mexican government alternated from harboring to expelling refugees at the border. Refugee problems are worldwide but rarely on our border. In the Middle East, the Palestinians constitute a large group of long term refugees dating back to the late 1940s with the creation of Israel. A separate UN agency UNWRA supports Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, Jordan, and Egypt. After the bombings of the American Embassy and the Marine barracks in Lebanon in 1983, the Reagan Administration stepped back from the Middle East and its refugee dilemmas. Africa produces waves of refugees due to political conflict, famine, drought, and civil war, mainly in Somalia, Sudan, Congo, Ethiopia, and Eritrea. Later the Balkans, Burma, and Bhutan generated hundreds of thousands of refugees. In the mid-'80s, Central America put a refugee crisis on our border.

My job was constantly evolving. We sought to improve living conditions in the refugee camps by adapting appropriate technologies. Traditionally peasants burn charcoal or wood inside their huts for cooking and heat. The trapped smoke causes respiratory and related diseases. Agencies started building stovepipes and improved stoves to help funnel smoke outside and reduce illnesses. Camp layouts were designed to locate latrines and hygiene facilities downstream to reduce bacterial infections. The refugees were assisted to set up basic schools, recreational facilities, truck gardens, chickens to augment food rations. The camps provided a captive clientele with opportunities to try out simple new technologies to improve their nutrition, health, and well-being.

Considerable effort went into helping the refugees develop self-governing systems within the camps. Refugees were mostly subsistence farmers who grew food in widely-dispersed little plots, or "milpas", and sold any excess in village markets. They were largely illiterate, fearful of authority, and easily manipulated, by both the left and right. Suddenly they had to flee and were stuck together in refugee camps living side by side, having to negotiate survival, deal with international agencies and foreigners, and with each other. It was interesting to see women's empowerment in the refugee camps. Men were mostly absent and women had to make decisions and take charge in ways they hadn't previously.

Q: Well, it gave them an opportunity, didn't it, since these-

THAYER: Women traditionally had few opportunities, particularly in rural areas. They had little access to education and knew little or nothing about family planning, health and sanitation, or non-traditional ways of living or raising their children. It opened up new concepts and ways of doing things. They showed a lot of resilience and ingenuity.

Q: Well, besides just making sure that the people were living, you know, weren't starving or getting unhealthy and all, was there, while you were there, how were attempts to get the people to go back to where they came from or to go somewhere else?

THAYER: The most interesting part of my job was negotiating refugee safety and returns. Resolving refugee issues is a key component of peace negotiations and ending conflicts. Inability to address Palestinian refugees has stymied progress in the Middle East for decades. With the Soviet Union transitioning under glasnost and the Iran-Contra scandal tarnishing the Administration, time was ripe to wind down the conflict in Central America. Although the underlying problems were still there, poverty, illiteracy, disease, corruption. Even before the peace accords, Salvadoran refugees sought to return home. Over time, life in the camps was becoming increasingly tense. Host governments blamed refugees for harboring insurgents, caching weapons, and provoking local unrest. Impoverished Honduran locals resented the Salvadoran refugees who received donated food rations, tents, stoves, piped water, and school supplies in their UNHCR-funded camps. Eventually UNHCR and international donors provided similar benefits to local Hondurans and to Mexicans hosting Guatemalan refugees. This reduced tensions but was not sustainable over a long time.

By 1987, Salvadoran refugees in Honduras were desperate to go back home. Often by the time refugees want to return, however, conditions have changed. Those who fled are often not welcomed back, because they aren't trusted, or because they are seen as sympathizers to the opposition, or because their homes and villages have been razed or burnt down or appropriated by others. Many governments don't want them back.

Tensions built to a point where the Salvadoran refugees in the Honduran camps declared unilaterally they were going to return to El Salvador. I had been to the camps many times, talking to the camp leaders and residents, international agencies, and government officials. UNHCR and U.S. policy at the time was to support the Salvadoran government which determined that conditions were not right for large scale returns. It became increasingly apparent that the refugees were going back anyway and nothing would stop them. They picked a date in October 1987, and announced they would walk back into El Salvador—the camps were only about 15 miles from the border—with whatever they could carry, babies slung over their hips. I remember an urgent three-way call with UNHCR in Geneva, the Salvadoran government, and us from the State Department to reach agreement on arrangements to transport the refugees back to designated safe areas in El Salvador. Many of the refugees' homes and villages had been destroyed or were still under opposition control. The refugees were allowed to select several areas they wanted to return to, with government approval. The agreement provided that UNHCR would accompany the refugees back and continue to safeguard and support them in designated areas inside El Salvador. This was a first for the UNHCR, whose mandate did not extend to aiding persons in their own countries. It established a precedent for UNHCR to expand its mandate to facilitate safe resettlement in country of origin. Sergio Vieira de Mello, a prominent UNHCR official who oversaw a number of peacekeeping operations, contributed to this effort and later managed similar refugee returns in other countries like East Timor and Mozambique.

Q: This is the man who was killed in Baghdad.

THAYER: Yes. He was killed in a hotel bombing in Baghdad in August 2003.

Q: A very high reputation Brazilian UN official.

THAYER: Sergio was one of the most admired, charming, and skilled diplomats in the UN system. He was born in Brazil, and had worked in Mozambique, the Balkans, Iraq, countries I knew and worked in. He was practical and fearless, inventive and deeply humanitarian. His death was a great loss.

The Salvadoran government was still headed then by Christian-Democrat Jose Napoleon Duarte. Duarte understood that a public confrontation between Salvadoran authorities barring the return of their own citizens would be a disaster, for the people involved as well as the image of El Salvador. He agreed that the UNHCR could facilitate the resettlement of refugees on government-provided land, and replicate the communal support and systems they had learned in the Honduras camps. This provided some protection from extremists on both sides and enabled the refugees to continue to benefit from community schooling, gardens, sanitation, and health facilities.

On the day of the first return, some 4000 refugees boarded buses, along with international solidarity group representatives, UN officials, and diplomats from several countries, as well as the media. I accompanied them to the border where Salvadoran authorities processed their documentation, including for hundreds of babies born in the camps. Some refugees had been away for more than eight years. Other returns came later. The operation worked very well, as the returnees became self-sufficient and were weaned off of UN support. The fact that refugees were able to leave the refugee camps after years away and safely reintegrate in El Salvador demonstrated leadership and courage on the part of both the Salvadoran government and the refugees. It helped build confidence and contributed to the peace process.

Q: Well, while you were there did essentially a town develop?

THAYER: Yes, over time.

Q: Well, okay, this is El Salvador. What about refugees from Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala and all?

THAYER: Guatemala continued to be very violent and repressive at the time, so Guatemalan refugees in Mexico had less confidence about going back. Mexico was relatively welcoming but concerned about the long term impact of Guatemalan refugees on the border. The infamous red bishop of San Cristobal de las Cases in Chiapas was seen as a leftist sympathizer who encouraged indigenous Mexicans to rise up against the government. He welcomed the Guatemalan refugees as allies in the struggle. Mexico was a signatory to the Refugee Convention but had no legal framework for dealing with refugees. The Mexican government saw international NGOs as leftist sympathizers and barred them from working in Mexico. Instead, a number of Mexican NGOs were created to administer UNHCR and international programs for refugees. Mexico eventually developed a plan to resettle Guatemalan refugees away from the border in the sparsely-populated northeastern provinces of Campeche and Quintana Roo. They arranged for the indigenous Mayan Guatemalans to work on restoring Mayan ruins, like Edzna in Campeche. Edzna was discovered in 1907. In 1986 Mexico obtained international support to employ Guatemalan refugees to excavate and restore the Edzna sites. Eventually many Guatemalans were able to obtain citizenship in Mexico; others were assisted to resettle back in Guatemala.

Given the tense situation on the border and in Guatemala, I wanted to accompany some Guatemalan refugees who were returning from Mexico to their villages. The Mexican government had prohibited journalists and diplomats from observing the transfer. So a local employee from our embassy in Mexico City and I rented a car and drove on back roads to the border. On the way we passed through several villages that had been demolished and burnt to the ground by the Guatemalan military. The refugees were returning to nearby towns from which they could rebuild their villages. We drove through Guatemala and watched several groups return. Each had been given tents, bedding, cooking and gardening equipment, some seeds and food, the ubiquitous striped plastic water jugs. They looked apprehensive but relieved to be back in their native land. We continued driving into the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico to see the sites where Guatemalan refugees were being relocated. In Merida I met with the U.S. Consul. He had booked me a room in a Cancun resort hotel where he normally housed official visitors. The night before, my colleague and I stayed at a ramshackle pension on straw-stuffed mattresses for about two dollars. The next night I was in a resort suite surrounded by lavish pools, gardens, and groomed beaches. The contrast was jarring. I walked a few blocks across the road to some shanties where resort workers were eating on picnic tables outside. They motioned for me to join them and gave me a plate of rice and beans. It was reassuring to see that a fair number of the workers were Guatemalan, employed peacefully alongside local Mexicans.

Many Nicaraguans had sought refuge in Honduras and Costa Rica, aided by UNHCR. Costa Rica was one of the few Central America countries not undergoing armed upheaval. It had a relatively strong constitutional system, had abolished the military, and enjoyed thriving tourism, retirement communities, and tropical fruit industries. Refugees in Costa Rica were not confined to camps, but lived mostly in rural areas on the local economy, including near Limon on Costa Rica’s Caribbean coast.

Q: Was there concern on our part about leakage from these refugee camps to the United States?

THAYER: Refugees in camps were the poorest of the poor, with few options and no resources to go anywhere on their own. Illegal migration to the U.S. for economic and other reasons was long-standing, originally mainly from Mexico. During the ‘80s an estimated million Salvadorans and Guatemalans fled to the U.S. Ongoing political turmoil, poverty, crime, and corruption, as well as earthquakes and hurricanes caused Central Americans to continue to migrate to the United States after the wars ended. Remittances from workers in the U.S. became a lifeline for many families who remained behind. Central American governments implored the United States not to deport workers who had little economic or educational opportunities at home and whose remittances were critical to the countries’ economies. Citing hurricanes and political turmoil, the U.S. at various times provided Temporary Protected Status waivers to Salvadorans, Hondurans, and Nicaraguans allowing them to continue to work legally in the United States based on the hardship it would mean for them and their home countries. Complicating illegal migration was ironically the 1986 immigration law. Provisions to tighten the border, legalize some migrants already in the U.S. and criminalize others, and penalize U.S. employers for hiring illegal workers did not reduce migrant inflows, as was hoped. Criminalizing migration instead led to worsening economic conditions in Central America, less freedom of movement, family breakdown, gangs, and the trend for women and children to come illegally to the U.S. to stay, not just men taking temporary jobs as before. Polarized politics in the U.S. has precluded any meaningful immigration reform since then.

Q: It’s a big issue but at the same time all one has to do is look at what’s happening here in the Washington area, which the construction language in Washington is Spanish with a Central American accent.

THAYER: Demographics and immigration are fascinating, the ultimate reality check. You can have all the policies and controls you want but ultimately people find a way. Migration is mostly a labor issue, that and survival. U.S. corporate interests thrive on cheap labor, for agriculture, meat packing and food processing, hospitality, landscaping, construction, as well as health care. Not to mention tech workers. There’s a lot of hypocrisy in the way we address migration.

Q: Then, you left this job when?

THAYER: I left that job in 1988. By then we had been in Washington for four years and my husband was looking into job opportunities in the U.S. At the time you could stay in Washington for five years without requesting a waiver. We wanted to stay one more year to see how things might work out.

Jonathan Moore had been the dean of the Institute of Politics at Harvard and he suggested I apply for an advanced degree. I’d always hoped to get a Masters but wasn’t sure how to fit that in. Harvard's Kennedy School of Government offered a one-year mid-career Master's in Public Administration (MPA). I took the GRE (Graduate Record Examination), completed several prerequisites and interviews, and went off to the Kennedy School that fall. I was fortunate because the State Department was building the new Foreign Service Institute campus in Arlington Virginia and had started reducing the number of academic grants for advanced degrees. It was good to see the Department expanding professional education and training for diplomats.

Q: We're located on the new Foreign Service Institute's campus.

THAYER: I went to FSI in Rosslyn for A-100 orientation and language training. As part of its post-Vietnam reforms, the military put a big emphasis on professional training and talent development for its officer corps. Many thought State should do the same. FSI started developing extended specialized classes, including a six-month economic course and more comprehensive functional and area studies. I think the Department sought to establish training thresholds for promotion and certain jobs, like the military has. I'm not sure how well it went. State Department officers are generally too busy or fearful of deviating from the career track to step back for training.

At any rate, four of us from State were accepted at the Kennedy School's MPA program. My husband, now job hunting, and our two young school-age sons stayed in Washington, so I commuted. I got a studio apartment on the edge of the Harvard campus, the living room quarter of a mansion with 14-foot ceilings and bay windows in a little Portuguese enclave near Somerville. I brought my bike and rode it to class. I commuted to Washington most weekends, first by air then by train when flights got too expensive. I would leave class on Friday afternoons and take the overnight train to Union Station in DC. On Sunday nights I took the overnight train back to Boston in time for class on Monday morning.

I was delighted to be a student again. As Harvard students, we could apply for classes at any school at the university, also at nearby MIT, Tufts University, and its Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy. When I asked Jonathon how I could possibly choose among so many courses, he said find the best teachers and get in their classes, whatever they're teaching. He got me started with a few names: Graham Allison, Robert Reich, Roger Porter, Dutch Leonard. I took David Koechle's class on U.S. labor history in Harvard's School of Education. I biked to the Fletcher School for a class on contemporary military conflict, including the Central American wars I had just worked on. I took a class with Stuart Eizenstat. Harvard has a two-semester system, with the month of January free to prepare for first semester exams. For the truly masochistic, it offers a few intensive month long classes in January for credit. I applied for and was accepted into Roger Fisher's January negotiations class in the Harvard Law School. Fisher and William Ury taught the class based on their best-selling book "Getting to Yes". It was Fisher's last class as he was leaving teaching the next year due to age. The class was compressed into five days a week for four weeks and had a long waiting list.

Q: Well, you can fill this in later.

THAYER: Fisher's "Getting to Yes," was a primer on negotiations and negotiations theory. It introduced ideas like ripening conditions for negotiations, mediation techniques, and "BATNA", the best alternative to a negotiated agreement, with case studies to show how it worked. Most of the students in the class were Harvard law students but Fisher selected a few students from other Harvard schools. My classmate from the Kennedy School was Jamil Mahuad. Jamil was an Ecuadorian politician of Lebanese and German descent who came to Harvard after being defeated in the 1988 Ecuadorian presidential election. I went to Ecuador after Harvard and a few years later Jamil was elected president of Ecuador. Fisher personally selected the students based on an essay and personal interview. A few weeks into the class, I asked Fisher at a lunch why I'd been selected. "I saw your background," he said. "I saw you worked on El Salvador and that Central America mess and later you went on to work on refugees. I wanted to have somebody in my class who could explain what the hell we were doing in El Salvador." He said he found it an interesting move for a Foreign Service officer to shift to refugee work, an example of "Getting to Yes".

It was a great class. I intuitively identified with the premise and process of mediation, the hallmark of diplomacy. Many of my classmates, the law students, felt differently. Law school was drumming the adversarial method into them and they seemed perplexed by Fisher's mediation approach. They were being trained to rip apart an adversary's argument, crush the opposition, get a win for the client. Getting to Yes, achieving a win-win by mediation seemed alien to them. Some became intuitively aggressive and argumentative when discussing a case. These are our country's future prosecutors, defense attorneys, and judges, I thought. It was instructive to see how training and incentives to crush the opposition would make it difficult to buy into the inverse approach: mediation, finding common ground, getting to yes.

On the first day of class, we were paired up for the duration of the course. I was matched with a young law student from an Oklahoma Indian tribe. His tribe was funding his education so he could represent the tribe in dealings with the U.S. government and commercial businesses. He described to me his tribal origins which emphasized cooperation, group over self, honor, and saving face. He, like I, was comfortable with mediation and we enjoyed working together. We few Kennedy School mid-career students in the class were experienced practitioners, in our 30s or early 40s. We had jobs, history, and resumes. The younger law students seemed fascinated by our professions and how we got there.

Q: I know. It's not often you can use what you've learned to pass on to others.

THAYER: I met some great people at Harvard who are friends to this day and got a broader appreciation of foreign policy and America in general. We had a good number of military officers in our class. I had come to know and appreciate the U.S. military during my work in El Salvador and with Central American refugees. They wanted to know about the collateral damage of conflict, like refugees. I found the same with embassy security officers. The first person I sought out when I got to Honduras or El Salvador was the embassy security officer. You had to be in good with the security officer because he or she had the power to approve or deny your travel in-country. I needed to travel to the border and refugee camps, places where security was dicey. I appreciated their difficult job and respectfully sought permission to do what I needed to do. Once I got stuck in a refugee camp overnight. Staying overnight in the camps was prohibited but sudden cross-border shelling kept us off the road from returning to the capital. I wouldn't pull rank on the camp security detail to leave against their advice.

Q: Well, I used to find as a somewhat different thing. You know, as a consular officer I would sometimes get people who were lawyers, came from a law background, and they make very poor consular officers. They tend to want to enforce the law and look for how you- I mean, you know, consular work is a matter of almost sort of feeling your way around and trying to come up with a solution as opposed to just say no or to back away from things. I mean, it's a different type of work and law is constricting, I think, to people.

THAYER: My youngest son Kevin graduated from Columbia and then Yale Law School. He went to work for a prestigious boutique law firm in San Francisco. After about three years, he said he had enough of that. He couldn't summon a passion for billing for Google or Microsoft's endless litigations, no matter how much it pays. So he changed jobs, went into green technology. We all need to find out where we fit in, what's meaningful to us. Time at Harvard helped clarify my interests, where I thought I could contribute something of value.

Q: Well, I'm thinking- Where did you go after you got your Master's degree? What happened then?

THAYER: Most of my Kennedy School mid-career classmates came from the domestic public service world. I was humbled by their incredible experiences and dedication. I had just turned 40 and most were around my age. They were curious about my life as a diplomat. But I felt they were dealing with much tougher issues, prisons, drugs, racism, poverty, homelessness, teen-age pregnancy. One of my classmates was a senior officer in the New York prison system. The stories he would tell. I couldn't imagine having a job like that. I remember thinking that I live in this rosy diplomatic world, dealing with important security issues to be sure but far from the gritty realities of daily life. Somehow this led me to bid on the anti-narcotics chief job in Ecuador, in part out of respect for my classmates who dealt with these kinds of intractable problems every day.

Q: So where did you go?

THAYER: I sought an assignment to head up the anti-narcotics office in Ecuador.

Q: Okay. Well, I think this is a good place to stop. We'll pick this up in 1989?

Eighty-nine and you're off to Ecuador as an anti-narcotics officer and your conscience has driven you to do this. You've got to watch that conscience; it really gets in the way, you know.

THAYER: It hasn't steered me wrong as far as I can tell.

Q: Okay. Today is the 2nd of September, 2008, interview with Yvonne Thayer. And Yvonne, do you want to tell us where we left off and so we can start again?

THAYER: We left off as I was finishing my Master's in Public Administration at Harvard's Kennedy School and heading to Ecuador to run the anti-narcotics office. My husband Randy has recently retired from the Foreign Service. He was born in Ecuador to an American father, son of a Congregationalist missionary, and an Ecuadorian mother from a prominent Quito family, the Borjas. Randy's paternal grandfather was a missionary from Weeping Water, Nebraska. He established a Christian church, school, hospital, and radio station HCJB in Guayaquil and Quito which are still in operation. On his mother's side, the Borjas were a political family with long roots. The Borjas were descended from Rodrigo Borgia, who became Pope Alexander the Sixth in 1492. Rodrigo Borja (Borgia in Italian) was from Spain. His son Juan (Giovanni in Italian) was named the Duke of Gandia and his descendants established themselves in the New World. The Pope's better-known children were Lucrezia and Cesare Borgia. In 1988, the year my Harvard friend Jamil Mahuad came fifth in the presidential race, Randy's first cousin Rodrigo Borja was elected president. He was the founder and head of the Izquierda Democratica (Democratic Left) party.

Randy had a fascinating family background. His father Harry had joined the Foreign Service after the war and Randy grew up in Quito, Santo Domingo, Santiago, Naples, Dublin, Oporto, and Washington. Randy hadn't found a job to his liking in Washington and we liked the idea of moving to Quito to be closer to his family. I applied for two jobs in Quito. The one that interested me the most was chief of the anti-narcotics section (NAS) at the embassy. After my Harvard experience, I wanted to work on issues that affect people in their daily lives. Like refugees, anti-narcotics was a functional, not regional, job. At the time there was no specialized cone for anti-narcotics work. The issue, however, was growing, both domestically and internationally. Our cold war adversary the Soviet Union was melting down; the Berlin Wall would fall in November. The Central American wars were winding down. Our national security institutions—the intelligence services, military, State Department—were seeing the forty-year-old mission to defend America against the Soviet threat shift. There was talk about a peace dividend, anticipation that huge expenditures for military, intelligence, and security could be downsized in light of the U.S. victory over communism. What was the role of the U.S. military without a super power foe? Looking back now (in 2008), all this seems quixotic.

The new mission turned out to be drugs. For a while at least. The war on drugs had been going on in fits and starts since the early '70s when soldiers returned home from Vietnam addicted to drugs. In 1970 Congress passed the comprehensive drug control act. The next

year President Nixon declared drug abuse “public enemy number one”, launching the war on drugs. In 1973 the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) was created. With external threats seemingly winding down, some of the energy and resources directed against the communist threat shifted to battling the drug threat. The Reagan White House created a new Drug Control Policy office headed by a “drug czar” and made drug interdiction a national security priority. Congress added legislation and funding for anti-drug operations. The goal was to eradicate drug crops and stem the flow of illicit drugs into the U.S. The First Lady launched a campaign “Just Say No” to discourage drug use, especially among youth. For a time, the Pentagon avoided getting involved in anti-narcotics operations, seeing it more as a police issue than a task for the military. But pressure grew for the military to apply its resources and might to this new enemy.
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At any rate, I applied for the job in Ecuador, thinking it would be interesting work and a good move for my family. Not long after sending in my bid list I got a call from the Assistant Secretary’s office in what was called INM (International Narcotics Matters). He called me up in Cambridge and said:” I see you bid on the NAS (Narcotics Affairs Section) job in Quito. Do you really want it?” I think I was the first female officer to seek a job dealing with drug lords and paramilitaries and that sort of thing. I said I really was interested, and explained why. He said: “In that case, we’re going to fast track the assignment.” I said fine. The next morning I woke up thinking maybe it wasn’t such a great idea after all. Ecuador wasn’t like Colombia, where anti-narcotics was a more violent proposition, but I’d be dealing with police and military and law enforcement in a complex and unsavory business outside a traditional diplomatic career. I was intrigued, but a bit concerned about exposing my kids to danger. I thought of my Cleveland Park next-door neighbor’s cautionary tale. In the ‘70s the U.S. focus was on heroin, the drug that plagued American soldiers returning from Vietnam. Nixon pressed hard on countries to eradicate poppies and interdict heroin entering the U.S. My neighbor worked at the World Bank. His children were the ages of ours. His father Nihat Erim served as Turkey’s prime minister in 1971-72. Apparently Nixon succeeded in getting Turkey to crack down on poppy production and heroin supply chains. Nihat Erim was assassinated in 1980, and I wondered if his crackdown on the Turkish drug trade played any role.

Q: How old were your children at the time?

THAYER: My children were eight and 11 at the time. I considered calling him back, but I didn’t and I was paneled quickly. And so I got my wish, to work on a gritty issue that directly impacts people’s lives. I finished school, graduated, and packed up for Ecuador. Benazir Bhutto spoke at my Harvard graduation exhorting us to take the tough road over the easy one, which seemed prescient and reaffirming.

Q: Before you leave the school, did you get any feel about the academic approach and view of foreign policy as opposed to yours as a practitioner?

THAYER: It was similar to the Face-to-Face program, that talking about foreign policy over a glass of wine and being in the trenches are different worlds. Policy-making requires building trust and relationships, understanding history and players, developing opportunities, crafting coalitions, setting goals, and creating incentives. It takes time and effort, understanding third order consequences. And luck. Academia can seem remote from the real world. Still, many Kennedy School professors cycle through government. Graham Allison, Ash Carter, Robert Reich, Roger Porter all held senior government jobs and brought their considerable knowledge and intellect to bear. I appreciate that academics and researchers reinforce practitioners and vice versa. Academics have the luxury of time and distance to evaluate how policies can be shaped and lead to change.

Q: They're usually people; this is where they sit until they come back in.

THAYER: I admired my professors and the mission of the Kennedy School to nurture, train, and motivate people in the Civil and Foreign Service, the military, public servants like myself. The diversity and caliber of students were outstanding. A lot of foreign students, like Jamil, came as Mason Fellows. Richard Neustadt, who authored a seminal book on Presidential Power, was there with his wife Shirley Williams from the British Labor Party. The Institute of Politics and Shorenstein Center on Media and Public Policy attracted top flight fellows and speakers. There were a good number of military officers getting advanced degrees. Ongoing professional education is a requirement for them, whereas for the Foreign Service training is more hit or miss.

Q: Well, there's the other side, too, that a military, particularly in a time of no particular war, has got a lot of people sitting around with weapons and they've got to keep busy.

THAYER: That is part of it. The reforms coming out of Vietnam and abolition of the draft in favor of an all-volunteer service put greater emphasis on professionalization of the military.

Q: Okay, so you're off to Italy.

THAYER: My father-in-law had retired to Rome after serving as Consul General in Mozambique. I went directly to Quito, my husband and sons spent a month in Italy and then joined me.

Q: You were in Ecuador from when to when?

THAYER: I had a three year assignment, from the summer of 1989 to 1992.

Q: Okay. Let's talk about Ecuador; what was going on there when you arrived? First of all, what was sort of the political and economic state of Ecuador and then how were American relations with Ecuador at that time.

THAYER: U. S interest in Latin America during the cold war revolved largely around whose side they were on: ours or the Soviet Union. Governments played off the superpower rivalry, and the superpowers competed via proxy wars. By the late '80s, the

Soviet threat was diminishing. As superpower tensions subsided, national security interest in Latin America waned, except for the drug issue. Some saw the drug war as replacing the cold war.

Ecuador, an Andean country with some ten million people in 1990, had had its share of political upheaval. The coast with port city Guayaquil and the Andean highlands with capital city Quito competed for power. Ecuador had oil, it was a member of OPEC. It exported bananas, cocoa, shrimp and flowers and had a significant tourism industry, including the Galapagos Islands. Ecuador's dependence on oil created a boom and bust economy.

After years of military and conservative governments, Ecuador's 1988 election brought social-democrat Rodrigo Borja to power. Borja was Randy's first cousin on his mother's side. Ecuador was struggling with falling petroleum prices, inflation, and austerity measures. It was also recuperating from the chaotic presidency of Leon Febres Cordero, a brash authoritarian leader from Guayaquil. Febres Cordero opened up the economy but clashed with the military, the courts, and the press; he was briefly abducted by rebellious troops. Borja ran on an anti-corruption platform, a greater state role in the economy, and a non aligned foreign policy.

Quito was the capital, also the financial, administrative, and cultural center of Ecuador. It was 9000 feet above sea level, perched on a long narrow plateau ringed by volcanoes. I found us a comfortable sun-filled house near my Ecuadorian sister-in-law, schools for the boys, and started work as the head of the Narcotics Assistance Section (NAS).

Q: Who was the ambassador at the time?

THAYER: Richard Holwill, a political appointee from Louisiana. He had worked on Haiti issues at State and before that at the Heritage Foundation. His DCM was a career Foreign Service officer Hal Eisner. Holwill was an affable person, interested in economic issues, a bit quirky. I remember his Fourth of July reception. Rather than the usual formal cocktail event, he served miniature hamburgers and hot dogs with ketchup. Some thought it was a bit declasse; I thought it was a riot.

Q: But the way you describe it doesn't sound like he left a sort of a professional impression on the- running the embassy or not or was this done mainly by the DCM?

THAYER: Holwill upset the government over some business deals and loan guarantees as I recall. But generally relations were good. He supported our anti-narcotics work and gave us a lot of freedom to do our job.

Q: Well, did you, I mean, you got there in '89 and all of a sudden '89, in December of '89 there's no more Soviet, well, the Soviet Union was dissolving and the whole bloc had collapsed. How did- Did that change the complexion of sort of what the embassy was focused on or had it already changed?

THAYER: Perhaps in past years the election of a nonaligned social democrat in South America would have upset some in the U.S. but the disintegration of the Soviet Union made it less of a concern. Intelligence collection and military aid shifted to the anti-narcotics fight.

Q: Okay. Well, let's talk about the drug situation. I mean, your drug situation.

THAYER: Ecuador was not a big player like Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia, where coca was grown and processed into drugs. Ecuador's role was as a transit route for coca paste moving from Peru into Colombia, for precursor chemicals used to process base into cocaine, and for drugs trafficked into the U.S. and elsewhere. It also served as a money laundering hub and R&R for Colombian drug lords who found refuge in Ecuador out of reach of law enforcement.

At first the U.S. military was hesitant to get involved in the messy anti-narcotics issue. In 1986 President Reagan declared drug trafficking a national security threat, and pressure mounted for the military to play a role. That same year, the U.S. dispatched troops and black hawk helicopters to destroy cocaine-processing labs in Bolivia, in what was called Operation Blast Furnace. As the Soviet threat ebbed, pressure grew for expanding the U.S. military role, including in Congress. In 1989 President George H. W. Bush designated the Pentagon as the lead agency for detecting and monitoring illicit drug shipments into the U.S. He announced the Andean Initiative which focused on Colombia, Peru, Bolivia, and later Ecuador. It included a military component to train and assist local anti-narcotics forces with drug interdiction, crop eradication, and dismantling of drug trafficking networks. The U.S. invasion of Panama in December 1989 was an opening salvo aimed at Noriega's alleged drug trafficking activities, and U.S. frustration over the failure to curb drug use and violence at home.

Budgets for anti-narcotics assistance began going up sharply. My predecessor had maybe $1 million to work with, my NAS budget grew five-old. I hired a retired DEA (Drug Enforcement Administration) advisor and local staff. Global Pentagon anti-drug budgets grew exponentially, from $5 million in 1982 to more than $500 million by 1989, peaking at around $1.2 billion in 1992. Some in the U.S., including among the military and human rights advocates, opposed beefing up Latin militaries, as many had a history of abusing power for political purposes. But drug production and trafficking was protected by well-armed paramilitaries and rebel groups beyond the capabilities of the police. The FARC in Colombia and Shining Path in Peru controlled a lot of the production. The military role was intended to provide security for local law enforcement, police, and DEA to find and force eradication of coca and processing labs, halt drug flows, and prosecute drug criminals. USAID was to help establish alternative crops and opportunities to move poor local farmers away from growing coca. This was a tall order, as coca represented a quarter or more of export earnings and the livelihoods of hundreds of thousands of peasants in the major coca-producing countries.

SOUTHCOM was based in Panama at the time. Gen. Max Thurmond was named commander of SOUTHCOM in September 1989 and led the invasion against Noriega that December. He advocated for an aggressive U.S. military role in defeating communist insurgencies in Central America and later the drug war. Thurman was replaced by General George Joulwan. Secretary of Defense Cheney gave the green light and SOUTHCOM went into action. The result was a large scale civil-military effort, with the State Department, Defense Department, DEA, FBI, intelligence services, and USAID joining forces. Originally the Andean Initiative focused on Colombia, Peru and Bolivia. As NAS chief in Ecuador, I argued that with Ecuador in the middle, serving as a transit country for precursors, drugs, trafficking networks, and money laundering, we needed to be involved. So Ecuador was brought in. We met at SOUTHCOM in Panama with folks from Pentagon and Washington agencies to coordinate aid, equipment, training, intelligence, and operations. Much of the focus was on the two big Colombian cartels, one based in Cali, the other under Pablo Escobar in Medellin. The big drug families operated with impunity in Colombia. They also had property and allies in Ecuador, who helped move precursor chemicals into Colombia and drugs and narco-dollars out. The top Ecuadorian drug family, the Reyes Torres, had property in Quito and throughout Ecuador. Colombian drug lords came to Ecuador for R&R, untouched by local authorities. Drug money was laundered through Ecuadorian banks. Illegal chemicals moved through Ecuadorian ports and the riverine system.

We worked with local authorities on all these issues. The U.S. provided vehicles, Boston Whalers and zodiac inflatables to conduct riverine operations, weapons, night vision goggles, training, intelligence, operations, even uniforms and MREs (meals ready to eat). We helped negotiate Ecuadorian approval for U.S.-funded Peruvian and Colombian forces to transit Ecuadorian airspace on eradication and anti-narcotics missions. In return, Ecuador asked for helicopters of its own. Later Ecuador agreed to let the U.S. use its air base in Manta from which to stage anti-drug raids. We set up a program to acquire, train, and deploy drug and bomb detector dogs. We purchased the dogs and equipment for the anti-narcotics police to build a kennel and train dogs and dog handlers.

My first task upon arriving, however, was to build good relationships with Ecuadorian officials. My main government contacts were the president's anti-narcotics advisor, Army Col. Cesar Almeida who took the job a few months before I arrived, the long-time head of the anti-narcotics police, and the customs police, which handled border security and monitoring. I also sought out the attorney general who oversaw criminal prosecutions and played a role in anti-narcotics policy and prosecutions.

Q: Well, at the time you were there, how would you evaluate the depth of corruption of the various, you know, the police, the military, the judiciary, the local government and the federal government?

THAYER: Corruption was endemic in most Latin American countries. The Borja government campaigned against corruption, especially that of the previous administration, and began instituting reforms once it took office.

Q: Was it just drugs or was it corrupt throughout other things?

THAYER: Ecuador is very dependent on oil, where high levels of investment, contracts, and corruption go hand in hand. Banking laws were weak, opening opportunities for money laundering. President Borja ran as a democratic socialist on a clean government platform. He lived simply and ran what was considered a relatively clean administration.

As throughout Latin America, the military plays a powerful role in Ecuador. It controls a fair share of the economy and tends to look down on police forces as inferior and corrupt. The Ecuadorian military's main security concern was its long-standing border war with Peru. Both countries claimed a big chunk of the Amazon rainforest east of Ecuador. Every year or so the two sides would face off along the disputed border and erupt into a skirmish or worse, sometimes resulting in fatalities. The Ecuadorian military was concerned to see the U.S. offering military support and materiel to Peru, even if intended for anti-narcotics purposes. Ecuador saw U.S. aid as favoring the Peruvian cause and strengthening Peru militarily. They were eager for U.S. military support and ties and signed on to the anti-drug effort, despite their dim view of it. Some years later, I was involved in the resolution of that border war.

Q: Talking about the air war and, you know, I mean-

THAYER: Have you interviewed Luigi Einaudi yet?

Q: No, I haven't.

THAYER: Luigi finally brought the border dispute to resolution when we were both on the Policy Planning Staff a decade later. My Harvard classmate Jamil Mahuad was president of Ecuador at the time and closed the deal. It ended the dispute and awarded the land to Peru, which helped to seal Jamil's fate. He was later ousted in a coup.

Basically, the Ecuadorian military didn't want drugs tainting their country but otherwise they didn't see drugs as their problem. What they wanted was U.S. equipment and training. We had to remind them it was not for their dispute with Peru. We wanted them to focus on the anti-narcotics effort.

Q: Well okay, well how did you focus on that? What could you do?

THAYER: The lack of rapport and cooperation between the Ecuadorian military and the anti-narcotics police hamstrung anti-drug efforts. They barely communicated, and had made little progress against drug traffickers, money laundering, or intercepting precursor chemicals. We wanted them to set up a riverine program to interdict chemicals, drugs, and money moving through Ecuador by river. We wanted them to beef up controls and monitoring at the ports and borders. We wanted them to step up intelligence collection and move against trafficking and money laundering networks. And we wanted them to coordinate anti-drug operations with us and neighboring Peru and Colombia.

Shortly after I arrived, I decided I would travel by boat up one of the main tributaries in the eastern Amazon jungle to get a better idea of the drug transit problem and how riverine operations would work. I duly informed the presidential adviser and the head of the anti-narcotics police of my plans. When I arrived at the river to rent a boat, actually a motorized dugout canoe, both of them showed up. As I thought, neither of them wanted the new NAS chief off patrolling the river on her own. It began to rain. So we three ended up spending hours together in the rain, getting to know each other.

Q: Well. What, I mean, the fact that you went in a dugout would mean that there really- were the smugglers using dugouts too or were they, I mean-

THAYER: Smugglers would be using fast boats. Or hiring locals to move product in canoes. My intention was not to chase after smugglers, it was to get these two key people together. I suspected they would come, if for no more reason than not to let the other get a head start with the new NAS chief. Col. Almeida was new to his job. I learned later that his predecessor, Col. Mario Montesinos, told him that if he played his cards right, he could “do well” in the job. (Three years later, Col. Montesinos was arrested for taking payments and supplying arms to drug traffickers.) We discussed the realities of Ecuador and how we could strengthen the Ecuadorian anti-drug police and military to cooperate together and with the DEA. I explained the kinds of support they could get from State and from the U.S. military. It was a productive day. We set up joint programs, goals, timelines, and regular consultations to assess progress. DEA and the U.S. military stepped up training and intelligence cooperation. Equipment started arriving.

Q: Well, how, in a way, how vicious were the drug lords in Ecuador? Because we certainly know how they were in Colombia, where I doubt if you could have tried to do something like that. I mean, drug lords are just, you know, they kill people, you know, just on the spur of the moment.

THAYER: Ecuador was smaller, less violent. It didn’t have a history of armed rebel groups and drug mafias like Colombia and Peru. It didn’t produce coca or significant quantities of cocaine. Ecuador survived by accommodating. My dad, an FBI agent from St. Paul, used to say Al Capone and the Chicago mafia had an understanding with St. Paul city authorities that as long as they didn’t engage in criminal and violent behavior, St. Paul would look the other way when they came through. St. Paul was reserved for the mob’s R&R. I think Ecuador played that kind of role. It stayed under the radar.

The big drug lord in Ecuador was Jose Hugo Reyes Torres. Reyes Torres owned extensive properties in Quito and ranches in the valley. He was believed to be connected to the Cali cartel, but seemed untouchable. His daughter was in my son’s elementary school class.

Q: Well, how about the judicial system? Were we- One of the big problems, of course, in these countries such as Colombia and all, was that you couldn't get a conviction because the drug lords would kill the judges or go after their families. How stood things in Ecuador?

THAYER: There weren't a lot of prosecutions or convictions of drug traffickers. Ecuadorian criminal investigators and judicial authorities were poorly paid and equipped, and likely fearful of upsetting the wrong people. Reyes Torres kept a low profile. As soon as I arrived, I made a point of getting to know the Attorney General Gustavo Medina de Lopez. He had authority over drug prosecutions and warrants, and along with the Interior Minister, would be instrumental in making the call on any serious anti-narcotics operations we wanted to conduct. I occasionally spoke with President Borja, mostly when Randy and I were invited to Borja family events, a Sunday family lunch, his daughter's wedding at the presidential palace. President Borja knew what I was doing at the embassy and was supportive, which paved the way for my access to other senior government officials. Once I got to know Attorney General Medina de Lopez, I invited him to visit the U.S. on an International Visitors Program grant. The Attorney General was trying to root out corruption in the judiciary and police and was eager to take a prestigious trip as a guest of the U.S. government. IVP grants were usually for a month. He managed to get away for two weeks. I went as his escort-interpreter, as I had with the Brazilian congresswoman 15 years earlier.

The Department set up an ambitious program. We met with top U.S. anti-narcotics officials at the White House, the ONDCP, State, DEA, the Pentagon, Justice, and U.S. Customs. We went to New York to visit the Coast Guard on Governors Island, and to ports to see how drug inspections were being done with dogs and sophisticated equipment. I had told trip planners that I wanted the Attorney General to see a drug treatment center, so he could see firsthand how drugs were ravaging U.S. society and why the U.S. was working so hard to reduce drug flows into our country. It wasn't until we got to New York that the State Department called with some last minute options to visit a treatment center. I chose one run by the Catholic Church, without much thought as to the details. It turned out to be in the Bronx.

The next morning I suggested that due to the hour the subway would be faster than taking a taxi. Big mistake. The Attorney General and I had been together 24 hours a day for almost two weeks. We got on well and he trusted my judgment. The previous night he had wanted to go to Radio City Music Hall. I was hoping to see the recently-opened "Phantom of the Opera". I got him tickets to see his Rockettes and managed to snag myself a last minute ticket to Phantom. He was grateful.

Anyway, we left our hotel near East 42nd Street and headed up to the Bronx by subway. The attorney general was short, compact, and fastidiously dressed, with an elegantly tailored pinstripe suit and fine matching alligator shoes and briefcase. I had lived in New York briefly but knew nothing about the Bronx or how the subway branches off. I assumed we could get off anywhere and take a cab the rest of the way. As we went further north, the passengers thinned out and onboarding riders became rougher looking. I decided we should get out. We were the only people to get out at that stop. Coming up the metal steps, we emerged into a war zone. The streets were mostly vacant with boarded up tenements covered in graffiti, cracked sidewalks, chain link fences topped with concertina wire. Piles of rubble, abandoned wrecked cars, and syringes were scattered everywhere. A few people loitered hazily in the distance. No cabs anywhere.

The Attorney General went pale. He wanted to cancel the visit and go back to the city. I looked everywhere for a cab. Finally I hailed a gypsy cab. It brought us to a run-down building that looked almost as bad as the others, cracked windows, rusty chain link fence. The driver insisted it was the Catholic Diocese drug treatment center. I told the Attorney General to wait in the cab while I checked to make sure we were in the right place. He refused to stay in the cab alone and trotted after me, his eyes wide. The cab took off, leaving us there.

Our trip to this drug-infested neighborhood was the ultimate bonding experience. The director met us at the door and proudly showed us around the treatment center. He was clearly impressed to have the Attorney General from Ecuador there, and wanted to show us everything. He started by showing us around the center facilities, counseling sessions, and treatment rooms. He then steered us toward the clinic to see where sick and overdose cases were treated. The Attorney General clutched his briefcase to his chest and silently shook his head, but we followed obediently. The clinic looked and smelled terrible. Waiting addicts were slumped over metal folding chairs lining the corridors. The medical staff stared at the neatly-dressed Ecuadorian Attorney General with astonishment. We left soon after, the director thanking us profusely for coming before calling us a taxi. The Attorney General was silent for a good while, then said: “I get it.”

We flew back to Ecuador, where our friendship deepened. Sometimes he would host me and my family at a weekend outing at the ministry’s recreational club. He liked to play volleyball. Similarly my police and military contacts would occasionally invite us to their clubs for games and a meal. The mounted police arranged for my sons to take horseback riding lessons with some of their kids, which we paid for. The Attorney General told everyone about his trip to the U.S., especially the visit to the treatment center. He began speaking out about the dangers of drugs and drug trafficking, and how important it was to keep Ecuador from falling victim to drugs. He proved very helpful as we moved to step up anti-drug operations and prosecutions. Eventually we took down the biggest trafficking family in Ecuador.

Q: Well, I mean, I take it that we- you must have had problems of people- We have Defense Department, we have drug enforcement agencies, the FBI; you know, people coming into this place sort of being under your wing and all and sort of pounding the table, you know, hot and full of piss and vinegar ready to really do something and you’re in a place that’s essentially still pretty laid back about the whole situation because there wasn’t much you could do. You must have had trouble sort of keeping them from getting too active or upsetting things.

THAYER: The anti-narcotics business attracts a lot of high energy folks. We were a good team. The military attaché and Mil Group commander did a lot to strengthen relations between the Ecuadorian military and police and respond to their requirements. The intelligence folks were discreet and effective. Importantly, the embassy, along with our military and DEA colleagues, saw our mission as a diplomatic effort. We resisted calling it a war on drugs. Addiction, crime, and corruption are human vices, always with us, and neither the war metaphor nor tools of war fit. Basically, we sought to model how the Ecuadorians should work together with us and among themselves. I traveled outside of Quito as often as I could get away. I visited foul-smelling oil towns in the Amazon jungle to meet with local authorities, and military and police border outposts right out of the wild west. The U.S. military was forbidden to go to the border for security reasons so I represented the U.S. As a former human rights person, I made a point to visit police stations and jails, asking about informants and suspects and how they were being treated, what kinds of information they were providing. It was really interesting work. Talking to folks on the front lines helped draw us together and convince the Ecuadorians we were serious about getting results.

One weekend Col. Almeida arranged for me to bring my sons on a narrow gauge train ride along the northeastern province of Ecuador. The train had few tourists but was full of local peasants piled high with baskets of food, green bananas, and live chickens. It rained heavily and the train derailed at some point, leaving us stuck for the night. We ended up at a tiny military outpost. I remember there was a warped pool table where the Ecuadorian conscripts congregated in the evening. We all took a turn playing pool under kerosene lamps buzzing with gigantic bugs. I had an improbably good night, winning several rounds of pool much to the surprise of my boys. We also visited a speck of a village La Tola on the Esmeraldas Coast. The dirt road was flanked by regularly staked poles, presumably to carry phone and utility lines into the village whenever funds permitted. The jail was a thatch hut on top of some poles, accessible only by a ladder. We saw high up that someone was inside but declined the jailer’s offer to bring a ladder so we could climb up to take a look.

As part of a parents’ career day program at my son’s elementary school, I was invited to speak about my job. Rather than talk of drug interdiction and raids, I studied up on drug control statistics and dangers. To make it more interesting I added a role play on saying no to drugs. I was in front of the classroom and the teacher was in the back when I described the role play scenario to the class. I picked one student to play a student, another a parent, another a teacher. I figured for the drug dealer role, a girl wouldn’t be as intimidating or likely to show off as a boy so I picked a pretty dark-haired little girl. I set up the group to play their parts. It was going fine when I noticed the teacher slowly working her way up to the front of the room. The kids were doing well, refusing drugs from the dealer and alerting their parents and teacher. Finally the actual teacher sidled up next to me and whispered in my ear: Do you know who you picked to be the drug dealer? It turned out to be Reyes Torres, the youngest daughter of the biggest drug family in

Ecuador. I was taken aback, but the kids seemed oblivious and were engrossed in their role play. I moved on quickly to another scenario, fortunately with no damage done.

I hired retired DEA agent Tom Zepeda as my adviser. He was a gruff, weathered Mexican-American from Texas, six feet tall, dressed in cowboy boots and jeans with a heavy turquoise and silver belt. Tom was an expert on Latin America and law enforcement, and a wonderful storyteller with decades of experience. He could tell at a glance who was talking straight and who wasn't. We did everything together. He came to my meetings with government ministers and we jointly conducted operational briefings for our law enforcement and military counterparts. We were a bit of a curiosity. I think it gave us both credibility.

Once a journalist from the Newhouse news syndicate came down as part of a team to profile America's "war on drugs" in the Andes. He said he had heard about us--the drug-fighting Mom and DEA grandfather in Ecuador--and wanted to see what made us tick. He ended up spending several days with us and wrote a three-part cover series. The journalist captured well the differences of working in Ecuador from elsewhere in the Andean region, and the value of Tom's and my relationship. He ended the piece by quoting Tom on how working in Ecuador differed from his previous DEA work. "Problems are different here and require different ways of doing things. Yvonne has taught me to be more of a diplomat and I've taught her to be more of a cop."

Q: Well, were we pushing anything except going out and catching, what do you call it, laboratories or-?

THAYER: We were looking for labs, for chemicals. We set up surveillance operations at the ports and border crossings and beefed up the riverine interdiction program. The police did nighttime raids with equipment, boats, and night vision goggles that we provided. Eventually they conducted operations jointly with the Ecuadorian military in more dangerous areas. Shortly after I left Ecuador, a joint riverine operation on the border was ambushed from the Colombian side and a dozen Ecuadorians were killed. We learned later that they had not followed the full security protocols. It was hard. I was familiar with several of the men who were killed. Ecuador was not a big producer of drugs, and our aim wasn't so much to interdict large quantities of drugs as to strengthen Ecuadorian resolve and controls and to dissuade traffickers from moving drugs, chemicals, and money through Ecuador.

Q: How did you fit with the rest of the embassy?

THAYER: I was on the country team and was well-supported by the front office, while enjoying a lot of independence. As NAS director, I had a separate budget, travel allowance, and staff. I went to joint meetings at SOUTHCOM, escorted Ecuadorian anti-drug officials to the U.S., participated in consultations in the Joint Interagency Task Force in Key West, the Army Intelligence Center at Fort Huachuca. I traveled to

Colombia, Peru, Bolivia, and Venezuela to coordinate with our embassies and fellow NAS directors. On one trip to Colombia, I went by helicopter to visit several drug laboratories and coca-growing fields. The workers had fled but coca leaves were still soaking in precursor chemicals in big plastic basins. In Bolivia our Ambassador Bob Gelbard advised me that coca tea was a good commonly-used antidote to altitude sickness in the 12,000-foot high capital of La Paz. I was horrified once back in Quito to find a few leftover coca teabags still in my coat pocket. Ambassador Holwill was interested and helpful and his successor, another political appointee Paul Lambert, was equally supportive. I always reported fully what I was doing, kept Washington informed, and got a lot of freedom. The embassy had many senior visitors from the State Department and other agencies, occasional staffdels and codels, an embassy inspection. The anti-narcotics program was always a major topic of interest.

I was fortunate to have contacts with senior Ecuadorian officials, in part through Randy's family connections, but my focus was always on the drug issue so I didn't get in anyone's way. My tour ended with our busting the biggest drug family in Ecuador, which we did with the help of the president and the attorney general.

Q: Well, why don't we talk about that the next time?

Alright. Today is the 8th of September, 2008, with Yvonne Thayer. And Yvonne, let's- you left Ecuador when.

THAYER: I left Ecuador in the summer of 1992.

Q: Let me ask you a question; I'm afraid I know the precise answer but when you came back, I mean, here you were, one a woman, two fairly new type of job and that is a narcotics officer, getting out and paddling up rivers and flying around and, you know, I mean, really- but learning an awful lot and being quite effective in the narcotics control. Did anybody ask you about this, how you did it? Were you debriefed? Did your experience pass on to anyone else?

THAYER: My tour in Ecuador ended with the takedown of the biggest drug family in Ecuador, the Reyes Torres family. As for lessons learned, I think generally the State Department does not do a very good job at compiling or evaluating lessons learned, passing experience and knowledge from one officer to another. We rush on to our next assignment, without much debriefing. Often there's no overlap with our successors. That said, there was a lot of interest in Washington about the dismantling of the Reyes Torres network. In fact there was some concern beforehand whether I or my family might be in danger from the raid since I was the face of the embassy's anti-narcotics office.

Q: Well, let's go back to the takedown of the family.

THAYER: The operation had been long planned by Ecuadorian and U.S. anti-drug teams. We had secretly wire-tapped the family for years, looking for an opening. As my departure approached, I urged the Ecuadorians not to wait until after I left. I had been the anti-narcotics chief for three years and wanted it done on my watch. More importantly, information showed some senior government, military, and banking officials were implicated and we were anxious the operation not be compromised or derailed before we could get it off the ground. A domestic abuse charge provided additional grounds for a warrant. President Borja gave the okay, Attorney General Medina approved the warrants, and the Interior Minister ordered the raids. On June 19 DEA-supported Ecuadorian police coordinated raids of the family's properties in Quito, Guayaquil, and their Hacienda San Antonio in Santo Domingo de los Colorados. Dozens of police surrounded Reyes Torres' Quito mansion, not far from my home, arresting him and some 40 associates. They seized caches of sophisticated weapons and radio equipment, and found an estimated $100 million in assets, including luxury cars, carpets, wine, and television sets. Later dozens more people were arrested. Documents captured in the raids showed the Guayaquil police chief was on the take. Col. Almeida's predecessor as the president's anti-narcotics adviser Col. Mario Montesinos was arrested for providing arms to the traffickers for money. Investigators froze hundreds of bank accounts, including that of the Under Secretary for Defense. The general manager of the army-owned bank was arrested on charges of money laundering. The army bank was eventually shut down.

The operation was a major shock in Ecuador. Many things had to fall in place to make it happen. The government had pledged to reduce corruption and cooperate with us on anti-narcotics. We built the trust and provided the tools to make it happen. I credit the President and Attorney General for their courageous leadership.

Q: when you took him to the garden spots of the Bronx.

THAYER: We had built close relationships and enabled the Ecuadorians to work effectively. Ultimately it was the government's success.

Q: Well, I would think, I mean, obviously the Ecuadorian government had to do the arrests and all-

THAYER: The prosecutions, confiscation of assets, investigations of the banks, everything. The Attorney General was key to all that.

Q: -and you know, a drug family has so many connections everybody that I think it'd be so hard to do this and arrange an operation like this in secret.

THAYER: The fallout out continued for years. Reyes Torres and associates were convicted and jailed and their assets were confiscated. Many years later a different administration overturned the findings and restored their assets then another returned them to jail. When the U.S. returned the Panama Canal in 1999 and relocated SOUTHCOM to southern Florida, Ecuador agreed to let U.S. drug surveillance flights operate out of its air base in Manta. In any event, I left Quito on a high note. I was probably debriefed more on my Ecuador tour than any other.

Q: Well, jolly for the system at last.

THAYER: Ecuador is a good example of the variety of work we do in the Foreign Service. INM was creating a specialized cone for anti-narcotics officers and encouraged me to join. But I was ready to move on. I saw drugs as a social, health, economic, and law enforcement problem that required a combination of different approaches, including more demand reduction in the U.S. I doubted we could ever succeed in reducing the amount of drugs available to the U.S. public enough that drugs would become expensive enough to deter users. Drugs and addictions are fungible; you shut one down, another takes its place. I was disheartened by the increasing criminalization of drug use in the U.S. Disproportionate sentences for cocaine and crack possession, three strikes you're out, mandatory sentencing, and growth of the privatized prison industry seemed the wrong way to deal with the drug problem. It seems that once we grab onto a problem, we throw lots of resources and laws at it without thinking much about the consequences. Then we lose interest and go on to something else. On the plus side, the U.S. eventually put several billion dollars into Colombia to help it overcome decades of political turmoil and drug violence. It didn't solve the drug problem but it saved Colombia from being a failed state run by drug criminals.

Q: Well then, you came back when now?

THAYER: I came back in 1992 after a three-year tour. I was promoted to Foreign Service 01 officer.

Q: That's equivalent to colonel, by the way.

THAYER: At some point the political counselor left early, and there was some discussion whether I should leave the NAS job and seek the political counselor job. It would have been a good decision from a career point of view. I had transferred from the economic to the political cone several years earlier and a political counselor job would have been a good move. But my NAS job was rewarding and high stakes. By that time my husband had reconnected with his Ecuadorian roots. He found a house, bought a farm, and stayed in Ecuador. I went back to Washington with our two sons and became a single working mom.

Q: How old were your boys?

THAYER: In '92, they would have been nearing 13 and 15.

Q: Well, those are the simple years. You know, a couple of boys in their early teens, yes, no problems.

THAYER: It was an adjustment. We went back to our old house in Cleveland Park and enrolled the boys in school. They quickly reconnected with their friends. We lived a pretty gilded life in Quito, had a lovely house, live-in help, private schools, tennis and horseback-riding lessons, family friends. But security was tight, our house was surrounded by a high fence and no one could go anywhere without a car or driver. I think they felt constrained and I assumed that if we went on to Paraguay or someplace similar, it would be more of the same. Randy had moved around a lot as a boy, switching schools and countries, attending boarding school. Having grown up in a big family in the Midwest, I felt the boys should be able to complete high school in one place and in their country. They didn't make a big deal about it, but we went back. One started his sophomore year in high school; the other eighth grade. I decided I would stay for five years to get both boys through high school.

Q: So what were you doing to start out in Washington? What were you-?

THAYER: The Soviet Union had collapsed in '89, Desert Storm happened in '91, and Clinton was about to win the presidency so lots had changed. My younger sister Maureen was in the Army Reserves and had deployed to Desert Storm as a civil affairs specialist. Kuwait was liberated from Iraq's Saddam Hussein so quickly that she did not end up dealing with civilian displacement and refugees. I was proud of her.

I was hoping for an office director job and got one, as director of bilateral affairs in the Human Rights Bureau. My early assignment as human rights officer in Argentina had a big impact on me. I liked working on issues like refugees, anti-narcotics, human rights, managing programs with budgets and specific goals. My colleague, the director of multilateral affairs, dealt with the UN, the High Commission for Human Rights, the OAS (Organization of American States), and other international agencies and ngos. My job, as director of bilateral affairs, included compiling the Department's annual human rights country reports, the same document I contributed to while in Argentina 20 years earlier. Congress required the report, which served as the source for human rights criteria governing votes on loans, export credits, arms sales and military training. My office drafted the reports in-house. A few years later a large team of contract staff, mostly retired FSOs, was hired to compile it. I think we did reports on 187 countries that year.

Q: Well, not only the State Department but the United States. With all our faults, all our warts, we're the only one that sort of takes a stand, which has really changed the playing field all over the world. I mean, they're all talking about human rights now. You can't duck the issue.

THAYER: The U.S. was the first to take a stand for human rights globally. It was a complicated but accepted part of our foreign policy through different administrations under both parties.

Q: And the Carter Administration pushed it harder but it was actually mandated by Congress.

THAYER: Congress mandated it before Carter was elected but he raised its profile. Patt Derian proved formidable, especially in Argentina. Handling of human rights varied widely through successive administrations but the core principal to promote U.S. values and human rights was institutionalized. By 1992, the annual human rights country reports had played an important role for nearly 20 years.

Q: I was- I had lunch, dinner, I think I mentioned the other day with Tex Harris and Patt Derian and next to me was a woman, Debra, I can't think of her last name, but she is Argentina who at the age of 15 spent five years in an Argentinean jail. Her brother was killed, he was 17, by the- - She's in her forties now. She's an American citizen. But she- It wasn't Timmerman but it was a Jewish family and she was 15 and her brother was 17, was killed right away.

THAYER: Argentina's dirty war still reverberates today.

Q: I mean, we were the only people to stand out and start calling it. With all the warts and everything else I still- I happened to be in Seoul, South Korea, at the time, and we were very nervous about this because Park Chung-hee was the dictator and he was not a friend of human rights but at the same time we had something like 40 very active North Korean divisions within 35 miles of us, which tended to make- didn't want to see the government dissolve.

THAYER: The law mandated cutting off military assistance to human rights abusers. A lot of people did not want that to happen. The requirement could be waived, and regularly was, in the Middle East, South Korea, and elsewhere where the U.S. decided we had higher priorities. The Southern Cone was one place where we made a stand, at least for a while. We cut off military assistance and vetoed loans there on human rights grounds, later in parts of Central America as well.

Q: Well, let's talk about the human rights bureau when you arrived there.

THAYER: Human rights was a worthy and useful foreign policy goal. The fall of the Soviet Union was precipitated in good part by the rise of Helsinki Watch and Solidarity, movements that grew out of human rights activism. The U.S. "won" the Cold War based on our ideas, values and aspirations, as much as our arsenal. However inconsistent the implementation, the U.S. built a lot of good will for defending human rights of ordinary citizens around the world. Not a few of those citizens eventually became leaders in their countries.

Q: Well, Israel was always a big problem because they were pretty nasty to their subject people.

THAYER: Yes, and in their occupation of Gaza and the West Bank. The annual human rights reports have great credibility. They are widely cited by Congress, the media, and ngos, and are used worldwide by international groups and other governments. We worked hard to be as fair, objective, and thorough as possible on those reports. I've been away from it for a while now, but I think U. S. diplomacy and prestige was overall enhanced by taking a stand for human rights.

Q: Who as your boss and, I mean, you were in the human rights bureau.

THAYER: Patricia Diaz was the Assistant Secretary for Human Rights when I arrived. She was replaced by John Shattuck, a lawyer and Harvard Vice President who had worked for the ACLU. John was widowed and recently remarried to a Wall Street Journal correspondent Ellen Hume. He was personable, open-minded, and tenacious in defending human rights. We admired him a lot. He traveled to some really wretched places. He wanted us to be proactive in promoting human rights, freedom of the press, elections, transparency, and fair judiciaries. In 1983 Congress had created the National Endowment for Democracy and two non-profit organizations, the National Democratic Institute and International Republican Institute, to fund freedom and democracy initiatives worldwide. By the early '90s, Congress was expanding funding for democracy, judicial reform, transparency, and press freedom programs, including through those institutes, ngos and U.S. embassies. The goal was to mainstream human rights, integrate it into countries' thinking and institutions. We worked closely with the regional bureaus, who acknowledged U.S. law mandating human rights. Some were probably happy to have our Assistant Secretary take the lead on those discussions.

In 1994 the Bureau was reorganized to include democracy promotion and labor and renamed the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor Bureau (DRL). John advocated for funds and programs and urged other governments and international organizations to help build democratic institutions. It was a heady time, coming just after the collapse of the Soviet Union when the U.S. was the world's preeminent power and saw itself as a leader in building coalitions for peace and democracy. The Anti-Narcotics Bureau had stepped up funding and programs for judicial reform and judicial security to strengthen prosecution of drug criminals. USAID also got heavily involved in Administration of Justice programs, providing training, equipment, and salary supplements for countries' judicial and law enforcement sectors. DRL ran its own programs. We also had a say in vetting foreign candidates for U.S. military training and civilian police grants. John worked all these angles to make DRL and human rights more of a player on the policy and assistance side.

Besides drafting and negotiating the human rights reports and overseeing democracy and human rights programs, my office staffed many bilateral meetings for John and Deputy Assistant Secretary Nancy Ely-Raphel. We spoke with foreign government officials, media, ngos, and international agencies on U.S. human rights policy and goals. We briefed outgoing U.S. ambassadors and embassy staff passing through Washington. We initiated bilateral human rights dialogues, including with newly-liberated Eastern European countries who were just then shaping their post-Soviet systems of governments. We wanted to provide information, support, and resources for them to build democratic institutions and ties.

Q: Because you had something like 13 or so new countries, just at the time you got there.

THAYER: There was a lot of bipartisan interest in supporting these countries. They had been under the Soviet thumb for so long and were just starting to write constitutions and develop legislative and judicial systems as independent states. The human rights dialogues helped to identify issues and connect people and resources.

Q: What do you mean by a "dialogue"?

THAYER: Most governments didn't have a designated human rights office or counterpart at the time. Meetings might be with a senior official in the presidency, foreign office, or judiciary, or someone in the parliament, media or ngo world who wanted to learn about U.S. human rights policy and incorporate such principles and systems in their countries. A number of countries, certainly the Czech Republic with Vaclav Havel and Poland with Solidarity, made human rights a priority and sought out U.S. input and support.

Q: Well, can you think of an example or two of one of your dialogues? Or also, mainly on the human rights reports any sort of conflicts of interest or something that you got involved in within the department?

THAYER: Israel was always a difficult topic.

Q: Did you get involved with Israel or was that sort of taken out of your hands and settled above your pay grade?

THAYER: Determining the final language on Israel was above my pay grade. My office was charged with checking facts, seeking additional sources to corroborate information, ensure objectivity, and fine tune accurate language.

Q*: I would think that you would have a problem there of, you know, so many people would have an agenda. I mean, obviously the Israeli files, or something, would try to downplay it but you also had the Palestinian files, you know, who are trying to drag out every perfidious thing that the Israelis did to the Palestinians, you know, and I mean on both sides. I mean, you had people, I think within the Foreign Service, who had their own agendas based on reflex action or something.*

THAYER: We worked hard to ensure the reports were thorough, verified, and honest. Some had classified annexes but the overall report was unclassified and released to the public. No one thought U.S. assistance to Israel for example or Egypt would be reduced under any circumstances. The process had waivers to get around levels of aid, military aid, and votes subject to human rights performance. Those decisions were tough and implementation was hardly consistent. My job was to provide an accurate picture. We might work through dozens of edits and disputes over how something was handled in a report. I would try to resolve issues with the relevant regional desk or office and we would turn over remaining issues for John to address directly with his counterpart at the assistant secretary and sometimes the Secretary level. Reports on “rogue” states or countries the U.S. disapproved of always piled on a lot of criticism. We tried to be objective and even-handed there as well. At times ambassadors or assistant secretaries would be upset if they felt that the country they worked on was being described in an unfavorable light. We had to juggle those differences.

Q: How about the United Kingdom and the IRA in Northern Ireland?

THAYER: That was another one done at the Secretary level. I recall Jean Smith, the Kennedy sister, was U.S. ambassador to Ireland at the time, yes ‘93-‘98. She was very pro-Irish and blasted England’s record. There was a lot of tension over that. Once the reports came out, usually in January, some countries or their embassies in Washington would express outrage at how they were characterized in the report. Saudi Arabia and Russia, for example, would protest their reports, and criticize things going on in the U.S. Some counties declared they were going to write a report on the U.S. human rights record.

Q: Be our guest.

THAYER: Exactly what we said: be our guest. Increasingly the UN, OAS and other organizations started country-specific programs to help promote human rights. We also sought to document in the reports areas of improvement and countries’ efforts to address human rights. We might cite a reduction in the number of persons held in jail without charge, or journalists jailed. Or steps to protect women’s rights or improve prison conditions. Congress came to look at the human rights reports as a catchall for countries’ performance on other topics. Trafficking, mainly of women and girls, became a big issue and a section was added on that, also treatment of gays and lesbians, the disabled, religious persecution. Eventually Congress mandated separate special envoys, offices, and reports to address those issues in detail, complete with programs and sanctions.

Q: And it particularly came with the collapse of the Soviet Union, so many like the Ukraine, Belarus and all; I mean, there were an awful lot of women looking for employment from these countries into Europe and much of this was fake employment. I mean, it was really prostitution.

THAYER: Horrific stories were coming out about trafficking, which led to a renewed look at the sex industry in Asia and elsewhere. The U.S. has a big trafficking problem of its own. In any event, many social and criminal problem areas started getting swept up into the reports, which put more pressure on embassies and desk officers to research, report, and assess huge amounts of complex information. We were frequently up on the Hill. We had a lot of hearings, testimony on the report itself, on individual countries, and on specific issues that Congress wanted accounted for. Nancy and John testified often, which involved a lot of work on our part, drafting and clearing testimony, practice sessions and murder boards, follow-up questions and tasks. Often the human rights bureau was called to testify along with a regional bureau. Congress expected DRL to critique the government's human rights performance or democracy failings, and the country officer would explain why the relationship was so critical and needed to be supported. These things are never black or white. It was a challenge to coordinate.

Q: Tajikistan.

THAYER: And Uzbekistan. We had to work these things out. I think Congress liked to have the human rights bureau testify, to see if they could generate conflict. Nancy was terrific, John too. They were calm, objective, and fact-based. They wouldn't allow themselves to be drawn into internecine battles. Later I came back to the Bureau, and worked with Harold Koh, the Yale Law School dean, another impressive figure.

Q: I'm just thinking, then you moved on or is there- can you think of any sort of specifics of one of these disputes or something? Did you get into them? For example, did you do the untouchables of India, which is-?

THAYER: We reported on the caste system and the untouchables in India. Their treatment was well documented elsewhere. Brazil's report included a lot on terrible prison conditions and treatment of prisoners. That was a problem in a number of countries.

Q: Well, how about in Brazil, the death squads of the police when cleaning up the-

THAYER: The favelas.

Q: And the homeless kids they used to-

THAYER: Yes, that was covered. It was also already pretty well documented. We had disputes with Inter-American Affairs (ARA) over Haiti's record. Aristide was elected then ousted out in a coup. I dealt with that in my next job.

Q: I watched this thing where Aristide was the darling of, particularly the Black Caucus and others. But he wasn't really very nice once he got in power.

THAYER: Aristide was restored to power in 1994 by the Clinton Administration. I had a big part in that. It is another example of how domestic politics shape foreign policy.

Q: You just roll over.

THAYER: Like in the 2003 Iraqi invasion when the State Department's expertise and counsel were ignored.

Q: Well, I think the problem about politics, particularly politics over which people really have damn little control, foreign politics, it leaves an awful lot of room for the bombast *and you know, strong opinions of people because it doesn't- and with the nice whipping boy and you can claim that you have the solution.*

THAYER: I've been reading Colin Powell's biography, with all the criticism of the State Department and how it hasn't fixed the world. How Powell was out-maneuvered by the White House to justify its rush into the Iraq War in 2003. I wasn't in the State Department at the time, but it brings up how the State Department and Foreign Service are a kind of whipping boy for whatever Congress or the Administration want done or are unhappy about. They pass a new law or policy, demanding that something abroad be fixed, threatening to cut aid or deny votes to force a change in behavior. Often it doesn't work, because countries have their own histories and priorities and viewpoints. Diplomats are supposed to understand these factors and explain them to decision-makers to help them shape policy. Unwelcome information can result in criticism of the Department, or a specific office or officer, kill the messenger. We seem to thrive on conflict and bombast. I'm not sure that will change unless we change perception about what matters.

Q: Well, you know, humankind may change .I have to take off in a minute, but you mentioned it got more programmatic. What are you talking about?

THAYER: I mean that besides dialogues and writing reports we moved into a more operational phase where we got money to develop and implement programs. It was a bit like USAID but with the focus on human rights and democracy promotion. These had mixed results, not unlike our anti-narcotics efforts, but with far fewer resources. I was glad I had three years in Ecuador running the anti-narcotics program. It is valuable for diplomats to develop program skills, learn to set objectives, manage budgets and people, evaluate results, take risks. Political officers don't often get program and management experience because the emphasis is on reporting and analysis.

Q: Okay, Yvonne, we'll pick this up the next time, and we're talking about '94 are we?

THAYER: In '94 I moved to the Policy Planning staff.

Alright, today is the 20th of October, 2008, with Yvonne Thayer. Yvonne, you went to policy planning when?

THAYER: After two years in the Human Rights Bureau, I was assigned to the Policy Planning Staff (S/P) in '94. It was early in the first Clinton administration. Warren Christopher was secretary of state and Strobe Talbot was deputy secretary. Sam Lewis was just leaving Policy Planning and Strobe brought Jim Steinberg over from INR to replace him.

Q: Okay. Policy planning can be anything- I've talked to Warren Zimmerman, for example, who was there at one point and he was basically a speech writer for William Rogers, and William Rogers left him with the instructions, he didn't want to get him on *the front page of the paper. But anyway, what was policy planning when you were there and then what was your role?*

THAYER: Strobe Talbot was a Yale classmate and Rhodes Scholar with Bill Clinton, an editor at Time magazine. I think the Secretary and Deputy found the State Department large and cumbersome, and preferred working through a smaller, closer group of aides, which Jim provided through S/P. Speech writing was done largely in PA (Public Affairs) with input from S/P. I came on to cover the Latin America portfolio, where my experience in human rights, refugees, and anti-narcotics came in handy. Just as I arrived, Haitian and Cuban migration crises erupted. Both were ARA issues and political minefields of great concern to the White House.

Q: It was basically the White House versus the Miami Cubans.

THAYER: Alec Watson was Assistant Secretary for ARA at the time, a career FSO, great guy. I had visited him and his family when he was consul in Salvador da Bahia and I was working for Newsweek 25 years earlier. Cuba is the quintessential political issue. In '94 the Cuban economy was tanking, following the loss of Soviet subsidies after the USSR collapsed. Castro called it the "special period" and responded to demonstrations, hunger, and unrest with repression. In August '94 he opened the safety valve, letting some 30,000 Cubans take to the sea. For decades Cubans had enjoyed special legal rights in the U.S. Cubans who arrived on American soil or were picked up by the Coast Guard or anyone and delivered to the U.S. were immediately admitted. Clinton had been governor of Arkansas during the Mariel boatlift of 1980, when some 125,000 Cubans, including criminals and mentally ill, were encouraged by Castro to flee to the U.S. by boat. Thousands ended up confined and rioted in Arkansas' Fort Chaffee at heavy political cost to Clinton. He wanted no replay of Mariel.

About the same time, many thousands of Haitians were fleeing to the U.S. Leftist former priest Jean-Bertrand Aristide, Haiti's first democratically-elected president, took office in February 1991 and was overthrown in a coup six months later. Attacks on his followers and economic collapse led many Haitians to try to escape to the U.S. Thousands were picked up at sea. Many were relocated to a refugee camp hastily set up in Guantanamo where they applied for asylum. Few Haitian asylum claims were accepted. Most Haitians were determined to be economic migrants and repatriated involuntarily back to Haiti. The stark contrast in the treatment of Cubans and of Haitians seeking refuge, blatantly racist and discriminatory, became politically untenable. Clinton had pledged during his campaign to return Aristide to power, in good part to justify repatriating the Haitians.

So my first months on the job were focused on efforts to restore Aristide to power in Haiti and negotiate agreements with Haiti and Cuba to stem the outflow of migrants. Aristide had relocated to Washington DC, close to supporters, including the Congressional Black Caucus. That fall negotiations with Haiti's junta leader Gen. Raoul Cedras to restore Aristide to power were faltering and a U.S. military invasion was imminent. Former President Carter, Senator Sam Nunn, and retired Gen. Colin Powell made a last ditch effort to persuade Cedras to step aside, flying to Haiti for talks literally moments before the invasion was set to begin. Aristide was escorted back to Haiti as president in October 1994, and the U.S. military mission was replaced by a UN Mission in March 1995.

Q: And it left the Clinton Administration wide open to, and it was basically a political thing, but wide open to racial discrimination. You're Cuban, you're in, and if you're a Haitian- On the Cuban thing, there are two things that stick in my mind and I'm sure of the dates and they may have- there's was one, the shooting down of two of the planes that were scattering leaflets which were part of this Cuban exile thing and the other was, I want to say Evian, or whatever it is, it was-

THAYER: Both happened later. With Cuba there's always something. The Brothers to the Rescue were a group of Miami-based Cuban exiles who would fly small planes over the 90 miles of the Gulf of Florida, dropping leaflets and looking for Cubans in rafts or makeshift boats. When they spotted someone, they would summon private boats or the Coast Guard to pick people up and bring them to the U.S. This served to encourage Cubans to escape by sea and was a major source of tension. Many died trying to escape in rafts, inner tubes and flimsy boats. In February 1996 the Cuban Air Force shot down two of the Brothers' Cessnas, killing four pilots. The planes had dropped leaflets over Havana but were shot down over international waters. Congressional outrage prompted Clinton to sign the Helms-Burton Act, which further tightened economic sanctions on Cuba and mandated stiff pre-conditions for any future opening with Cuba. The Elian Gonzales custody controversy happened in 2000.

Q: You were fortunate then.

THAYER: Coincidentally the Elian case involved my later boss on the Policy Planning staff, Greg Craig. Greg, a prominent DC lawyer with ties to the Democratic Party was my Cleveland Park neighbor. He became Elian Gonzales's lawyer. For a while Elian stayed at the Youth for Understanding headquarters on Wisconsin Avenue near where I live. Greg negotiated his return to his father in Cuba, supported by the Clinton administration.

With the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989 and Democrats' return to power in 1993, some thought it was time to move toward normalizing relations with Cuba. Republicans had successfully cultivated the Florida anti-Castro vote for years. After 35 years, Castro was still in power in Cuba. But the Soviet threat and influence had waned, Castro had sent some conciliatory signals about anti-narcotics cooperation, and mid-western farmers were eager to sell grain and agricultural goods to Cuba. My old boss in Argentina Wayne Smith was still generating op-eds, reports, classes, and Cuba study trips to encourage opening relations with Cuba. He and others asked why the U.S. was working so hard to cultivate ties with our arch-enemy Russia and formerly communist Eastern European countries, while punishing little Cuba right in our backyard.

Q: It was politics. I mean: -it was Florida.

THAYER: So it goes. Diplomats are trained to build relationships and advance U.S. interests but some issues become so politically entrenched that they override common sense.

Q: Particularly when the Reagan Administration came in; this is where Senator Jesse Helms' crew was sort of allowed to run wild to begin with.

THAYER: Helms and the Miami Cubans owned Cuba policy. Their opposition kept Castro going. Younger Cuban-Americans were more open minded but had little political clout.

Q: On the policy planning or anywhere maybe on the ______ Security Council on the desk, was there sort of a political type looking after the interests of the Cuban exiles breathing down your neck or did you get this by picking up- because it was done at a much higher level or was there something sort of down there?

THAYER: Politically powerful Miami Cubans and congressional conservatives dictated U.S. policy on Cuba, sidelining the State Department. The handiest way to politicize the Department is to stuff it with political appointees. I've worked with many and many are great. But over time more jobs were being filled with Schedule Cs and special advisor or special envoy positions for pet projects or niche topics to please some political constituency. They can be duplicative and suck up Department resources, while depriving career professionals of key jobs and advancement.

Q: Schedule C is a political appointee.

THAYER: The Policy Planning Staff (S/P) was created in 1947 as the Department's in-house think tank to support the Secretary and take the longer view. Career diplomat George Kennon was its first head. As the staff photos over the years on the office wall show, it started small and grew, increasingly with political appointees. When I was there, we were only two Foreign Service officers and one or two career civilians on staff. Most of the staff were short-term political appointees. They were experts in their fields and the work environment was collegial and fast-paced. But it was less well connected to the rest of the building. Secretary Christopher tended to operate with a small senior circle on the Seventh floor, where his mahogany row offices are located, with S/P just around the corner. In general, S/P summarized big issues into manageable parts and ensured policies were compatible and coordinated within the building and with other stakeholder agencies. We prepared or cleared decision and action memoranda for principals meetings in the Department and at the NSC (National Security Council) and for meetings with foreign officials and heads of state. I worked closely with the ARA (American Republics) and other bureaus, attended ARA senior staff meetings, and ultimately cleared everything ARA produced for the Seventh floor. At times I helped mediate differences between bureaus. I had to be prepared to brief Jim or principals on issues at any moment. The bureaus are regularly tasked to prepare briefing books for Seventh floor meetings and travel, with historical and issues backgrounders, biographic notes, policy papers, and talking points. The sheer size is overwhelming. Jim would have us distill these papers into key points. ARA and I worked well together but I thought the regional bureaus could fairly ask why so much tasked work was repackaged by Seventh floor staff. Jim invented a useful product he called mega-talkers. These were concise one page papers with bullet talking points for each currently critical issue that senior leaders needed to know about. They could take the unclassified mega-talkers to meetings and media events to ensure consistency and accuracy on U.S. policy. We updated them weekly.

Q: Did you get any feel for the regime of Warren Christopher? Hand on, supervising, strong ideas or what?

THAYER: Warren Christopher was a trim, precise California lawyer with a somewhat stiff demeanor. He had been deputy secretary under Secretary Cyrus Vance during the Carter presidency and was known as an astute negotiator. The previous Secretary was Republican Jim Baker, a wealthy, urbane Texas lawyer and Bush confidant, with high energy and media presence. Christopher was not that comfortable with the press. He spoke and acted deliberately and cautiously, without bringing a lot of attention to himself. I think he saw his role as a responsible steward of U.S. power. The U.S. had won the Cold War. Academics and pundits talked about the end of history, U.S. exceptionalism, and the peace dividend. Clinton's main foreign policy goals were expanding NATO and encouraging peace between Israel and its neighbors. Then Somalia, the Bosnian war and Rwandan genocide erupted, grabbing the headlines and hijacking the agenda. Clinton had a voracious appetite for information and recognition and was popular abroad. But his focus was on domestic issues, mainly the economy and crime, until personal political problems took over much of the energy of his administration, culminating in his impeachment.

Clinton acknowledged his lack of experience in foreign affairs and looked to Christopher as the elder statesman. I remember prepping Christopher for a five nation trip to South America and the Caribbean. Secretaries of State didn't travel much to Latin America so we were glad he agreed to go, to strengthen ties and promote free market economics and trade. He agreed to visit a new Walmart store near Buenos Aires but only reluctantly to shed his suit jacket and tie. We hardly recognized him in a sports shirt. Argentina had been helpful on a number of issues, including cooperation on peaceful uses of nuclear energy, and we rewarded them by designating Argentina a major non-NATO ally and including it on the visa waiver list. Coming up with "deliverables" for high level meetings and trips created important opportunities to strengthen bilateral relationships.

Q: On Haiti, what were your thoughts and maybe within the policy planning on Aristide? Aristide had some very committed people, particularly in Congress, who thought he was the cat's pajamas but there were many who did not think this at all. What were you getting about Aristide?

THAYER: Clinton had campaigned on restoring Aristide to power. He had appealed to and won much of the black vote, and the Black Caucus, among others, was insistent that

Aristide and democracy in Haiti be restored. Having won the Cold War, the Clinton administration tried mightily to craft a sense of purpose and direction in U.S. foreign policy. Madeleine Albright, then ambassador to the UN and later first female Secretary of State, made democracy promotion a priority issue, chiefly among the liberated Eastern European countries but also Latin America and Africa. She pushed for Democracy resolutions in the UN and the OAS, and ultimately created a new Community of Democracies as a vehicle to promote trade, human rights, and peaceful settlement of disputes.

Q: OAS, Organization of American States.

THAYER: Luigi Einaudi, who I knew briefly from my El Salvador tour, was a senior adviser in S/P. Luigi had headed ARA's policy office and been ambassador to the OAS (Organization of American States). Luigi was heavily involved in negotiating a Democracy Charter for the OAS. The OAS was founded in 1948 with U.S. encouragement to advance regional cooperation and security among American states. In 1962 it suspended Cuba as a non-democratic state. The overthrow of Aristide in Haiti challenged the OAS-- and the U.S-- to defend hemisphere democracies, underscoring Clinton's pledge to restore Aristide to power. Both the UN and OAS passed resolutions calling for Aristide's return to power. Haiti had been a failed state and an embarrassment to the international community for years under the despotic Duvalier family, Papa Doc with his Tonton Macoutes and then Baby Doc, who was forced into exile in 1986. Aristide was a firebrand who exhorted his followers to use violence and had been critical of the U.S., but Clinton followed through. The U.S. military invasion was minutes away when Carter and his team persuaded Gen. Cedras to leave. Cedras got a nice stipend and U.S. transport for himself and family to exile in Panama.

The night before Aristide returned to Haiti, someone arranged a farewell party in the Blair House, across the street from the White House. It was an elegant sit down dinner with Aristide and friends, including his future wife Michele and several from the Black Caucus. I raced home after work to put on evening clothes. A harpist played and violinists strolled through the antique-filled rooms. Champagne flowed. The Haitians were dressed over the top, sequins, glitter, diamond jewelry. Liveried Blair House staff served a splendid dinner amid many toasts. Aristide flew to Haiti and finished his term a year or so later. He was elected again in 2001 and overthrown again in 2004.

Q: I think he's in South Africa right now, isn't he or something?

THAYER: I think so.

Q: He is a divisive figure. And not beyond having opponents killed and that sort of thing. But anyway, I think the bottom line for us was it did help us stop the migration out.

THAYER: With the Aristide government back in power, the Haitian migration emergency abated, at least for a while. Haitian outflows slowed. Haitians picked up on the high seas were returned to Haiti and Haitians in camps in Guantanamo and other Caribbean nations were repatriated, despite Haiti's limited ability to accommodate them.

Cuban "boat people" however continued to flee, amid riots, threats, and economic misery in Cuba. Some 40,000 left in 1994. In September the U.S. and Cuba signed a landmark migration accord, calling for safe, legal, and orderly migration from Cuba. The agreement permitted Cubans who reached U.S. soil to stay but barred Cubans intercepted at sea from entering the U.S. It became known as wet foot/dry foot. The agreement committed the U.S. to admit a minimum of 20,000 immigrants a year and set conditions for the voluntary return of Cubans picked up at sea back to Cuba, including no retaliation and periodic U. S. monitoring of repatriated Cubans. The 20,000 visa minimum was reached through family immigration, refugee processing, and a visa lottery. Several other cautious steps were introduced to relax relations, by easing travel restrictions to Cuba, expanding people-to-people diplomacy, and increasing the amount of legal remittances that could go to Cuba. The shooting down of the Brothers to the Rescue planes in 1996 brought much of that to a screeching halt. Clinton ended up signing the Helms-Burton Act, which further tightened the embargo and established strict pre-conditions for any future diplomatic opening with Cuba. Many saw the bill as Congress usurping the executive branch's constitutional authority to conduct foreign relations but Clinton signed it anyway. It played conveniently into Castro's hands.

Q: Didn't we have an Interests Section there this whole time? I mean, we're talking about we don't talk but we've got diplomats sitting in Havana.

THAYER: After recognizing the Castro government in 1959, Eisenhower broke diplomatic relations with Cuba in January of 1961. In 1977 during the Carter presidency, we returned to the same building on Havana's walled waterfront the Malecon and opened it up as the Interests Section of the Swiss Embassy. My old boss Wayne closed the embassy in 1961 and returned in 1979 to head up the Interests Section. He labored for decades more to reopen relations with Cuba, so far still without success.

Q: Well, during your time, with all the, I can only say posturing, because I think this is probably the operative word, about Cuba, was there any talk about closing the Interests Section?

THAYER: Clinton initially seemed eager to reopen relations with Cuba, especially after the wet foot/dry foot agreement. Miami Cuban elders were opposed but mid-western grain exporters, tourists, and younger Cubans who wanted to visit family members were in favor. The fact that the Soviet Union was no longer an enemy and impoverished Cuba no longer a threat made it seem reasonable. Cuba was on the U.S. terrorist list but there was little evidence that Cuba was funding or supporting terrorists by then. Castro offered to cooperate on anti-narcotics efforts in the region, including flyovers. The U. S operated anti-drug flights out of Key West, Miami, and Panama until we returned the Canal to the Panamanians in 1999, so that was a useful offer. Former President Jimmy Carter visited Cuba as Castro's guest in 1984. It infuriated the Reagan administration. You still see

“Jimmy Carter ate here” plaques and autographed photos and menus in restaurants in Havana.

Q: Did you find- How’d you find reporting out of Cuba? You know, were you getting, I assume you would be getting reports from our Interests Section and all that?

THAYER: The Interests Section operated as an embassy, with reporting officers, a small consular staff and refugee processing office. We had little economic interaction beyond some agricultural exports, and operated in a very restricted environment. Cuban diplomats are not allowed to go beyond a ten mile radius of their Washington and UN New York offices and American diplomats cannot not go ten miles beyond the Interests Section. It is a shame because Cuba has lovely beaches and historic towns, and it severely restricts our interaction with Cuban people. Which of course is the idea. Our world was limited to Hemingway marina at one end of Havana to some nondescript beach at the other, and Hemingway’s hacienda La Finca with its three-toed cats inland.

I was on the Policy Planning Staff when I first went to Cuba in 1996. The migration agreement provided that Cubans who were picked up at sea, the wet feet, were transferred to U.S. Coast Guard cutters where a preliminary determination was made if they had a potential refugee claim. If they were found to have credible fear, they would be brought to Guantanamo for processing. If not, they were returned directly to Cuba. It was defined as a safety issue, to discourage Cubans from trying to cross the 90 miles to the U.S. by sea. A key part of the agreement was that Cuba would not retaliate against those who were returned. They would not lose their benefits, ration cards, housing, or access to jobs or schooling, all of which Cubans get from the government. Cubans being repatriated from the Coast Guard were met by U.S. and Cuban officials at a discreet dock near Havana, where they were officially released by U. S. officials into Cuban custody. They were then returned to their homes with the promise of resuming whatever job or benefits they had previously. The agreement permitted U.S. consular officials to visit repatriated Cubans at home to ensure they were not being mistreated or denied benefits just for trying to leave. In 1996 I went to Cuba to do a repatriation monitoring. It was amazing to visit returnees in their homes, wherever in Cuba they happened to be. It drove the Cubans crazy to see U.S. officials travel outside the ten-mile limit, but that was the agreement. I worked in the consular section for a week to qualify as a mission consular officer. I then drove with another consular officer in an official car with a new-fangled and not very functional GPS (global positioning system) looking for repatriated Cubans. We managed in a week on the road to find a fair number of them. It was an amazing trip and incredible reporting opportunity. A few years later the Cubans limited the monitoring program and required that it be done by phone or with Cubans coming to Havana to meet with consular officers.

Q: Let’s talk a bit about what were your impressions and adventures traveling around Cuba.

THAYER: We had a list of people we wanted to see using the addresses and sometimes phone numbers they had provided when registering on the Coast Guard ships. We had to inform Cuban authorities of our general itinerary. and we assumed we were being followed. It was strange. The addresses and few phone numbers we were given were hard to track down. Many small village streets are not named or marked. Few Cubans had phones, so most of the phone numbers were of a nearby store or school. Our Cuban security minders could have led us to the homes but we wanted to be discreet and anonymous. We went to Santa Clara and several other towns and villages. Many families lived in four or five-story Soviet-style housing blocks, grim cement buildings with external stairs and an occasional narrow balcony overlooking scrub ground. The families were astounded to have someone from U.S. Government show up unexpected, so we had to ease into it, but for the most part they seemed fine to talk to us. We assumed everything was bugged, but most families quickly welcomed us inside. In some cases, the person we were seeking was away so the relatives would speak. To my surprise, many launched into a lengthy critique of the regime: there were no jobs, limited education, little to eat. They seemed demoralized and resigned.

Their small flats were of similar design and had nearly identical furnishings. It was as if Bulgaria or someplace had some excess lamps or folding chairs lying around that were shipped over to Cuba and rationed out to each family. So everyone had the same plastic bucket, the same chairs and table, the same single-bulb floor lamp. A few homes had identical wooden rocking chairs. It was odd to see the same items in different homes in different towns. The only personal items were pictures or an occasional plaque or plastic flowers. Electricity was sporadic and nothing worked very well. In one ground-level cement house with peeling green paint I saw a very thin young man with longish hair playing an upright piano. It was badly out of tune. I listened for a while, and when he stopped, I slipped him some money. To repair the piano, I said. He put the bills into his pocket without looking up.

In one town, the family said the person we were looking for didn’t live there anymore, but his sister worked downtown. They gave us her address. When we pulled up at the building, we found ourselves at the Cuban communist party headquarters. Giant posters of Castro, Stalin and Lenin were tacked to the walls, and small groups of shabbily-dressed men waited morosely in the lobby. We were wondering what to do when someone asked who we were looking for. I gave him the name of the sister, and after a few minutes she came out to the lobby, dressed in a neat grey uniform skirt and blouse with a beret. I explained we were from the State Department and were looking for her brother as part of an agreement we had with the Cuban government. She paused for a bit then quietly moved us to a corridor out of hearing distance. She looked around and then said softly that she was really anxious about her brother. “He’s been harassed. He was supposed to stay, he got his ration card back but he left again. There’s lots of ways they can make your life miserable.” She went on. “He won’t…he doesn’t want to stay. I’m not sure where he is. There’s nothing you can do.” We explained what we were doing and what protections the Interests Section might have to offer, and left her the phone number. It was moving and sad.

Our last stop was Varadero Beach. Varadero is the Cancun of Cuba, a long spit of land with dozens of high rise resort hotels overlooking sparkling white beaches and turquoise seas. Cuba had built up Varadero as a tourist destination and source of hard currency. Spanish, Canadian, and Soviet companies built huge all-inclusive resorts where everything was imported, even sugar in little packets although Cuba had once been a major exporter of sugar. One of Castro's main complaints against Batista was the exploitation of Cuba as a lurid gambling and vacation destination for high roller foreigners and mafiosos. Varadero was strictly policed for tourists and off-limits to Cuban nationals except for day laborers. Most of the resort guests were men who flew directly into Varadero on vacation charter flights and never ventured far from the beach, rarely making it to Havana 85 miles away. We came to see a couple that had been returned by the U.S. Coast Guard and provided a Varadero address. We found the man in a day laborer housing complex off the main beach road. He said he was doing ok. When we asked him about his partner, he was evasive for a while then said, she's up at the bridge. Varadero is accessible by one narrow bridge with tight access controls. Depending on the time of day or the official in charge, young Cuban women would sometimes loiter around the bridge, seeking company with dollars in their pockets. We couldn't find her, but we did stay that night in a Varadero Beach resort hotel. I was the only female in a sea of pale, overfed foreign men. The evening's activity was a toga party, and all of the men were parading around in bedsheets, drinking tropical punch and doing the Macarena, the latest craze. Bizarre.

It was an incredible experience to visit rural Cubans in their homes. We saw a lot of despair. It seemed like the dream had gone wrong, and all energy and hope had withered with it. This was in'96, 36 years after Castro came to power. Back in Havana, while walking with an embassy colleague in the Old Havana tourist area, I was mugged in broad daylight. Street theft was unusual in Cuba. My civilian passport was stolen (American diplomatic passports were not recognized in Cuba), along with cash I'd just gotten to pay my hotel bill (credit cards are not accepted). I had to get a new passport, dated 1996 in Havana. I was back in Cuba in 2006 running the refugee program when that 10-year passport was expiring so I got another passport in Cuba dated 2006. I need to go back in 2016 to keep up my Cuba-issued passport.

Q: Were you getting any feel for the infrastructure, the transportation, restaurants, food or anything like that on all these trips?

THAYER: With the collapse of the sugar industry and end of Soviet subsidies, Cuba was in a severe economic slump. The military, which ran most businesses in Cuba, had begun a major renovation of Old Havana in a bid to attract tourists and hard currency. Block by block the lovely crumbling buildings with ornate wrought iron balconies and stained glass windows were being restored. Most were turned into state hotels or restaurants, galleries or museums. A limited number of small eateries, called paladares, were operated by private individuals. These were strictly controlled and taxed. The local currency was the peso. It was worth of fraction of a newly-invented "foreignor" currency, the CUC, which was denominated in dollars. Many Cubans received money from relatives abroad, mainly the U.S. As tourism picked up, the best-paying jobs were in hospitality and taxis, where tourists would pay or tip with hard currency. The famous old American high-finned cars from the 1940s and 50s were everywhere, lovingly maintained and polished to a high gloss. They shared the badly rutted roads with boxy Soviet cars, round yellow motorized three-wheeled buggies called coco-taxis, huge smoke-belching buses, and horse-drawn carts. I stayed in the comfortable Hotel Presidente in downtown Old Havana and walked the hour each way or took a coco-taxi to the Interests Section. Through my in-laws I had met Yale anthropologist and Mayan expert Michael Coe. His son Andrew had recently published a history guide to Cuba and introduced me to several of his friends. A Santeria priestess invited us for a private session, complete with chicken bones, plastic black doll saints, feathers, candles, cigars and cane alcohol she spat around our shoulders. Another of his friends was a medic in his late 30s, trained in dialysis, who helped Andrew as an interpreter and driver. The medic had inherited a classic old American car from his father and could make more money as a taxi driver for tourists than he could running a dialysis machine. A medic job might net him 15 or 20 dollars a month. Regular Cubans shopped in designated stores or warehouses where their ration cards, depending on availability, got them bad quality rice, flour, cooking oil, bread, occasionally coffee and eggs. This was during the special period and the economy was doing badly so they seldom got milk or meat. I think children up to age two qualified for some powdered milk. The sugar, dairy, and coffee industries in Cuba had collapsed. Some limited fresh food was sold in open-air local peso markets. Better quality covered markets accepted only CUCs. Those who got hard currency from working with tourists or from relatives abroad could access some, but not all, of the dollar stores and pay top dollar for imported goods.

One evening the medic invited me to his home for dinner. This was unusual. Cubans rarely invited foreigners to their homes. He and his wife, their child, and her father lived on the ground floor of a small low-rise apartment building near the edge of Havana. Andrew advised me to bring food as a hostess gift, so I brought imported cooking oil and coffee and chocolate I had bought at the dollar store. When I arrived I put the gift bags on a table. I wasn't sure if it was legal for them to accept imported food, and I assumed the house was bugged or neighbors were watching, so I didn't say anything. Nor did the family. What was interesting was my host was very anti-regime, his wife was very pro, and her father was rabidly anti-Castro. He was in his 60s so knew Cuba before the revolution. The family conversation whipsawed between pro and anti-Castro arguments. Her father kept referring to life before Castro and how much better it was. His daughter tried to shush him but he insisted loudly, "I am an old man now, they can't do anything to me." She defended the regime. Her husband explained diplomatically that Cubans had had high hopes with Castro but time had eroded the dream. As the wife laid out a few simple dishes for dinner, she said to me, "I wanted to make something special. I saved my ration card for eggs but no eggs were available over the last few days. I'm sorry." I quickly complimented her cooking. Then I happened to glance out at their bare little yard and said, without thinking, "This is a nice yard, could you keep a few chickens here for eggs?" Everyone fell silent. The man and his wife and father-in-law looked back and forth at each other. Finally the husband said, “You see, that’s the difference between a Cuban and an American. The American says, “We don’t have any eggs, why don’t we raise some chickens?” The Cuban says, “The ration card doesn’t have eggs, or the store has no eggs. There’s nothing to be done.” He looked at his family and said, “This is what it’s come to. If the government can’t give us eggs, we do without. We would never think what we can do for ourselves.” A few years later I went back to Cuba and looked up the family. The husband had left, illegally, for the U.S. His wife and father-in-law stayed behind. It was a common Cuban story.

Q: And drugs, how did that go in Policy Planning?

THAYER: Drugs remained a big issue. Congress expanded criminal penalties for drug possession, leading to an explosion of incarceration and prison-building in the U.S. After Desert Storm and rising conflicts in the Middle East and the Balkans in the early ‘90s, the U.S. military role in anti-narcotics declined. Public opposition to U.S. military involvement in the Americas grew, especially criticism of U.S. training for Latin militaries implicated in human rights abuses. There was a big push to shut down the School of the Americas at Fort Benning. The School was eventually renamed in 2001 and the curriculum modified. At one point I flew to Fort Benning to discuss the changes. The U.S. tried to separate military assistance with anti-narcotics from political opposition, so we would not be seen as meddling in local political conflicts. This didn’t really work. The FARC in Colombia and other guerrilla groups were operating and profiting from the drug trade, blurring those lines.

Q: The revolutionary groups which had gotten more and more involved in the drug trade.

THAYER: It became impossible to distinguish the two. The FARC and allies were controlling more and more territory in Colombia. Elected governments would propose peace talks and sometimes try turning over large parts of Colombia to the FARC, with disastrous results. Drug flows from Colombia increased. When we put pressure on the Taliban and disrupted Afghan heroin networks, Colombian drug lords got into poppy production and heroin. Eventually the Clinton and Bush administrations committed several billion dollars to Plan Colombia to help arrange a peace settlement and stabilize Colombia. It didn’t stop drug flows but revived Colombia and saved it from becoming a failed narco-state.

With the U.S. victory in the cold war and economies growing, trade expansion became a major U.S. goal. NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement), originally proposed by Reagan, was finally ratified and came into force in January 1994, with side agreements on labor and environmental cooperation. That October at a meeting in Indonesia, leaders of 21 countries formally established APEC (Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation) and a framework for free trade and regular summits. Building off the APEC model, we at Policy Planning worked with ARA, the White House, and economic and trade experts to create the first Summit of the Americas. Richard Feinberg at the NSC was a principal architect of the Summit which was to promote democracy and a free trade zone of the Americas. Clinton hosted the first Summit in Miami in December ’94. The Summits, now coordinated by the OAS with rotating hosts every three years, address issues of democracy, free trade, poverty, and the environment. U.S. presidents rarely attended OAS regional events and hemisphere leaders often felt overlooked and taken for granted. So the Summits provided a regular forum for the president and bureaucracy to engage with regional leaders on common interests. At the time, the U.S. saw the UN as bloated and wasteful and our member payments were in arrears. Luigi saw regional organizations like the OAS as under-utilized agents for change and cooperation. He negotiated the OAS Inter-American Democratic Charter, which was finally adopted in 2001. We worked to build regional approaches on anti-narcotics, in an effort to be more effective and reduce Latin American sensitivities over being singled out for pressure. When Paraguay and Mexico complained about the flood of illegal American weapons in their countries, we opened talks on an OAS small arms convention. Illegal movement of U.S.-manufactured guns and ammunition through Mexico, Central America, Paraguay, and elsewhere was contributing to crime, drug violence, and human right abuses. The Inter-American Convention Against Illicit Manufacturing and Trafficking in Firearms, Ammunition, and Firearms was adopted in ’97. It was the first legally-binding regional agreement to curb illicit firearms trafficking. It was exciting to be involved in these various initiatives, with counterparts from Latin American embassies and governments and multiple U.S. agencies.

Q: What about, Mexico of course, being the very large, the giant of the south, you might say; Mexico must have had a unique position. How were relations, from policy planning-wise?

THAYER: I thought too that Mexico was a unique partner and we needed to do more to build that relationship. Mexico played an important role in the UN, OAS, and other multilateral agencies where our interests went well beyond bilateral issues. I proposed that we hold policy planning talks with Mexico to deepen ties on broader regional and multilateral issues. I knew Jorge Castaneda slightly from my time at the Carnegie Endowment. Jorge was a left-leaning intellectual and academic with a dozen books to his name and close connections to the Foreign Ministry. He helped facilitate contacts for our talks and invited us to his beautiful home for an extended discussion of U.S.-Mexico relations and global issues. This proved useful when he became Foreign Minister under Vincente Fox in 2000. We started similar policy planning talks with the Brazilians, the largest country in South America and another key player in UN and OAS circles.

In June 1995 I went to Haiti as an OAS election observer to the local and parliamentary elections. I’d been a U.S. election observer in El Salvador in 1985 but this time I was lent to the OAS to be part of its observer mission. By this time, election observers were becoming more common. The International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), the OAS and other organizations and governments fielded observer missions to elections in the Americas and worldwide. The programs came to support pre-election monitoring, assisting and funding for voter registration, elections publicity, and training for election workers, polling, and exit polls.

Aristide's return the previous year had not brought much improvement to Haiti. The country remained politically fractured, with deep divisions among civilians and with the military, and the economy was still depressed. The U.S. had pledged to help get Haiti back on its feet but had little to show for it. Elections were seen as an important step forward. I was assigned to a small northern village near Gonaïves. Gonaives was known as the City of Independence, the place where Haiti declared independence from France in 1804. It was a politically-charged town and the scene of violent riots over the years. A French-speaking OAS observer and I went by jeep over rugged roads from Port au Prince to within a few miles of our assigned village. Rain had washed away much of the dirt road so we walked the rest of the way, carrying our clothes and gear. The village leaders directed us to the prison, which had been replastered and whitewashed for us to bunk in. We slept in hammocks hanging from hooks in the walls. It was unnerving to sleep in a Haitian prison. We could see marks and scratches under the new paint and at night you almost hear the walls groan. The next day we walked to several schools to watch voters mark their ballots and drop them in tamper-proof boxes. It was inspiring to see Haitian volunteers and poll watchers carefully checking people in against long stapled pages of voter lists. The voters came dressed up for the occasion and proudly showed us their thumb mark after they voted. Everyone took their responsibilities seriously.

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Q: Was there any reflection of sort of the bully boys in the dark glasses and all that type of-?

THAYER: Voting went smoothly where we were although tensions erupted near the capital and surrounding slums like Cite Soleil where Aristide supporters lived. Turnout was low but overall the election was ruled fair. Aristide's party Lavalas got nearly three-quarters of the vote. His chosen successor Rene Preval won the presidential election later that year. Haiti continued to struggle and Aristide was elected again in 2001. Before I left Haiti, I went by bus to Jacmel, a port town on the southern coast known for its French colonial architecture and Haitian naif art. My in-laws had wintered in Jacmel a few times and loved its laid-back arty coastal feel. I bought a few naif canvasses on the street and a metal wall sculpture of a fish. Haiti is famous for wall art cut out of metal oil drums.

One of Luigi's major accomplishments was resolution of the Ecuador-Peru border war, the hemisphere's longest running border dispute. Differences over the border festered since the early 1800s resulting in a war in 1941. Anxious to resolve the problem as World War II heated up, four guarantor countries, the U.S., Argentina, Brazil and Chile, mediated a temporary solution in 1941. Ecuador declared it null in 1960, and skirmishes, sometimes fatalities, erupted regularly. A brief indecisive war in early 1995 ended in a cease fire mediated by the four guarantors. Subsequent talks, managed by Luigi as the U.S. guarantor representative, led to a military observer mission and ultimately a peace agreement in 1998. Through rounds of shuttle diplomacy, Luigi came up with creative solutions like contiguous national parks and shared economic and commemorative areas that were accepted by both parties. It was a superb example of Getting to Yes. Fittingly, the agreement ending the border conflict was signed by then-Ecuadorian President, my Harvard friend and Getting to Yes classmate Jamil Mahuad.

Q: One thing more; we've talked- pretty well covered most of the policy planning. One thing, could you talk about Jim Steinberg a bit, because he was- What sort of role did he seem to play?

THAYER: Jim was well-connected and well-informed, a classic policy wonk. He could come across as shy or aloof, even blunt, but he had a ready smile, a solid command of detail, and was a good listener. In Clinton's second term Sandy Berger replaced departing National Security Adviser Tony Lake and brought Jim over to be the NSC Deputy. I think Jim was effective because he was comfortable working behind the scenes, enabling others success. For example, S/P assisted with Dick Holbrooke's negotiation of the Dayton Accords in late 1995, ending the war in Bosnia. The Balkans wars dominated Clinton's first term, involving all of us dealing with NATO, the UN, peace keeping, human rights, and refugee issues. The other horrific crisis of that period was the Rwandan genocide in late 1994. We didn't have an Africa specialist at S/P at the time so my colleague who handled IO issues (International Organizations) Suzanne Butcher covered the endless, painful discussions on Rwanda chaired by Susan Rice, Assistant Secretary for African Affairs. Suzanne's read-outs were gut-wrenching. We seemed paralyzed on Rwanda. Many attributed it to our retreat from Somalia after nearly two dozen U.S. soldiers were killed in two downed helicopters in 1993. When Jim left for the NSC after two years, Madeleine Albright chose DC lawyer Greg Craig to replace him at S/P. Greg came to Rome when I was DCM to consult about Kosovo and continuing problems in the Balkans. He went on to be White House counsel the next year, and later served as Elian Gonzalez's lawyer.

Q: Okay. Well, I'm just looking- This is a good place to stop and we'll put, as usual, at the end, where did you go after policy planning?

THAYER: I became the deputy chief of mission at the U.S. Embassy to the Holy See.

Q: Alright. Well, we'll sprinkle some holy water on ourselves and talk about that. Today is the 27th of October, 2008, and this is Yvonne Thayer. You were at the Vatican from when to when?

THAYER: Ninety-seven to '99.

Q: Alright. Could you explain a little of our relations with the Vatican? You know, a little bit of the history of this and how they stood when you got there.

THAYER: I mentioned earlier that I had worked in all three U.S. embassies in Rome: the U.S. Embassy to the Republic of Italy, the U.S. Embassy to the UN agencies/FAO, and the U.S. Embassy to the Holy See. The last two were created when Reagan was president. Millicent Fenwick prompted the establishment of the U.S. Embassy to the FAO in 1983 after losing a Republican Senate bid. William Wilson got his President's Personal Representative job upgraded to Ambassador to the Holy See in 1984.

Q: Ninety-seven. Who was the ambassador?

THAYER: When I arrived, the Ambassador to the Holy See was Raymond Flynn. Flynn was the three-term Irish Catholic mayor of Boston. He had played an important role in Clinton's 1992 election. Clinton and Gore were pro-choice, so the fact that Ray Flynn, a high profile pro-life Catholic, actively backed Clinton was important to attract the Catholic vote. When Clinton won, Flynn got his dream job as ambassador to the Holy See in 1993, stepping down in the middle of his third term as Boston mayor. When I arrived in 1997, he was in his last months of what had become a difficult tour. My first instructions as DCM were to help smooth his departure. I didn't know all the details but over the years there were a number of incidents and decisions that soured Flynn's relations with the Department. For one thing, he went through what he found to be the humiliating downsizing of the U.S. Embassy to the Holy See. The chancery had been in a beautiful historic building near the Vatican, luxuriously furnished by Ambassador Wilson. It had elegant reception rooms, a prime location, Marine guards, all the pomp and stature of a U.S. embassy. With the retrenchment of the State Department in the '90s, apparently part of the "peace dividend", the Department decided to reduce its smaller embassies into "SEP" posts. This meant downsizing or eliminating things like the embassy chancery, DCM residence and staff, Marine guards, furnishings, budgets, and more. That happened on Flynn's watch and he was livid. The chancery moved from the beautiful building near the Vatican to a modest two story house, a former Russian embassy annex, on the Aventine Hill overlooking the Circus Maximus. It was a real comedown: a converted house with cramped rooms and bedroom offices, no Marine guards. Flynn refused to set foot in the chancery and said he would work instead from his residence, a lovely palazzo on the Janiculum Hill overlooking Rome. He couldn't take classified materials out of the embassy so it was unclear how he was doing his job at that point. Flynn's then-DCM had been told to vacate the DCM residence and staff and move to a dreary apartment across the river with no official furnishings, staff, allowances, or parking. He refused to do so, and counseled me to do the same.

So Flynn lost the embassy and much that went with it. He and his Vatican contacts were outraged. They liked to point out that a quarter of the world population was Catholic, roughly a billion people at the time, and a quarter of the U.S. was Catholic. They argued that the Vatican has significant influence in many predominantly Catholic countries, including most of Latin America and many European and African countries. Popes, especially the current Pope John Paul II, often play an outsized role on the international stage. Flynn was particularly angry that the administration couldn't see the value of his contacts and efforts to draw more American Catholics into the Democratic Party. Flynn's relations with the "big embassy", the American embassy to Italy, had soured over all this and the two embassies were barely communicating. Word was that Irishman Flynn was too friendly with the bottle, that he partied until dawn with his guards, drivers, and priest friends. Reportedly some romp in a Roman fountain ended up with police fishing some pals out of the water. It was all very messy.

Q: Sound like la dolce vita or something.

THAYER: Great drama. Flynn's tour was up but he was postponing his departure. He continued to host visitors and entertain in his residence.

Q: Did he have to give up the residence too?

THAYER: He kept the ambassador's residence, a beautiful palazzo. Eventually Clinton named a new ambassador, Lindy Boggs. She was the former representative from Louisiana who had taken over the House seat of her husband Hale Boggs after he died in a plane crash in Alaska. She was the mother of Cokie Roberts.

Q: Famous broadcaster and commentator.

THAYER: Her son Tommy Boggs is a prominent lawyer-lobbyist in Washington. Another daughter was mayor of Princeton but had died. A very distinguished Louisiana family. Lindy was 80 I think when she came. Her nomination put more pressure on Flynn to leave. My instructions as the new DCM were to ease Flynn out gracefully.

Q: Did he have any- Was he still in a position where he could choose his DCM or were you sort of thrust upon him?

THAYER: We didn't know each other. I was offered several DCM jobs, including Oslo, but immediately chose the Vatican. It meant returning to Rome, the city I loved. I spoke Italian and a few other languages and had worked with Vatican officials in various countries. I knew Vatican Secretary of State Sodano and Cardinal Pio Laghi from my time in Argentina over the Beagle Channel conflict. As soon as I arrived, I went to see Flynn at the residence. He was gracious. We talked about his departure and I proposed a farewell party. Flynn said he didn't want any farewells. He planned to invite a few friends over for dinner, turkey, people liked turkey and it was hard to find in Italy. He could get it at the Naples commissary. I was invited. It was pleasant, casual, no guests from the big embassy or other diplomatic missions. Flynn told me the Department's downsizing of the embassy was disgraceful. He planned to issue a lengthy statement criticizing the decision. I replied carefully that it would be inappropriate to issue an official complaint while he was representing the U.S. government. Once he relinquished the ambassadorship he was free to say what he wanted as a citizen. I said if he wanted to make a public statement criticizing U.S. policy as ambassador, it should be cleared by the Department. He decided not to issue the statement but made copies on embassy letterhead to circulate in Rome. I cautioned against using official stationary and embassy equipment to transmit his critique. We maintained a cordial relationship and he ended up distributing the statement after he returned to the U.S. Before he left, he agreed I could host a diplomatic farewell for him at his residence. I slightly knew "big embassy" DCM Jim Cunningham and he and Ambassador Bartholomew came, along with other ambassadors and senior Vatican officials that I would be working with as Charge'. Soon after Flynn got on a plane and left.

Q: Well, you know, as you were doing this, did you- was he a, you might say, a problem within the administration but what about his other ambassadors with the Vatican representatives and with our embassy and, you know, the embassy to Italy; I mean, was he a problem all over or was he sort of an intramural problem?

THAYER: Flynn was a colorful character, outgoing, opinionated. I think he hoped to attract more American Catholics to the Democratic Party so downsizing his embassy and status was painful. He spent a fair amount of time traveling back to the U.S.

Q: How long were you with him?

THAYER: We overlapped for a few months. When he was in Rome, I'd go to his residence and brief him on developments since we couldn't bring classified material to his house.

Q: How did you find the rest of the embassy that was left sort of dealt with this? I mean, was there sort of relief when he left or had the tension spread to them or not?

THAYER: Most of the embassy's American diplomatic staff turned over so we just lived with it. We had very experienced and proud local staff who were distressed and demoralized, but diplomatically kept their complaints to themselves. Like Flynn, the departing DCM was angry. He came to the office but refused to vacate his official DCM residence, with its staff, furnishings, and garden. He urged me not to allow the Department to take away the DCM residence and went back to fight it in Washington. But I had no choice. The big embassy took the house. I moved into a small, modestly-furnished temporary apartment in Trastevere that was kept for visitors and storage. I won't go into the grim details but the big embassy, which handled admin and housing for our now diminished embassy, wanted to reduce housing costs and thwarted every attempt we made to find a suitable replacement DCM residence. After a year of searching, the departing Argentine DCM proposed I take his apartment on the Lungotevere. It was walking distance from the office and the rent was a fraction of the prices the embassy housing office was proposing. The owner agreed to some expensive upgrades and I moved in over a year after I arrived.

Q: Do you feel that, you know, looking at this, your ox is only being gored slightly but you were in the middle of this thing; did you feel that sort of the administrative people in Washington just, despite Flynn and his problems, were they not being very helpful?

THAYER: I was chargé for extended periods and focused on the job. Admin folks in Washington provided no support. I don't know how much it had to do with Flynn's opposition. The “SEP” embassy experiment proved to be problematic overall and I think it was later abandoned.

That aside, the job was wonderful. Just the thought of representing the U.S. at the Holy See was thrilling. We began to rebuild relationships with the big embassy, Holy See offices, and counterpart embassies that had flagged through the changes. Some months later Ambassador Boggs arrived. She was an instant hit, a charming Southern lady who brought a lot of dignity and wisdom to the office. As is usual, she left much of the running of our small embassy to me. She was a devout Catholic, well-read, interested in everything. She dutifully went through all the cables and was quick to do whatever the Department instructed. She entertained beautifully and had a lot of visitors, family, friends, congressional and staff delegations, ambassadors, academics, journalists.

Q: Well, let’s talk about- In the first place, are you a Catholic?

THAYER: I am. It was not a requirement to be Catholic but I am.

Q: I want to ask a question, I don’t know if this is the right question, how Catholic, at that time, or maybe now, were you, are you?

THAYER: I was raised Catholic and was plenty Catholic while I was there. My kids were baptized in St. Peter’s when we were in Rome in the early ‘80s.

Q: I was raised Episcopalian but for many years I’ve been sort of, sort of a lackadaisical atheist. But when I was consular general in Naples I got to a point where I could practically do the entire mass in Italian, because I would be hauled out, along with the communist party representatives and everyone else, you know, in Naples. I mean, things were always done at the church and we’d all get together and _________, whatever it was called, the establishment, and have masses. So I mean, whatever you are, you are.

THAYER: It helped that I had a Catholic upbringing and background. My knowledge of theology wasn’t all that deep, but I had studied Vatican history and influence on the world stage. My Borja in-laws descended from Pope Alexander VI and relatives of my grandfather had been Swiss Guards, so I felt a personal connection.

Q: Well, let’s talk about, as you saw it as a political type, and I’m talking about professional political officer, looking at the Catholic Church’s influence in the world at that time.

THAYER: Pope John Paul II was charismatic, inspirational, a towering intellect. He had specific goals that attracted world attention. He was credited along with Ronald Reagan for influencing the rise of Solidarity in Poland and the fall of the Soviet empire. He was outspoken about the crises in the Balkans, Rwanda, and the Middle East. He established diplomatic relations with Israel in 1994 and significantly improved Church relations with Judaism, Islam, and the Eastern Orthodox Church. John Paul II traveled constantly. He was the first pope to visit the Great Synagogue of Rome, the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, Auschwitz in Poland, Vad Vashem and the Western Wall in Jerusalem. He initiated inter-religious dialogues throughout his travels and enlisted senior American and other clergy as special envoys on peace missions in various places. I recall American Cardinal Ted McCarrick coming through Rome regularly to discuss efforts to stabilize Christian presence in the Middle East. The Pope, who was an avid sportsman and youth leader as a young priest in Poland, loved being around young people. He started International World Youth Days and presided over nine on nearly every continent, including in Denver in 1993 and Paris in 1997. He spoke fondly of his visits to the U.S. and brought Denver Bishop Stafford back to the Vatican. He wanted very much to visit Russia but never did because Patriarch Alexy of Russia refused to invite him. The Vatican was a Permanent Observer to the UN and an active member of several UN agencies. The Vatican was active around the globe and we had many common interests.

One of my first duties as Charge' was to sign the book of condolences for Princess Diana at the British Embassy in September 1997. Shortly after, Mother Teresa died and I signed the book in the Indian embassy. Acknowledging such losses was sad, and became a regular part of my responsibilities. Soon after I attended the World Eucharistic Congress in Bologna. The Pope had invited Bob Dylan to perform. Dylan, dressed in cowboy boots and a stetson, sang a gravelly rendition of Knocking on Heaven's Door and A Hard Rain's Gonna Fall. He awkwardly greeted the Pope and was criticized for showing a lack of dignity and respect but the 300,000 young folks there loved it. A month later the Pope convoked a Synod for the Americas, a periodic assembly of senior clergy and laypeople from all over the Americas. It was a great opportunity to meet U.S. Catholic leaders, the powerful Knights of Columbus, and prominent Catholic academics in their roles as counselors to the Pope.

That September the historic hill town of Assisi north of Rome was clobbered by two massive earthquakes. Part of the walls and the vaulted ceiling of the Basilica of St. Francis were destroyed, including frescoes by Giotto and Cimabue in the Upper Church dating from the thirteenth century. Nine people died, including some technical experts who were in the nave assessing the damage when the second quake hit. Surrounding villages and churches were also severely damaged.

Q: This is where the Last Supper is-

THAYER: Many of the famous Renaissance artists worked in Assisi. Shortly after the earthquake I went to Assisi with a Vatican escort to see the damage and explore how the U.S. could help. I learned about an IBM team that had worked on a similar disaster in Peru. An earthquake there destroyed an ancient church whose frescoed ceiling collapsed into thousands of pieces. IBM came up with some computerized system to catalog the broken pieces and digitally reconstruct the ceiling. I put IBM in touch with Assisi officials and heard that they provided computer models to reconstruct the Basilica ceiling from the hundreds of boxes of color-coded fragments.

One of the first foreign policy issues I dealt with the Pope's plan to visit Cuba in January, 1998. Longtime U.S. policy was to ostracize Castro and we didn't want anyone, especially the revered Pope, to lend any legitimacy or support for the regime. I was instructed as Charge' to urge the Vatican to turn off the visit. I knew the Vatican would dismiss this request out of hand and suggested we have more faith in the Pope's abilities. He had after all been instrumental in the collapse of the Soviet Union. He had made Cuban Bishop Jaime Ortega a cardinal in 1994, affording him a higher profile and some protection from regime attacks. I proposed that I review our concerns about Cuba with my Vatican counterparts and open a discussion on what kinds of things the papal visit could do to improve political, religious, and human rights conditions for Cubans. The Vatican welcomed this conversation and invited me back for several discussions on Cuba.

Ironically, some thought Castro himself would downplay or derail the Pope's visit. The Communist dictator had attacked religion and banned Christmas. The regime continually harassed Cuba's small underground Catholic community. Religious services and classes were barred, publications were confiscated, possession of Xerox or mimeograph machines was forbidden. But Castro gave Pope John Paul II the royal treatment. He picked him up at the airport and attended his huge open air mass. He released over 100 political prisoners at the Pope's request. He re-established Christmas as a holiday and eased restrictions on religious observance. Cardinal Ortega continued to work quietly to reopen churches and expand religious teaching and services. Some priests took a higher profile to test the regime's curbs on church activity, and some dissidents considered Ortega too slow and deferential to Castro. Overall, the Pope's visit and his public appeals for political and religious freedoms in Cuba were seen as a net plus. We continued to report on Vatican follow-up from the visit, and follow news from priests visiting from Cuba.

Q: What was behind much of the horrors of the Serbs and the Croats when they got the upper hand in Bosnia for a while. What did we do on these things? On mean, from your point of view what was our- what were we up to?

THAYER: The Balkans dominated U.S. foreign policy during the Clinton administration. Vatican diplomats often have unusually good access and perspective, especially in predominantly Catholic countries, and we shared their news and findings with the Department. The Holy See had been among the first to recognize Croatia, Slovenia, and Bosnian independence in 1992. It repeatedly appealed for an end to Serbian ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and reconciliation of its three confessional groups, Catholic Croats, Orthodox Serbs, and Muslim Bosniaks. Shocked by the Serbian massacre of 8,000 Bosnian men and boys in Srebrenica in July 1995, the Pope spoke out frequently for peace and reconciliation and endorsed the Dayton Accords that December. He visited Sarajevo in April 1997 and Croatia in 1998. It is notable that the Church, which traditionally opposes military intervention (it condemned the '91 Gulf War), muted such concerns in the case of Bosnia. The Pope spoke instead of the need to protect human life under attack by malign forces. Church teachings uphold the theory of just war, based on proportionality, legitimacy, collateral damage, and likely outcomes, which applied in this case. We made numerous demarches asking the Vatican to back UN resolutions condemning Serbian strongman Milosevic and supporting coalition military action in Bosnia and later Kosovo.

As tensions over Kosovo mounted, I attended a meeting of U.S. ambassadors to Europe called by Gen. Wesley Clark, Supreme Allied Commander in Europe, in Stuttgart. Clark, who had overall command of NATO forces, briefed us on preparations for military action if Milosevic refused to stop attacks on Kosovar Albanians. After hundreds of thousands of Kosovars fled Serb attacks during the winter of 1998-99, NATO bombing forced Milosevic to withdraw in June. Coincidentally I later went to Kosovo after leaving Rome. During that trip to Germany, I learned that excess U.S. military assets were being drawn down in Europe and could be available on an as is-where is basis for civilian purposes. These included furniture, vehicles, office and communications equipment. I had been meeting with the Catholic humanitarian agency Caritas in Rome which manages Church support for refugees and displaced persons and other charitable activities worldwide. Caritas Croatia was struggling to assist victims of Serbian bombing in the early 1990s. After I confirmed the availability of excess U.S. military assets, I visited Caritas offices throughout Croatia to determine what goods and supplies were needed. I went to several bombed Croatian cities, including Split, Zara, and Dubrovnik. Dubrovnik, a major Adriatic port and historic walled city, was slowly recovering after seven months of Serbian shelling in 1991. We visited the Catholic bishop at his residence. It had been heavily bombarded. When it was rebuilt, the bishop left a section of the damaged wall unplastered to show the deep pock marks of the shelling. Local Caritas officials also took us to Vukovar, an eastern river port town badly damaged by Serbian militia. Still contested by both Serbs and Croats, it was mostly rubble and uninhabitable at the time of our visit. Fortunately we were able to donate a significant amount of excess U.S. materiel to Caritas Croatia offices.

Q: You know, what you're saying about the Catholic Church and some of the involvement with being on the side of the oppressors in this rings a bell with me because I spent five years in Yugoslavia and I got a big dose of World War II history while I was there, where the Catholic Church and Croatia, the priests got involved in massacres of Serbs and all.

THAYER: Right, Croatia's Ustase. Pope John Paul II spoke out about World War II tragedies, including the Ustase and the Shoah, as he worked to rebuild relations with Israel and Jews worldwide. Many criticized Pope Pius XII for failing to speak out forcefully against the Holocaust. That came up later in my tour when I was working with Stu Eizenstat on Holocaust era assets.

A good part of my work involving the Balkans was with the Community de Sant'Egidio. The Community was founded in 1968 by Andrea Riccardi and a group of lay Catholics to share prayer and service to the poor. It occupies the former Carmelite monastery and church of Sant'Egidio in Trastevere, not far from where I lived.

Q: This is a holy year or something?

THAYER: ’68 was the year of student uprisings in Europe. That was the summer I hitchhiked through Europe, including Rome. I must have passed by Sant’Egidio on that trip but knew nothing about them. When I came back as DCM in 1997, Sant’Egidio was famous for its charitable activities in Rome and mediation efforts abroad. It ran a weekly evening prayer and other projects like daycare centers, programs for the homeless, and aid to pilgrims. Every Christmas it hosted an elaborate Christmas dinner for the homeless in the Basilica of Santa Maria in Trastevere, one of the oldest and most beautiful churches in Rome. It replaced the pews with trestle tables and VIPs competed to serve the meals to the homeless. My two sons and I served at those dinners while we were in Rome. One year the President of Italy came and dished up meals alongside of us.

Two founding priests of the Community of Sant’Egidio were Don Vincenzo Paglia, who was bishop at the Basilica of Santa Maria in Trastevere, and Fr. Matteo Zuppi. Both were indefatigable gifted priests with global outlooks and nerves of steel. Sant’Egidio members cultivated priests and seminarians from around the world who came to study in Rome. One was a bishop from Mozambique. He worked with Sant’Egidio, mainly Fr. Zuppi, to mediate an end to the civil war between the Mozambican government FRELIMO (Mozambique Liberation Front) and RENAMO (Mozambican National Resistance; Portuguese: Resistência Nacional Moçambicana). I had lived in Mozambique until its independence in 1975. Shortly after, an ugly civil war pitted the leftist FRELIMO government against the South Africa and Rhodesia-backed rebel group RENAMO. The fighters kidnapped children and forced them to become child soldiers, cut ears and limbs off their victims, slaughtered thousands, and devastated the countryside. Sant’Egidio hosted the warring parties through many months of peace talks at their Rome headquarters, eventually leading to a power-sharing peace accord in 1992. Sant’Egidio was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize for its work on Mozambique. Cameron Hume was DCM to the Holy See at that time and published an interesting book about it.

The Vatican had recognized Sant’Egidio as a Public Lay Association, and the Pope spoke admiringly of its track two backchannel diplomacy. Vatican diplomats joked they envied Sant’Egidio’s independence and lack of bureaucracy. When I arrived as DCM, Sant’Egidio was working on several fronts: an education accord in Kosovo, a peace agreement in Guatemala, and a ceasefire in Colombia where guerrillas and drug networks were ripping the country apart. Fr. Zuppi led peace and reconciliation efforts in Rwanda, which was slowly recuperating from the 1994 genocide and its aftermath, and in Uganda, where the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) was kidnapping children and turning them into killers. The LRA was run by fanatic Joseph Kony, who terrorized Uganda and central African countries for decades. Sant’Egidio also promoted inter-religious dialogues and organized the World Days of Peace with religious leaders from around the world. Our embassy team worked closely with Sant’Egidio and doubled embassy reporting to Washington. Over time, Secretary Albright became interested and we proposed she visit the Community.

This had an interesting back story. Soon after being named secretary of state in Clinton's second term, Albright made the obligatory round of introductory calls in Europe. When she got to Rome, instead of calling on both the Italian head of state and the Pope as was typical, she did not seek a Vatican call. The Vatican is a separate, sovereign state headed by the Pope located in Rome. Failing to make an introductory call was seen as a serious breach of protocol. It was another thing that drove Flynn crazy. He was annoyed by a lot of things, but was really offended that the Secretary did not make a call on the Pope when she first came through Rome. No one knew why. Some speculated that since Albright was raised Catholic but converted to Episcopalian after getting married, she may have felt uncomfortable about seeing the Pope.

Q: She'd been brought up as Jewish.

THAYER: I think she learned of her Jewish roots later. Whatever the reason, she skipped the Vatican on that trip. For Flynn, it was another indignity.

Q: You were there when it happened?

THAYER: I was there when she finally went in 1998.

Q: I was wondering, had we made our protests, I mean, your embassy made its protests and all this?

THAYER: I'm sure Flynn made the point that the new Secretary of State should make an introductory call on the Pope. When Ambassador Boggs arrived, she was determined that Secretary Albright make that visit.

Q: These things add up and people-

THAYER: The Vatican is very formal, discreet, correct. It was unseemly to come through Rome for introductory state visits and ignore the Pope. I don't know if it was intentional or not, but there it was.

Q: Well, it could have also been Flynn.

THAYER: I hadn't thought of that.

Q: I mean, in other words, Albright just didn't want to tangle, I mean, get involved with this guy.

THAYER: You mean, maybe she was afraid he'd get carried away and haul them all off to the Trevi Fountain or something like that?

Q: Yes, you know, somebody said you don't want to go there, you know, he's a loose cannon and-

THAYER: I don't know. It seems Washington could have dealt with it better. By the way, Democrat Flynn was alienated enough that he endorsed Bush in 2000. He set up some foundation and I think he ran Catholics for Bush.

In any event, Ambassador Boggs understood, and the Vatican made sure she understood, the snub of skipping a papal visit. When we learned the Secretary was coming back through Rome in March 1998, likely on Balkans business, Boggs in her gentle persistent way insisted Albright make that delayed call on the Pope. Albright, or maybe her staff, seemed reluctant but finally agreed. What Albright wanted was to meet with the Community of Sant'Egidio. We had reported on many of their activities, including regular updates on Kosovo. So Albright came, made her 45-minute call on the Pope, and came over to Trastevere to see Sant'Egidio. It was quite the evening. There was a good sized crowd in the piazza outside of Sant'Egidio when her motorcade and entourage drove up. As dusk fell, the lights of the monastery came on and glittered through the stained glass windows and interior gardens. Sant'Egidio made impressive presentations about their work in Kosovo and elsewhere. Prosecco and good will flowed. Quite a different world from Foggy Bottom.

Don Vincenzo Paglia was my main contact on Kosovo. Following Dayton and the uneasy peace in Bosnia, Kosovo was the latest part of Yugoslavia besieged by Serbian strongman Milosevic. Kosovo was 90 percent ethnic Albanian (nominally Muslim) and ten percent ethnic Serb. The Serbs considered Kosovo its ancestral home because they suffered a disastrous defeat there against the Ottoman army on the Field of Black Birds in 1389. Many gorgeous historic orthodox Serbian monasteries are located in Kosovo.

Q: Yes, the major monasteries were there, beautiful, Pec.

THAYER: Milosevic had already lost much of the former Yugoslavia and threw everything into retaining the little enclave of Kosovo. The Serbian minority harassed and persecuted the ethnic Kosovar Albanian majority who refused to vote in elections or accept Serb rule. The Kosovar Albanians ran their own underground schools, clinics, and communities. Although nominally Muslim, they were mostly non-practicing, although they maintained ornate mosques and some Muslim norms. Serbian attacks amplified their identity as Muslims.

Q: When I was an election observer in Bosnia I had an interpreter, a young man, and as we sat and drank beer and grilled pork, and I asked him was he a Muslim, and he said oh yes. Have you ever been in a mosque? And he said no, but you know, I mean, this is just a form of identification.

THAYER: It was interesting how the U.S. thought that if we supported Kosovar Albanians and Kosovo independence, the Muslim world would be grateful and see that America is not anti-Muslim. It didn't work out that way. Don Vincenzo knew Milosevic and Ibrahim Rugova, the modest professorial leader of the Kosovar Albanians. Don

Vincenzo traveled to the region in a kind of shuttle diplomacy seeking to get the Serbs to reopen schools for Kosovar Albanians. He saw it as a confidence-building measure and a way to get a foot in the door for future negotiations. He argued to Milosevic that if Kosovar youth could not get an education and jobs, they would turn to arms and rebellion. The talks went into great detail about which classes would open, in what numbers, what language, with what books. After many months, the parties signed an education accord in 1996, which opened a number of university classes and vocational school programs to Kosovar Albanian students.

Each day I would walk from my transit apartment in Trastevere to the embassy across the Tiber river, stopping to see Don Vincenzo in his Basilica office two or three mornings a week. Often he was on the phone to Milosevic or Rugova or an intermediary, trying to work out the details. He would update me on what was going on and we would brainstorm how the U.S. could help or piggyback on his efforts. I reported all this to the Department. In the meantime, Ambassador Bob Gelbard, who I had met in Bolivia, and Jacques Klein had been appointed special envoys to find solutions to the Kosovo problem. They passed regularly through Rome and we would meet with Don Vincenzo and Vatican officials, seeking ways to influence Milosevic and Rugova as tensions mounted. It was interesting to work these issues officially with Vatican counterparts and in parallel informal talks with Sant' Egidio.

Q: Well, I was wondering though, were you picking up, in the first place, how did you find, you know, the Vatican diplomats have, you know, a wonderful reputation. I've heard other people say yes, to a way, but they're really not as clued in as they think they are but they're great presenters. Did you find this or what?

THAYER: We made frequent demarches to the Vatican and were regularly summoned to discuss topics they were concerned about. I went with Ambassador Boggs or alone to meet with Foreign Minister Jean-Louis Tauran, a French bishop who handled relations with states, or one of his country experts. Tauran was formal, soft-spoken, rather inscrutable. Vatican diplomats are highly educated, experienced, and knowledgeable. They often spend five or more years in one country and become fluent in the people, language, and leaders. They benefit from extensive local Catholic networks. I don't think I ever saw one bring or refer to notes when meeting with us. They would slip noiselessly and without aides into an ornate Vatican meeting room, summarize the specific problem that concerned them, and outline whatever actions they sought. In turn, we would demarche them on what we wanted, say, a vote in the UN or a statement to back U.S. policy.

The Vatican was seized with the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide. The Pope spoke out against the Rwandan genocide in 1994 and visited Africa the next year, appealing for an end to ethnic violence. Catholicism is the majority religion in Rwanda. Hutu attackers bulldozed and burned down churches with hundreds of Tutsis and moderate Hutus inside, and slaughtered hundreds of thousands with machetes. After the genocide, many thousands of suspected murderers were arrested and detained in appalling conditions, including Catholic clergy and laypeople, some for years without charges or trial. The Vatican pressed the Rwandan government to speed up trials, which proceeded slowly until establishment of gacaca community courts in 2001. The Vatican asked us and other governments to urge Rwandan authorities to resolve these cases, in which many Catholic clergy and laypersons were found guilty. The Vatican later apologized for the role of Catholic members in the genocide.

On China, the Vatican was concerned about the lack of religious freedom and China's refusal to recognize the Catholic Church of Rome. The Chinese government had created a pseudo "official" Church which did not recognize authority from Rome, driving Catholic priests and faithful underground. The Vatican was having discreet bilateral talks twice a year with China seeking to reduce pressure on underground Catholics in China, acknowledge Vatican authority and vocations, and open reciprocal diplomatic missions. They wanted U.S. help with these efforts. Religious freedom in China, actually everywhere, was a big issue for the U. S. Congress created an office and special envoy for religious freedom in 1998, with reporting requirements and assessments of countries performance. We followed these developments closely. Vietnam, Saudi Arabia, China and others had poor records on religious freedom and were called out in Department reports. As it happened, the U.S. re established relations with Vietnam when I was at the Vatican. Pete Peterson, a prisoner of war in Vietnam, was named the first U.S. Ambassador to Vietnam since that war ended in 1975. Peterson came to the Vatican on his way to Vietnam. I brought him to meet with the Pope and with Vietnamese priests who had been tortured in Vietnam for exercising their faith and had found sanctuary in the Vatican. As with China, Vatican officials were working to establish official recognition for the Catholic Church in Vietnam.

Visits to the Pope were momentous occasions and the highlight of my tour. He had a magnetic personality despite his humble demeanor and increasingly bent frame. Which reminds me of the Secretary's visit. After the delay in her making the call, Ambassador Boggs was anxious that Secretary Albright's visit with the Pope go well. I think she wondered why the Secretary showed greater interest in meeting with Sant'Egidio than the Pope. The Vatican is very formal and protocol is exacting. We were given precise instructions on timing, how many could participate, and guidance that women's heads be covered in the presence of the Pope. We duly passed these details to the Secretary's staff. The staff promptly informed Ambassador Boggs that the Secretary doesn't wear hats and would do as she wished. The Ambassador was taken aback by this response.

Q: Let's say feisty.

THAYER: We just wanted everything to go well. Ambassador Boggs was deeply concerned about the hat issue and asked me what to do. I told her that the staff may not know or may not be conveying correctly the Secretary's intentions. I said I would wear a small hat and carry a mantilla and if at the last moment the Secretary needed something on her head and was willing to wear it, we could slip her either one. So I wore a tiny black velvet hat my mother had given me and put a black veil in my pocket. As it was, the Secretary arrived wearing a big green hat with a wide brim that matched her outfit. She was just fine. Several of her female staffers did not wear a head covering.

Ambassador Boggs and I were waiting in the Pope's reception room with the Secretary's party while she had a private one-on-one meeting with the Pope. It was all very formal. The head gentleman-in-waiting, dressed in tails, gently reminded us that only a certain number of people were allowed to go into the Pope's private office to join the Secretary and Pope later for pictures and exchange of gifts. Somebody must have done a count. Mark Grossman, who was Assistant Secretary for Europe at the time, and David Hale, the executive assistant, were there plus a lot of people I didn't recognize. Someone from the Secretary's party came over to me and said: "We are too many, you can't go in." It was my turn to be taken aback. I was the DCM and had accompanied any number of high-ranking U.S. visitors to see the Pope. Anyway, I stood back as the group began crowding around the door to the Pope's office. The head gentleman, watching this from the door, walked slowly across the room to me, wordlessly took my arm, and escorted me back to the front of the line with Ambassador Boggs. Ultimately we were all allowed in. I trust the Secretary's staff found it meaningful to be introduced to the Pope. But they acted rather poorly.

Q: Well, it is, shabby.

THAYER: Albright's staff was known for being full of themselves. I don't think the Secretary was like that. But they were her people. I've since seen her at a number of events and admire her attention to her students, her books, her plain speaking about foreign policy.

Q: Well, one of the problems, I think, with Albright was she did have a coterie around her, which is very possessive.

THAYER: Yes.

Q: And, I mean, this is- it would be shown; you know, they wanted to make sure they all got there and I mean, these are not people- I mean, Baker had the same coterie but his people are still around because they were particularly talented. I don't think Albright's people were, for the most part, very talented.

THAYER: I thought Wendy Sherman was very effective. She was close to the Secretary and worked on many tough issues. The Secretary had excellent career diplomats working for her too. But her personal staff…

Q: And people, when they get in that position, become much more- they develop very sharp elbows as far as making sure they get in and are acknowledged, and all, I mean, as opposed to adding much to the foreign policy mix.

THAYER: It's too bad. Secretaries of State need to have good relationships with career professionals. Unfortunately, this was also a time of "right-sizing" the State Department, budget cuts, personnel cuts, falling hiring and promotion rates. It contributed to the Department's decline and is an unfortunate legacy for Albright and Clinton.

Q: One of the things that- Here's an embassy to a foreign power but the one thing probably you didn't have to do was to try to represent the United States to the Vatican in a certain way, explain what the United States was about because the Catholic Church was part of the political process in the United States in a way. I mean-

THAYER: The Vatican had plenty of sources on what was going on in America. The Monica Lewinsky impeachment thing was happening at that time.

Q: Oh, how did that play out?

THAYER: Vatican and embassy counterparts I spoke with were frankly incredulous that this matter would take over America. The way they saw it, America has so many problems: race, poverty, climate, prisons, drugs. China was a looming problem, the Middle East was tense, the Balkans were imploding. The Vatican could not understand how America could tie itself up in knots for two years to impeach a president over Monica Lewinsky. Italians, Europeans in general, thought it was crazy. Mrs. Boggs made it clear she felt the same way. She found it frustrating and self-defeating.

Q: Well, in a way Monica Lewinsky was, it was an attempt by the Republican for a coup. I mean, that's essentially what- I mean, it was using whatever means and Miss Lewinsky, Ms. Lewinsky served as a convenient thing, you know, and embarrass the president and allow a lot of the Republicans to try to unseat him.

THAYER: Fortunately, we continued having interesting work and visitors. Dan Golden, the head of NASA, came. Discoveries from the Hubble telescope were breaking new ground on the origin of earth and space. Golden was putting together a council of faith leaders to address religious implications of these stunning new scientific findings. He said he was concerned that science not get ahead of humankind's religious sensibilities. He wanted someone from the Vatican to participate, to represent Catholic thinking. I took him to meet with Vatican leaders and they named a representative to join his council. Another time we hosted Jeffrey Hoffman, an astronaut who helped repair the Hubble telescope's mirrors on the first repair mission to the orbiting telescope in 1993. Like Golden, Hoffman dazzled Vatican hierarchy and scientists. Hoffman was NASA's first Jewish astronaut; the fact that he and Golden were Jewish seemed to delight our Vatican contacts who were highlighting outreach to Jewish leaders. These visits helped pave the way for increasing U.S. participation in the Vatican's Pontifical Academy of Sciences. The Vatican has a dozen or so Pontifical Academies to promote progress and understanding in fields including science, social sciences, fine arts, and archeology. Members include some of the most respected names in their fields and many Nobel laureates; they are elected by their peers and appointed by the Pope. Relatively few

Americans were represented in the Academies. We encouraged consideration of distinguished American scientists and were pleased to see their numbers increase. One of my favorite priests at the Vatican was American Jesuit astronomer Father George Coyne. Fr. Coyne was the director of the Vatican Observatory at Castel Gandolfo, the papal summer residence in the hills twenty miles south of Rome. I went there several times, once with Maryland Senator Barbara Mikulski. The Vatican Observatory dates from the 16th century, when the Church sought to apply the study of astronomy to reform the Gregorian calendar. Light pollution forced the Vatican to operate its main research telescope from the International Observatory in Arizona since the 1960s but its headquarters remain in Castel Gandolfo. The offices contain amazing ancient artifacts and books, including a first edition of Galileo. Fr. Coyne handed me the book to see Galileo's doodles in the margins. Galileo, charged with heresy and facing torture, was forced to recant his findings that the earth revolves around the sun in 1633. Pope John Paul II created a commission to review the Galileo matter and in 1992 he formally cleared Galileo of wrongdoing.

Every day brought some new issue. Stu Eizenstat, Clinton's Under Secretary of State for Economic Affairs, was also Special Representative for Holocaust Era Issues. He had previously served at Treasury, State, and Commerce and as Ambassador to the European Union. I took a class from him at Harvard's Kennedy School. Eizenstat devoted himself to Holocaust restitution issues, including recovering assets from bank accounts, stolen art and property, slave labor, and insurance policies. He negotiated agreements with the Swiss and other European governments to find and restore assets to Holocaust survivors and heirs. Eizenstat came several times to Rome to press the Vatican to open its Hitler era archives and participate in a conference he was organizing on Holocaust Era Assets in 1998. It coincided with the already widespread criticism that Pope Pius XII had had not done enough to help the Jews during the Holocaust.

Q: Yes, there was a book called "Hitler's Pope."

THAYER: The Vatican had begun the early stages of canonization of Pius XII which sparked renewed attention to his role. He had been papal nuncio in Germany before the war. While many criticized him, others documented Pius' efforts to protect Jews and oppose the war. The Vatican was officially neutral during the war. Books were published arguing all sides.

Q: And the charge of the Catholic Church did not reign in, I think the brothers of- I think it was St. Francis, Franciscans who were prominent in setting churches, Orthodox churches on fire in Croatia during World War II.

THAYER: Eizenstat came personally to ask the Vatican to open up its archives covering that period, as he did with other European and newly-liberated eastern European countries. East Germany and Poland in particular were grappling with their wartime past, much of which was buried during the Soviet period. The role of the Church in places like the fascist puppet Ustase regime in Croatia, which rounded up Jews for extermination, was also being questioned. Eizenstat pressed countries to open their archives in order to shed light on atrocities, restore stolen assets, and foster reconciliation. Many governments, corporations, banks, and academic institutions participated in the effort. For the Vatican, this was problematic. The Vatican has a strict protocol schedule for opening archives. It is done per papacy, usually after 80 years or more. I think they were up to Pius X and 1914 when Eizenstat came. He wanted them to open their records covering the Holocaust years and to participate in the conference. After numerous talks, the Vatican agreed to send two archivists to the Washington conference and began to loosen restrictions on some wartime documentation. In 2002, Pope John Paul II agreed to release documents through the papacy of Pius XI through 1939, several decades ahead of schedule.

Our embassy also played a small supporting role in creation of the International Criminal Court. The U.S., initially with strong backing from Albright at the UN, led negotiations for an international court to charge and try perpetrators of crimes against humanity which might otherwise evade justice. Albright's senior adviser at the UN David Scheffer was named the first Ambassador-at-Large for War Crimes Issues when she moved to State in Clinton's second term. When negotiations finally opened in Rome in 1998, Scheffer represented the U.S. By that time, however, congressional opposition to the court eroded White House support, weakening Scheffer's hand. When he asked the spacious U.S. Embassy to Italy for assistance and meeting space, his requests went unanswered. So I offered him space and help in our much smaller embassy. Scheffer came over through that fall for private one-on-one or small group talks with delegates, some of which I sat in on. The talks finally produced the Rome Statute creating the International Criminal Court. Faced with complaints that the Statute and Court represented a constraint on U.S. sovereignty and concerns that Americans could be indicted by the Court, the formerly enthusiastic Administration all but buried it. Clinton quietly signed the treaty on his last day in office. His successor Bush later withdrew the U.S. signature. Although it never ratified the Statute, the U.S. has cooperated with a number of special tribunals created by the Court, including on the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, and Cambodia. Scheffer went back to teaching law and assisted the UN with the Khmer Rouge trials.

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Another John Paul II initiative was his convening of the first International Prayer for Peace in Assisi in 1986. This landmark event brought together many different faith leaders from around the world for dialogue on peace, justice, and human rights. In 1997, Sant'Egidio organized the International Prayer for Peace in Venice and Padua. I had just arrived as DCM and participated in the event. Religious leaders came from America and around the world: Methodist, Baptist, and Catholic, Jewish rabbis, Muslim clerics, Orthodox Christians, Sikhs, Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, African evangelicals. Pope John Paul II was eager to build relationships with different religions in order to foster inter-religious dialogue and promote peace. It was clear he wanted an invitation from Russian Orthodox Patriarch Alexy to visit Russia, but that didn't happen. Alexy was beginning to rebuild the Orthodox faith and community after 70 years of repression under communism and reportedly did not want the Roman Catholic Church competing for influence and disputed church property rights. At the Venice event, Romanian Patriarch

Theoctist proposed the next Prayer for Peace be held in Bucharest in August 1998, the first in a majority Orthodox country. At the 1998 event Theoctist invited the Pope to visit Romania, which he did the next year, in May 1999. It was the first papal visit to a predominantly Orthodox country in more than a thousand years. I attended the Prayer for Peace event in Romania and joined other delegates on a trip to religious sites in the countryside, including a model church, temple, and mosque arrayed like the three crosses on a hill.

Q: Okay. Well, why don't we stop here but a couple of questions I'll have to ask about the Vatican when we pick this up. Had the problem of pedophilia come up while you were there? Because this practically bankrupt the Catholic Church in the United States. I mean, did this at all come on the radar at all or did you get any feeling? Because obviously the suppression of the facts of this and the moving of priests around and all turned out to be pretty horrendous.

THAYER: The issue of pedophilia and Catholic clergy's abuse of children was just beginning to surface during my time at the Vatican. I think the issue first opened up in the United States, and then extended to other countries. It wasn't discussed during my time, indeed it was very much avoided. I recall years later seeing priests and bishops I'd known in Rome addressing the issue. Archbishop Diarmuid Martin of Dublin, who I worked with on Justice and Peace issues and UN conferences when he was in Rome, was criticized for revealing the extent of clerical sexual abuse in Ireland.

Q: What about the Opus Dei? I mean, because you know, I've never read it but there's this book, "The DaVinci Code," and they've been turned into a sort of a secret malevolent society or something. Did we have any feelings about the Opus Dei?

THAYER: The Pope's spokesman was the urbane Spanish doctor and journalist Joaquin Navarro-Valls. He was accessible to the press and fluent in many languages. He was a member of Opus Dei and lived in its Rome headquarters. Opus Dei had a reputation as a secret conservative society but Navarro-Valls made no secret of his membership and its commitment to celibacy and social works. Pope John Paul II, for all his global outreach and initiatives, was theologically conservative and supported Opus Dei.

Q: Today is the 16th of January, 2009, with Yvonne Thayer, and we're not exactly sure where we quit. We're dealing with the Vatican. You were in the Vatican from when to when?

THAYER: I was deputy chief of mission at the Vatican from 1997 to 1999. We discussed a lot of things from that time. Another drama I recall came from within the Swiss Guard. One of the Guards murdered the commandant and his wife and then killed himself. The press went crazy over the story but the Vatican hushed it up quickly. Swiss Guards are young single males, only the commandant can be married. I spent a day as the guest of the Swiss Guard, seeing their living and dressing quarters, the seamstresses making their uniforms, (Swiss Guard uniforms were designed by Michelangelo), the armory where their swords and arms are made and stored, and their museum inside the Vatican. They showed me a book of Swiss citizens who had served as Guards over the centuries. The hand-written names included two Metrailers from Sion around 100 years ago. The Guards assured me they must be relatives, as my maternal grandfather was a Metrailer from Sion from that same period, and declared me an honorary member. We had a difficult moment when an American woman sued a Swiss Guard. She accused him of pushing her away from the gate when the Vatican was closing, causing her to drop her camera, damaging it and hurting her arm. She got her congressmen involved, which led to months of talks on blame and liability—she demanded an apology and recompense for her camera and spoiled vacation-- but it was finally resolved.

Q: Were you picking up from your sort of the church contacts any concern about what appears to be a growing separation of the more industrialized Western European, European states from the Church. I mean, you know, some people call it the post Christian era. You don't, I mean, obviously Poland is still heavily Catholic but in France and England and all, not an awful lot of people attend church.

THAYER: Right. Except for religious holidays, churches in Europe are rarely full. Most Church vocations were in Africa and the Philippines, South America. Pope John Paul II traveled to those regions and actively encouraged vocations outside of Europe, where Church membership and vocations were declining.

On a personal note, I was lucky to have my two college-age sons come visit over the summer and holidays. One summer my son Kevin got a temporary job in the Defense Attache's Office at the big embassy. He became friendly with the Attache's son who took him to Rome's Cinecitta' to try out for a few days' work as an extra on a film by Anthony Minghella. It was called The Talented Mr. Ripley with stars Matt Damon, Jude Law, Gwyneth Paltrow, Cate Blanchett, and Philip Seymour Hoffman. A few days after the try outs, we were in Capri where my son got a call asking him to come back for a follow-up audition. A call-back seemed a bit excessive for a two-day part as an extra. When he went back, Kevin was asked to join the crew for the next four months as Matt Damon's stand-in. Kevin had some excess college credits at Columbia University so he arranged to take the fall semester off. The production filmed in Rome, Ischia, Naples, and Venice from late August to December. Kevin had a high time hanging out with the cast and crew, seeing Italy as a movie set, and making some money. It was before most of those wonderful actors were well known and they were accessible and fun. I recall Matt, who had to lose 30 pounds for the role, sitting off by himself wolfing down a plastic container with some 600-calorie meal while others crowded around tables laden with Italian food.. Teen-age groupies would chase after Kevin, thinking he was Matt, which pleased Matt no end. Kevin, too. As the Mom of Matt's stand-in, I visited Kevin and the set in each location. Great fun. We had another wonderful opportunity when a U.S. admiral invited me to tour his nuclear-powered submarine docked in Naples. I brought the entire staff and we spent a fascinating day touring the sub and trying out some underwater maneuvers in the Mediterranean.

I left the Vatican in 1999 and came back to the State Department. The Balkans were still in turmoil. Kosovo was burning and NATO was preparing airstrikes. The Department was pulling people in to work on Balkan issues, special task forces, peacekeeping units, USAID missions. It was a bit like Iraq after 2003 when many U.S. diplomats were deployed to staff

Iraq war and reconstruction missions. Serbian attacks followed by brutal fighting between Serbian security forces and the rebel Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) forced hundreds of thousands of Kosovar Albanians to flee their homes. The refugees escaped through snow and mountains into Macedonia and Albania, where UNHCR and Red Cross teams struggled to provide food and shelter. Shocked by scenes of families collapsed in the snow, the U.S. rushed aid to the region and offered to airlift up to 20,000 Kosovars into the U.S. for asylum. Thousands were flown in U.S. cargo planes directly to Fort Dix in New Jersey. I had rejoined the Human Rights Bureau by then and traveled to Fort Dix with Assistant Secretary Harold Koh. Koh, former dean of Yale Law School, spoke movingly to the refugees who sat on long rows of cots crammed into large warehouses on the base. Describing himself as a refugee, he welcomed them to America for a new start. Koh's father had been a Korean diplomat and requested asylum when an opposition regime took power.

My job at Fort Dix was to interview Kosovar Albanian refugees to document Serbian war crimes. It was an interesting mix of coincidences. I had just come from Rome where David Scheffer was negotiating the statute creating the International Criminal Court, which the U.S. would later back away from. Yet my task was to collect testimony to use against Milosevic in a future ICC court.

Q: What were you, I mean you, the people you interviewed, what sort of things were you getting?

THAYER: Milosevic had deployed Serbian forces and Yugoslav army units to force ethnic Albanian Kosovars out of Kosovo, classic ethnic cleansing. Kosovar homes, farms and villages were pillaged and burned. Mosques were damaged and destroyed. Kosovar men and boys were murdered and dumped in unmarked graves. The Ottoman Empire's defeat of Serbs in Kosovo in 1389 is celebrated by Serbs as an important part of Serbian history and national identity. Six hundred years later, the Orthodox Christian Serbs made up about ten percent of the population of Kosovo while the nominally Muslim Kosovar Albanians made up 90 percent. After peace talks broke down in 1999, NATO began a three month bombing campaign, which it called a "humanitarian war". Eventually Milosevic's forces withdrew. NATO set up a 30,000-person peacekeeping force KFOR in Kosovo, which soon passed to a UN mission UNMIK to administer Kosovo until its status was determined. It's interesting that today as we speak, ten years later (in 2008), Kosovo just declared independence, which the U.S. recognized.

Documenting war crimes stories at Fort Dix was intense. U.S. congressmen, hill staff, celebrities, and journalists came to Fort Dix to see the refugees and hear their stories. INS and social service agencies came to process the refugees for resettlement around the U.S. Not long after, however, NATO bombing forced Serbian forces out, first NATO then UN peacekeepers moved in, and many of the refugees wanted to go back home. Many returned to Kosovo before the year was up. As for Milosevic, he was eventually charged with 66 counts of war crimes, genocide, murder, torture, crimes against humanity. He was tried in the International Criminal Court from 2002 until his death in 2006. Shortly after Fort Dix, I went to Pristina, the capital of Kosovo, for several months to assist UNMIK with rebuilding Kosovo.

Q: Okay, you were in Pristina from when to when?

THAYER: The fall of 1999.

Q: Well, how did Pristina strike you and the situation there when you got there?

THAYER: Kosovar Albanians were of course delighted with NATO's defeating the Serbs. They took over the capital Pristina, where they had lived in fear and hiding for years. They in turn retaliated against resident Serbs, who fled by the thousands into northern Serbian-majority enclaves or Serbia itself. Meanwhile, NATO security forces and the UNMIK mission had appropriated buildings and a park on the top of a hill overlooking the city. Larry Rossin, my A-100 colleague, became a senior UN administrator in Kosovo. The U.S. established a temporary mission in a string of rented buildings along a street barricaded at both ends for security. Having just come back from Baghdad (in 2008), it's funny to think back on how slapdash it was in Pristina. Baghdad was all T-walls and cement barricades and heavily armed guards in the tightly controlled Green Zone. In 1999 Pristina had just opened up to peacekeepers. We lived in a sprawling single story building with almost no furniture. The kitchen had an old rusting stove and refrigerator, a few large aluminum pots, and some plastic plates and cups that we all shared. Food was bags of rice, canned meat and soup, and occasionally some vegetables. Lots of tea. I slept on a worn mattress in a dorm-like room with a rotating cast of roommates from different countries, speaking a variety of different languages. I was advised to bring mouse traps from the U.S. but quickly decided I'd rather keep no food in my room and hope the mice would pass me by, than be awakened multiple times each night by screeching mice caught in glue-sided traps that needed to be discarded.

UNMIK was in its early days, trying to move quickly to establish a viable government, local security and health services, and to revive economic activity after years of war and ethnic conflict. Ibrahim Rugova, who I knew of through my Sant'Egidio friend Don Vincenzo, had led the underground Kosovar party and was the putative leader, although his soft-spoken, self-effacing manner was largely drowned out by more militant fighters.

Q: KLA.

THAYER: The Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA). In its effort to obliterate the Kosovar Albanians, local Serbs had taken over homes, businesses, and properties of the Kosovars they had forced to leave. They also destroyed Kosovar records. At the same time, Kosovars living largely underground hadn't filed documentation with the ruling Serbian government for years. So there were few or no birth or marriage or property records, licenses or bank records. This created a huge problem for this small country of some 1.8 million. The UN was working to set up a governing structure. They had a lot of lawyers working on a draft constitution, security framework, legal systems. The UN made a big effort to involve civil society, which was difficult since Kosovars had played little to no role in previous governments. So UN and ngo teams set up women's groups and other community structures to elicit input on how the new government should be designed and run. I worked for a time with a group from the American Bar Association which fielded pro bono lawyers to draw up legal structures. Then I shifted to a different task, perhaps because of my background at the Vatican. An insidious aspect of warfare in that region was to destroy the religious and cultural symbols of the opposition group. Serbs had occupied, damaged or destroyed numerous Kosovar mosques and religious buildings. The UN feared that the now-dominant Kosovars would attack and destroy the medieval Orthodox monasteries and other Serbian cultural sites in Kosovo. Kosovo was the center of the 14th century Serbian empire, with the capital in Prizren, and home to dozens of Orthodox churches, convents, and monasteries, including the Patriarchate of Pec complex, the Decani, and others.

Q: These are just gorgeous. Why the, you know, I mean, the Serbs, it's really crazy. They did the same thing in Bosnia, they blew up- whereas the Bosniacs did not go after the Orthodox churches.

THAYER: The UN deployed international peacekeeping military forces, from Brazil, Australia, Pakistan, and elsewhere to provide static protection for these Orthodox sites and the Serbian nuns or clergy and staff living there. I traveled around Kosovo with a driver and interpreter to meet with the Serbian clergy and custodians of these sites and with the peacekeeping forces protecting them. I also met with the small group of Roman Catholics at their church in Prizren. Our goal was to build ecumenical support for the rebuilding of Kosovo and confidence and reconciliation among the religious groups. This was not an easy thing. The pockets of Serbs I met with were terrified of potential Kosovar attacks, despite the presence of international peacekeepers. My presence was for confidence-building, to show that the UN understood the danger and was keeping an eye on it; also to ensure that relations with the peacekeeping forces were working smoothly. I would report my findings to the UN and arrange to come back periodically to check on results. The Orthodox clergy and nuns would show me around their exquisite medieval buildings and grounds, offer me tea, and send me off with jars of honey. It seemed like every Serbian monastery and convent produces honey; they competed on who had the best honey from their own flowers and bees. Another purpose of my visits was to determine whether, as was rumored, that the Serbs had hidden state documents and Kosovar records in the monasteries and convents to keep them out of Kosovar and UN hands. I never saw or could verify whether such records were hidden on Orthodox religious properties.

Q: You're lucky, because when I used to go the circuit around I'd end up with this damned slivovitz- which I hated. That's plum brandy.

THAYER: I got tea and honey.

Q: Well maybe it's because I'm a guy or something. It was more in Macedonia.

THAYER: Helping Kosovo to rebuild revealed the inevitable contradictions in promoting democracy and reconciliation. I liked being on the ground working with Kosovars and international organizations to help build institutions, reopen schools, and revive the economy. The reality was that Kosovo, a geographic crossroads, historically had an entrenched criminal black market economy that UN and earnest NGOs had to acknowledge. It's interesting to me that after the U.S. invaded and established a presence in Afghanistan, we seem mystified that the traditional criminality and poppies and heroin trade have revived bigger than ever in a place we sacrificed to liberate and transform. We seem to have bottomless naïveté that building "democratic institutions" will replace countries' historic survival patterns.

Q: It's a very poor area; it's a good reason why the Serbs basically got the hell out of there. They didn't- very few settled there because there isn't much there.

THAYER: It's a mountainous, rocky area with little agriculture or mineral wealth. Its economy was historically based on contraband. And that's what flourished.

Q: Did you get involved at all with the Russian peacekeeping force which came in and caused a lot of waves?

THAYER: The Russian force caused a lot of grief. My work was elsewhere. Having worked with the Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement (INL) before in Ecuador, I helped some with creating and training local security forces. Law enforcement and police training had become a big part of INL's mandate. INL brought in U.S. civilian and military police to train local security forces drawn from all Kosovo ethnic groups. The U.S. eventually built a huge base in Kosovo, complete with Taco Bell and bowling alleys, Camp Bondsteel. Like we did in El Salvador and later Baghdad.

Q: One of the things that I've- I heard a complaint on various police-keeping operations that the United States tends to send, you know, 55 year old, overweight retired policemen, or something like that, who really don't add a hell of a lot to the mix where other countries to come up with, you know, more active men. Did you find this?

THAYER: I think the effort worked fairly well in Kosovo. In part because few Serbs participated. The force was mostly Kosovar Albanian and these jobs provided pay, benefits, and status not widely available in the shattered country. Retired American police can make a lot of money signing on for these overseas police training programs. Certainly there is the language barrier and lack of knowledge about local conditions and history, so pre-deployment training is key. In Kosovo I met some impressive U.S. cops who I thought showed mature understanding of what they could reasonably accomplish. Obviously we didn't move fast enough in Iraq in 2003 to establish civilian law enforcement. That invasion was military-led and funded so produced a military version of law enforcement. Which is not appropriate in a normal policing environment.

Q: Did you get involved with the problems that showed up around Mitrovica a lot? That's sort of where the Serbian enclave met the Kosovar group.

THAYER: The Serbs who remained in Kosovo barricaded themselves in fortified enclaves like Mitrovica. A huge UN concern was how to protect the Serb minority. Kosovar Albanians basically wanted them out of Kosovo altogether. Serbs were frantic not to disappear from their historic grounds. Not unlike the Christians being pushed out of the Holy Land and parts of the Middle East by Muslims and to some extent Israelis due to the conflicts there.

Q: Can you give us some specific examples of what you were doing?

THAYER: Lack of documentation and population data was a huge problem. Kosovar Albanians had not participated in a census for a long time in defiance of Serb rule, also because Serbs themselves wanted to hide the extent of their minority status. Most birth, marriage and death records, voter cards, property and tax records had disappeared or been destroyed. A number of UN experts and pro bono legal ngos were trying to construct Kosovo institutions and records, starting with a governing document. I represented the State

Department's Democracy and Human Rights Bureau in helping to determine how to design, fund, and staff programs to rebuild institutions. I reported on various Kosovar groups, interests, and potential leaders. It was challenging because everything was in chaos and had to be built from the ground up.

Q: Well, what about the Orthodox clergy? This is, to my mind, they have been a prime mover in poisoning the well in Serbian areas particularly against other groups. How did you find the Serbian clergy?

THAYER: My trips and meetings with Serbian Orthodox leaders was to reassure them that NATO and the UN recognized their role and legitimacy in Kosovo. And that we were committed to protect the historic Orthodox patrimony and a degree of Serbian autonomy and self-governance in the province, as demonstrated by the international forces dedicated to Serb property and enclaves. The Orthodox Serbs I met with were grateful since no one else was coming to see them.

Q: Then where did you go?

THAYER: I went back to the Human Rights Bureau and served on the U.S. delegation to the UN Human Rights Commission at its annual session in Geneva. The Commission, dating back to 1946, evaluated human rights conditions, dispatched rapporteurs, and promoted human rights worldwide. It had increasingly been taken over by some of the world's worst human rights abusers, Cubans, Syrians.

Q: The Syrians were there, the Libyans were there.

THAYER: Geographical groups elected their own members and leadership in which the most tenacious countries were elected regardless of their human rights records. The U.S. took the Commission seriously and pushed resolutions to highlight abuses and sanction offending countries. Some resolutions created Special Rapporteurs to investigate and report back on human rights conditions in a particular country. One of the key U.S. goals was to get a strong resolution on human rights abuses in Cuba. For years we had managed to get one passed despite a concerted Cuban diplomatic effort to quash it. Resolutions involved a lot of negotiations and often senior even presidential level engagement to get the outcomes we wanted. The previous year's Commission had for the first time defeated a U.S. resolution on Cuba. This was a major defeat, much to the fury of the politically-powerful Cuban-American lobby. So the U.S. was determined to get one passed in the current year's Commission. I spoke Spanish, had been to Cuba, and was knowledgeable about the Pope's visit there, so l was tapped to work on the Cuba resolution among other things. One of the first things we decided was that the U.S. should not be the lead or introduce the Cuba resolution. The U.S. politically-charged animus against Cuba was too well known. The Czech and Polish governments agreed to introduce the resolution. Both were Eastern European countries whose dissidents-turned-leaders were building successful post-communist democratic governments. They were not party to decades of entrenched anti-Cuba politics or a punitive embargo and so had more credibility on Cuba's human rights record. Both countries emphasized they wanted to work with Cuban citizens and dissidents and share their experiences throwing off Soviet communism. I worked closely with Czech Minister Martin Palous, who later became ambassador to the United States, and with the Polish delegation to craft the resolution and get support from other member countries. Nancy Rubin, the U.S. Ambassador to the UN Commission on Human Rights and Harold Koh, Assistant Secretary for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor (DRL), worked hard to secure votes. The Cubans had a skilled high level delegation who knew the UN and international human rights law backwards and forwards. They had carefully cultivated favor and votes by fielding Cuban doctors and applying pressure in Latin America and Africa to defend themselves and defy the U.S. I ended up working very closely with the Ecuadorian Ambassador Luis Gallegos Chiriboga, a funny, urbane, and experienced diplomat who led the Latin American regional group. Ambassador Gallegos believed strongly in human rights, had deep personal credibility, and was a master at parliamentary procedure. He worked patiently with the drafters and friendly governments to craft a resolution with a positive, not punitive, tone, and encouraged Cuba to welcome support from former communist countries to open up political freedoms and human rights. The final vote was 21-20 in favor of a resolution, with 12 abstentions. The Cubans were apoplectic. The Department was delighted.

The other major achievement of the Commission was the first Resolution on Promotion of the Right to Democracy, which passed 51 in favor, none opposed and two abstentions (China and Cuba). It followed a lengthy debate and rejection of numerous amendments proposed by Cuba. Harold Koh came to Geneva to promote the Resolution, which was seen as a watershed universal endorsement of democracy, a personal goal of Secretary Albright and the Clinton administration. Albright went on to promote the Community of Democracies, a coalition of states established in 2000 to promote democratic principles and practices.

I was on the U.S. delegation to the next year's Commission as well, which was again successful in passing a resolution on Cuba and advancing the Democracy resolution framework. The composition of the Commission, however, continued to concern the U.S. and others, which pushed for reforms. Eventually the Commission was eliminated in 2006 and replaced with the Human Rights Council with new membership rules. By that time the human rights issue was eclipsed by things like U. S. involvement in torture, Abu Ghraib, extraordinary rendition, Guantanamo.

Q: How long were you working with the United- on human rights? You sort of avoided the time when all of a sudden we took a hard turn to the right after 9/11 and human rights, we got involved in lots of abuses.

THAYER: Yes. I had retired by then, in 2000. I had served 25 years in the Foreign Service. I retired on a Friday and that Monday I left for a five and a half month trip around the world.

Q: Oh boy. Did you go back to your old places?

THAYER: To the contrary. I wanted to go to places I'd never been before. I started in Greece to visit some people I met after Kosovo. When I left Kosovo in 1999, I had to depart overland through Macedonia from where I was supposed to fly back to Frankfurt by military plane then on to the U.S. I had leave to burn and when I walked into the travel agency in Skopje to book my ticket I decided on the spur of the moment to go instead overland to Greece. During my long wait for the travel agent, I had plenty of time to observe a big map of Macedonia on the wall. The map showed all the surrounding countries except that Greece on the southeast border was blank. Greece did not recognize Macedonia, a former province that was once part of Yugoslavia and was the birthplace of Greek hero Alexander the Great. Both countries refused to acknowledge the other. When I asked the agent how to go to Greece, she said it was impossible. Someone else in line signaled for me to meet outside. He explained I could take a bus to the border with Greece, walk through both countries' passport controls, and continue to Thessaloniki by cab. I took this as a sign and went on to Greece. I met some Greeks in Athens who ran a guesthouse in Paros. I decided I would come back once I retired. My first thought when looking at Round the World plane tickets was to stop at 15 or 20 countries along the way. RTW tickets permitted unlimited stops as long as you traveled continuously in one direction. I soon decided so many stops would leave little time to really enjoy a country. So I booked my ticket from Washington to Greece, then Turkey to India to Thailand to Bali and back to the U.S., roughly a month in each country. From Thailand I traveled separately to Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia. My sons spent their college winter break with me in Thailand and my sister, her husband and later our mother joined me in Thailand and Bali.

The trip was wonderful, a nice transition to retirement. A friend joined me for stops in Athens, Delphi, Meteora, then Paros Island to see my friends, and Santorini. I continued traveling solo by local ferry to other islands, Mykonos, Naxos, Crete, and Rhodes, and as summer drew to an end, to some of the smaller islands, Samos, Simi, Tilos, and Kos. I finally crossed by ferry to Bodrum in Turkey. I traveled around Turkey for a month, from Fetthiye, Kas, and Antalya on the southern coast up through Konya (whirling dervishes) and Cappadocchia (fairy chimneys and underground early Christian rock caves), back east through Pamukkale (terraced thermal baths), Hierapolis (ancient Roman spa), Kusadasi, Selcuk, Ephesus, Izmir, Canakkale, Istanbul, and finally to Ankara. I stayed with a Foreign Service friend in Ankara through the excruciating days of the recount of the November 2000 elections. Once we saw the Supreme Court hand George Bush the presidency, I flew to India for a month. I stayed with an A-100 classmate in Delhi then went on to Rajasthan, Mumbai, Kerala and Goa by boat, to Thiruvananthapuram in the far south, and back to Delhi and Agra. From there I flew to Bangkok for a month's travel around Thailand. My two sons came for the Christmas holidays. We started at a fancy beach resort in Koh Samui recommended by the embassy but cut that short to go to the smaller island of Koh Tao where we got certified in scuba diving. We traveled north to Chiang Mai, visited Karen and Shan indigenous villages, rode elephants. The boys headed back to Bangkok to fly home for college. I continued on to Chiang Rai and took a motorized canoe down the Mekong River to Luang Prabang, the lovely flower town of Laos, then overland to Vientiane. I flew to Hanoi for the Chinese New Year and visited Ha Long Bay, then went south through Thanh Hoa, Vinh, beautiful Hue and Hoi An to Saigon, now Ho Chi Minh City. From there I visited the Cu Chi tunnels. I continued into Cambodia in the back of a truck where I saw the Angkor Wat ruins near Siem Reap and reminders of the horrendous Cambodian genocide at the Tuol Sleng genocide museum in Phnom Penh. I returned overland to Bangkok to meet up with my sister and her husband and later my recently-widowed mother for another few weeks in Thailand and finally Bali. I often said that I would be in Bali still except that I got a call from the State Department asking me to help out with a project.

Q: So, in this post retirement, which I find so interesting, I was just talking to David Piper, who is retired from being ambassador in Brazzaville and the next thing you know he's a chargé, retired and a chargé in the Sudan. I mean, there is such a thing as a second life in the Foreign Service. What have you been doing since?

THAYER: When I first came back to Washington I helped develop a training video for FSI on embassy crisis management. FSI commissioned it as a self-learning video game to teach emergency preparedness and emergency action plans. It could be done online or used for table exercises and embassy trainings on crisis management. It was an interesting project. We filmed episodes around FSI. Once we set up and filmed a mob scene at a pretend embassy at Quantico. Several months later I signed on as a WAE ("when actually employed") rehired annuitant with the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM). I've been working for PRM four to six months a year since then. The first issue I worked on was resettlement of some 20,000 Hmong refugees who were being expelled from a Wat (temple) in Thailand. Vietnam refugee admissions were largely over by that time but the Thais refused to keep this group of Hmong refugees.

Q: This was out of Cambodia wasn't it?

THAYER: The Hmong were hill tribes from Vietnam. They had assisted U.S. forces during the war and after we left they were persecuted by the Vietnamese. Most fled to Thailand. Overall, tensions with Vietnam had subsided a lot. The U.S. had resettled hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese. Some had returned to Vietnam; others resettled in the region. The Vietnamese abhorred the Hmong as traitors and pressured the Thais to get rid of them. PRM gets a special appropriation for refugee admissions, so it had funding to hire me to help with this emergency operation. WAE makes a lot of sense. We retirees have skills and experience, and since our retirement and benefits are covered, we cost little and work only when needed.

Q: Sure. And you're doing- there's not a lot of personnel bother. I mean, you're just there.

THAYER: Right. There is little admin or follow-up stuff with WAEs. I felt efficient and productive as a retiree. I work up to six months a year and have time for my own interests.

Q: Well then, with the Hmong, did you- one things of a fairly large community and, was it Minnesota or-

THAYER: My hometown of Minneapolis and twin city St. Paul had large established Vietnamese refugee populations by then, including Hmong. Also Amerasian children, born of mixed Vietnamese and American parents. They became another refugee category for resettlement when they were being persecuted for being mixed race and offspring of the enemy Americans.

Q: And how did the group that you- Had the Hmong in Minnesota pretty well established themselves by this time?

THAYER: Many Hmong came to the U.S. in the late '70s and early '80s, so these 20,000 coming in 2004 were a sudden late addition. The Hmong were a pre-literate highland tribe. By this time many Hmong were well established in Minnesota. I met a Hmong state senator and police officers, lawyers, merchants, and teachers from the Hmong community. We would also see Hmong, mostly aged men, sitting at the lakes in Minneapolis fishing. I think the city provided some special dispensation for Hmong to fish without a license.

Q: Yes, they didn't have a written language, if I recall.

THAYER: Right. Regular Vietnamese were not sympathetic to the Hmong, who tended to group together in Minnesota, California, a few other places. People wonder why Minnesota but Hmong are highland people from a cooler part of Vietnam and had fled to remote hilly parts of Laos and Thailand. Also Minnesota provided generous benefits and public services. I went to Minnesota several times for this job, once with the head of the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) at Health and Human Services (HHS). Dr. Van Ha was a Vietnamese refugee whose office provided federal support for refugee resettlement. We met with city and state officials, police, educators, health providers, and community leaders to discuss the impact the new arrivals would have on housing, schools, transportation, and health services. And what kids of federal and state support would be available to help. The State Department processes refugee cases abroad, with help from the UNHCR and social service agencies. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) actually makes the determination who qualifies for refugee status in interviews conducted abroad. It's a long complex process, which takes many months and sometimes years, involving multiple interviews, security checks, medical checks, documentation, and cultural orientation. Once refugees arrive, PRM funds private American mostly faith-based agencies to assist refugees for the first 90 days. These include the U.S. Catholic Conference of Bishops, Lutheran Immigration Refugee Services, Hebrew Immigration Aid Society, Episcopalian Migration Ministries, World Relief. They arrange housing, food stamps, health care, schooling, employment services, English language classes, transportation, and cultural orientation for the new arrivals. Another job I did part time was to monitor agency affiliates on contract to the State Department. By the end of the 90 days, most refugees are already working.

Q: Well you know, I started out in the Foreign Service in 1955 as a vice consul in Frankfurt, working on the- for the refugee relief program, and you were dealing with refugees from Eastern Europe, with HIAS and Tolstoy and the Lutherans. You know, I mean, all- Well, this of course is what makes the United States, we're all somewhat refugees of one sort or another.

THAYER: I liked all my jobs in the Foreign Service, but found refugee work particularly fulfilling. I'm lucky that I can continue to do this kind of work as a retiree. In 2006 I went to Cuba for six months to run the refugee program. It was ten years since my first trip to Cuba to monitor returnees from the migration accords.

Q: How did you find the refugee program working in Cuba? This is an odd thing.

THAYER: The 1994 migration accord required the U.S. to admit 20,000 Cubans a year. That could be through family reunification, regular immigration, the refugee program, and a lottery. Each had different criteria. The Cuba refugee program is an exception because refugees normally have to flee their country of origin due to persecution and require a DHS determination of persecution. There was a backlog of some 50,000 applications for refugee status in Cuba, but as the years passed, it became harder to find individuals who qualified. Cubans would come in and claim they'd lost a job or been harassed because of their beliefs, which DHS would try to verify in interviews. The program called for processing 4500 refugees a year from Cuba. The lottery was open to anyone, as long as they fulfilled health and security criteria, and helped fulfill the 20,000 quota.

The Cuban government loves these programs. We have no formal relations with Cuba but hold regular talks to ensure the migration accord is being implemented. When I went back to Havana in 2006 the relationship was particularly tense. Fidel Castro, who was suffering from a debilitating intestinal illness, had announced he was stepping down and turning the government over to his brother Raul. Nearly everyone thought his days were numbered, but he carried on for many more years. I was back again in 2009 when he finally formally relinquished power to Raul. Only then did some things begin to change. Raul Castro opened up the Internet, permitted cell phones, and let people operate small businesses and host tourists.

Q: Well did you- Why did the Cubans like, the Cuban government like the program?

THAYER: The Cuban government loves the migration programs. It removes dissidents. We are Cuba's safety valve. U.S. policy has probably done more to prop up the Castro mystique and regime than anything else. Cuba is a communist dictatorship but the Soviet Union collapsed almost two decades ago and stopped bankrolling the Castro regime. Nowadays Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez is the patron, providing cheap oil and other subsidies.

Q: I can't remember; have you been to Iraq?

THAYER: Yes, I was in Iraq this spring.

Q: I thought so. How did that strike you?

THAYER: In 2008 Congress passed the Refugee Crisis in Iraq Act. The Act directed the Department to establish a program in Iraq to process at-risk Iraqis for admission to the U.S. as refugees. The law grew out of public criticism that Iraqis were risking their lives and that of their families to serve as interpreters and aides to U.S. government and military forces and deserved protection and incentives for their service. Journalist and writer George Packer drew attention to the problem in a series of blistering reports in the New Yorker and a play called "Betrayed". Some few Iraqis were receiving special immigrant visas (SIV). Others had to flee to Jordan or other countries outside of Iraq to apply for refugee status, and the number of admissions was minimal. A PRM colleague and I were sent to Baghdad to set up the in-country program. The only other in-country refugee programs permitted under U.S. law were for designated groups in Cuba and the former Soviet Union.

Q: Well, there's quite a lot of criticism about we're putting a lot of Iraqis at risk, you know, by supporting this in difficult places. We weren't accepting many refugees.

THAYER: Right. First a small program was established to provide some 50 interpreters with SIVs. SIVs are typically for local national employees with long service records at U.S. embassies and posts abroad. Those who qualify can apply for the special visa and immediate green cards based on their service. The new program permitted at-risk Iraqi employees to apply regardless of length of service. Fifty admissions was a drop in the bucket and even that small number wasn't reached. Later the number was increased to 500. SIV processing was slow and did not cover most family members. It provided no resettlement assistance or benefits upon arrival in the U.S. In the meantime, hundreds of thousands of Iraqi refugees had fled to neighboring Jordan, Syria, Turkey, Egypt, Lebanon, and elsewhere. There they could apply for refugee status with the UNHCR and apply for small amounts of international support, although not nearly enough to cover shelter, food, schooling and medical costs. The U.S. was the occupying power in Iraq, and as such, was slow to acknowledge that Iraqis were fleeing persecution and danger inside Iraq. Hopes that the situation would normalize and violence would end so that refugees could go home obviously didn't happen. The U.S. government and especially the Department were roundly criticized for doing too little too late to help the Iraqis, especially those at risk for assisting American forces. Critics pointed out that the U.S. had taken in hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese refugees who fled after U.S. forces left Vietnam but could only manage 1600 Iraqi admissions in 2007. DHS, which was responsible for making refugee determinations, was anxious and reluctant about granting refugee status due to the difficulty in getting ironclad security checks. Many refugees had fled without all their documents and most couldn't get required police and other security clearances. Their names, often Mohammad or Ali, were hard to verify. By 2008, as criticism mounted, State named a Senior Coordinator for Iraqi Refugees to work with DHS to ramp up refugee processing and press other countries to take Iraqi refugees. PRM managed to admit around 12,000 in 2008.

My job in Baghdad was to set up the in-country refugee admissions program. I went to Iraq for 29 days, came back to the U.S. for more security training, and returned for five more months to get the program up and running. (TDYs over 30 days to Iraq required extensive security training, including in firearms, evasive driving, and major medical disasters at a security training facility in West Virginia.) When I went back to Baghdad the second time, a few weeks later, the situation on the ground had worsened considerably. Rocket and artillery attacks launched from Sadr City, a Shia slum stronghold just outside the Green Zone, ripped into the heavily-fortified U.S. Green Zone where the U.S. mission was housed in Saddam Hussein's palace. Ryan Crocker was the Ambassador and David Petraeus was the military commander. U.S. staff were housed in metal containers laid out in rows on the palace lawn, piled high with sand bags. Several containers suffered direct hits killing colleagues—both American and Iraqi--in their beds. One American was killed while on a treadmill in a container fitted out as a small gym. That day, after flying commercial from Washington to Jordan and on a military C-130 cargo plane from Amman to Baghdad airport, I picked up my flak jacket, helmet, chemical suit, and radio, and looked around for transport to downtown Baghdad. The road from the airport to Baghdad was called Route Irish, with IED craters, smashed vehicles and sniper fire. Most of us waited for a seat on a Rhino, a heavily-armored 22-seat bus that shuttled the 7.5 miles between the U.S.-controlled Victory Base at the airport and the Green Zone, mostly at night. On my first stay, I'd gotten a ride on a helicopter for the quick flight to LZ (landing zone) Washington outside the palace door. This time, with Sadr City attacking the compound and a heavy sand storm, I resigned myself to a long wait and rough ride on a Rhino. While waiting, I struck up a conversation with a helicopter pilot. It turns out he was from the Minnesota National Guard. When I said I was from Minnesota he invited me to go with him on a helicopter transfer scheduled for a senior U.S. military officer. I threw my gear in back and hopped in. He helicoptered to the far side of the runway where the VIP traveler never materialized. I expected he would drop me back at the Rhino but he said, "What the heck, we're cleared. Let's go." Off we flew on a zig zag course to LZ Washington. Just before landing, close to midnight, he said he could only touch down long enough for me to jump off. Already half a dozen damaged helicopters were lined up just outside the LZ. I grabbed my gear and jumped off. The helicopter was gone in an instant, burying me in a huge wash of dust and sand. It was pitch black. All the lights were out so as not to draw enemy fire. I stood there for a while not knowing which way to go, when a jeep without lights careened up to me. “What the hell”, said the driver, “Who the hell brought YOU here?” He threw my gear in back and we drove a few blocks to a guard house where he got out and ordered another driver to take me to the Palace. I felt really bad, putting them at risk that way. I introduced myself and asked the driver his name. “Angel“, he said, in a Spanish accent. He smiled. Angel indeed, my guardian angel, I thought. I arrived at the palace after midnight and dragged my stuff in through the four-meter high gilt front door. I slept on a sofa that night. The next day I was issued a key to a container, some towels and sheets. I quickly realized the containers were not safe and found myself a cot that I moved into my office in the palace. My colleague decided to do the same. We had a long narrow windowless office on the second floor. We each set up a cot at opposite ends of the room, and arranged our desks and a few chairs in the middle for visitors. We shared a huge royal bathroom down the hall with garish marble basins and gold faucets, along with other staff who set up offices in the palace bedrooms.

We worked around the clock to set up the refugee program. This included procedures, referral systems, document verification and processing, security checks, medical checks, and an initial orientation program. Given the difficulty in bringing Iraqi candidates and family members into the Green Zone for interviews and medical exams, I worked out an arrangement with the head of the small military medical clinic. He agreed that clinic doctors could do medical exams for refugee candidates on a voluntary basis two mornings a week when medical demands were usually light. The first time we scheduled appointments, the system I set up to get the refugee candidates cleared into the Green Zone broke down. Frantic not to abandon the families and leave the waiting doctors with no cases, I ran to the distant clearance check-point and begged the guards to permit the candidates, who already had the proper documentation and authorization, to enter. We made it in. I discovered later that UNHCR Goodwill Ambassador Angelina Jolie was visiting the Green Zone that day, and the guards, staff, and generals were apparently so rattled and excited to see her that they could barely manage anything else. I joined her later at a small meeting with some refugee women in the Palace. Jolie was rail thin, dressed in black with a head scarf. She listened intently to the group as they told their stories. She asked me a lot of questions about the admissions program. She clearly dazzled embassy and military senior leaders. I greatly admired her authenticity and generosity in highlighting the plight of refugees.

Last Monday, I was at a benefit hosted by Refugees International with Sarah Jessica Parker and Matt Dillon at the Kennedy Center. It featured George Packer and his play “Betrayed”, which criticized the U.S. for not living up to its moral responsibilities to assist Iraqis at mortal risk due to their association with American forces. It was an incredible, moving play. I was introduced as the State Department officer who helped set up the program for Iraqis in Baghdad. That was nice. It reminds you how celebrities and persistent journalists can make things happen in Washington that otherwise wouldn’t get traction. I was proud to have played a part.

Q: Oh yes. Well, you know, you can go back and look at the opera, “The Consul,” which is in a way somewhat the same. I mean, all part of this selection process, who comes to the United States. “The Consul” By Menotti. It has a mysterious figure, a consul of people waiting in the waiting room. He wrote “Amahl and the Night Visitors,”-

THAYER: Yes, of course. An opera. I'll have to look that up. We'll have to get the Italian embassy to do something on him. A little evening of Menotti.

Q: It's not a pleasant tale but- Well, Yvonne, I think it's probably a good place to stop. I want to thank you very much.

End of interview

THAYER NOTE: In the years since recording this oral history, I continued to work for PRM as a WAE and contract monitor. After Baghdad, I returned to Cuba in 2009 and 2011 to run the refugee program. In 2013 and again in 2014 I served as humanitarian advisor to the commander of Command Forward Jordan (CFJ). CFJ was set up in the King Abdullah Special Operations Training Center (KASOTC) a few miles north of Amman to coordinate plans and preparation for possible U.S. military intervention in Syria. It followed President Obama's declaration that a chemical attack by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad on Syrian civilians would be a red line. When al-Assad did so, Obama submitted the issue to Congress for a vote, which did not pass. Instead, the U.S. worked with Russia to get Syria to eliminate its chemical weapons stockpiles and submit to IAEA inspections. I worked with CFJ and the U.S. Embassy in coordination with the UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, UNHCR, ICRC, and other agencies to assist the nearly 700,000 Syrian refugees in Jordan and prepare for potential future outflows. I visited and reported on Jordanian-Syrian border crossing and reception facilities and Syrian refugee camps at Za'atari and Azraq, and handled other humanitarian issues, visitors, and training. In 2015 and again in 2016 I served as interim Refugee Coordinator in Beirut and re-established the admissions program there. Lebanon, a country of six million people, hosts some 1.2 million Syrian refugees, 200,000 Palestinian and 20,000 Iraqi refugees, the highest per capita in the world. The U.S. has provided almost $2 billion in refugee assistance to Lebanon since 2012. We hosted visits of Deputy Secretary Tony Blinken and PRM Assistant Secretary Anne Richard to expand U.S. support for programs for refugee children and girls. I continue to monitor refugee arrivals and resettlement agencies around the U.S., notwithstanding sharp cuts to the program under the current administration.