Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

RICHARD A. VIRDEN

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INTERVIEW

Q: When and where were you born?

VIRDEN: I was born in St. Cloud, Minnesota, on July 24, 1941.

Q: You want to talk about your family? How about on your father's side? What do you know about them?

VIRDEN: My dad's name was Ralph Virden. He was born in 1920 in central Minnesota, in a small town called Waite Park. His father's name was Andrew Virden. Andrew came to Minnesota as a young boy on the "orphan train" from New York, back around the turn of the 19th century.

Q: That very famous series of trains. Can you explain what that was?

VIRDEN: Well, these were boys from orphanages in New York City who were sent by train to the Midwest to work on farms. My grandfather was only six or seven at the time he made the trip, around 1900. His father was an engineer who was killed in a train accident in upstate New York; Andrew was not sure what happened to his mother, except that she died when he was very young.

Andrew had identification papers pinned to his back when he arrived in Minnesota, but they were eventually lost, so there's no documented family record. He was not treated very well at the first farm where he was placed --- the farmer was expecting an older boy who could do more heavy lifting – but things worked out better when he was eventually able to move to another farm.

Q: And this was your grandfather?

VIRDEN: My grandfather on my father's side, yes.

Q: What he did he do? He became a farmer, or what?

VIRDEN: He worked on a farm for some time, then in a railroad yard in Waite Park. This was a shop where they painted train wagons. After some years there, there was an accident that caused him to lose his hearing – and with it his job. The family was awarded an insurance settlement, but the insurance company went broke and never paid any of it. After the accident, Andrew worked on a daily farm again for more than 15 years until he retired.

Q: And how about his wife?

VIRDEN: In 1915 Andrew married Clara Imdieke, who was born in Meire Grove, in west central Minnesota. Both her parents, Joseph and Elizabeth Imdieke, were from Germany originally. Meire Grove was a very German community, as were many of the nearby towns and villages.

Q: Do you know anything about that settlement?

VIRDEN: Well, Meire Grove was – and remains -- primarily German. It's now a village of about 350 people. My great grandfather, Joseph, was a farmer and also had a brick making business; the brick house he built and lived in is still there. He also helped build the parish church, which remains in use today. The nearest town is called New Munich, so it's a very German area, that part of Minnesota.

Q: Did they get involved in the Civil War at all?

VIRDEN: No, my relatives were among the first settlers there, but they arrived after the Civil War.

Q: Well, to get to your father, then, your father, tell us about him.

VIRDEN: Dad was born in 1920, so he grew up during the Depression. He went to high school in St. Cloud and worked for a while in the Depression-era Civilian Conservation Corps. He and my mother, who was from the nearby town of St. Augusta, were married in 1940. For part of the war, he worked helping build the Alaska Highway. He was not drafted for military service early on due to bad vision but was called up in late 1944. By that time he and Mom had three young children at home. Dad went through basic training in Minnesota and was then assigned to a military hospital in Colorado, where he was when the war ended.

Q: How much education had he had?

VIRDEN: High school.

Q: So what did he do after the war?

VIRDEN: After the war he began working as a nurse's aide at the St. Cloud Veterans Hospital, where he continued in various capacities until his retirement more than 30 years later. To earn extra cash to raise our family of six, he also worked evenings and weekends for many years pumping gas (gas was 19 cents a gallon then!). He still found time to bowl once or twice a week, and well enough to be named to the local hall of fame. He was a championship cribbage player, too.

Q: All right, on your mother's side, what do you know about them?

VIRDEN: My father, by the way, died in 2007. My mother, whose maiden name was Marcella Trappen, was born in 1916. She still lives independently in the family home and, God willing will celebrate her 95th birthday this July. She was born in St. Cloud and lived there as a young girl before moving to a farm outside the nearby town of St. Augusta, where she studied in a one-room schoolhouse through the eighth grade; times

were tough, she was needed on the farm and so did not get the opportunity to go on to high school.

Once her youngest child, my brother Tom, was old enough, Mom went to work outside the home as a seamstress, making life jackets and similar products. Since retiring she's become a dedicated quilter; every member of the family has at least one of her works of art to treasure.

My maternal grandmother, Rose Liesch, was born in Rice Lake, Wisconsin, to German immigrants. She married, John Trappen, who was also German-born. John worked in granite sheds in the St. Cloud area until contracting stonecutter's disease; he died in 1929, when my mother was 12 and her sister, Alvina, 15.

Q: Granite chips in the lungs, I guess.

VIRDEN: Yes, exactly.

Q: Did you grow up in St. Cloud?

VIRDEN: Yes, I did. I went to Catholic grade school and high school, then a dozen miles away to St. John's University, a liberal arts college founded in Collegeville by Benedictines in 1858, the same year Minnesota became a state.

Q: You want to talk about, when you were a kid, what was St. Cloud like?

VIRDEN: Well, it was a small, kind of gritty, blue-collar town, but for us a very pleasant place to grow up in. Nobody we knew had a lot of money in those days and it didn't seem to matter; we had a great time.

We spent our free time playing games and sports of all kinds. In the summer we went swimming in a municipal pool but also in rock quarries outside the city. We played football and baseball whenever we could round up a quorum. We also hung out at the ballpark to watch the St. Cloud Rox, a Class C Northern League team and a farm club of the New York, later San Francisco, Giants. We saw a lot of future major leaguers, like Henry Aaron (who played for Eau Claire, in the same league), Orlando Cepeda, Willie Kirkland, Gaylord Perry and others on their way up.

Sports, outdoor games and John Philips Sousa concerts in the park were all part of growing up in that era. A friend from that time said to me recently that we had a Tom Sawyer-type boyhood. We felt that way, care free.

Q: Hockey, too?

VIRDEN: No, I loved all the other sports, but hockey was just one I didn't get into. Football, baseball, basketball, those were all big for us.

Q: As a kid, did you have brothers, sisters?

VIRDEN: Yes, indeed, I have a brother and two sisters. I'm the oldest, my brother the youngest.

Q: Your family, would you call them blue collar?

VIRDEN: Yes, though we would probably not have used that or any other label.

Q: What was the neighborhood like where you lived?

VIRDEN: Well, now St. Cloud is a town of about 65,000. I suppose in that era it was more like 35 or 40 thousand. It felt like a small town. We could walk most everywhere we wanted to go, and we did; either that or ride bicycles. The sidewalks in our neighborhood had WPA (Works Project Administration) chiseled on them, so they'd been put down during the 30s.

Ours was a Catholic, working class neighborhood. We went to Catholic schools: Catholic grade school, Catholic high school. Most of the people we knew were Catholic in those days. Many of my friends were of German background, but we also had Poles, Irish and Scandinavians.

Q: How important was the church in your family's life?

VIRDEN: It was very important. It was a very Catholic upbringing in those days. We went to church regularly. Catholic values were what we grew up believing in and so did just about everybody we knew. It was a very Catholic community and a Catholic milieu. We were regularly warned against so-called "mixed marriages," to a non-Catholic; naturally, I would eventually wed a Norwegian Lutheran!

Q: Irish Catholics, Italian Catholics, each of these has its own almost distinct flavor, you might say.

VIRDEN: In this case, it was more German and Irish Catholics, not so many Italians, some, but not too many, in this area.

Q: Was the priest sort of dictating what movies you should see and books you could read?

VIRDEN: Yes, well, there was a certain amount of that, but not in an oppressive sense. It was more that we knew what was expected, what was right. You were educated by the nuns and good, basic Catholic values are what they espoused and exemplified; it was never a matter of, "Don't you dare go see this movie. That is not allowed, or you'll get in trouble." It was not that kind of a rigid rule.

Q: Did you participate in church activities: altar boy, that sort of thing?

VIRDEN: I did some of that, yes.

Q: What about politics? Where'd your family fit?

VIRDEN: You know, politics was not something that was of great interest in our home. We did not spent a lot of time around our kitchen table talking about politics and national issues, or even local political issues; this was just not something that our family paid a lot of attention to back then.

Q: Did sort of the outside world intrude much, through TV, newspapers, radio?

VIRDEN: Not so much. We did not get a television until I was in about sixth grade. Before that we listened to radio a lot, comedians like Jack Benny and Bob Hope. Our first TV, black and white, was a big step forward. That would have been in the early 50s. We watched entertainment shows and the local news but didn't pay much attention to the national news broadcasts. If our local daily newspaper offered much national or international coverage, I was oblivious to it.

There were not a lot of organized activities. Mostly it was neighborhood kids. We would just get a critical mass together and get a game going, just thrown together. Now kids have organized sports teams. We didn't have that as much.

Q: Yeah, I grew up in that sort of time. Kids were turned loose and you had to be back by dinner or 6:30 or something, but the rest of the time, keep out of the way.

VIRDEN: Exactly.

Q: Were you much of a reader?

VIRDEN: Yes, I always like to read. I started with comics, then things like *Tom Sawyer* and Huck Finn, and a lot of sports books. We always had books around the house, and St. Cloud also had an Andrew Carnegie library, where I borrowed lots of books.

Q: Do you recall any books that really affected you?

VIRDEN: Well, yes, I liked Tom Sawyer, Huckleberry Finn, The Adventures of Robin Hood, a series about Frank Merriwell at Yale and other sports books. I also enjoyed Life on the Mississippi -- St. Cloud happens to be on the Mississippi River – and some of Mark Twain's other books, like Roughing It. That's the sort of thing I read in those days.

Q: How about winters there? Do they hit pretty hard?

VIRDEN: You bet. Minnesota's reputation is well deserved. They were hard winters, lots of snow and ice and cold, and we spent many an hour shoveling the driveway so we could get the car out – if it would start – or unstuck, when the snow was too thick.

Minnesotans learned early on how to rock a car back and forth to break free. (Watching Washington, D.C. drivers in the snow is a hoot!).

More generally, you just wore heavy clothes and got on with your normal activities. Looking back, the winters then seemed harder than those today, though the winter we've just gone through was long and deep – a throwback to those times.

Q: School, did you go to Catholic schools?

VIRDEN: Yes, all the way through college, so an early Catholic education, other than one year in a public kindergarten.

Q: How about elementary school? It was taught by nuns?

VIRDEN: It was taught by nuns in those days.

Q: How'd you find the nuns?

VIRDEN: I liked them. I got along very well with them and did not find them to be harsh or mean, as you see them portrayed in some accounts. I didn't find that at all. I considered the nuns to be dedicated and sympathetic and felt I learned a lot from them.

Q: in elementary school, where there any courses you liked and didn't like?

VIRDEN: Well, I was a good student and enjoyed school. I did well in reading, writing and arithmetic, not so well in reading aloud or cursive writing; my family and friends assure me that latter has not improved with time.

St. Anthony's was only a few blocks from home, and all the other kids lived within walking distance as well. I played with the same kids after school, and it was a very comfortable environment.

Q: How'd your football team do? Were there sort of organized teams at school?

VIRDEN: Well, we played all the other Catholic grade schools and won the city championship when I was a seventh grader. I have a photo of that team that still brings back happy memories. I played on the line but also called some of the offensive plays, so that was a lot of fun. We were pretty good again the next year, too, though we fell just short of another championship.

Q: At that point, were kids beginning to divide, those headed for college and those that weren't, or were you all pretty much in the same track, almost.

VIRDEN: No, there wasn't that, yet, at that stage. We weren't even thinking about college in that period. It was not like nowadays, when you start kind of building up a portfolio that can get you into a good college. We didn't think in those terms at that time.

Almost everybody went on to high school and it was only later, towards the end of high school, that you started considering whether to go to college and where.

Q: Were you much of a movie fan, or was that part of the culture, you would say?

VIRDEN: Oh yes, we went to the movies every Saturday. I think movie admission was twelve cents in those days. There were three movie theaters in St. Cloud and there was always something interesting playing: a feature movie, newsreel and short subjects. For a nickel you could get a candy bar or something to go with it and that was a big outing, on Saturday afternoon.

Q: Well, in high school, where'd you go to high school?

VIRDEN: St. Cloud, Cathedral High School.

Q: How much was this a church school?

VIRDEN: It was run by the Catholic diocese. The administration was primarily clergy, mostly nuns and a few priests, although there were also some lay teachers in those days. Cathedral is still in business now, but I think that ratio is reversed; it's primarily lay teachers now.

Q: Were you at all attracted to maybe becoming a priest, or not?

VIRDEN: Not at that time. I thought about it later on when I was in college. In fact, I went into the pre-seminary for one semester before deciding that was not for me.

Q: What were your favorite courses in high school?

VIRDEN: I liked mathematics but also English. I did pretty well on both sides of that equation and didn't have a clear track in mind at that stage.

Q: Did you get involved in high school affairs, one way or the other?

VIRDEN: Not too much. I played football my freshman year and figured out I wasn't going to be big enough or fast enough, so I didn't go out for the team in subsequent years. Also, I usually was working part time while I was going to school and in summers. I was not on the student council, or playing any part in varsity sports.

Q: What sort of work were you doing?

VIRDEN: Oh, lots of things. I worked in a grocery store, as a pin spotter in a bowling alley, things like that. A couple of summers I worked laying sod in yards, probably the hardest work I ever did in my life.

Q: as a pin spotter, did you have to duck the flying pins and all?

VIRDEN: We sure did. In those days, we had semiautomatic machines, so you would have to sit back, and then quickly throw the pins into the machine. You'd grab four at a time, throw them into their slots, throw in four more, then pull a string and, as the machine started descending toss the last two in place and jump out of the way. You moved fast or you got sore shins.

Q: Yeah, you had to be rather agile to do that.

VIRDEN: Right, indeed. We got paid about $10 a night to do this and also got to bowl for 10 cents a line on Saturday mornings. My friends and I did a lot of bowling in those days.

Q: How about dating? What was the dating pattern?

VIRDEN: I didn't do a lot of dating in high school. A few kids did, I didn't. I was a slow learner.

Q: How about news and all? Was sort of the outside world beginning to intrude on you at all during high school?

VIRDEN: I remember as a junior taking a civics course in which we talked about national politics, including the 1956 presidential campaign and the one coming up in '60. That was kind of the first time, as I think back on it now, when I started getting interested somewhat in outside political affairs.

It was a good course, a high school civics course, and something of an eye opener for me.

Q: Well, you were in high school from when to when?

VIRDEN: 1955 to '59.

Q: You graduated in '59. What were you directed towards?

VIRDEN: Well, I was going to go to college, at that point. I didn't know then what I'd study, just that I wanted to go to college.

It looked like I was going to go to St. Cloud State College until late in the game I got a partial scholarship from St. John's University, in Collegeville, where I really hoped to go; it was enough of a scholarship that we could afford the balance financially, and I was very pleased to end up going there.

Q: What was St. John's like?

VIRDEN: Well, it was a much respected, all male college in those days, run by the Benedictines, who have an abbey there. It's been there a long time, since Minnesota became a state in the middle of the 19th century. Eugene McCarthy was a graduate and former faculty member.

Garrison Keillor also worked on campus for awhile, on the radio station, and later memorialized the surrounding area as Lake Wobegon; his fictional creation is based on real bars and cafes and churches I know in little towns like Avon, Albany and Freeport. There's now a real Lake Wobegon Trail running through them. Keillor got the people right, too, though he moved in a lot of Norwegian Lutherans to replace the German Catholics who predominate in most of those towns.

There's a girls school, the College of St. Benedict, three miles from Collegeville, in St, Joseph. The two Benedictine-run colleges were separate then but joined forces a decade or so after I graduated; their classes are all co-ed now, a development we would have welcomed in my day.

I found the St. John's campus a very exciting place intellectually, a revelation to me in many ways.

Q: What was your major?

VIRDEN: Well, I started off as a math major for the first semester and decided that, though I liked math and algebra, I wasn't good at analytic geometry or interested in it. I then went into a pre-seminary program for a semester before eventually deciding against that course.

The rest of my time at St. John's I was English major.

Q: Pre-seminary, what did not attract you?

VIRDEN: That's an interesting way to think about it. It was a question of testing whether I wanted to devote myself to that kind of a life, to being a priest, to celibacy and that kind of commitment. In the end I decided no, I wanted to lead a different kind of life. I tried it for approximately four months, thought I'd given it a fair test, and decided to take a different path.

Q: Well then, any particular aspect of English literature that attracted you?

VIRDEN: Well, I took courses in English literature – Shakespeare, Chaucer -- American literature, creative writing. Hemingway was – and is – a particular favorite. So was J.D. Salinger at that time, and Henry Fielding's Tom Jones. I was invited to join an honors reading program, which introduced me to some of the world classics.

I also took a course in journalism, worked on the school newspaper, and served as a stringer for the AP, the St. Cloud Times and the Minneapolis Star Tribune. I spent the

summer between my junior and senior years working for the Daily Transcript, in Little Falls, Charles Lindbergh's hometown. I covered sports, society, the police beat, traffic accidents, politics – a bit of everything.

It was fun. I enjoyed newspaper work and thought that's what I'd get into when I left St. John's. By that time I'd figured out that journalism was more my cup of tea than creative writing.

Q: You were at college during the election of 1960, when John Kennedy ran. Of course he was Catholic. Did that campaign resonate with you?

VIRDEN: Only in retrospect. At the time I was there, I don't remember being very engaged with it at all. Later, when I moved to Washington right after graduation in the summer of 1963, I quickly became engrossed by the civil rights movement, the March on Washington, Kennedy's assassination, Vietnam and all the other dramatic events of that period. But when I was still in college, not so much.

Q: What was the social life like at St. John's?

VIRDEN: Active and varied. We played poker and bridge and drank a fair amount of beer. There were lots of watering holes and dance halls in St. Cloud and some of the other towns around there.

It seems hard to believe now, but in those days the students at St. Benedict's had to be in by eight o'clock on school nights. Even on weekends they had be back by ten or eleven at night. So it was a fairly tight curfew. But there were girls there, and there was also a nursing school in St. Cloud with lots of student nurses, and by that time I had discovered dating.

Q: Again, did the outside world intrude much? Obviously, we all knew we were in a Cold War, but did aspects of international relations hit you at all?

VIRDEN: One thing I remember is the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 and what a scary time that was. A couple of students at St. John's were in the military reserves and were called up, which got our attention. That brought it home to us, how dangerous the situation was.

Q: Were you, entering college years, a liberal, conservative or sort of what the hell?

VIRDEN: It was more what the hell, or simply ignorance. My political views were not yet formed at all. It was somewhat of a provincial place, St. John's, at that time.
It didn't have what it has now, with almost all students taking part in study abroad programs. There were one or two such opportunities even then, but it was not something that many students did.

Probably some of the other students were, but I was not that conscious of the outside world. The Foreign Service was not anything I even thought about at that point.

Q: at any point, did the family go up to Canada, or get around, goes to Washington or anything like that?

VIRDEN: We traveled as a family to surrounding states. We went to the Dakotas, Iowa, Wisconsin, and Michigan but never made it to Canada then.

Q: How about the Mississippi? You were a Mark Twain devotee. Did you get down around the Mississippi at all?

VIRDEN: Yes, well, the Mississippi cuts through the center of St. Cloud, so we were always aware of it. On one of our family trips we went up to Lake Itasca, in the northern part of the state, where the great river starts as a little stream you can step across. So we were very conscious of the Mississippi, we even did a little fishing in the river, although fishing tended to be better in lakes.

Q: at your college, was there much of an ethnic mix?

VIRDEN: Well, our students were mostly from central Minnesota, although some came from the Dakotas and some from the Chicago area; they were of primarily German and Scandinavian stock, with a good number of Poles, too. We had one classmate from Palestine, several others from the Caribbean, one or two American Indians, but altogether few minorities. The campus is very different today, of course.

Q: It was just getting started, but did the civil rights movement cause any stir at the college?

VIRDEN: No, not that I can remember, not then. That would come for me as soon as I moved to Washington, where I was suddenly right in the heart of it. The famous March on Washington took place that summer, August 28, 1963. That was a revelation to me.

Q: Well, as you were nearing the end of college, you graduated in '63, was it?

VIRDEN: Yes, that's right.

Q: What were you thinking of doing?

VIRDEN: I was looking for jobs in journalism or the federal government. I took something called the Federal Service Entrance Exam, which the government used in those days to start the process for pretty much all entry level jobs.

I got a good score on that exam and received job offers from a bunch of federal government agencies, in Washington, St. Louis (a regional headquarters) and elsewhere.

The opening I found most appealing was as a writer and editor, beginning as a GS-5 with the United States Information Agency in Washington. And so I went for that.

Q: You came in in what, '63, then?

VIRDEN: That's right.

Q: Had you heard anything, any reputation of the Information Agency?

VIRDEN: I'd done a little bit of reading about it, including its role abroad, but of course my job was civil service. I was assigned as a writer and editor in the Near East/South Asia press branch, that's where I was to start in Washington.

So a week after graduating I took the train, actually a series of trains, with transfers in Minneapolis, Chicago and, I think, Pittsburgh. It was hot, and the air conditioning broke down somewhere along the line, which made the 24 hours or so seem even longer. I arrived in Washington June 9, 1963.

The next morning, June 10, I reported for work to begin what turned out to be a 41-year government career. I remember the date well because it was the same day President Kennedy gave an historic speech at American University, about nuclear proliferation and arms control.

Q: How did your job and USIA strike you when you first went there?

VIRDEN: I was the low man on the totem pole in this office, a small newsroom. There were eight or ten people there doing news and feature reports that were sent out daily to United States Information Service posts in the Near East and South Asia.

It was an old style newsroom. In fact, we typed hard copy versions of our stories, which were then sent by pneumatic tube down to a central newsroom in a different part of the building. That's how old fashioned it was; it's probably hard for anybody in the internet age to imagine moving copy by such primitive means, but that's how it worked then.

I'd taken courses in history and geography, but I knew little about the countries of my assigned region, so I had to learn as I went along. I was sent on assignments around Washington and occasionally to other parts of the country. For example, I reported on a convention of Pakistani students in the United States, in Oklahoma; the next year I covered the same group in Glassboro, New Jersey.

When the United States started sending emergency food aid in response to a drought in India, I wrote a series of reports tracking when ships left U.S. ports, what they were carrying, and when they were due to arrive in India. Another time I reported on a ceremony in the office of Sen. Robert Kennedy, who gave an award to the widow of a Pakistani Fulbright student who'd died saving an American student from drowning.

Such assignments helped me learn my way around town and around the bureaucracy. Just living and working in Washington broadened my horizon, if you will. Now I really started following national news and international affairs. I read the *Washington Post* and several other major newspapers every day and began what to this day remains a strong interest in our political life.

After John F. Kennedy was assassinated, I read everything I could find about him and his administration, including books by two of his aides, Ted Sorensen and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., and it was a political awakening for me.

Q: Were you looking towards where you wanted to go within USIA?

VIRDEN: Well, I was debating whether to stick with USIA or go into newspaper journalism. I looked into such jobs and had some offers from newspapers around the country.

If I was going to stay with USIA, I wanted to get into the Foreign Service side of things. I was determined to either do that or take one of the positions with a newspaper. Then I passed the written exam and the invitation to the Foreign Service came through. If that hadn't happened, I would have left, that was my thinking then.

Q: Were you looking at any particular aspect or geographic entity, or something like arms control or anything like that, specializing in that?

VIRDEN: No, I didn't have any specialty or part of the world in mind. I remember that early in our Foreign Service orientation we were asked to indicate our preferences among the spots available at that time. Somewhere on my wish list was Thailand.

The Vietnam War was going strong by that time and I was interested in going out to that part of the world, to try to better understand its significance. Although my first choices were Germany and Italy, Bangkok was also fairly high up on my list, and that's where I ended up.

Q: Tell me about the wireless file. What was it?

VIRDEN: Well, that was kind of a daily news service that the U.S. Information Agency maintained, consisting of news and feature articles and texts of speeches by the president and other senior U.S. officials. It was sent by radio-teletype, hence the name "wireless file." So it was like a teletype service that went from Washington to our embassies and USIS posts, which then placed selected materials with local media.

Some of it what was sent was only for the information of people in the embassy, to keep them abreast of events back home that might affect our relations with their countries of assignment, and some of it they could offer to newspapers or media outlets in that country

The plaque outside USIA's headquarters at 1776 Pennsylvania Avenue -- a great address, no? -- said the agency's role was "telling America's story to the world." The mission was what we now call public diplomacy: to inform foreign publics and try to gain their understanding and support for the United States. We didn't call it that, but it's what the press and publications service was doing in those days.

Q: What were you doing on that?

VIRDEN: I was writing articles that were tailored for countries in the Near East and South Asia. Some stories were produced in a central newsroom, and others were done in regional branches, for particular countries or regions. I worked mostly on stories meant specifically for the countries in my region, though I also eventually wrote some articles, about a National Student Association convention for example, for worldwide usage.

Q: Well then, how long were you a civil servant?

VIRDEN: Not quite three years, until I entered the Foreign Service in March of 1966.

Q: What was social life like in Washington at the time?

VIRDEN: Well, it reminded me of John F. Kennedy's line about Washington being a city of northern charm and southern efficiency. Coming from Minnesota, the environment in Washington was radically different from anything that I had known.

To begin with, the presence of blacks or African Americans in the drug stores, on the streets, everywhere in the city was new to me; there had been almost no minorities in St. Cloud or at St. John's. This was really the heyday of the civil rights movement and there were lots of strong feelings on all sides. I remember going to a bar in Georgetown and being amazed when nearly everybody stood up to cheer when the band played *Dixie*.

It was a charged atmosphere in those days. It was barely two months after I arrived in Washington that the historic March on Washington was held, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. gave his great, "I have a dream" speech, and the civil rights movement started picking up steam.

Racial tension was definitely a part of what you saw and felt in Washington back in that time.

Q: Did you find yourself falling into any particular camp, or were you more an observer?

VIRDEN: Well, I was staying in a fraternity house in Foggy Bottom at the time of the March on Washington and watched that moving demonstration with great interest. At the time, I wasn't sure the March would help, but I believed strongly in what the protestors stood for. Over the next two years there was a bitter, drawn out battle to get a landmark civil rights bill through Congress; it was stalled by a filibuster that seemed destined to go on forever.

President Kennedy couldn't get the bill through, but partly in homage to him, it did eventually become law in 1964, thanks also to the considerable legislative skills – and courage -- of Lyndon Johnson and my fellow Minnesotan, Hubert Humphrey. The voting rights act passed the next year may have been just as important.

I followed all this day to day, the maneuvers in Congress, the Birmingham church bombings, the speeches of Dr. King, the murder of the three civil rights workers and the searing national debate.

Before the whole Vietnam trauma, the civil rights conflict was already front and center, inspiring us but also exposing our faults and our profound divisions.

Q: How did you get into the Foreign Service?

VIRDEN: The traditional way. I took the written exam, passed, and was called in for a formal interview. As I remember, there were three Foreign Service Officers who questioned me for two hours or so. Eventually they asked me to leave the room, and a bit later the chief examiner called in and said, "Congratulations, you passed!" Little did I know what lay in store in the years ahead!

Q: Well, do you recall any of the questions?

VIRDEN: No, not really; memory fades. I think it was mostly a discussion of contemporary events. We talked about Vietnam, the civil rights movement and some of the other issues of the day, as well as the Constitution, our system of government and a bit of our history.

Q: How about Vietnam, by the time you came in, this is '66, did you have any feelings about our involvement in Vietnam?

VIRDEN: Yes, I thought then that we were doing the right thing. I believed our policy was well intentioned and that we were correct in getting engaged there. That's how I felt at the time. I was later to change my mind, based on my actual experience in Vietnam, but during the period we're talking about right now I believed our policy was valid.

Q: during the oral exam, did Vietnam come up, do you remember?

VIRDEN: I'm sure we talked about the war, but I don't remember being asked "Are you for or against it?"

Q: I don't think it was put in those terms, probably.

VIRDEN: I do remember that there were 37 of us in my entering class, including just one woman, out of 37. Nowadays of course more than half who come in are women. That's another revolution -- women's liberation -- that has occurred during my lifetime.

Q: Well then, the USIA training sometimes is combined with the State Department, sometimes separate, sometimes back and forth. How was it in your time?

VIRDEN: We had some of both. We were part of a joint class with State Department Foreign Service Officers. Of the 37 who were in that A-100 course, ten of us were USIA officers. We took the same A-100 course and consular training, and then had a separate, shorter period -- a month, six weeks -- of familiarization at USIA.

Q: Do any of the people who were in your A-100 course stick out in your mind over the years?

VIRDEN: Well, yes, there were several. One was a guy named Robert Little, who'd just graduated from Harvard and was a very impressive young man. He went to Vietnam on his first assignment and was killed during the 1968 Tet Offensive.

Then there was another fellow named Roger Morris, who was first assigned as a personal aide to former Secretary of State Dean Acheson, then was detailed to the National Security Council. He quit the Foreign Service in 1971, in protest against our invasion of Cambodia, and went on to write well-received biographies of Henry Kissinger and Richard Nixon, among other books.

Another classmate was Ray Seitz, whose first assignment was to London. He later had several other tours there, including as the first career officer to ever be ambassador to the Court of St. James.

Q: What were you asking for, when you took the course? Where'd you want to go?

VIRDEN: As I remember it, we were given a list of posts that would be available and told to choose a half dozen or so, in order of preference. My first choices were Germany and Italy but Bangkok was also high on my list. I forget what else was there at the time, but I ended up getting assigned to Thailand.

I didn't have a really strong preference, so I was open to almost anything. You have to remember, I'd never been out of the country.

Q: Had you developed a significant other at this point?

VIRDEN: Not yet, no.

Q: Serial significant others?

VIRDEN: Yes, there you go.

Q: Today is March 28, 2011. When was your first assignment?

VIRDEN: Well, I left the country in January of 1967 for Bangkok after completing about six months of Thai language training.

Q: How'd you find the language training?

VIRDEN: It was difficult. I had studied a little German in college, but it was college-type instruction, with a large class and not much actual speaking of the language, so the linguistic method used by FSI was totally new to me. It took a while to get the hang of it, but eventually I caught on and did well enough to qualify.

Q: And you were saying, this is your first time overseas, wasn't it?

VIRDEN: This was the first time to leave the country at all, yes.

Q: You were in Thailand from when to when?

VIRDEN: I arrived in January 1967, having stopped in Japan and Hong Kong on the way out. I stayed in Thailand almost three full years without home leave, until October of '69.

Q: When you arrived in '67, what was the situation in Thailand?

VIRDEN: You remember I was working for the United States Information Service; at that time we had a very large program in Thailand, one of the largest in the world. This was connected to the Vietnam War, so the focus was on counterinsurgency.

We had as many as 13 branch posts in Thailand at one time. We even had people in some rather small towns, particularly up in the northeastern part of Thailand, because of the concern about an insurgency growing there related to the war in Vietnam. We also had a lot of air bases up in that region that we were using for the Vietnam War effort. The main focus of the U.S. mission overall to Thailand and of USIS was keeping Thailand with us and helping the Thais hold the loyalty of their own people.

Q: Politically, what was the situation in Thailand, looking at it geopolitically?

VIRDEN: Well, they were an ally in the Vietnam War. They were one of the few countries – six or seven -- that actually had troops on the ground in South Vietnam. They had about a thousand soldiers there, I think, at the peak.

Within Thailand itself, the same political system prevailed that had since the absolute monarchy was ended in 1932. Since then, power had been shared primarily between the King and the army. There were some of the trappings of democracy, but it was not a full-fledged democracy. It was still pretty much absolute rule in those days.

Q: Where were you assigned?

VIRDEN: Well, the first eight or nine months I was based in Bangkok and had a series of assignments with different sections of the United States Information Service there. In those days USIA officers had rotational training, you moved around different parts of the operation – press, radio and television, library, cultural center, executive office, field operations -- to learn the business. The final three months of that training in my case was in our consulate up in Chiang Mai, in the far north.

Q: Now, let's talk about your original assignments. What sort of work were you doing?

VIRDEN: Well, my first non-training assignment then was as a branch public affairs officer in a town called Phitsanulok, which is in the north central part of the country, maybe about three hundred miles due north of the capital, Bangkok, and 20 miles east of Sukhothai, which had been the capital of a Thai kingdom in the early Middle Ages.

I was the only USIS officer there, with a staff of about half a dozen Thai employees. What we were doing then, as I mentioned, was counterinsurgency. We had a five-province region, bordering on both Laos and Burma, and we operated what we called "mobile information teams," or MITs.

The idea was to get Thai government representatives out of their offices and into the villages, to show villagers that their government actually did things for them and that there was a government on their side and worthy of their support.

We would take people along on our MITS who could offer concrete help: veterinarians, doctors or nurses, agricultural specialists, educators, the chief district officer or his deputy, sometimes the governor and other provincial officials.

And we would bring things to give away as well: medicine, for example, and pamphlets about the King. We would also show movies, using 16 millimeter projectors, a sheet held up by bamboo stakes, and our own generators (there was no electricity in most of these villages). We reached many of these places by Jeeps on ox-cart trails, since there were few decent roads.

And the whole idea, again – this being an authoritarian system, going back centuries, with a government very distant from the people – was to work with the Thais to bridge that divide, to bring the government and the people together. The whole effort was born out of concern of a spillover from the Vietnam War; we were concerned that a disaffected population could turn against the government here, too, as in Vietnam.

Q: Here you are, a young kid, all of a sudden you're by yourself with this staff of six. How did you find the experience?

VIRDEN: It was fascinating, stimulating, sometimes intimidating, often exhausting. I did have almost a year of rotational training and travel and moving around the country with some of the other people who were already in the field doing this, so I didn't start from

zero when I got my first assignment on my own. I'd been in the country almost a year by that time, when I started taking on that responsibility.

You just did it. I understood what we were trying to do, it made sense. And of course I did have a staff of good, experienced Thai employees who knew what they were about.

It was pretty isolated, when you got into some of these areas. I was often the first *farang* -- - or, white foreigner, in Thai -- that ever showed up in many of these villages, so I was a curiosity. Watching this large, pale creature take a shower was a source of great mirth for village kids; you had to maneuver a couple of pakimas – a sort of large towel – while pouring water from buckets. It was a risky business.

We'd bring along sleeping bags and sleep on the floor of a pavilion or Buddhist temple. Village food, which it would have been rude to decline when offered, could be gut-wrenching.

At night we'd show movies. There was no electricity, so we would string up bamboo stakes and tie a sheet to them and that we would be your screen and we'd show cartoon type films, Walt Disney type things, public service advertisement.

Q: These were basically informational films?

VIRDEN: Yes, and we had had some entertainment features, too, and films about King Bhumibol and his activities, because that was the strongest asset -- in terms of the loyalty of the villagers -- identification with the king and the royal family.

I remember being on one of those trips, in the small town of Mae Sot in Tak province on the border with Burma, when an Air America pilot who'd just flown in on a small aircraft told me Robert Kennedy had been assassinated that day, that's how I learned about it.

On another village trip, in Uttaradit province near the border with Laos, we needed an elephant to pull a teak log off our path. It's probably the favorite petty cash voucher I ever submitted: 10 baht (50 cents), hire of elephant to remove log from trail.

Q: When you were in the villages, were they interested in us, or

VIRDEN: No, we were a curiosity but little more than that. These were people who were really cut off. Remember, many of these villages had no roads. They were very poor in those days.

I believe there was something like 50,000 villages in Thailand, and many of them -- we're talking now in the late 60s -- did not yet have electricity. Part of what the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) was doing in those days was helping build roads through much of the country. Some major dams were also in the works, financed by the World Bank among other organizations.

That development work had not yet progressed very far. There were still many areas that had not been reached. And so these were rice farmers, living out there amid their rice paddies as they had for time immemorial. Our presence was something new to them, not only that they had foreigners around, but also their own government.

Q: How'd you find the Thai government officials, you were getting them out. Were they sort of reluctant, a bunch of Americans pushing them out into the boondocks and all?

VIRDEN: Well, it was often a struggle. It was much more comfortable to stay in their offices back in the district or province capital. We would sometimes get the governor and his staff out on some of these things, too. That took even more work.

Some officials – particularly those trained at the USAID-created district academy – were willing to go but lacked the means. We had Jeeps of our own. We provided the transportation and paid for the gas to get out there. So we had to kind of provide the wherewithal and impetus, because this was not something they were used to doing.

Traditionally, state officials stayed in their offices, and if there was contact at all, the people came to them; they did not go out to the people. So in a way this was a revolutionary concept.

Q: Were there security threats to you?

VIRDEN: Yes, there were, and in fact the year after I left there three of my Thai colleagues from Chiang Mai were killed, ambushed by terrorists.

The area we were in was fairly close to the Laotian border, up in the north central part of Thailand, so there was spillover, particularly in the mountain tribe regions, on both sides of the border. The border was pretty porous and there was frequent violence. Most of the trouble was attributed, rightly or wrongly, to communist terrorists, CTs, as they were called in those days. There indeed was a communist party of Thailand, and some actual armed terrorists active in the field. So the threat was real enough, if perhaps exaggerated.

Q: I'm not too familiar with that area, but you say the mountain people. Were they Hmong, or were they separate from the normal plains Thai, or not?

VIRDEN: Yes, they were. The northern part of Thailand is very mountainous and the north central part, where I was, was on the fringe of that. In that region, there was particular concern about the mountain tribes.

There were a wide variety of tribal people in those mountains and the Hmong were among the larger groups. Yes, the Hmong – or Meo -- were some of those that we were concerned about in those days. Not to say that all the Hmong were on one side or the other, but they were part of the perceived threat.

There were also the Yao and Karen, over near the Burmese border, and a wide variety of other groups. I think in some languages, like in Vietnam, they're all called *Montagnards*, or "mountain people." There's quite a variety of tribes covered by that generic term.

Q: Did we have programs to work with the mountain people, or not?

VIRDEN: Yes, we did and the Thai government did, too. The king and the royal family in particular had a number of initiatives. Another concern in those days was that the tribal people were involved either in opium production or in opium transit; one of the major programs of the royal family was crop substitution.

That's not something I was directly involved in, but we as a mission were trying to encourage the growth of crops other than opium. It's a tough sell and a long-term struggle. Actually, I think the effort continues to this day.

Q: When you moved to Chiang Mai, that was, what, your last year and a half for so?

VIRDEN: That was near the end of 1967. That was the final three months of my orientation training. I was attached to the U.S. consulate up there, and then transferred to the post in Phitsanulok. So I moved away from Chiang Mai but got back there occasionally on visits.

Chiang Mai, of course, was a wonderfully exotic place. There's a book about Chiang Mai, called *Consul in Paradise;* it was written by W.A. R. Wood, a British diplomat who went there as a young man and just never left, a fascinating book about a really quite beautiful and interesting part of the country; it's cooler up there, too, because of the mountains. The Thai woman chosen as Miss Universe one year was from Chiang Mai; it was a kind of Shangri Ra in that era.

Q: Who was the consul general there when you got there?

VIRDEN: A man named Wever Gim. It wasn't a consulate general, it was a consulate then. He was the consul.

Q: You were there from '68 to

VIRDEN: In Phitsanulok from early 1968 until late '69.

Q: I would imagine that our military would sort of overwhelm everything there.

VIRDEN: Yes, though not so much in my area. They were more in the northeastern part of the country. In Phitsanulok, there was a small radar site, so we had a detachment from the U.S. Air Force there and we had a very small U.S. military advisory group working with the Thais. I was the only civilian U.S. government official on the scene.

Q: How'd you find the writ of the Thai government out there?

VIRDEN: It didn't extend very well into the villages, even in the lowland plains; that was exactly what we were trying to change. We felt it was important for the Thais to get government services out and extend them beyond the provincial capital or the district capital, make those villagers out there believe that the government provided them something valuable, was on their side and could do useful things for them.

That had not been the case for most of history. The fact that many villages didn't yet have electricity and didn't yet have usable roads was a pretty good indicator of that. They didn't have schools, either, in many of these areas.

That, by the way, is I think considerably changed now, but we're talking about the late 60s.

Q: I take it the king was sort of the thing that held things together in Thailand?

VIRDEN: Yes, the king and the Buddhist religion were the unifying forces that brought Thais together; it was nation, king and religion.

Q: the Buddhist religion, since you were working on the information and cultural side, did that intrude, help or was there a problem with it, from your perspective?

VIRDEN: Not a problem, no. It was one of the major unifying forces that made the Thais a nation. Now, one region of the country was a bit different and I didn't work in that region. That was the south, the Malayan peninsula, where the ethnic makeup is mainly Malay and the religion is primarily Islam.

Now we're talking about the Deep South, the southern peninsula of Thailand, going down towards Malaysia. That's a somewhat different situation down there. I visited but never worked in that part of the country.

Q: Was there much spillover from Laos, refugees or that sort of thing, in the area you were dealing with?

VIRDEN: Yes, there was a border with Laos that was not patrolled in those days. The tribal groups moved back and forth at will. I mentioned earlier that the year after I left there was an ambush in one of the northern regions – Nan province – in which three of my Thai colleagues were killed. The attack was attributed to a hill tribe group in that border region.

There was a fair amount of moving back and forth and the government writ did not really extend up into those border areas.

Q: Did you have sort of an immediate boss in Chiang Mai?

VIRDEN: I did, the Consul, when I was in Chiang Mai. But when I was in Phitsanulok my boss was in Bangkok. The USIS field operations officer in Bangkok was the person I reported to.

Q: How was the support, instructions, etc, from, well, from Washington through the embassy and through your agency and all when you were that far out in the field?

VIRDEN: All that was very far away and the communication was weak. Even phone service was problematic; getting calls to and from Bangkok was shaky. You had a pretty long leash in a field program like that in those days to do what you thought was best and report about it later.

Q: That must have been fun!

VIRDEN: It was exhilarating in many ways.

Of course, you could also feel a bit cut off at times, too. A senior colleague from that time used to talk about something he called the "foxhole mentality," by which he meant the tendency of soldiers in exposed positions to feel that, "nobody behind the lines knows anything or cares about us out here." It's an understandable but not especially healthy attitude to adopt. I tried to keep the phenomenon in mind then and in later year when I was on the other end, supervising other officers from a distance.

Once when I was living in Phitsanulok a tower was hit by lightning and power knocked out for the entire town for the next three weeks. This was at a time when temperatures in the lowlands were often a hundred degrees every day. That didn't seem to matter too much to the Thais, who put on jackets when the temperature dips below 90, but it was hard on a Minnesotan. We didn't have phone service either, but if I had to choose between the phone and air conditioning, it wouldn't have been a tough call, so to speak.

But for me, working out there, yes, it helped me learn to use my own wits and do what needed to be done as best I could judge it in those days.

Q: How was social life? I would think that, one thinks of the plays of Noel Coward and others, having drinks at sundown and extremely pretty girls and all that. It's like the British Consul in Paradise*. It could sort of interfere with your work, or spur you on, or what?*

VIRDEN: Well, sure, there were times like that, especially in Chiang Mai and Bangkok, less so in Phitsanulok. But the news that really matters is that it was on this tour that I met my future wife! Linda Larson was in Bangkok that first year I was there on a junior year abroad from her college, St. Olaf, in Northfield, Minnesota.

Q: Where else?

VIRDEN: Right, there you go! Linda and I were from towns 14 miles apart but we met 10,000 miles away in Thailand! Through family connections, she learned that I was there and got in touch. I invited her to dinner, and the rest is history, as they say. We were married in late 1971, after she finished college and I completed a tour in Vietnam. This year we are celebrating our fortieth wedding anniversary.

Q: Congratulations!

VIRDEN: Yes, thank you very much.

Q: Now, how about the influence of the American military? With these big bases around, did that intrude much on your work?

VIRDEN: Yes, but a little less so for me than for some of my colleagues working in the northeastern part of Thailand, where we had major air bases, at least half a dozen of them.

We only had a small radar installation at Phitsanulok airport, plus a small detachment of military advisors in town, not a major presence in the region.

The radar group had a little club, where I could go to watch movies, have a drink, play poker, that kind of thing. This group did not have much contact with Thai authorities; their work was connected to the Vietnam War, tracking airplanes that were doing something in Laos or in Vietnam, not in Thailand.

Q: Were there officers, particularly political officers, coming out from the embassy and trying to find out what was happening and how did you interact with them, if they did?

VIRDEN: There was some of that. But actually, the area where I was based was part of the Chiang Mai consular district. Wever Gim, as I mentioned, was the consul in Chiang Mai. He and a political officer working with him up there would come down to the region once in a while to gather information on political developments.

As an adjunct to my own job, I also did a certain amount of political reporting, since we would see and hear things while we were out and around. In addition to reporting on our own programs, we reported basic data – number of houses in the village, availability of water and electricity – and whatever tidbits we picked up that might be useful.

One example that comes to mind was when the Thai government, with U.S. backing, broadcast to hill tribesmen in an area near Laos directing them to come down to the valley to get away from an ongoing military operation. However, we'd been in the makeshift camps in that area and knew they were simply not equipped to cope with a new influx of refugees. So I reported what I believed was a potentially dangerous disconnect between the message and the reality that would greet anyone who heeded it.

On another occasion, I raised the alarm about the lack of plans to provide for the hundreds of village families that would be displaced by the huge Sirrikit (named for the Thai Queen) Dam, then being built in Uttaradit province.

Q: What about the corruption situation there?

VIRDEN: Well, yes, there certainly was a fair amount of corruption, one would have to assume. It didn't brush against us in any direct way. It may have been one reason for the skepticism we would often sense when we were out in the countryside. Like, who are these strangers, why are they here, what do they want to take from us? It wasn't hard to detect a certain amount of distrust, and a record of corruption or exploitation probably had something to do with that.

I don't remember personally noticing any direct examples of corruption, but I didn't doubt it was part of the picture.

Q: Had the influence of either drugs or drug money penetrated that area when you were there?

VIRDEN: There was opium traffic, but it was primarily up in the very remote areas where the opium running took place. It was fairly confined, where that was going on.

There was some of it grown in Thailand's own mountain regions and some of it coming from other areas in Burma and Laos, the so-called Golden Triangle. Much of the trafficking was controlled in those days by remnants of Chiang Kai-shek's forces, the KMT, who had been up in those hills since the days of China's civil war. They didn't grow the opium but got protection money out of it.

Two years later, when I was a correspondent based in Saigon, I was sent to all three of the Golden Triangle countries to do a series about efforts to curb the drug trade.

Q: Well, then, you left there in, what, late '69?

VIRDEN: Yes, I left in late '69 for home leave with orders to return to a new assignment in Bangkok, as assistant radio and television officer. That's what I thought I was going to be doing next. While I was in Minnesota on leave I got a call from Personnel and was told, "Hold on. Your assignment's going to change. You're going to go to Vietnam instead. You're needed there."

Already by that point, I was told, about half of USIA's Foreign Service Officers had served in Vietnam. The agency's message to me was in effect: We have a huge operation there, we need more bodies, and it's your turn. Here are a bunch of jobs that are open, choose one.

So that was it. Well, I thought about it for awhile and decided to go ahead. One of the jobs that was open was for a Wireless File correspondent; since I had a background in

journalism and continued to be interested in it, that appealed to me more than serving, say, on a provincial advisory team.

So I chose that; USIA agreed and sent me to French language training for a few months, then on to Saigon, where I arrived in July, 1970. I stayed until October of 1971.

Q: So you were in Saigon?

VIRDEN: I was based in Saigon, but I traveled all over the south. I moved around in South Vietnam, reporting what was going on in areas like pacification, refugees. I wrote hard news and feature stories for the USIA wireless file; these pieces would appear in military publications like *Stars and Stripes* and other commercial newspapers around the world.

I sometimes attended the infamous "Five O'clock Follies," to hear what the U.S. and Vietnamese military and civilian briefers were saying and pick up leads on stories to chase down, in Saigon and in the field. I hitched rides on U.S. military helicopters and fixed wing aircraft, Air America too, to get around.

Early on I had an emotional reunion at a firebase near Chu Lai, off the central coast, with my brother Tom, who was then nearing the end of his one-year tour as an Army grunt; he'd grown up since I'd seen him last, as a fun loving teenager, three and a half years earlier.

Q: What was your impression, you mentioned the "Five O'clock Follies," the press briefing that was held at five o'clock, the nickname for it, what was your impression of the media, the American media, there at that time?

VIRDEN: By this time most reporters were aggressively skeptical and anti-war. Remember what period we're talking about here. This was the summer of 1970, and most Americans had pretty much turned against the war by then.

We still had a huge military presence, of course, about 400,000 troops in the south. That was down from a peak of 543,000. We'd started a process of so-called Vietnamization, so we were reducing that figure gradually. By the time I left we were under 200,000. But throughout that period, we were a major presence.

You had a whole variety of correspondents. It was a very large press corps, from the U.S., Vietnam and around the world. Many were very good, dedicated reporters. Some had been there for the duration. There were others who never left Saigon and "covered" the war from their desks in the city. But most of them were diligent, courageous, well qualified people. I was impressed with them.

I spent some time with them, including more than a month in a makeshift press camp up in the northern part of the country when the South Vietnamese Army crossed the border into Laos, near Khe Sanh, to try to cut off the Ho Chi Minh Trail. That was in January

and February of 1971. There was a press camp set up somewhere in Quang Tri province to facilitate coverage of this operation.

And, again, I saw a lot of very dedicated journalists doing their job; some of them died trying to get the story of this particular campaign.

Later in life, when I was teaching at the National War College, I was pleased to bring one of the greatest of the Vietnam correspondents, David Halberstam, to speak there.

Q: Of course he was the author of The Best and the Brightest.

VIRDEN: Yes, he won the Pulitzer Prize for that book, which is a devastating analysis of how America's elite led us into a quagmire in Vietnam.

Q: Yeah. Did you find that sort of you were considered a government flack or something like that by the media people?

VIRDEN: Well, I don't know about that, I suppose there may have been some who looked at us that way. Most didn't spend any time thinking about us one way or another; they had a big war to report. The reporters I knew seemed to regard me and the other two wireless file correspondents as simply colleagues. We showed up at the same places they did and reported what we saw and heard.

I remember one feature I wrote that first summer about the so-called "Street Without Joy." Bernard Fall wrote a book by that title, about the French experience in that stretch of land. Maybe you know that area?

Q: Oh, yes. I've traveled it, from Da Nang up to Quang Tri.

VIRDEN: Yes, exactly. Were you in Vietnam at this same period?

Q: I left in July of 1970. I was consul general there.

VIRDEN: Well, we must have just crossed paths then. You left the month I arrived. And you'd been there for --

Q: 18 months.

VIRDEN: I'm sorry we didn't meet at that time.

Anyway, I went up to that area in July or August of 1970. I flew to Da Nang on a C-130 and then went by Jeep through that string of villages, which were coming back to life in this period. Pacification was actually having some effect.

People had basically abandoned those villages around the time of the 1968 Tet Offensive, considering them unsafe. Now, two years later, relative security had been restored and

people were moving back home. So I wrote a feature describing what had been done to make that progress possible; it got a big spread in *Stars and Stripes* and was picked up by quite a few other publications.

I remember covering a ceremony for a group of *Chieu Hoi*, defectors from the Viet Cong who were coming over to the government side. On another occasion I interviewed a North Vietnamese POW. A sampling of other topics included a Vietnamese doctor running a field hospital up in the highlands; American legal experts invited to help re-write some of the country's basic laws; land reform; Vietnamese elections; and press conferences held by visiting politicians of a variety of political persuasions. Vietnam was still a huge international story, and there were few slow days.

Q: My impression was -- I wasn't, obviously, in the media side of things -- but there were a lot of really amateur journalists there.

VIRDEN: Yes, well, there were a lot of very young guys – and a few women -- who didn't have any training as journalists but just sort of caught on as local stringers or runners for some of the media organizations. Some of them learned fast and did a good job and others were opportunists.

So you got a mixed bag, yes. They were not all of sterling character. Some of them were just adventurers and some of them were shoddy journalists.

My general impression, though, was that most of them were dedicated and really determined to discover the reality and report it accurately. They didn't always succeed. I remember standing on the tarmac at Ton Son Nhut with much of the Saigon press corps when Henry Kissinger, then the National Security Advisor to President Nixon, left Vietnam for Pakistan. No one sniffed out that he would take off from Pakistan for Beijing – and end more than two decades of our non-recognition of China.

Q: Well, I would think you would have been sometimes in a difficult position, where sort of the free media was reporting one way and we were trying to, particularly the military or the embassy side was trying to report something the other way and there you are in the middle.

VIRDEN: Yes, well, I think as a country we had a major problem with what was called the "credibility gap." I saw lots of examples of the divergence between the Washington narrative and the on-the-ground reality. One of the worst was something called the "hamlet evaluation system," under which you got inflated statistics all the way up through the internal reporting channels. It brought to mind that old saying about "lies, damned lies and statistics."

You had all these numbers about how great everything was going; that included the body count, which was often invented or exaggerated every step up the line, from the lowest level on up. A recent Vietnam novel, Matterhorn, reminded me all over again how that worked and how self-deceiving the numbers were.

Q: Yes, whether officials could sleep in the village at night and that sort of thing. One cooks statistics if you can.

VIRDEN: Well, that's what gave rise to the phrase in those days, the credibility gap. Or think back to old computer terminology, "garbage in, garbage out."

That was not the kind of reporting we did. Those of us working for the wireless file and U.S. government publications were just trying to relate facts, some of the untold or under told stories that also merited attention.

So, the body count and other such statistics to measure progress in the war, we were not using that kind of stuff. If you believed the figures in the hamlet evaluation system, we were always on the verge of declaring victory – until we lost. We did not do that kind of reporting.

Q: as we were both there, the media tended to concentrate on horror stories or something. This is true of course in the United States. You don't report on how nice things are here in Arlington, you report on a disaster somewhere.

VIRDEN: Well, that's the nature of the beast, perhaps. That's what commercial media, some of them, believe: that "if it bleeds, it leads," that kind of reporting. To some extent what we were trying to do was counter that by simply reporting some of the other events or broader developments that were also part of the picture but were not being noted.

Q: Did you ever run across times when they would take your story and not publish it for policy reasons, or that sort of thing?

VIRDEN: Yes, once in a while, there would be pressure to try to make things look better than they were and I would feel that from either an editor in Saigon or back in Washington.

An example is that invasion of Laos in early 1971. That was a real test case. The South Vietnamese Army went across to try to cut off the Ho Chi Minh Trail once and for all. Unfortunately, it didn't work very well; they got their tales handed to them.

The United States provided air support, but we did not go in on the ground with them, so it was kind of an early test case of how the ARVN, the Army of South Vietnam, would do on their own. They did not do very well.

There was pressure on us to report this invasion as a success story from the get-go, but we were able to fend that off by arguing that inflated claims would only undermine U.S. credibility and ultimately blow up in our faces.

Q: What was your impression of the government of South Vietnam, its extension into the field, its officials and all?

VIRDEN: My conclusion was that we were backing the wrong side. The government just was too weak and corrupt; Americans had basically taken over most of the war for the South, trying to win it for them. And in the end that couldn't be done.

I'll put it this way: based on what I saw out there, I came to believe we got ourselves on the wrong side of Vietnamese nationalism. Even though we sent a half million man expeditionary force over there we could not change the stark fact that the government of the South couldn't attract the loyalty of its own people.

It's a simplification, of course, but I think accurate. The Viet Cong and North Vietnamese and Ho Chi Minh -- as a representative or symbol of Vietnamese nationalism -- were stronger than our South Vietnamese ally. Try as we might, it was not within our power to change that fundamental reality.

Q: Did this leave you with a template for viewing future American policy, as you went around. You'd been in a place where basically we'd backed the wrong horse.

VIRDEN: That's a very good question. Yes, it did; one fundamental conviction I developed at this time – and hold to this day -- is that military force is a blunt instrument not well suited to solving political problems. We would be better off relying on other instruments, other tools, instead of resorting so readily and so often to military power.

A related observation is that in crunch time U.S. military commanders prefer to rely on U.S. troops – who are well trained, well equipped and will follow orders – rather than depend on local allies -- who might fall short in any or all of those categories. We saw this phenomenon when we took over the war in Vietnam, and we're seeing it again now in our reluctance to turn matters over to our local allies in Iraq and Afghanistan until they receive still more "training."
This tendency to turn to our own forces is natural enough, but it does not bode well for our prospects in any future proxy wars. And it should make us wary of trusting military commanders to decide when we can safely hand over the keys.

Q: by this time, how'd you feel about a career with the U.S. Information Service?

VIRDEN: Well, I have to say that I don't regret having gone to Vietnam. It was a central event for my generation. It dominated our national life during that period, and in many ways the fault lines that were either created or exposed by the Vietnam War still define to our political life today.

So I was glad I was there to witness it and learn from it. But wartime Saigon was also a corrupt, raffish, cynical place; I was relieved my tour was over and was ready to move on to other assignments.

Q: You left in '71?

VIRDEN: Yes, late ’71. I left Saigon in October and Linda and I were married in late December, in her hometown in Minnesota, during a snow storm. Our first assignment together was Brazil, where we went in the spring of 1972.

Q: Well, how did your wife and your family and friends back in Minnesota and all, how’d they feel about the war?

VIRDEN: Very anti-war, very strong feeling there, as much of the country, against the war. This was also the time when Americans were not treating returning soldiers very well, to our shame.

I think John Kerry said this -- and I liked his way of putting it -- during the 2004 election: “You have to separate the war from the warriors and whatever you may think of the war, don’t blame the people that are sent out there to fight it. Blame the politicians for sending them.”

We failed to make that distinction during the Vietnam War and maybe we’ve learned from that. The Iraq War was also highly unpopular, but the soldiers who were sent out there to fight it were not blamed for it.

Q: Then, Brazil, you were in Brazil from when to when?

VIRDEN: From 1972 to 1974. Our first post was a place called Belo Horizonte, the third largest city in the country, in the state of Minas Gerais. I knew nothing about it before I was assigned there, but that state alone is as big as France. Brazil has dimensions like that.

Linda and I went there as newlyweds in the spring of 1972, spent one year there and then were transferred to Sao Paulo for another year, that was ’73-’74.

Belo Horizonte had been a U.S. consulate earlier, but then it had just -- I think a year or two earlier -- been closed and all that was there at that time was a USIS branch post. There was still a considerable need for consular services, so I asked the Consul General in Rio to send up consular officers occasionally, to schedule a time so they could deal with some consular matters.

Otherwise, it was a big city of almost two and a half million in those days, so it had a lot of things going on, political, cultural and educational, economic things, so there was a lot to do.

One occasion I remember was when Linda and I called on the great American poet, Elizabeth Bishop, who lived in a nearby town, the charming old colonial city of Ouro Prêto, or “Black Gold.” She had a house there; we arranged to bring her some books and we had a very pleasant chat over lunch. Later, in one of her prose pieces, she described being visited by “the young American consul and his even younger American wife.”

Q: Tell me, what was your impression; now you'd had a chance to look at Thailand and South Vietnam and all, what was your impression of Brazil, from the perspective of Belo Horizonte?

VIRDEN: Well, this was really quite a new world for me, a different kind of work. Because there had been a consulate there, the residents still looked for a lot of the same kinds of services and representation that they used to get from the consulate, and they clearly felt slighted by our having reduced our presence. So I was engaged across the board, with the governor and the mayor and other politicians and some of the business leaders, as well as the academics and the media.

I had an American assistant and a Brazilian staff and we occupied the old quarters of the consulate. There was a whole wide variety of activities and it was very interesting, but, again, a bit isolated, too, since there were no other U.S. government officials in the city or the state. Of course, communication was better than in rural Thailand; we're talking about a big city here, not a small town like Phitsanulok.

Q: How stood Brazilian-American relations at the time?

VIRDEN: They were somewhat tense, because this was military rule in Brazil in those days. The military had taken power in a move that the U.S. had some involvement with, allegedly, at any rate. That was back in the 60s. The military were still in power and would remain in charge for another decade or so.

We had Peace Corps volunteers in the country. The military rulers didn't like that and felt that the volunteers were kind of undermining their control by drawing attention to human rights abuses; that was a source of some tension. The Peace Corps in fact was kicked out of Brazil, a couple of years later, and we're not back there to this day, which is too bad, because it was a good thing for both countries and could be again.

Overall, the Brazilians were personally friendly to us, but with the top leadership there was that certain amount of tension.

Q: Well, what sort of work were you doing?

VIRDEN: Well, we had a bi-national center there that we supported, giving them resources, materials and so forth. They were teaching English and offering American cultural programs. We would bring in, on our own, guest speakers, and we had a very active Fulbright exchange program, in both directions, and were identifying candidates for International Visitor grants. We were also working with the media, giving them materials and interviews. So it went across the board.

I remember one time when the ambassador came to visit Belo Horizonte and we had to host a dinner for local dignitaries: the governor, the mayor, the heads of the major media organizations, the whole thing. The ambassador didn't speak any Portuguese at all and Linda, who was 25 years old at the time and had just taken a short course in Portuguese at

FSI, put on the dinner while also doubling as interpreter for her table mates, the ambassador and the governor. It was kind of a baptism of fire.

Q: Yeah! Who was the ambassador?

VIRDEN: William Rountree. You know him?

Q: Yes, I do. I think I've interviewed him. He served in a number of places.

VIRDEN: Yes, and spoke various languages, but Portuguese was not one of them.

Q: Did you find what we were trying to say about America, in a way, a hard sell? Brazil is a major country. Did they sort of brush you to one side, or what?

VIRDEN: No, they wanted a lot more from us. They wanted a lot of everything. They were unhappy that the consulate there had closed.

They felt that they were a major city, the third largest in a very large country and capital of a large state with impressive mineral resources, lots of citizens who had gone to work in the United States, so a lot of contact. They were upset that we chose to close the consulate. They felt there was too much going on, that shouldn't have happened. So that was part of what we had to try to deal with.

The Vietnam War was still underway and they were against it; that was another factor in those days. And then of course they were under military rule and we were talking about democracy and human rights. Some blamed us for interfering, others for not doing more.

So there was all that tension at the senior political level. But in our personal relations with a wide variety of civilians there, we did not feel that; we felt great warmth, as natural allies, two large countries with mostly democratic tendencies and lots of personal ties, we did not feel personal hostility.

Q: Did you find particularly, say, the students, the faculty of the universities, colleges, looked more towards Europe than towards the United States?

VIRDEN: No, when they sent their children for education abroad, they sent them primarily to the United States. That was a well established tradition. Some went to Portugal, a few other places in Europe, Australia, but the primary place they wanted to go to study, in those days at least, was the United States.

Q: Was the center of USIA activities in Rio, or was it in Brasilia, or elsewhere?

VIRDEN: Well, the capital had recently been moved to Brasilia, and some of the embassies were dragging their feet about leaving the wonderful, lively, dynamic city of Rio de Janeiro to go to the new capital, which was out in the sticks.

We'd just gone through most of that migration and not too happily. Brasilia is really out there, way back in the upland plateau. The Brazilians made a bold decision to move there. This was around 1960 or so, when they decided to realize this ambition, which had been in their constitution even way back, to eventually do that.

Well, they decided it was time to go for it. The motivation, I believe, was fundamentally to secure their hold on the Amazon. They needed to develop the hinterland or else somebody would take it away from them, to put it in very blunt terms. So that was why they moved the capital from Rio.

Again, Rio, a great city and Brasilia at the beginning was just emptiness, there was nothing there. They built a capital out of scratch and if you go there to this day -- I was assigned there thirty years later, at the end of my career -- it still feels a bit unreal, an artificial city. It's now become a fairly large city, but it still feels like an artificial construct, instead of one that developed naturally.

Q: Yeah, I remember seeing a French movie, <u>That Man From Rio</u> or something like that, with Brasilia as a backdrop for this movie, but in its early days and sort of the red earth and all of a sudden these cement buildings sticking up in the middle of nowhere.

VIRDEN: Yes, designed by a socialist architect, Oscar Niemeyer. Some critics said then that as a result it was a city without a soul.

But you were asking where USIS was based in those days. We still had sort of a big part of our operation in the former capital, Rio; portions were gradually being moved up to Brasilia, but with large consulates general in Rio and in Sao Paulo, we maintained a good presence in both of those cities.

Q: Sao Paulo of course is the engine that drives Brazil, in a way, isn't it?

VIRDEN: Yes, and my second year in Brazil, during this period, we transferred to Sao Paulo, where I became the information and press officer.

This was a different sort of experience. Sao Paulo, even then, was a huge city.
It was about ten million in those days; now it's almost double that, the metropolitan area, close to twenty million, one of the great metropolises of the world.

It's also the economic hub of South America. More than 400 of the Fortune 500 companies, our Fortune 500 companies, are based there, so it's a huge economic center.

Part of my work in those days was dealing with the press, working with Brazilian journalists who were trying to fight the censorship of the military government. For example, the country's leading newspaper was <u>O Estado de Sao Paulo</u>; when Estado's editors weren't allowed to publish an item, they would fill the blank spots with either classical poetry or food recipes, to let the people know that they'd been censored. Friends at the paper would sometime privately slip me the pieces that had been cut.

So that was part of what we were doing, keeping in touch with journalists, including dissidents. But Sao Paulo was a huge media center – big newspapers, publishing houses, news weeklies, nine television stations, even more radio stations – so there was plenty to do.

Q: Did you, when you were in Belo Horizonte, to start with, you say the state where it's located is big as France. Did you get out and around much?

VIRDEN: Yes, I did. The road system was pretty good, and it was possible to move around, to get to the old colonial towns, like Ouro Prêto and the larger towns out in the western part of the state, like Uberlandia. In the south there was another city called Juiz de Fora, which was quite a big industrial city.

Minas Gerais is a big state – it had about 12 million residents then -- that's important both politically and economically. There were some universities in the outlying areas, and meeting key people there, bringing them speakers, identifying candidates for our exchange programs, was all part of my job.

So in the year or so that I was there, I did get around the state a fair amount.

Q: In Sao Paulo, had crime taken over as much as it has recently?

VIRDEN: No. Of course, there was a good deal of crime even then, but not like today. The city didn't have -- at least that I remember -- it didn't have the reputation for violence that it has nowadays. I've heard a statistic when I was there in the early 2002 or 2003 that there is on average thirty violent deaths per day.

Q: Good God!

VIRDEN: Yes, and Rio has almost as many, proportionately, too. You had asked earlier about drugs. This is about poverty and the drug culture, a lot of the violence is tied to drug wars in the slums, or *favelas*, as the Brazilians call them.

Q: Did we have programs designed to penetrate sort of the slum areas, or the equivalent, or particularly more the black areas and all that.

VIRDEN: Well, we did. Over the years, we had a very large USAID assistance programs there, particularly in the poorest part of the country, which is the northeastern region, sort of the bump that juts out into the Atlantic over towards Africa.

Up in that area, the land is poor and poverty is pretty widespread. You have millions and millions of people there living below the poverty line, and AID over the years -- it waxed and waned – but it used to have really large assistance programs. And in this era that we're talking about now, the early 70s, we still had a very large assistance program.

I remember years earlier somebody, the ambassador, presumably, had complained that the U.S. presence, including AID, had grown like Topsy. I think it was Frank Carlucci, then a young Foreign Service Officer, who was put in charge of cutting it down to size. AID at that time -- and again this is just a little before I was there and I don't know this from direct experience -- but they had people in every ministry of the Brazilian government, that's how embedded they were. The World Bank was also there, funding a large number of development projects, and of course, a big proportion of World Bank funding is American money.

So there were large assistance programs, of ours and the World Bank, in particular going on there, even under military rule. But they were more targeted on poverty and health, not so much on the crime issue, although that obviously played into it.

Q: It seems, you've got this tremendous country, with lots of industry and all and yet in the time you're talking about it was really almost treated as a Third World country, wasn't it?

VIRDEN: Well, it was a Third World country, or half of it was. The southern part, from Sao Paulo going south, is better developed, better land, more prosperous.

The classic study of Brazil was called *The Mansion and the Shanties*, a reference to the huge discrepancy between the rich and the poor. So as a generalization, the northeastern section was particularly poor and the southern section, Sao Paulo and points south, much more developed.

When we talk about my second tour, we can talk more about how that is changed now and particularly under the president who just left office, after eight years in power, with an 85% popularity rating.

Q: Was there a problem of being part of sort of the American establishment in Belo Horizonte, or even in Sao Paulo, of being taken over by the well to do and all that?

VIRDEN: Interesting question. There was a certain amount of that attempted. There was an upper class that tried to draw U.S. government representatives to their parties, into their social circle, for their own reasons.

It often had to do with getting a visa for a cousin or other relative. So it would be useful to have U.S. government people that you could go to if you had a problem. It was fairly transparent, not hard to tell who was trying to use you.

Q: It had been more in the Sixties, but in the Seventies, we were trying to correct our racial policies and get more integration and all that and the Brazilians have always made a great to do about how they are a well integrated society and people who've served there all tell me "Hell, no, it wasn't that way at all."

How did you find that and sort of selling what we were doing?

VIRDEN: Again, another excellent question. I agree with what I think you're suggesting: that the Brazilians were not nearly as successful at that as they would like to claim.

They didn't free their slaves until 1888, and most black Brazilians will tell you that, from that period to some extent still to this day, that they suffer discrimination. Claims that Brazil is a fully successful, fully integrated society don't really hold up.

They've made a lot of progress now, and they were making some progress in those days, but that discrimination still exists is undeniable.

Our own situation, okay, we're in the early 70s by this time, we have passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and we're just starting to see some African-American politicians making their way forward.

That's a story that Brazilians could see and judge for themselves, this was not something we could sell them on. We tried to simply present facts: we have had a problem throughout our history, we're working on it, we're making some progress, but we're not anywhere near declaring victory in this area. I think that remains true today.

Q: You'd been basically off on your own pretty much during your career up to your transfer to Sao Paulo. Did you chafe under being in a big office, or have more fun, or how did you find it?

VIRDEN: Yes, there was a bit of that on the job. Suddenly I found myself in a huge post, with lots of people around, multiple bosses, and that took some getting used to, but did I learn to adjust, yes.

I took away from my earlier assignments an appreciation for the independence of being out there on your own, and I urge other, younger, officers, if you get a chance to be a big fish in a small pond, when you have to make the decisions and carry them out, it can be an exhilarating and growing experience.

Learning to work as part of a large team was also a valuable experience, -- just in a different way.

Q: You left Sao Paulo when?

VIRDEN: Let me just add one note about Sao Paulo that's very important, on the personal side. While we were living in Sao Paulo we adopted our son Andrew, as an infant, in Curitiba, a city about a two hour drive south of Sao Paulo in the state of Parana. He became a Foreign Service brat, traveled with us everywhere from then on, and now lives in Minneapolis, where he just finished a graduate degree at the University of Minnesota.

Q: Our kids loved it. They didn't go into the Foreign Service, but I think they all appreciated it. Not all kids adjust to it, but ours did, I know.

VIRDEN: Well, that's right. I found that, in Andrew's case, it made him able to adapt to different situations and different cultures, even within our own country. Foreign Service kids tend to be good at that.

Q: Where did you go after Brazil?

VIRDEN: Well, I went to Washington for a couple years and then on to Poland. I left Brazil in September of 1974.

Q: Today is April 4, 2011. So where'd you go after Brazil?

VIRDEN: I went to Washington and spent the next two years working in the press and publications service of USIA there, one year as European Branch chief, the second as special assistant to the head of the press and publications.

Q: Okay, could you explain to someone like me what this was all about, what was the press business?

VIRDEN: It was the information division of USIA, in those days it was a large, worldwide, press and publications operation. We produced news and feature stories for a daily wire service, targeted by regions, as well as regional and worldwide magazines such as Problems of Communism, Dialogue, American Illustrated and Economic Impact. and some others. So it was a large press and publications enterprise.

Q: Did you have a chance to observe the content of the publications? I was wondering how you found them.

VIRDEN: Yes, the magazine division was first rate; they put out much respected magazines, each one quite different.

Problems of Communism was a very sober, scholarly, objective look at the communist world and what was going on there. It was sold in many parts of the world and highly regarded.

Then there was Dialogue, a cultural and intellectual magazine, again, circulated quite widely and translated into other languages. *America Illustrated, which was produced for the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe,* was another one I should mention.

So it was a variety of magazines that had a very good reputation, distributed in different ways in different parts of the world, sometimes in English and in other places in the vernacular language.

Q: Did you have any insight into how the contents of these articles were chosen?

VIRDEN: Well, there were two major divisions here: the magazine division and then there was the daily wire service division, the part I worked in for the first year and I was in the European section of it, so, I worked very closely in the daily selection of what was sent on the wireless file. We tried to choose material that was relevant in Europe and that our posts there could actually use.

For me, it was the first time for real exposure to European issues, so it was an education, learning about debates we were having with our NATO allies at that time. I had not previously served in Europe. Later I would go on to spend years working in and with Europe, but this was my first familiarization with the bread and butter of our daily dialogue with Europeans. There were separate services then for Western and Eastern Europe.

Q: Well, you were there during the Watergate period, weren't you?

VIRDEN: Yes, just afterwards, as a matter of fact. I watched President Nixon's resignation speech live on television in Brazil, which was unusual for Brazil, to carry that, but it was a big story there, too.

But it was hard for Brazilians and other foreigners to understand what Watergate was all about, why what happened was so serious that a president had to resign. It was a story they followed but did not quite appreciate in the same way as we did back home. We had a lot of explaining to do.

Anyway, I did watch that, the resignation occurred just a few weeks before I left Brazil to come back to Washington.

Q: Well, this was your first time sort of in the bureaucracy of USIA in Washington, wasn't it?

VIRDEN: Well, no, I had started there as a civil service writer/editor for a couple of years before entering the Foreign Service. But this was quite interesting to me now, coming back. Previously I had been a member of the civil service staff myself, now coming back as a Foreign Service Officer and the only one at that in this particular press unit, the European press branch.

So I'm looked at a little differently, now. There was a certain tension between the Foreign Service and the civil service in those days, a different perspective. The civil service employees had spent their entire career in that unit, in most cases. So you had different points of view, and that created a certain amount of friction, more with some individuals than with others.

Q: Did you have a chance to sort of look around and decide where you wanted to sort of concentrate, as your career progressed?

VIRDEN: Yes, I did. I got very interested in Eastern Europe, since I was working in part during this period with the Eastern European area office for USIA. As an independent agency, USIA had its own office for each region of the world.

And so I started working on a daily basis with that office and got intrigued by the situation in Eastern Europe and U.S. relations with that part of the world. And so when it came time to sign up for my next assignment, I asked to go to Eastern Europe and was chosen as the Information Officer/Press Attaché in Warsaw.

Q: Who was the head of USIA at the time?

VIRDEN: Let's see, I think it was James Keogh, who had been with Time magazine and then the Nixon White House before that. The person I worked for most directly at this time was Robert Beecham, the head of IPS, the press and publications service.

He occupied the office that Edward R. Murrow used to have when Murrow was the head of USIA. Murrow was one of my own heroes, so now I found myself, when I was special assistant to Beecham, in that office daily. Murrow was the director of USIA during the Kennedy Administration; I admired him for what he did for USIA as well as for earlier work as a legendary journalist.

Q: How was Beecham?

VIRDEN: He was and is a friend. I'd worked for him before. He was the USIS Press Attaché in Bangkok when I was there; I spent part of my orientation training time working with him.

He's a smart, experienced guy. As press officer in Thailand when we had all those Thai bases that we were using for operations in Laos and Vietnam, he had to handle that story somehow, threading his way between a close-mouthed Thai government and an aggressive press corps eager to find out what was going on and report it.

In this new incarnation, he was directing a worldwide press and publications service, fighting to protect resources while also paying attention to the content of what we sent out. I learned a lot as a troubleshooter for him.

Q: Was there, at the time you were working with Beecham and maybe even before, did you feel any pressure to either do away with USIA or to amalgamate it? Was that at all an issue?

VIRDEN: Not in those days, no. What I remember -- and I could have the chronology a little bit out of whack here -- but what I'm remembering, it was around this period when there was talk about the old CU, the old cultural and academic part of the State Department, merging that with USIA. Actually, that function had gone back and forth over the decades. At this time it was still in the State Department; around this period, or

slightly later, it was pulled out of State and joined with USIA, uniting the information and the cultural part of what the U.S. government did overseas in USIA.

Earlier, as I say, the cultural function had stayed with State when USIA was created. In the late 70s, it moved to USIA. And then, of course, in the late 90s, USIA itself was merged with the State Department. So you had your ups and downs.

Q: You were there for part of the Carter period?

VIRDEN: Yes, but just for a short part of it. I was only two years in the Washington bureaucracy at this point and then started studying Polish. I spent most of the last year of these three years in Washington studying Polish in preparation for the assignment in Warsaw.

Q: How'd you find Polish as a language?

VIRDEN: Tough, very tough, very complex grammatically, rather intimidating. It's a ten-month program. I'd gone through Thai, French and Portuguese already, so I did know how they taught languages at FSI; I just did reach the required 3/3/ level in Polish after the ten months there.

So the FSI method works, I'm a believer in it, as opposed to how you study languages in colleges, for example, I really believe FSI does a very fine job of offering you the opportunity to learn what you need to know to use languages.

Q: Particularly as you get older, it doesn't get easier.

VIRDEN: Amen! It's always tough. None of them is easy, even the so-called easier languages. They're all difficult, particularly if like me you don't have a natural gift for languages.

I've studied a bunch of them in the Foreign Service and got to the point where I could use them, but I don't retain them. It takes me a while to get back into a language. I've actually had occasion to go back to countries, three different times I went back to a country where I'd previously served, and the language eventually came back, but it always took work to make it happen.

Q: You went to Poland and you served there from when to when?

VIRDEN: Well, we went in the summer of 1977 to begin what turned out to be an extremely intense and fascinating experience, a great time in many, many ways.

My job there was information officer and press attaché. Ours was something of a beleaguered embassy. Warsaw was behind the Iron Curtain, as we put it in those days. To the government and party people we were a hostile embassy, out to undermine them; the Polish people never looked at us that way, but the ruling party sure did.

We were watched, phone conversations were monitored. I remember once when Linda picked up our phone at home and heard one of her previous conversations played back to her. A little glitch in the recording system!

But working with the Polish media in those days was stimulating. The journalists were an interesting bunch, especially the dissidents who were producing lots of underground or *samizdat* publications. Even the party journalists knew a lot that they could not print or put on the air, and some of them would talk with us about it.

They would tell us who was up, who was down and some of the debate going on behind the scene about, for example, whether to raise food prices and what sort of popular reaction might be expected (Such moves often provoked riots). Church-state relations were another hot, not-for-publication, topic. Washington had an eager appetitive for such tidbits, so I was forever writing memoranda of conversations.

For our part, we did indeed try to help break the government's monopoly on information. So, for example, we would give our friends bootleg copies of Newsweek every week. We made a deal with Newsweek *to ship in* a big bundle of copies of the magazine every week for us to give away; we couldn't send the copies through the mail – they'd be stolen or confiscated – but we'd find ways to get them to our contacts. In a society where access to information was controlled, such uncensored information about the outside world was a highly sought commodity. It's just one example of the kind of thing we were doing in those days. We also distributed USIA magazines, including Polish editions of Dialogue and America Illustrated (Ameryka, in Polish).

In my first year in Warsaw, President Jimmy Carter came on a visit. This was right after Christmas, the last three days of 1977.

There was an infamous incident that first night. The interpreter that the State Department had arranged was not a native speaker of Polish; he was a Ukrainian and simply not up to the assignment. Even those of us with only limited command of Polish could recognize some basic mistakes. Those mistakes became the story of that visit, at least that first night; little else was discussed in the press center.

Q: This was the "lust after

VIRDEN: Yes, that's right.

Q: "Lust after" what?

VIRDEN: "Lust after Poland in my heart" and so forth, that's right, that was that night. And you had to feel a little sympathy for the guy. Like I say, Polish was his third or fourth language; he was standing out on a bleak tarmac on a very cold winter night, had never heard Jimmy Carter's southern accent before.

It was near midnight when Air Force One touched down, and there stood the interpreter, nervous, freezing and struggling to even hear what Carter was saying. So he got some stuff wrong, and that was the way the visit started. A ton of planning goes into presidential visits, but mishaps crop up anyway; in this case, some Washington desk jockey picked an interpreter's name off a list without a lot of thought about whether he could handle the assignment. The Polish government, giving the function a higher priority, brought back their ambassador to the UN to interpret for Prime Minister Edward Gierek during this visit.

Still, there was more to the visit than language flaps. Before he left, President Carter had what I'm told was the first full-scale press conference by an American president in a communist country. I dickered with a platoon of Polish authorities to get the thing set up; we had a very large turnout of journalists, from Poland, the White House press corps and third-country representatives.

We tried to get some underground journalists into the press conference site at the Victoria Hotel, but in the end they were blocked by Polish security personnel. In response, the White House wrote out answers to three questions submitted in writing, and I hand delivered them early the next morning. It wasn't as much as we wanted, but the dissidents did get their questions in and received answers from the president.

In arranging the press conference, we had also negotiated an agreement for the Polish Press Agency (PAP), to transmit the transcript of the President's press conference, and they did so. That was also a breakthrough in those days.

All this was happening in my first few months in Warsaw. Another highlight that first fall was attending the opening of the academic year at the Catholic University in Lublin (KUL), then the only private university in that part of the world. It had a long, proud tradition (including a library whose core collection that had been brought from a Catholic seminary in St. Petersburg at the time of the Russian revolution).

Part of what the U.S. embassy did – and other Western embassies, too – was to send representatives to Lublin for KUL events, to demonstrate our support for the university and the freedom it represented.

So that fall I well to Lublin for ceremonies marking the opening of the 1977-78 academic year and there met Cardinal Karol Wojtyla, who a year later would become the first non-Italian Pope in 500 years. At this time he was an adjunct professor at KUL, in addition to his duties as the cardinal of Krakow.

In their ceremonies, the KUL administrators would traditionally acknowledge, one by one, all the representatives from Western embassies. The minister of religious affairs, a Communist Party official, would sit there quietly, fuming perhaps, as we stood up to show our support for principles like freedom of speech, inquiry and religion. It was delicious political theater.

I mention that because it's in the next year that the Polish pope is elected. This is a bombshell, of course. That night in October, 1978, I was watching the nightly news broadcast on state television -- that's all there was, broadcasting was a state monopoly – when the announcer said, "And in Rome today Karol Wojtyla of Krakow was selected as the next Roman Catholic pope." Pregnant stop, then on to something like, "And now, here's the latest tractor production news from Ursus."

The announcer didn't have any instructions yet, no one telling him what to make of the news, what it might mean for the party and the country. The Polish people didn't have any doubts though; in Krakow they poured into the streets and squares, and church bells – included one that had rung only once before in a century, at the end of the second world war – pealed all that night.

Just over half a year later, the next June, John Paul II came home for the first time as Pope. It was an overwhelming, transformative event. Nearly half the population, more than 15 million people, came out to see him as he traveled around the country for six days. Most Poles were clearly giddy that one of their own had been selected to lead the Roman Catholic Church. But it was more than simple pride, too. Ordinary citizens could see that they were not alone in identifying with what the new pontiff and his church stood for: Western values and opposition to the regime they were forced to live under.

It was not only extremely moving but also the beginning of the end of communism in Poland and that whole part of the world. The church, after all, was the center of opposition. It represented Polish nationalism. It was the focus point of opposition to the communist regime – and not only symbolically.

Church leaders would do things like having flying universities in church basements and put out underground publications. Communism was not a system of Poland's own choosing; it had been imposed on them by the Soviet Union after the Second World War, and several decades later it had still not won any legitimacy. One way to express opposition to it, in Poland, was to work with the church. Church activity was not only religious but also very political during this period.

So when a Pole become head of the Roman Catholic Church, and then came home in triumph, people felt they were not alone; it was the end of a kind of isolation, the first thing Poles collectively had to be happy about together in decades.

Remember, it was the very next year that Solidarity -- the trade union and political movement -- burst on the scene and quickly attracted something like 13 million members. One thing built on the other.

The pope's election and then his return home, these events revived Poland's spirit. "Be not afraid, "John Paul II said when he came back to Poland, and Poles listened. They concluded: "We really can do something, we don't have to just put up with this forever and we've got a lot of others who feel as we do about this, so let's see what we can do to change the conditions we live under."

Q: It must be rather exhilarating.

VIRDEN: Yes, it certainly was. You could definitely get caught up in that, being on the ground during that period and watching what happened. On the first day of his 1979 visit, the Pope said a mass in the main square in Warsaw (once called Adolf Hitler Square), and an estimated million people were there for that. I felt very privileged to be one of them. The Pope's homily included many political allusions, and they were not missed by many Poles, who know their history. He was young and vigorous and confident, and all of that came across and really energized the crowd and Poland's political life.

Q: Who was the ambassador?

VIRDEN: Richard T. Davies was the ambassador for the first year or so I was there and then William Schaufele came in after that.

Q: They're two professionals.

VIRDEN: Yes, they were both top-notch professionals. Both were very good, in different ways. Davies was a specialist in that part of the world. Schaufele had served in senior jobs elsewhere. Both were serious, dedicated career diplomats; I enjoyed working with them.

Q: What were the Soviets doing when you were there?

VIRDEN: Well, they had a very large embassy. They had troops, based in outlying parts of the country, not right in the capital, but their ambassador was a strong political force there.

They were not popular and they knew it. Poland had been invaded by Russia, I forget, 19 or 21 times. The Poles were all very conscious of that. So that was kind of the dynamics of the situation. The Poles had to study Russian in school. There were lots of people who'd studied Russian but refused to use the language.

In that first homily, John Paul II, I forget how he worded it, but there was an allusion to the Russian Army sitting just across the Vistula River and not acting when the Poles rose up in August of 1944 to try to throw out the Nazi occupiers. Something like 200,000 Poles died in the two months of that uprising, and the Russians were right there and did nothing.

On the other hand, when he went to Auschwitz-Birkenau on this same trip, John Paul noted that many Russians were among the victims who died there, and he talked about the need to bind up the wounds of war. Then he walked alone over to the ruins of the crematoria and knelt in silent prayer. Again, I felt very privileged to witness what was a very profound moment.

A couple other points I'd make about the Polish character that came across to me in those days. When we first moved into our house, we didn't have any furniture yet, but the house did have a grand piano, which USIS had supplied. One day, after a full day of work, one of the members of the Polish work crew sat down at the piano and played Chopin for 45 minutes. There were no other chairs, so the other workers just stood and listened silently all that time. It told me something about how Poles feel about their culture.

And also, during that first Papal mass in Warsaw, an embassy driver who'd given Linda a ride home knelt down in front of our TV to watch the event. On other occasions we'd seen elderly Poles kneeling on cobblestone streets outside churches when there wasn't enough room inside.

Q: Was Jaruzelski running things at the time?

VIRDEN: No, he was in the Politburo but didn't take over the government until a bit later. At the time I left, it was still Edward Gierek, who'd been in office for about a decade. I left in June of 1980, and it was later that summer that Solidarity sprang forth; it started in the shipyards in Gdansk, and at some point Lech Walesa jumped over the wall of the Lenin shipyard and into history.

Walesa quickly assumed leadership of the Solidarity movement. Jaruzelski was one of the senior leaders who tried to control or suppress this phenomenon. But the movement just kept growing, and eventually Jaruzelski, who was by then the Prime Minister, imposed martial law, a year and a half later, in December of '81.

I was in Thailand by that time, but I heard later from Polish friends what it was like. In fact, some of them had been at our old house across the Vistula the night martial law came down. We had a tradition of showing U.S. military circuit movies there and having some of them over, so they were going home from an event at my successor's house when the crackdown was announced.

That was December, 1981, and martial law forced all the pro-democracy, anti-regime activity underground. A lot of people had personal tragedies that came about from this step, which made Solidarity illegal. Still, in the end, Solidarity would eventually win the day.

It took a little less than eight years, but in 1989 Solidarity and its leaders forced free elections, which they won, and went on to throw out the entire, discredited system. Poland became a free country again. So, what John Paul II and Solidarity started was interrupted only temporarily by martial law; within a decade, their cause triumphed after all.

When I was reassigned to Poland again shortly after that, in 1994, I saw a country transformed. So those two assignments together in Poland were certainly among the

highlights of my career, to be able to see the compelling drama of what happened in that one country.

Q: What trends were sort of going through the society, would you say, that you were concerned with?

VIRDEN: Well, first of all, economic times were tough. If you want to get into an analysis about what failed over there, it was an economic system that -- I put it this way -- it was an economic system that didn't deliver the goods.

Central planning did not work. You could cite a million examples of that, but basically there were no goods to be found in most of the stores. Restaurants had printed menus but usually could not actually produce anything that was listed. You learned not to even bother looking at the menu, but simply to ask, "What do you have today?" It usually wasn't much.

It was that bad. The economy was really down in the dumps. The theory of socialism and central planning may have been appealing to some, but what it translated into was dismal; it failed to deliver what people wanted, it didn't work.

There was a saying then, probably not unique to Poland, that "We pretend to work and they pretend to pay us." Their currency couldn't be used to buy anything worthwhile. Workers were bitter about the "*valuta*," or hard currency stores, where the party leaders could go to shop; they were being paid not in valuta but in Polish zlotys, which were good for little.

There are lots of ways you could get into the specifics of this. Women would walk around with what they called "perhaps bags." They carried a big, empty bag just in case -- perhaps -- something would suddenly be on offer on the streets. Whatever it was, they'd go for it, whether they needed that particular thing or not, because you could always trade it for something you really did need. That was kind of how botched up the whole economy was in those days.

And then, in the middle of such misery, the government would periodically decide to raise meat prices, to charge what seemed to Poles like astronomical sums for any cut of meat. The government was perennially broke, desperate for more revenue, and would try to get it by raising the fixed price for meat and other commodities. Such moves prompted people to take to the streets in protest; conditions were already very hard, and the government seemed interested only in making them harsher.

The bitter economic conditions clashed with the lies that the government was telling about how wonderful their worker's paradise was; ordinary citizens could clearly see that the reality of everyday life was very different from what the government was claiming.

As a result, the government and party had lost all credibility by this stage. We're talking more than thirty years, now, that this system had been in place, and people no longer believed what they heard.

The government did have a monopoly on broadcasting, except for things like Radio Free Europe or BBC short wave radio from outside the country. But what Poles were hearing from their official mouthpieces was contradicted by what they actually saw every day when they went out into the streets and stores.

We talked about a credibility gap in our own country during the Vietnam War. Well, this is what prevailed in Poland in those days.

Q: Well, I've talked to people who've served in Poland during this same period and they say they were convinced that there were probably maybe three, maybe four dedicated communists in the country. I take it communism as a theory was not really accepted by anybody but the most hard line?

VIRDEN: Yes, and even most of the few who did accept it did so only because they were careerists and that was how they advanced their careers, by joining the party. If you wanted to advance in any field, you had to be a member of the party.

Even an academic, maybe especially academics, everybody, in any field, except the church, you had to be a member of the party to advance beyond a certain level. And the army is another prime example of that, you had to be a member of the party to get beyond a certain threshold.

So, yes, in terms of true believers in the theory of communism, there wouldn't have been many, not many at all, by this point. Now, remember, again, we're thirty years into it.

Back in the earlier days of the Bolshevik revolution, the god that failed, there were no doubt Poles who believed in the theory of communism, But by this time, the reality of what it translated into was perfectly obvious to everybody.

Q: Here, you've got people who in order to advance their careers have to go to Communist Party meetings, which must have been either meaningless or turned into something else.

VIRDEN: Pretty cynical, right, they were just looking out for their own skins and it's a temptation: if you want to get a decent place to live, you have to be in the party. If you want your kid to be able to go to a good school, you have to be in the party. If you want your family to get a week's vacation at the beach or in the mountains, you have to be in the party.

So there was a lot of pressure and some would cave into that. I think this applies not just to Poland but throughout Eastern Europe in those days. There was tremendous pressure.

If you wanted any of the goodies that life had to offer, you needed to play ball. Everybody had to make tough choices.

Q: Did you find yourself at all getting into arguments about the theory of communism, or nobody wanted to argue on it?

VIRDEN: No, you did not get into abstract discussions about the virtues of communism as a political/economic ideal, not with the people that I knew.

The best defenders of the regime could do was argue that at least under their socialism – that's what they termed it, not communism – everyone was guaranteed a job and health care. That the care provided was shoddy and unreliable – except in elite facilities reserved for the nomenklatura – were simply brushed aside. Others, unable to make much of a case for what they had, would point out our own shortcomings: "Your country is far from perfect. Look at what you did in Vietnam and your scandalous civil rights problems." In short, they would try to take the offensive by going after our faults.

Q: Were you able to develop close friendships with Poles, or were the secret police too much of a problem?

VIRDEN: Yes, I did develop some very close friendships, particularly with some of the Polish journalists that I worked with in those days, some I was able to keep in touch with over the years.

They knew the risks of their system, so you had to kind of be guided by their sense about that. Someone would say, "We need to talk. Let's go for a walk in the park," and we'd do that; otherwise, any place we'd be able to meet would be monitored. Restaurants where you might go, you knew there would be recording devices there at any table we'd be assigned.

So sometimes a guy with something really sensitive to talk about would say, "Let's go outdoors somewhere and walk around a little." You'd get a certain amount of that.

There were also a few Western journalists based there, too, who were part of the mix. We shared information with them about what was going on, the dynamics within in the party, the dissident activity outside it by groups like KOR, the Polish acronym for the committee to protect workers. We were all trying to get a handle on where events were heading.

And then of course I should mention my colleagues within the embassy. Because we were kind of a beleaguered mission, as I say, the authorities were so hostile, we drew together more closely. There was a strong *esprit de corps* among the embassy people, a sense that we were meeting a challenge together.

Some of the friends that I've retained to this day come from that period, born of a sense of engagement in a common effort that required hanging together. As you know from

your own experience, the nature of Foreign Service assignments depends not only on where you are, but when you're there. The situation can be quite different.
Being in Poland in that period, you really did kind of feel a part of something meaningful and historic.

Q: How about the subject of the Katyn Forest?

VIRDEN: It was on the censor's list. There was an official censor's blackbook in those days that listed topics you could not even mention in the media. Poles would readily talk with you privately, though, and they all knew the Russians did it, that the official version that the Germans murdered all those Poles at Katyn was a monstrous lie.

And this added to the climate of cynicism and the credibility gap, because the official version was known to the whole country as a horrendous lie and yet that stood out there on the record and you could not say otherwise.

So here you have a regime putting out things like that and trying to get people to believe them when they say, "We have to take these steps, we have to tighten our belts even more, etc" and it's a regime that just has no credibility left, because of things like Katyn.

Q: There's a movie called Katyn*. Have you seen it?*

VIRDEN: Yes, I have.

Q: I've seen it, too.

VIRDEN: Yes, well, Andrzej Wajda is perhaps the greatest of Polish film makers, and that's saying a great deal. He says this 2003 movie was the culmination of his life's work. He could not have made this film earlier.

Q: It's a very powerful movie. Did you have much contact with the church, or was that not within the province of USIA?

VIRDEN: Yes, we did, we had quite a bit of contact with the clergy and with Catholic intellectuals, in my case also with Catholic publications. I mentioned the Catholic University in Lublin and our considerable support to that independent university.

But also, down in Krakow, there were some Catholic publications and in particular a weekly newspaper that pre dated the communist era and had managed to survive. Its editors found lots of ways around censorship. It had more latitude, and would push the envelope as much as it could down there.

"Tygodnik Powszechny," or general weekly, had started during the Second World War. When I returned to Poland in the 90s, I persuaded our ambassador to give a dinner to honor Jerzy Turowicz and his 50 years editing that newspaper. Most of the legendary leaders of Solidarity and the Polish Revolution showed up at that dinner, a very happy

occasion and a great way for us to identify with what this newspaper and the whole revolutionary movement had done. The ambassador told me later it was one of the greatest moments of his life, that he felt like he was dining with the Founding Fathers.

Q: How about the Polish diaspora? Did that come back? Was that something the embassy had to deal with?

VIRDEN: Yes, I don't know quite how to characterize it. You had a whole variety. Some Polish communities in the U.S., they would still send remittances home to Poland. That was an important source of income for many families.

We had also a lot of Polish returnees, to whom our consular officers would deliver U.S. Social Security retirement checks every month.

You also had some émigrés, in Paris, in particular, who published material that would be smuggled out to them, and that would be another way to break the government's monopoly on information about what was happening there. So that played a role, also.

So it cut a variety of different ways. Many of those who might have wanted to come back to Poland couldn't get there in the end. That opened up more in the 90s, once communism had been defeated.

Q: Did you ever find you were sort of in competition with the Soviet propagandists or not?

VIRDEN: Didn't feel that, no. They worked very hard at it, of course. It wasn't direct Soviet propaganda. It was the Soviet line coming through their Polish puppets. It wouldn't be stuff attributed directly to the Soviet Union, it would be things that the Polish Communist Party was putting out as ordered by Moscow.

Q: You were there from when to when?

VIRDEN: From 1977 until 1980.

Q: These of course were the Carter years. He renamed USIA for a while and was trying to do something different, wasn't he? Did you feel you were under really different leadership, or not?

VIRDEN: No, thinking back on it, I don't think of it as that different. It was kind of just reshuffling things and the substance of what we were doing, I don't think back to as anything particularly different at all, no.

Now, I should say that of course we had the national security advisor at the time a Pole, Zbigniew Brzezinski, very interested in Polish affairs, so that was one of the considerations in those days.

And I remember that when Carter came there was a big controversy, because Brzezinski was pushing to have dissidents and the Polish Communist Party people at the same embassy reception and our ambassador at that time, R.T. Davies, fought him on that. This was way above my pay grade, but the way I heard it, he and Brzezinski had a real clash over this, with the ambassador telling him, "You cannot do that, you can't put these people into the same room. It just doesn't work under this kind of system right now" and Brzezinski pushing for it.

In the end, they didn't do have the mixed reception, the ambassador won the point, but that may have been why he didn't get the follow-on job he really wanted, as ambassador to Russia.

Q: Yes, these things happen.

VIRDEN: But the human rights push, that was very much a part of the Carter Administration, aided by the Helsinki Accords, which also gave us some latitude to help push for more of an opening and maybe helped prevent the authorities at that period from cracking down as hard as they might have on freedom of the press.

Q: of course, as we know in retrospect, the Helsinki Accords really sort of helped widen the crack in the Iron Curtain and caused all sorts of problems for the Soviets in the long run. Was there any feel at the time that the Helsinki Accords business was at all significant?

VIRDEN: Yes, some, those it may be those accords didn't get as much credit as they should have. I remember a story about a guy who got in trouble at work for doing something that upset the factory manger, who said to him, "All right, you're getting suspended, three days without pay. Just go home and you're lucky, because in the old days, we would have shot you." He goes home and tells his wife that, "You know, it's getting worse than I thought. Now they're rationing bullets!"

But I think the Helsinki Accords are underrated. I think they had something to do with the relative restraint shown by authorities, because in the early days they put people in jail, some died and many were tortured, including in Poland, say, twenty years earlier. So at this time they're trying to repress dissident activity, but they're not being as brutal as they might have**.**

Q: How was social life there?

VIRDEN: Well, it seemed to us very rich. We had a good time. As I mentioned, it was a kind of cohesive embassy unit. We did a lot of things, socializing together, a lot of dinner parties. We had movies that we would get through the embassy, through the military circuit, so we all had projectors at home and could run 16 millimeter films, so that was partly what we did.

For escape from the gray environment, we could get away to West Berlin, an oasis for us. It was a day's drive through Poland and East Germany; we could just get there by going on a special access road, an old Hitler autobahn as a matter of fact, that we were allowed to use – but not stray from. We could enjoy the comforts of the West for a day or two and also stock up at the PX; we were otherwise relying on a one-room commissary in the embassy basement for supplies.

In terms of getting news from the outside world, we were pretty cut off. We'd receive the International Herald Tribune three or four days after publication. Voice of America and BBC were important to us in those days. They came in by short wave of course and there were sometimes efforts to try to jam them, but most of the time that didn't really work and we were able to hear them.

Poland also offered a variety of concerts, still a rich musical tradition that we could draw on in those days. Warsaw had very nice parks and there were historic places to explore. The Chopin Society gave concerts in a central park every Sunday and also occasionally in the countryside, at the composer's birthplace in the village of Zelazowa Wola. Life was not boring, by any measure.

Q: Could you get out in the countryside much?

VIRDEN: Yes, we could. We could get around quite a bit.

Q: I've talked to people who served in Russia and they all mention the fact that once you got outside of the ring highway around Moscow, it's like you're back in the 14th century or something.

But, with Poland, it wasn't quite as primitive, was it?

VIRDEN: No, it wasn't. Poland's rural areas would have some of that character, too; some villages were rather poor and isolated. But mostly it was a better road system than that and not nearly as cut off as you're suggesting parts of Russia might be.

And it wasn't hostile out there. Remember that the system Poles were living under then was imposed on them, it wasn't of their choosing, whereas in the Soviet Union it was not that way, it was the reverse of that. The Russians had adopted their system themselves, through revolution, and that was a fundamental difference, maybe, in the psychology of the two places.

Q: Were your contacts kind of saying, "God, we can hardly wait to get out from under this," or was it more or less a matter of being resigned and hoping?

VIRDEN: It was pretty resigned. Few who were living there at the time thought you could overcome the huge monolith that was the party apparatus, the *nomenklatura*, as they called it, the ruling elite. It seemed all powerful.

That the protesters would eventually win, well that just seemed like a fantastic idea in those days. Most people just were kind of resigned: "We hate the system, but how are we ever going to get rid of it?" They didn't really see a prospect.

And I think that was probably the attitude of the outside world, also. There'd been lots of unsuccessful protests in the past against this system, starting with Berlin way back in the early 50s.

Q: '53. I was confined to my barracks. I was an enlisted man in West Germany at the time.

VIRDEN: So you lived through that, then. Well, that was the first, I think and then there was Hungary in '56, Poland also in '56, then Prague in '68, Poland in '70-'71 and '76. You had lots of these efforts, all of them suppressed.

So there was a kind of feeling, for many, that this was just another futile effort, that the system was too strong, too powerful to overthrow.

And yet, despite that widespread attitude, there were those who rose up and found a way. It was a true triumph of the human spirit, of hope over experience.

Q: Say a group like the young parish priests, priests who were coming out of the seminaries, did they seem to be a different breed of cat than what had gone on before, or not?

VIRDEN: I was very impressed with the clergy back in those days. I knew several priests fairly well. I remember Linda and I being invited to a rural parish rectory once, having a very pleasant dinner and hearing all kinds of things about food – grain, potatoes, meat – being shipped directly from the Polish countryside to Russia, even though the Poles themselves were hurting.

The clergy were pretty open in their hostilities to the regime and worked hard and courageously at it. They would do forward leaning stuff, like hold meetings of dissident activists in church basements, for example. Flying universities, they'd run courses like that, following an old Polish tradition.

Many of the most talented individuals in the country, not having other avenues open to them, joined the priesthood; they had a variety of motivations, spiritual but also patriotic, a determination to do something positive to make things better in their country.

I saw a lot of that in the priests I met. I was highly impressed with them.

Q: Well then, you left there in 1980?

VIRDEN: Yes, we went from there back to Thailand. Of course I'd previously studied Thai, there was a suitable opening, and we decided to go for it. We might well have

stayed in Europe, and when Solidarity was born just a couple months later were sorry not to be there.

It had been hard to leave Poland; we were very much taken with the Polish people, their faith, their gallows humor, their love of country and their valiant struggle against seemingly endless adversity. Linda cried all the way to Frankfurt on the flight out. But my tour was up, it was time to go and so we went back to Bangkok, where I was assigned as the information officer and press attaché for three years, from ’80 to ’83.

I characterize what was going on in Thailand at this time as the aftermath of war. So what we were dealing with in those days, the main focus of our mission there, were things related to the aftermath of the Vietnam War.

In particular, we had large numbers of refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos that were in camps in Thailand. We also had questions about Americans missing in action and trying to find them, or their remains. And those were kind of dominant issues for our entire mission in those days.

The ambassador was Mort Abramowitz for the first year or so. I remember working with him on one occasion in the chancery at 3 or 4 in the morning; this must have been at the end of March in 1981.

Two things were happening at once. Yet another coup attempt was underway in Thailand and President Reagan was shot in Washington. I wrote a statement for the ambassador to release to the press, declaring our non-involvement in the coup and intention to stay out of the squabble.

The first news we got about President Reagan was misleading, saying he was barely scratched and so forth. We all of course learned later that he was much more seriously injured than was believed at the time.

Q: Was it a different Thailand than when you’d been there before? I realize you’d been off in the provinces, but did things seem different at all?

VIRDEN: Well, yes, in some ways. Maybe the biggest was that rural life was changing. When I was there earlier, so many of these villages were inaccessible and you didn’t have proper roads, you didn’t have communications.

Well, now, this is a decade later and you’re getting that. A decade of work, with lots of outside organizations helping, including our own USAID, had made a difference. A lot of important development work had been done in building village to market roads and larger highways and bringing electrification. So that started to result in some genuine improvements to rural life. That’s one significant thing, and it was a continuing effort.

As for the refugees, the Thais didn't want them there. We had to twist their arms to allow the refugees to come in even temporarily, promising that other Western countries would take them for permanent settlement.

That was a great point of contention throughout this period: which countries would take these refugees from their camps in border areas, and when. We of course brought huge numbers to our own country. Canada, Australia, Germany and Argentina were also important destinations, as I recall, but that was a constant and thorny problem for U.S. relations with Thailand.

It was a complex job determining which refugees would go where and how they would be selected, screening them. A major section of our embassy was a refugee office set up to deal with this issue. It was the dominant story of the day.

The final two of those three years I was there, the ambassador was John Gunther Dean.

Q: Oh, yes, I've interviewed John.

VIRDEN: Okay, well, when I first met him, I said, "I've been to your home town" and he was rather surprised by that, since he was born in what was then Breslau, which was in Germany. It's now in Poland and is called Wroclaw.

He was a genuine pro, and one of the things he did believed in was personalizing how we delivered American assistance. So every time we gave a new grant for something or completed a project, he would go out for a ceremony at the work site and get identified with it, get a picture taken. We would send USIS media teams there and get the story placed on television as well as in newspapers. One Saturday morning he sent his special assistant to track me down at my son's t-ball game to complain that one of these events wasn't reported that day in the Bangkok Post.

Some people might say the ambassador was just on a big ego trip, but I don't think so. I think he was right. His involvement made it meaningful for Thais, about how the U.S. was there for them. It was a sort of personal diplomacy, a way to show that the ambassador and his country were trying to help improve the life of the average Thai. I think it was pretty effective.

Q: the thing that impressed me about Ambassador Dean was the fact that he, unlike so many of our other sort of diplomatic stars or something, he was almost always out in field. He was not a Washington operator.

There are various stories, but he was pretty solicitous of staff, too.

VIRDEN: That's very true. He was that way, definitely was with me and Linda. He treated us well and I saw him do that with others, too. He clearly cared about people, and that was very impressive and appreciated.

Q: He's written a book on his time, based on the oral history I did.

VIRDEN: Really? I didn't know that.

Q: He had some problems later on. I think he had what amounted to a nervous breakdown in India. I can't help but feel all the munchkins in the corridors of the State Department jumped on him, maybe because he didn't have a Washington base.

VIRDEN: He never had a major job back there. I know he was ambassador in the field at least four times.

Q: A very impressive career.

VIRDEN: A very impressive man. I liked him very much. I thought he was a great ambassador. As was Morton Abramowitz, both of them. Abramowitz was always showing up in refugee camps in rural areas, too. They were not Bangkok-bound, either one.

Q: Were the refugees a problem within the embassy, with some pushing for them and others saying, "For God's sake, let's get out of this"? Was this a bone of contention, or not?

VIRDEN: Yes, we had a lot of congressional interest, too, and you got hit from all sides about our policy. There was an ongoing debate about whether we had an obligation to the refugees. Around this time I also first heard the phrase, "compassion fatigue."

And we certainly heard plenty from the Thais. They felt a lot of pressure on their own society from the presence of so many refugees in their midst. They felt threatened, and they really only very reluctantly agreed to offer even first asylum, with no permanent settlement.

I was rather shocked to discover as recently as a few years ago that some of those camps were still in operation, some refugees still waiting for a permanent home almost three decades later.

Q: What was your impression of the Thai government in dealing with it?

VIRDEN: I was not too impressed with the way they did this. I think they could have been more humane about it. They were more preoccupied with potential damage, economic and political, social, to their own society and less focused on the human needs of people who had to flee their own homelands because of war.

They were very reluctant to do much for them and they didn't want to make them too comfortable, they didn't want them to get the idea they could stay forever.

So it was a constant battle. I think some of the people who had line authority over dealing with this issue could say more about that, but I know it was a constant tension.

We're talking about big numbers that were there. You had the Vietnamese and Khmer "land people," who came over the Cambodian border, you had some of the Vietnamese "boat people" way down in the southern part of Thailand, and you had the Lao and Hmong up in the north and the northeast. You had quite a variety of them, each with their own individual as well as group-specific issues.

The United States had a major responsibility for this situation, a consequence of our Vietnam War, but Americans were reluctant to take in too many. Our representatives spent a lot of time, too, trying to convince the Canadians, Germans, Australians and others to share the burden.

Q: What about the Thai media? What was your impression of it?

VIRDEN: Very lively. Bangkok had a huge number of newspapers in those days. There were a couple of good English language daily newspapers, the *Bangkok Post* and *The Nation*. And then there were something like 25 daily newspapers in Thai and even several daily newspapers in Chinese.

There was an equal abundance of radio and television stations. And many foreign news organizations made Bangkok their regional base. So all in all, this was a crowded, dynamic media center.

Many of the Thai newspapers were identified with particular political factions. And some of them were quite irresponsible, scatological and respected few journalistic standards; others were very impressive operations. So you had the whole range.

That was then. I don't know what it's like now, whether anywhere near that number of newspapers has survived. Journalism has changed a great deal, no doubt there, too.

You also had, by the way, a very large foreign press contingent, and they had their own club down near the fabled old Oriental Hotel, sort of modeled on the foreign correspondent's club in Hong Kong, I think.

I spent a fair amount of time there, lots of good times. Linda and I had the pleasure of meeting Walter Cronkite and his wife there one evening, shortly after he'd retired from CBS. He was another of my heroes, and I asked him whether he'd considering taking an appointment as director of USIA. "Not under this crowd," was his smiling response (This was the early years of the Reagan Administration).

Many of the U.S. and third country journalists based in Bangkok covered not only Thailand but all of Southeast Asia. Now, most media organizations have very little permanent representation abroad. It hurts the bottom line.

Q: Were you and your organization spending time in southern Thailand, where there was a small Islamic revolution going on, or not?

VIRDEN: Yes, we were, in both of my tours in Thailand. Back in the early 60s, USIS had two branch posts in the southern part of the country. That area, of course, is ethnically distinct, the religion is different. The distance from Bangkok is significant.

There are lots of reasons why you would fear a separatist movement down there. And that's before the rise of terrorism and the threat that we feel these days from militant extremists peddling a perverted version of Islam.

So I think to this very day, that whole phenomenon, the Thais worry about their hold on the south and security down there; they are concerned about possible separatist or terrorist movements coming out of that region.

Q: Did the existent of a vibrant sex industry which catered to the world, practically, in Bangkok, did that impact on the operations of the embassy in any way, or not?

VIRDEN: No, I wouldn't say it did. I think the consular section maybe most, because you'd get Americans who'd get in trouble; there was sex tourism coming from the U.S., as well as from Germany and some other places.

So that was a factor and I think our consular officers, more than I realized at the time, had to help Americans who got in trouble. There were drug related issues, too. When the Thais, at our insistence, started to enforce drug laws, some Americans got caught in the web, and we had to plea for leniency. There was a certain inconsistency there, to put it mildly.

Q: Again, how did you find social life there?

VIRDEN: Oh, well, wide open. There were many great restaurants, both Asian and European, and lots of wonderful things for us as a family to see and do within Thailand itself. Linda was pleased to be back in a country she'd first known as a student, more than a decade earlier. Our son, Andrew, went to the first, second and third grades at the International School of Bangkok and starred on a championship T-ball team. We had fun.

Q: I realize you were based in Thailand, but had we begun to open up to Vietnam at all, or was there any connection with their embassy in Thailand?

VIRDEN: Yes, because there was something called the "orderly departure program." During this period we started sending consular officers over to Saigon periodically to interview potential candidates for refugee status.

We were looking at Amerasian children, for example, and other potential refugees with a direct tie to the United States. So we started to send over one or two consular officers every week to screen potential candidates.

There was great interest in this, so I got involved as press attaché in setting up press conferences and interviews for Bangkok-based media to learn more about what was being done.

Q: Did any stories in the United States have particular resonance or interest within Thailand that you had to deal with?

VIRDEN: One genre I remember involved periodic kind of adventure stories about guys going in and trying to find American POWs who were still allegedly being held by the North Vietnamese or by the Laotians.

Nothing ever came of any of those stories, but there was still some belief and these stories would appear in U.S publications. Free lance operators, ex-Green Berets or whatever, would go in convinced there were Americans still being held at this spot or that remote area, and they were going to go in there and rescue them.

There never was any real good reason to believe there was anything to any of these stories, but nonetheless they did get a lot of play.

Q: Yeah, well, in the 1992 election, Ross Perot, a presidential candidate, basically endorsed the theory that there were Americans in captivity in Vietnam or Laos or Cambodia.

VIRDEN: And there are lots of people today that believe Barack Obama was not born in America, too.

Q: You left in --

VIRDEN: I left in ’83 and was assigned next to the National War College.

Q: Today is April 11, 1011. Which war college were you at?

VIRDEN: The National War College at Ft. McNair, in Washington, D.C.

Q: So this is ’83 to ’84?

VIRDEN: That’s correct.

Q: How did you find the war college, when you first got there?

VIRDEN: Oh, I loved the whole experience, actually. It was a wonderful opportunity. You’re probably familiar with how it works there. At that time, three quarters of the students were military officers, at the rank of colonel or the equivalent, the other quarter civilians of comparable rank from the various U.S. government agencies that deal with foreign affairs.

I was delighted to be included and to have an opportunity to spend a year studying national security strategy, thinking about my own experiences and comparing them with other professionals.

I enjoyed it very much and learned a great deal from the year.

Q: Was there an attitude of the military, Vietnam was over?

VIRDEN: This was the Reagan era and there was not a lot of interest at that time in looking back at Vietnam. It had been almost a decade since we left Vietnam. We did have some discussions on Vietnam, but it wasn't a major focus in those days.

It was still the Cold War and U.S.-Soviet relations, arms control, things like that, were among the major issues.

Q: I take it the Soviet Union was the enemy and seen as a very potent enemy?

VIRDEN: Well, that was the time when President Reagan called it "the evil empire."

Q: Would you say, particularly the army felt it was sort of getting the mix right, because during the Vietnam War, towards the end, things had kind of fallen apart, moral and troop discipline and everything else?

VIRDEN: They had fallen apart and it was a very terrible, sour experience for career military people. There was divided opinion about it; some agreed with the national consensus that Vietnam was a mistake and others did not. There were still some who believed the military hadn't been given an opportunity, that they could have won the war, should have won the war, were blocked from doing so by political weakness at home. So there was some divided feeling about that.

Then there was, of course, internal professional debate about what should be the military's doctrine: was counterinsurgency a failed doctrine? Should we be doing something else? What should be our strategy?

While there was a lot of debate about military doctrine, the emphasis at the war college is actually on an overall approach to national security. So you study all of the tools of statecraft, not only what the military does, but also the whole civilian side of the house, too. That was in part of why we civilians were there, as a matter of fact; you had officers from all the major branches of the armed services, but you also had the State Department well represented, you had the CIA there, and you had the other major federal agencies that deal with foreign affairs.

The reason the National War College was founded, as a matter of fact, was that after the Second World War -- after Eisenhower's unhappy experience with coalition and joint warfare -- leaders saw a need to get the services and the civilian parts of the government

to work better together. That's kind of the focus of what you study at the National War College. Military officers are supposed to come out "purple," instead of Navy blue, Army green, etc.

Q: Well, did you find yourself both a student and a tutor to the military?

VIRDEN: Yes, I think that's fair to say, right. I learned from them and I hope that they learned something from the civilians like me who were there, too. And we would have the discussions about Vietnam, for example. Why did we lose there and how do we explain the first American war that we didn't win? There were lots of occasions for such dialogue, in the classrooms and in the corridors.

The discussion about the proper balance in our national security policy continues to this very day. Even Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, a Republican appointee, argues that the civilian side of what we do needs to be beefed up. That will give us other options, so that our only recourse isn't to send in the Marines. I've met lots of career military people who felt the same way.

It's a myth, the assumption that military officers always wants to resort to arms. It's not really the case. They know better than anyone the horrors of war , what it means to send men into battle, and would prefer that political issues be solved earlier, by other means, before it comes to that last resort that is military force.

Q: I'm told, sort of the story that I've heard from people who served there, in the war college, when they had war games or something, usually the military was pressing for diplomatic measures, while the diplomats were pressing for military measures, each not realizing the limitations on the other side.

VIRDEN: That's a very good point and it's what I'm just trying to say, too; military officers were right up there in wanting to see that we have these other tools, to make sure that we put resources there, so that we have them available and that when confronted with problems we look at diplomacy, public diplomacy, foreign aid and all the other tools of statecraft, not only military power. If we invest in these tools and use them wisely, they can help prevent the need for military action, which always ends up costly and bloody.

Q: Did you go on any trips that left a lasting impression?

VIRDEN: Yes, each student took a major field trip in the spring, breaking up into groups of ten or twelve or so. In my particular case, I chose to go to the Middle East, because of its strategic importance and also because I had never served there and probably wouldn't, since I didn't have any of the languages of the region.

So I went to Israel, to Jordan and to Egypt. There were about a dozen of us and it was a fantastic two-week trip. We were in east and west Jerusalem, the West Bank and the Golan Heights, and many of the other sites that are important politically as well as religiously. We went to places that are in the world news constantly, just to get some feel

for the lay of the land and what life is like on the ground and how it's controlled there. The experience certainly gave me more of an understanding of the long-running Arab-Israeli conflict, which to this day is a huge factor in our relationship with that part of the world.

The stops in Jordan and Egypt were just as stimulating. In Jordan we visited Petra, visited a tank company on maneuvers in the desert, and met with King Hussein. In Cairo we saw pyramids as well as aging Russian tanks and other military equipment that the Egyptian army would be replacing in the decades ahead – with our aid.

Q: Obviously you were looking towards your next assignment. And what were you looking for?

VIRDEN: Well, I wasn't focused on anything in particular at this stage, because this was my first time back in a long time and I was going to have three years in Washington.

After a year at the war college I was assigned to the American Republics office at USIA, as policy officer for that part of the world. While there I started focusing on an assignment overseas, which turned out to be Portugal.

Q: You would have been '84 to

VIRDEN: '86.

Q: In the Latin American bureau.

VIRDEN: That's correct. This was an era of war in Central America, with the United States engaged in something of an anti-communist crusade in Nicaragua, El Salvador and Honduras. That was the era of Iran-Contra. So that was a big part of what I dealt with.

It was also the time that we sent what was called a "rescue mission" to Grenada. In fact, I went along on the White House press plane when President Reagan went to Grenada to celebrate his success. I had earlier gone to Grenada on an orientation visit, now to coordinate USIA's support for the President's visit. So I saw that.

Throughout this time, we had battles in the interagency process with representatives of the Pentagon and the CIA in particular; I was among those who thought our regional policy was out of balance, that we were placing too much emphasis on security while neglecting vital economic and social needs.

So there was lots of tension and internal battles, about what we were doing as a country and about the focus of USIA programs.

Another manifestation of that in a slightly different way was our relationship with the Andean countries and our war on drugs. I remember arguing with some of our people on the ground in that part of the world that our preoccupation with drug trafficking was

misguided in overlooking the equally important demand side of the equation. Many of us believed that if Americans reduced their demand for illicit drugs the whole problem would diminish greatly. We didn't make much of a dent in U.S. policy or in our country's appetite for drugs. Too bad.

But these were some of the issues we were dealing with.

Q: Well, let's take the anti-left wing side first, in Central America. Did you have any piece of that action?

VIRDEN: I can't remember many of the specifics. I participated in lots of meetings with representatives of other parts of the bureaucracy; we locked horns about our general approach to that region and over where our resources should go, what our message should be. I thought we needed an approach that took into account more the perspective of the people in the region that we were dealing with.

Q: Were you comfortable with what we were doing in Central America?

VIRDEN: Not terribly, no and that's part of what I'm trying to suggest here. We were trying to influence the debate. Our programs needed to report the policy and its rationale faithfully, of course, but, in our own internal deliberations, we tried to move it somewhat in what we believed was a sounder direction.

Q: Where in USIA were you?

VIRDEN: I believe it was called the Office of American Republic Affairs, or ARA; it was the Latin American division of USIA, the area office for Latin America and the Caribbean.

Q: One of the things that have struck me is that USIA officers are very powerful and influential overseas. As chief of a consular section, I've been a member of the country team and the USIA head is a major figure.

And yet when I talk to people who serve in Washington, most of the jobs in Washington for USIA, this was back in the old days, were more almost administrative, they just didn't seem to have quite the same seat at the table. Did you feel that at all?

VIRDEN: Well, yes, in some ways. I think it was part of a bigger phenomenon, that USIA was a fairly small player in Washington, a small agency that had a hard time competing with the big boys.

Compared to the secretaries of state and defense, and the CIA director, the head of USIA commanded relatively few resources and was not backed by powerful constituencies, so I think USIA, just as you say, was not a strong player in the major policy decisions of the day.

Overseas -- it's broader than just USIA -- I think the whole country team concept works better in the field, because there the ambassador has authority directly from the president. Everyone in an embassy takes direction from the ambassador, going back to the day when President Kennedy gave ambassadors a letter saying "You're in charge of everything that our government does in your country of assignment, with the exception only of military commanders in the field." That precedent has held to this day and worked relatively well.

So, frankly, I think U.S. government programs and policies are better coordinated on a day to day basis overseas than in Washington. On the other hand, the big policy questions, matters of war and peace, for example, are decided – properly – by senior officials in Washington.

Q: Right then the drug fight was pretty well concentrated in Colombia, Peru, Ecuador, wasn't it?

VIRDEN: Well, yes, mainly there. USIS posts in those days had to do an annual country plan, articulating what they proposed to do and why. They were under tremendous pressure, political pressure, from their ambassadors, DCMs and others, to focus almost single mindedly on the war on drugs.

We in Washington had to approve the country plans. We would come back to them, saying, "Right, we're supporting the war on drugs, but that doesn't mean we do it to the exclusion of all of the other important things that we ought to be doing in that country." And we had all kinds of battles about that.

Q: Did you find your time in Washington you might say enlightening as far as how things work and that sort of thing, for later in your career?

VIRDEN: Yes, I did. I particularly enjoyed the war college experience. I really did think it gave a new perspective. And then the not quite two years working on Latin American affairs also, I think, yes, an important learning experience with internal battles over U.S. policy and program direction in support of that policy.

So at the end of that two year time then in Latin American affairs I was assigned as public affairs officer in Lisbon, Portugal. I took a brief transition course from the Brazilian version of Portuguese that I'd learned earlier to the continental version, which is slightly different, and then went to Portugal in the summer of '86 for my first assignment as a country public affairs officer.

Q: You were in Portugal from '86 to

VIRDEN: April of 1990, so almost four full years. When I arrived the ambassador was Frank Shakespeare, a former director of USIA. Soon thereafter Charles Wick, who was then the director, came on an official visit. So here I was, a fledgling PAO, hosting a visit by USIA's director and working with an ambassador who once had that job.

On the morning after Director Wick arrived, I went to a breakfast with him and the ambassador at the ambassador's residence. Ambassador Shakespeare was saying something complimentary about our USIS program when Director Wick, who was known as something of a comedian, turned to me and said sternly, "Okay, that's all very well, but you're fired!"

Q: To you?

VIRDEN: Yes. He was kidding, as it turned out, but he had been looking at his briefing book and was unhappy to find included an unfavorable U.S. press item about him that someone had slipped in. Ambassador Shakespeare defended me, said that "Obviously, somebody else was playing a dirty trick here," and that we'd look into it. With that, we were able to move on. We never found out what who was the prankster, though we had our suspicions.

Q: Yeah, ho, ho, ho. In Portugal, what was the situation when you arrived?

VIRDEN: Well, they'd had their revolution about a decade earlier.

Q: '74.

VIRDEN: And now at this point they were kind of just getting used to not having an empire anymore and to getting into the European Union; the effects of the latter were not yet being felt when I arrived there, but over those next few years you did see the start of modernization, really, and economic development of what was still a fairly backward country in those days.

With membership in the EU, you started to get an increase of money coming in from other members of the EU. You could see that happening, and with it Portugal began to slowly change its focus from its colonies in Africa to European-related issues and to adjust to no longer having the empire it had ruled for five centuries.

One of the major issues for the United States during this period was the negotiations to renew our agreement for use of the air base out in the Azores, the Lajes base on the island of Terceira, which we'd had ever since the Second World War.

I was a member of the negotiating team, which was a very interesting experience. On the Portuguese side, we had the national authorities in charge, but we also had regional political leaders from the Azores, who were determined to continue reaping economic benefits from our use of the base; it was a multisided negotiation.

In the end, we did reach a new, 10-year agreement that included a substantial amount of economic assistance. We did not call it rent – no one wanted such a characterization for a transaction between allies -- but we did guarantee annual funds for Lisbon and also to the

territory of the Azores. And Portugal could continue to describe its making available the facilities in the Azores as part of its contribution as a charter member of NATO.

So it was worked out I think satisfactorily for all. This was no zero-sum game.

Q: When you went in, did you all sort of have, you knew you were going to have to pay a hunk of money and we'd been doing this since the 1940s, but did you kind of know how much you were going to pay and you went through the motions, or how did it work?

VIRDEN: Yes, I think we had a figure in mind. We didn't know exactly the mixture between economic and military assistance, nor did we know how U.S. funds would be apportioned between Lisbon and the Azores. On the Portuguese side it was fairly contentious.

On our side, we knew we wanted to do this, since Lajes was -- and remains today -- a useful facility, particularly as a stopping off point for ferrying supplies and soldiers to other parts of the world, including the Middle East and South Asia. I think Lajes was used extensively in the first Gulf War and in our current engagements out there, too. It's a very convenient spot.

Q: Did you feel the influence of Massachusetts and Rhode Island? That's where a lot of Azoreans live and they have powerful senators. Did you

VIRDEN: Yes, we did and we would hear from those offices quite a bit on consular matters, too, lots of Congressional queries about family reunification. As you say, Fall River and New Bedford are real hotbeds of Portuguese immigration.

So as you quite rightly say, many Azoreans have made their way to New England, and those communities are a political factor. They helped us secure pretty generous funding for the economic side of what we were providing to Portugal, for example.

To help ensure that the U.S. assistance was used effectively, something called the Luso-American Development Foundation was established and funded. I'm not quite sure how it stands today, but I believe it remains a significant player to this day. It is not a direct line agency of government but instead an independent foundation endowed with money given by the United States as part of the Lajes agreement.

The foundation's board members include political and business leaders appointed by both countries. It has been considered such a success that the model was followed elsewhere, including in Poland, where a Polish-American enterprise fund was set up after the fall of communism.

Q: Was there much contact or conference with Spain at that time, with our offices in Spain, or were you really moving in separate paths?

VIRDEN: I went over there to compare notes, for orientation, but there was very little direct engagement. The two countries are on separate paths.

The Portuguese, of course, have always resented the Spaniards; they say, for example, that they can understand the Spanish language but the Spaniards make no effort to decipher Portuguese. So they felt dissed by that.

Once in a while you would hear an old Portuguese proverb to the effect that Portugal got nothing from Spain but bad weather and bad marriages. So you get an idea of the attitude.

Q: Right now, the Portuguese are going through sort of a financial disaster and this after the Portuguese got into the EU and were able to borrow money. Did it seem to be a pretty effective government?

VIRDEN: Yes. You had a number of parties that sprang up immediately after the revolution and most were still active at this time, a little over a decade after that. So you had the Socialist Party of Mario Soares, who was president when I was there. You had the Social Democrats, led by Prime Minister Cavaco Silva. And then some other prominent politicians in both these major parties.

You had a Communist Party whose old time leader, Alvaro Cunhal, was still active; the communists had been pretty strong in the mid-Seventies, right after the revolution, but had faded quite a bit by this time. Their message seemed rather tired (The Portuguese said Cunhal would "just turn on the cassette"). So they were not a major contender.

But overall, party politics was quite lively. The politicians seemed to be quite competent. One of the young Social Democrat leaders, Jose Manuel Barroso, went on to various leadership positions in Brussels, where he is currently President of the European Commission.

So Portugal had a very good crop of politicians, very competent. And there was a feeling then that, we're just inventing it now, we're present at the creation. They'd just come out from that era of empire and were starting to reap some benefits from the European Union.

The difficulties we're seeing right now, today, all that came later. In the mid 80s the atmosphere was very hopeful; it felt like the beginning of something good.

Q: Were there the equivalent of the French pieds noirs*, out of Algeria? Were the former settlers in Africa coming back, were they a significant force?*

VIRDEN: They were definitely a phenomenon, they were there and in fact we had a few returnees working in our embassy; they tended to be kind of diehards who just couldn't get used to the loss of empire.

To the extent they were a significant factor, it was in trying to maintain a continued interest in Africa. Portugal was still a player in African affairs at that time. I can

remember frequent visits to Lisbon by leaders of Angola, for example; talks to try to bring peace in Angola were brokered by the Portuguese and the meetings sometimes took place there. Portugal retained a strong interest in what went on in Africa, particularly in their former colonies, like Angola and Mozambique.

So, yes, to that extent, they were an influence. Now, that continues, I assume, somewhat to this day, but, also, gradually, as Portugal is drawn into European Union affairs, the importance of Africa becomes somewhat less in Portugal's outlook.

Q: What about the Portuguese media: TV, newspapers, radio? How did you find dealing with them? Did they have a slant, or what?

VIRDEN: I enjoyed dealing with them very much. I got to know some of their top journalists and TV people. They had a wide range of papers, some very good ones, very quality newspapers and editors there, that I liked and whose company I enjoyed.

Television, the state television was extremely important then. It had been mostly a state monopoly in previous years. That was starting to change, you started getting independent television, but the state broadcasters, both TV and radio, were still extremely important and we were able to work with very well with them.

This was the days in USIA when Worldnet was going strong and we were able to get Portugal's president, Mario Soares, through state television, to give us a direct interview on Worldnet. It didn't hurt that both his senior political aide and the key official at RTV were former International Visitor Grantees – and good friends. Compliments to my USIS predecessors for that; some of the benefits of good public diplomacy appear only over time.

We did have a very cooperative relationship with all of the media then. It was not a troubled period. They were very happy to work with us.

The Communist Party had its outlet, they were there, but we had the whole range of media available and it was very flourishing democracy by this time.

Q: Could you make contact with the communists?

VIRDEN: They were an open, legal political party at that time. I don't remember that we had a whole lot of dealings with them. We knew their players and our political section was in touch with them, but we didn't have a lot in our USIS section that I can remember.

One thing that relates to that that I remember, though, in November of 1989 we had set up a conference with Portugal's strategic studies institute to discuss NATO in a multi-polar world. That was the title of a two or three day conference we were going to have, kind of like a think tank exercise, experts from the U.S. Portugal and some other countries.

Well, on the very eve of the conference the Berlin Wall came down! So at the opening session the next morning, the French representative -- he was from a think tank in Paris -- got up and said, "Well, here's the speech I was going to give this morning" and very dramatically tore the thing up! We had a very spirited discussion after that.

Q: Was terrorism at all around at that time?

VIRDEN: Angola and trying to settle the civil war in Angola was one of the issues we dealt with then that had a dramatic military component, an ongoing guerrilla war. But the sort of preoccupation with terrorism that we have today, I don't remember anything like that, looking back now.

Q: I wouldn't think there would be, but I was just asking.

Was there much of a flow of economic refugees coming out of Africa into Portugal?

VIRDEN: There was some of that, yes. That was part of what we tried to do, to help with the very poor who were coming back or fleeing the violence in Africa.

Remember that Portugal is only a country of about ten million people, and though it once had a worldwide empire is nonetheless relatively poor. Even now, after a couple of decades of help from the European Union, per capita income is still, what, about ten thousand dollars.

And the infrastructure in the country was weak. Again, the European Union helped by financing major roads that were very much lacking in the mid 80s.

Q: Your ambassador was Frank Shakespeare while you were there?

VIRDEN: Frank Shakespeare was there only about my first year, and then he left to become our ambassador to the Vatican.

Q: How did you find your ambassadors used you while you were in Portugal?

VIRDEN: Quite effectively, I thought. USIS was very well integrated into the mission there. USIS was in the chancery, unlike some of my previous posts, where we were off at separate installations. So here we were very much right there, in all of the meetings, an integrated part of the embassy. So I think that worked quite smoothly.

I think back to what Edward R. Murrow said when he was director of USIA that he wanted to be in on the takeoffs, not just the crash landings and I felt that in this case we were right there, in all of the discussions and that's how it should be. Luckily, we didn't have any crash landings, gracas a Deus – thank God! -- as the Portuguese would say.

Q: How was social life there?

VIRDEN: Oh, it was a lot of fun. The food was good, the weather was good, and so was the wine. We had a fine house in a close in neighborhood overlooking the Tagus River and the spot from which many of the great Portuguese navigators set sail. The Portuguese are friendly people and their country is an intriguing blend of old and new. Lisbon was a great place to serve then and I'm sure it is today, too. We had a good time there.

One unfortunate thing was that the school in those days was a disappointment. It was proprietary, a privately owned school and just not very challenging. So after Andrew finished 9th grade there, we decided to do something we never believed we'd do, we sent him to boarding school back in the States.

Q: Where'd he go?

VIRDEN: He went to St. Andrews, in Middletown, Delaware.

Q: Oh, yes, that's a very good school.

VIRDEN: And it worked out very well, but it was a hard thing for Linda and me, sending him away like that; we never thought we'd do that but just decided it was the right thing to do.

Q: Well, then, you left there when?

VIRDEN: We left Lisbon in the spring of 1990. My next assignment was to Bucharest, so I was sent back to Washington briefly to cram in a little Romanian language study. I went home I think it was like April or so and then studied Romanian until the summer.

And of course Romania was in turmoil at this time. About the same time I got the assignment, in December of 1989, we watched on Portuguese television as the Romanian dictator, Nicolai Ceausescu, and his wife were executed.

Q: and his wife, yeah.

VIRDEN: On Christmas Day, 1989. Linda and I got there a half year later, in the summer of 1990. Bucharest was in chaos. Power was literally still up for grabs in the streets of the capital. There were constant demonstrations still at this time in the central University Square. Protestors called that site a "communist-free zone."

That's where the students would come to protest. Sometimes the miners came in from the coal mines also to demonstrate there. And this kept on. Romania's was the one violent revolution among all of those that took place at this time.

It was an ongoing fight over who would gain power and what the future of the country would look like. One of the big underlying questions was whether the old communists who'd reinvented themselves would still control things, or whether new leaders and a true democratic system would emerge.

A few years later, when I was in Warsaw again, the new president of Romania, Emil Constantinescu -- a university rector, genuine democrat and long-time friend of USIS -- came through on a state visit to Poland. One of his assistants recognized me in a receiving line and exclaimed, "We did it! We did it!" They had won an election.

One event I remember well from my time in Bucharest was our celebration of the twentieth anniversary of the American library. Under an agreement between President Nixon and Ceausescu, Romania got to open a facility in New York and we were able to open an American library/cultural center in Bucharest.

I can't tell you how many Romanians pulled me and other USIS officers aside the night of the anniversary celebration to tell us how much that library had meant to them during the dark ages. We heard a torrent of unsolicited testimony about how that center kept the lights of freedom and democracy flickering for them. It was all very heartwarming to hear -- and a clear indication of what role institutions like that could play in closed societies.

Unfortunately, most of those USIS libraries are closed now, a casualty of misguided budget cuts.

Q: Well, when you arrived there, things, as you say, were in turmoil. Did we have a policy?

VIRDEN: Well, yes we did. In very basic terms, we were trying to promote a democratic outcome. We were doing everything we could to support a responsible democratic movement and put a brake on some of the more totalitarian remnants that were still around then.

Remember that the *Securitate*, the security organ under Ceausescu, had been everywhere and penetrated throughout the country and into families and so forth. The security forces were a very strong continuing presence there. They didn't just disappear come the revolution. In fact, one of the tasks I took on was to go out periodically to a still-sinister-feeling old Securitate installation on the outskirts of Bucharest to pick up microfiche copies of archives to mail to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. Museum representatives told me the microfiche were an invaluable addition to the historical record of the Holocaust in Romania. I assume Romania was being paid in some fashion for providing these documents, but I was not party to that.

Anyway, the security people were still there, as were many of the politicians identified with them. There was constant tension between people like that and some of the strong opposition, young people fighting for democracy, of the very type that you saw this spring in the streets of Cairo.

So we were very clearly trying to help those who we thought were working for the right things. We gave them political support, economic help, and used whatever leverage we had to push for reforms.

One focus was a battle on a high policy level over whether Romania would get most favored nation trade treatment. They wanted that desperately to lift economic prospects, so that was a lever we could and did use to get them to do such things as open up access to broadcasting and to allow freedom of the press.

Television, in particular, had been an important instrument for maintaining Communist Party control. It was a monopoly. It was a main means of communication with much of the public. To me, based on what I saw in Romania and earlier in Poland, television not religion was the true opiate of the people. Someone could find a doctorial thesis in how totalitarian regimes used television, I'm convinced.

In my particular part of the embassy, we spent a lot of time, pushing, encouraging and otherwise supporting Romanians who were trying to set up independent broadcasting. We also asked the ambassador and Washington to lean on Romania's political leaders to loosen their grip. The story was similar with newspapers.

Q: Well, did you get anywhere?

VIRDEN: Yes, we did. It did gradually open up. For example, there was an independent newspaper called Romania Libera that was really out there in its challenge to the old school hard-liners. Through a foundation set up with U.S. government money, the International Media Fund, we gave them a printing press and printing supplies and got all that stuff admitted into the country. That took an intensive team effort.

Television was even harder, because it requires more equipment and other resources; in this case it also required a change in Romanian law, which made broadcasting a state monopoly. Here again, our mission worked at various levels to get reform legislation drafted and passed into law. Eventually we did succeed in that, partly because we made it one of the conditions for granting most favored nation trade status. The resulting end to the state monopoly on broadcasting was an important part of the democratic opening.

I also took satisfaction in convincing Romanian Ministry of Communication officials to lease time on state transmitters for Voice of America broadcasts into the disintegrating Yugoslavia. VOA gave me an award for that bit of jiu jitsu.

Q: Who was our ambassador when you arrived?

VIRDEN: A political appointee named Arthur "Punch" Green, from Oregon.

Q: How was he?

VIRDEN: He was a good man. He was kind of in over his head at first as a political appointee who had not had previous contact with that region of the world, in a country that turned out to be in turmoil and under fire. He seemed a surprising, maybe unwise choice at first blush, but he did fine.

There was a story told about him before I got there, the time of the revolution itself. The embassy was preparing to evacuate Americans around Christmas of 1989, because of the continuing violence, and so his DCM got everybody lined up for a motorcade south to Bulgaria. The motorcade was all lined up, ready to go, when the ambassador started to get into his. The DCM had to pull him aside and say, "No, Mr. Ambassador, you stay!"

The story may or may not be true. He'd just barely gotten there. During my time with him, I liked him. He was a very open man who tried to do the right things and listened to his professional staff. I thought he did a good job, under tough conditions.

His tour ended after my first year there, and he was replaced, by John R. Davis, who was a highly respected career professional; he'd already been ambassador in Poland during the rise of Solidarity, so he knew that part of the world and that kind of political phenomenon.

Q: The whole of Eastern Europe was going through turmoil. Bulgaria was changing. There's very little contact with Bulgaria, isn't there, or not?

VIRDEN: Well, Romania and Bulgaria are in the same neighborhood and tend to get lumped together, in terms of their prospects. Both countries got rid of their communist system about the same time, although remnants were still around and still fighting for power.

And the countries were paired in terms of their aspirations to get into the main clubs in the West, to get into NATO and the European Union. And so they were always on the same track. There was always a certain rivalry, but they also had common interests.

And eventually they both made it, a somewhat surprising result looked at from the perspective of my time, when gaining admittance to NATO and the EU seemed like an almost impossible dream. Yet it came about.

Q: Yeah, it's been remarkable how things have developed.

VIRDEN: I'd like to mention one thing we did at this time that I believe was important. Americans, who had watched on television as the National Library in Bucharest burned to the ground during the violence of December '89, responded with a spontaneous book donation drive.

Allen Docal, the director of our cultural center, and his library staff did an incredible job managing this effort, with of course the help of volunteers all over the United States. We ended up delivering -- I can't give you an exact number, but it may have been as many as

a million volumes -- boatloads of books over that we then sorted and distributed throughout Romania during this period.

The logistics of getting those books shipped, sorted and distributed were very very complicated. We turned our center's auditorium over to this campaign for the duration, which lasted more than a year. Once we got the books through customs, we separated them into categories and identified the organizations we thought could put them to the best use: libraries and schools, churches, public facilities all around the country.

Q: Well, had there been a significant English teaching program prior to the collapse of the Ceausescu regime?

VIRDEN: Some, but this had not been a major focus there, unlike in many other countries.

Q: Well, did we beef that up, as far as whatever we could do?

VIRDEN: Yes, we did. We started doing more for English-teaching and American Studies programs, and we also created a Fulbright Commission. We'd had a modest Fulbright program, run out of our cultural section at the embassy. We decided the time was right to negotiate a formal agreement to set up a bilateral Fulbright Commission and found a sympathetic senior official in the foreign ministry.

The Romanian government gave us wonderful office space, a former museum, and we were able to put the Fulbright program on sound footing. I hear it's still going strong.

Q: Looking at it, professionally, this must have been a hell of a lot of fun.

VIRDEN: Yes, well, Romania had a bad image in those days. People didn't want to go there; conditions were rugged, even for diplomats (embassy families used to draw lots for grapes and bananas when the occasional military support flight brought such luxuries).

But it was indeed an exciting and stimulating time. We found the Romanian people very appealing as they dealt with a critical moment in their history. They were digging out from under a rock, reinventing their country before our eyes. They didn't get a great deal of help – could only look with envy at the billions in Deutschmarks East Germans received to aid their transition – but they made it.

How it is today I don't know, but in the early 90s you felt something good was happening and that we were on the right side, we, as a country. Our policy, I believe, was enlightened; we were doing what we could to move events in a positive direction. Romania turned out to be a very rewarding experience.

Q: Did you get involved in the orphan business, or adoption business? I've interviewed Ginny Carson Young, who are an old friend of mine, about her involvement, around that time. And it became quite an issue, didn't it?

VIRDEN: It certainly did, and I remember Ginny very well. We worked together on this. In fact, I remember she got interviewed about it on Sixty Minutes, by Leslie Stahl, about this whole adoption thing and some of the chicanery that was going on. And there was a lot of it. Americans to their credit were responding to the crisis by trying to be helpful, but sometimes under very dicey, shaky, dubious arrangements: babies were being sold under the table and children were being made available who were not actually orphans. So our consular officers had a lot to do there.

One of those years, it must have been '91, Americans adopted more children from Romania than from any other country. I think the number was something like 2,000 that year. We were a small, crowded embassy, and our consular waiting area had to do double duty as a baby changing room for a spell. It was a frantic, chaotic time.

It was a lot of work for Ginny and her section and the rest of us, too, trying to protect Americans -- who were reacting out of humanitarian concern – from being victimized.

Q: Yes, this is the thing. People were letting their kids go, claiming they were orphans and then would come back later on and say it really wasn't an orphan and that sort of thing.

VIRDEN: Yes, some of these babies were unwanted children that had been placed in orphanages; their parents couldn't or wouldn't deal with them. The health conditions were often miserable, and there was a lot of AIDS, because of reuse of needles and things like that.

So, again, embassy officers really needed to play a role here, to protect Americans and make sure they knew what they were getting into.

Q: I've been interviewing people who served in Russia and other parts of the Russian empire after its collapse, when things were going through tremendous change and one of the problems that occurred there was that they had an awful lot of American volunteers, or people from various nonprofit organizations and all and churches and all just going over there and feeling they could do anything. Many of them were, I won't say they were criminal, but they were just all kind of dubious, or really didn't know what they were doing. Did you have that problem?

VIRDEN: Absolutely. That's exactly what I'm trying to talk about there. So we tried to encourage Americans, yes, this is great, you want to do good here and we want to try to help you, but work with responsible organizations that have experience, who do due diligence; don't deal with the fly-by-night operators on the street, because you could really get burned.

And some did get hurt. I think there've been some follow up studies about some of the adoptions that took place that turned out to be tragedies for the families involved. Talk

about no good deed going unpunished. In other cases, people just got fleeced of their money.

So, again, we worked very hard to try to protect Americans and get out reliable information, but it was kind of an overwhelming situation. It was just such a wonderful humanitarian instinct on the part of these American families who wanted to try to help; we did our utmost to channel that so that the results would really be good for the American families and for the children being adopted, rather than a tragic development.

Q: Once Ceausescu had left, was there still an entrepreneurial impulse or not, or had long years of dictatorship really hurt them?

VIRDEN: I don't think there was any lack of entrepreneurial impulses. What was more of a concern was an authoritarian tendency. There had been a ruling class, they had the largest security force, proportionately, I think, any of those countries had and the *Securitate* were everywhere.

These were people who did not want to give up power, and neither did the politicians who were affiliated with them, particularly when privatization of state industries was getting started.

There was obvious tremendous potential for huge profits there, and the people who had been part of the ruling establishment were in the best position to profit from it. This was not a phenomenon limited to Romania; it existed throughout Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union – the whole, crumbling communist world.

Billions of dollars were siphoned off during privatization by people who had been in power and knew how to use the advantages they enjoyed, including contacts within the country and outside it.

I don't know if any one country was more successful than others at controlling the privatization of state assets. But certainly, with all the turmoil and reinvention and shifting from a command to a market economy, a great deal was stolen in the process.

Q: You were there 'til when?

VIRDEN: I was there until November of 1993, so a little over three years (We had extended for a third year). We went to Washington for home leave and a little refresher training in Polish, needed because it had been almost 15 years – and three languages -- since I was there. I went to Warsaw in late April or early May, a month or so before my family, because the post needed to prepare for a visit by President Clinton.

Q: From '94 'til when, you were there?

VIRDEN: To '97.

Q: What was the Poland like that you went back to?

VIRDEN: Well, it was a country transformed, a tonic for me to see. When I left there, in the summer of 1980, it was still under communist control; Solidarity was just fermenting in the background and did not come to life until later that same summer.

As we know, this drama played out over the next decade, but by the end of '89 to '90, Poland had shed its communist system and was suddenly a free country again, a democratic country, fully in control of its own destiny and its own territory, for the first time in about a thousand years. So this was just an amazing transformational period for Poland.

Now, in '94, Lech Walesa was president. You know his story: he never went beyond high school, vocational education, lost his job in the Gdansk shipyard, jumped over the fence and took over leadership of Solidarity and the protest movement in that historic summer of 1980. In 1983 he won the Nobel Peace Prize, and in 1990 he was elected president of Poland.

So when I arrived there he was president, but the next year -- and maybe this was a sign of how well democracy was flourishing -- he actually lost his campaign for reelection; this great hero of the revolution was defeated in 1995 by a young ex-communist, Aleksander Kwasniewski. In the old days, no one would ever have believed that a communist, or former communist, would win in a fair contest, but Kwasniewski did.

Walesa just did not run a very good campaign and paid the price for it, so maybe that was simply evidence Poland had arrived as a democratic country. He tried to make the whole campaign about calling the other guy names (In effect, "you're a commie, you're a commie…."). He didn't perform very well in a televised debate and that was just enough, probably, to swing the election, so he lost and Kwasniewski actually went on to do well enough as president to win reelection.

Q: Now who was your ambassador when you arrived?

VIRDEN: Nicholas Rey, who was a Polish-American, a descendent of the Polish aristocracy. He was a political appointee, a businessman in New York and the ambassador my whole three years there, the second time around.

Q: How did you find him?

VIRDEN: Well, we had a rocky start. He'd wanted someone else for the PAO job and didn't make me feel particularly welcome. It took awhile for us to appreciate each other, but in the end we did. I found him fine to work with. I mentioned earlier his enthusiasm about the dinner I arranged for Jerzy Turowicz, the longtime editor of Tygodnik Powszechny and other leaders of the long battle against communism in Poland.

The whole diplomatic thing was new to the ambassador; he'd tried unsuccessfully to become a Foreign Service Officer as a young man, and now, after a successful career in business, was delighted to be the U.S. envoy in his ancestral homeland. He relished his own role and appreciated what USIS was doing there. I

One thing he had to face, which was not a pleasure for him or for any of us, was budget cutbacks. As we started drawing down around the world, now that the Cold War had ended, resources dried up. The ambassador reluctantly concluded we had to close our consulate in Poznan, our only outpost in the western part of the country, and with that our branch post there.

That was hard. That was very difficult. Our USIS post in Poznan had a really rich, storied history and was continuing to do great work. To make the best of the decision to close, we turned the library resources that we had there into an American reading room at a major university there. We also arranged for our senior Polish employee to be kept on as America's Poznan consular agent, a position she holds to this day.

So we salvaged something, but it was a sad moment, part of a broader phenomenon of American retraction. Okay, we won the Cold War, now the feeling was we didn't need all those outposts around the world. I thought then and I think now that this was shortsighted on our part. By closing that USIS post we saved maybe a couple hundred thousand dollars a year. It was pennywise and pound foolish.

Now, actually, we're talking about going back into that part of Poland. A part of our anti-missile defense system may be based in that region of Poland, and we're going to need civilian representation on the ground out there again to deal with base-related issues.

This is just one example of our instinct to cut back, the thinking being that since we weren't fighting the Cold War any longer, we didn't need these things. I think that was a false calculation. It's the same sort of folly that ended up with USIA being folded into the State Department a few years later. USIA was looked at by some as sort of a Cold War agency that was no longer needed. Again, I think that was a big error.

For a dramatic example of our myopia, take a look at the movie, "Charlie Wilson's War," in which we cough up billions to drive the Soviets out of Afghanistan but can't spare even chump change for schools and roads for our victorious allies.

Q: Yeah, well, having to deal with sort of the political realities in the United States, it's not coherent.

VIRDEN: True enough. Nor consistent.

Q: I know. Well, how did you find, when you got back, the media?

VIRDEN: Oh, it was quite different, although some of my old friends were still in business; some of them who'd been in the underground were now thriving. They had in

fact a major newspaper by this time: Gazeta Wyborcza, "Electoral Gazette," I guess you'd translate that. The anti-communist underground had created that paper and now it was the dominant newspaper in the country. Adam Michnik, one of the legendary leaders of the revolution, was its founder and editor.

It was a totally free press. You had all varieties of political opinion represented: fascists on one end and far left on the other. It was wide open and that would be the contrast from before.

That was a little less true for broadcasting. Throughout this region, Poland included, state broadcasting had really been in a strong position. That was a major tool of how the Party maintained control, it dominated domestic radio and television, the media through which the masses got most of their information. Breaking through the state monopoly was just starting to happen. Independent broadcasting wasn't quite secured yet at this time. Some private parties were trying to get independent radio and television off the ground, but there was political – and commercial – resistance to overcome.

We were able to be of some help with that, in terms of making connections with some potential American partners, for example, and with pressuring political leaders to reform laws.

Q: Did they have significant media representation in the United States, or did they pretty well have to rely on the wire services and what you could supply to them about American developments?

VIRDEN: Gazeta Wyborcza, the newspaper I mentioned, did have a Washington bureau, but that was very rare. Most of them did not have that. Most newspapers were not well funded operations yet, at that time. Just like American news organizations find it too expensive to station people overseas nowadays, it's certainly true of the Polish media.

Television, there were American broadcast partners who were trying to work with them, so there were some American organizations in particular willing to put up some money so they would be allowed in. That started to happen then and it's reality now.

Another of my roles in Poland was to serve as chairman of the bilateral Fulbright Commission, something I'd done in Romania and Portugal as well. Because money was now short for Fulbright, too, we decided to do a fund raiser. We arranged with a film distribution company to use the Polish premiere of a U.S. film, "Evita," for this purpose. The manager of the Marriott Hotel, who was a member of our Fulbright Board, agreed to host a dinner, while Fulbright Executive Director Andrzej Dakowski -- a dear friend -- and I cajoled business leaders into springing for a night out for their employees, their clients, and their spouses. The occasion brought a lot of favorable attention to the Fulbright program, people had a good time, and in one evening we netted $50,000 for the Fulbright endowment. That was something of a coup.

A few years later, after I'd left Warsaw, President Kwasniewski awarded me Poland's Knight's Cross for helping promote U.S.-Polish understanding through my work with the Fulbright program. It's one of my most cherished honors.

Q: We had had fairly good academic relations with Poland even during the worst of times, hadn't we?

VIRDEN: Yes, we did, we definitely did and that was always a challenge, to get people of independent mind and not just party hacks to send on your program. There would always be pressure from the Party to send "reliable people," from their perspective, on these programs and we were always looking for people of quality and independent mind. And that was a constant tension throughout that period, I would say.

At one point during this period, Ambassador Rey encountered the Prime Minister, Finance Minister and Warsaw's mayor talking with visiting NATO Secretary General Javier Solana. Knowing that all three Poles had benefited from Fulbright scholarships, the ambassador said to Solana, "By chance are you, too, an ex-Fulbrighter?" Solano responded, "By chance, no. I worked like hell for that scholarship!"

Q: Were you able to get out in the hinterland quite a bit?

VIRDEN: Yes, there were no restrictions at this time. I'd get down particularly to the second city, Krakow, a lot. It was easy to go down there by train, a couple hour train ride and there were important contacts there.

There was a major university, Jagiellonian, that was founded in the 13th century, a very high quality, prestigious place. We did a lot of business with them.
Also, Krakow was where a lot of the Catholic press was concentrated, and it was John Paul II's home base.

Then there were other major cities around the country where we didn't have an on the ground presence. We still had a consulate in Krakow, but, take Gdansk, which was the birthplace of Solidarity; we didn't have a presence there, we didn't have a consulate there, we didn't have anybody based there at all, so we tried to travel up there occasionally.

Again, it was a matter of money. Neither the State Department nor USIS had the funds to station people in these outlying cities, even though they were tremendously important places. So we would try to make up for that by visiting them; we did as much internal travel as we had the money and time for.

I'd like to mention one other thing: on this tour we had kind of bookend visits by President Clinton. The first was shortly after my arrival, in June of 1994. On that trip, the President told members of the Sejm, the Polish Parliament, in effect that: We're going to get you into NATO; it's a question of when not if; it's going to happen.

This was a critical message. Lech Walesa was still president then and had been publicly unhappy; he wanted immediate membership and saw the Partnership for Peace as a stalling action, a way of fobbing Poland off. In reality, President Clinton said, the Partnership for Peace is genuine transitional vehicle that will help Poland realize its dream.

Before the President returned three years later, we carried out an all-out public diplomacy campaign on behalf of NATO enlargement. In Poland, unlike in Western Europe, where the emphasis was on the virtues of enlarging NATO – Poles needed no convincing on that – we stressed to Poles that the United States could be counted on to deliver if they made the required political, military and economic reforms. And they did so.

So when President Clinton came back to Warsaw in July of 1997, he could confirm that NATO was inviting Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary to join the alliance. It fulfilled a U.S. promise and a Polish quest, making for a very triumphant occasion.

Like all presidential visits, these two had their stories. I was shocked when for the first one the White House sent advance word that it would need 900 hotel rooms! That was in 1994, and that was in fact the size of the presidential travel party (counting the White House press corps, who reimbursed the government for their rooms). I'm sure you've worked on presidential visits, so you know they're huge logistic undertakings, in addition to everything else. All the world's a stage….

Anyway, President Clinton came to town twice during my Warsaw tenure, and both visits came off well. I got to go to the state dinner the second time he came through, in 1997. It was in the same room of the Belvedere Palace where the Warsaw Pact had been signed four decades earlier and where the 1989 "roundtable talks" were held that ended the communist era. There was potent political symbolism to that night; it was heady stuff.

Q: How about the very large Polish-American community? Were they a presence?

VIRDEN: Yes, a positive presence. They were an important lobby back in the U.S. to make sure that we didn't forget about Poland, a role they took very seriously and played well. They also were in constant communication with their relatives back in the home country, trading information and often sending remittances to relatives back in Poland.

Back in the United States, for Polish-American politicians and politicians friendly to Poland, Poles are significant voting blocs who make sure Poland is on our radar screens; even under the communists we found ways to help Poland, especially with agricultural credits. Polish-American politicians like Sen. Edmund Muskie and Rep. Clarence Zablocki showed up rather often. (So did baseball hall of famer Stan Musial, another proud Pole).

When I was in Warsaw the first time, we were regularly giving Poland large agricultural credits so it could buy American grain. They desperately needed it, of course. The command economy was not working very well, and Poland was not then producing

enough to feed its own people. We were helping address that need, and I would have to credit Polonia with helping make sure we damn well did. American farmers benefited, too, of course.

And in the 80s, when Solidarity was forced underground, the American trade unions, again, with Polonia's prodding, smuggled in money, printing equipment and other supplies.

So, in sum, I'd say Polonia was a very positive factor in U.S.-Polish relations, even if its special pleading was sometimes a headache for embassy officers.

Q: The Russians had been all over the place. They had never been exactly loved. How did you find it when you got there?

VIRDEN: Well, no love lost, you're quite right; it's a stormy history, to put it mildly. The Poles calculate that they've been invaded from the East 19 or 20 times, something like that, and they were extremely conscious of that bitter record.

They were forced to study Russian in school during the communist era, but they didn't like it, wouldn't speak Russian. Even when the Party was in control of things there, the muttering in the street was not favorable to the Russians, let's put it that way.

So it's kind of interesting nowadays that Poland is in NATO, it's fenced off, out of bounds. That was what was so important about eventually getting Poland into NATO, it's telling the Russians, "Okay, forget about it, Poland is now free and going to stay that way, so deal with it."

To some extent, that's been happening. Of course, there's still lots of unpleasant history to try to get past, but Poland and Russia now have productive relations and increasingly so, and that's progress. Memories of the Cold War have dimmed somewhat, as I think we talked about that in our earlier discussion.

Now the Russians have acknowledged that they, not the Nazis, murdered 20,000 Polish officers and intellectuals at Katyn, during the Second World War. That monstrous crime has now been openly acknowledged. That's a huge step forward, to get that on the record, that, okay, at least now we know what happened there, maybe we can be honest about confronting others sore points as well.

Q: What about the Germans? Now you had a united Germany? Was there nervousness there?

VIRDEN: There was always a certain respect mixed in with other feelings toward the Germans. Back in my first tour, there were little votive lights on just about every street marking a spot where "the Hitlerites" shot 15 or 19 Poles during the war; around the corner you'd find another similar shrine, all through the heart of Warsaw.

This was encouraged by the Communist Party authorities, to justify the alliance with the Russians. I'd say this was a rather cynical political use of a terrible history.

This reminder of the Nazi past continued all through that communist period, almost fifty years. When the Cold War ended and Germany was reunited, Poland elbowed its way into the talks about the borders that had been established after '45. As part of the terms of reunification, Germany had to accept those new borders as permanent. That was vital for Poland, whose borders had shifted a couple of hundred miles to the west as a result of the war and still feared revanchist German claims to some of this territory.

Once the borders were secure, economic relations began to intensify. In lots of border towns, Poles and Germans commute back and forth across the frontier for their jobs every day. The whole border is quite open. German industry is heavily invested in Poland, including in sensitive sectors like banking and the media. Lots of Polish workers are employed in Germany, as they are elsewhere in the West, now that they are in the EU and able to move freely.

There is a history that will never be forgotten, but present relations are productive and more and more so all the time.

Q: Well how did you find social life there?

VIRDEN: Well, now you could go to restaurants that actually had the items on the menu, and wonderful food at that. And cultural life was wide open. You could go to movies; you could go to concerts of all varieties; first-run Hollywood movies were on offer.

Some big name American entertainers, like Michael Jackson and Tanya Tucker, came to town. The San Francisco Symphony came on tour, without our help, though we piggybacked on their visit to hold a reception to introduce orchestra members to Polish cultural and social leaders.

And there was a proliferation of rich Polish cultural offerings. Poland had been a grim, tense, closed up country back in the 70s, but now it was emerging again with vibrant political, cultural, social and economic life.

We talked earlier about entrepreneurs. I think Poles are natural entrepreneurs. And non-governmental organizations, there had been hardly any; suddenly there were tens of thousands of them, almost overnight. We helped foster some of them with a small grants program we administered with USAID money. A small group of us would meet with the ambassador and decide on the spot which applications merited support; it was a streamlined process and, I'm convinced, more effective than many of our more elaborate aid efforts.

So this was a country suddenly waking up; it was an exciting time to be there and also a moment of vindication. Poland had disappeared from the maps for 150 years, carved up by Prussia, Austria and Russia. Now it was not only back on the map, but it had secure

borders and was a truly independent, democratic state for the first time in a thousand years.

Q: What about students? Were American universities opening up to Poles?

VIRDEN: Oh, yes. There was tremendous back and forth. Poles could go to the U.S. to study and American universities were coming in. I know the University of Minnesota, for example, Carlson School of Management, had started an MBA program with the main economic institute in Warsaw.

That's just one example. A lot of those kinds of academic exchanges now were suddenly possible. As you understand, during the communist era that was all very strictly controlled.

Now all kinds of new possibilities were there and a lot of American academic institutions were interested. Those who were first off the mark were able to get something going. So there is a rich academic exchange between the U.S. and Poland.

The language is a bit of a barrier of course. English was not that widespread in Poland, but it started to develop rapidly at this time; Poles saw English as a passport to better things. A considerable number learned English well enough to be admitted for study in the U.S. English began to be taught in schools instead of Russian (a lot of Russian language teachers had to be re-programmed).

Q: Were there sort of displaced Marxist professors wondering around, or what happened to them?

VIRDEN: Well, human resilience is fairly impressive and so some of the professors, just as a lot of the politicians, reinvented themselves successfully. I knew some of them, and it was like their previous incarnation never happened.

As I think I may have said earlier, too, there never were too many defenders of abstract communist theory. They were more career opportunists back in the old days. Now, some of those who may have had natural political abilities, they were able to reinvent themselves and many of them prospered.

Q: Where did you go next?

VIRDEN: I went back to Washington. My next assignment was for a year as diplomat in residence at Georgetown. And then I did a couple years in the European bureau of USIA. In fact, right in the midst of those two years was when we were incorporated into the State Department.

Q: Today is April 15, 2011. Incidentally, how did you feel about "whither Poland?" How's Poland going, when you left it?

VIRDEN: It was going very well. It was a success story. It was a leader among the former communist countries making the transition to market economies and democracies and it was way out front in showing others how to do that.

It also had all the problems of democracies and rather fractious politics, but that was a huge improvement from how it had been for many decades in Poland. So it was doing very, very well. I felt good about how the country was faring.

Q: Did Poland have any territorial problems, either wanting something or somebody else wanting part of Poland, or was this pretty well a thing of the past?

VIRDEN: Pretty much a thing of the past. They had lost some territory in the east that was primarily ethnic Polish and they greatly regretted that. In compensation, they had gained some territory in the west, where much of the population was ethnically German, a mixed population.

Those borders were ratified when Germany was reunited in 1990 and were regarded after that as a *fait accompli*.

Q: Were they making efforts to satisfy the minorities? I think of Italy, with the German speaking population in the South Tyrol. These ethnic things can get nasty, unless you really make a real effort.

VIRDEN: I would say the long lingering issue in Poland was still relations with the Jewish community. There was a remnant of anti-Semitism that was out there in the society that they were fighting hard to try to overcome.

There were a lot of people working on Polish-Jewish relations. They were making some progress, but there, too, by this time the remaining Jewish community in Poland was very small, but there still was such a community and then relations with the Jewish diaspora was also part of the equation there.

So that was a problem that they were still working on and are to this day, somewhat.

Q: Okay, you went to Georgetown. You were there from when to when?

VIRDEN: I was there for one year, one academic year, 1997 to 1998. During that time I developed and taught a course on public diplomacy. It was called, "The Evolution of Public Diplomacy, "and subtitled, "From Armed Propaganda Teams to the Age of Internet." I had fun putting this together and then offering it to students in the School of Foreign Service there at Georgetown.

There had been some sporadic courses like this in the past, some of my colleagues who had been there had taught something similar. It hadn't been sustained, though, so I'm pleased to see that now it's been institutionalized; there is a public diplomacy course there now as part of the curriculum in the School of Foreign Service.

Q: Now, you're looking at this, I won't say it was the early days of the internet, but it's pretty early, when the internet was first becoming a mover and shaker. What was your take on this?

VIRDEN: Well, my course addressed the communications revolution and the start of the age of globalization. We talked about how the revolution in communication was opening up so many more possibilities for so many people around the world, for governments, but also for individuals, empowering individuals, too.

I remember an article I read at that time called "The Rise of Non-State Actors," by Jessica Matthews. She wrote about how more and more non-government organizations and individuals were able to play roles because of the communications revolution; they could get more information, they could also make their own voices heard.

One telling example was the whole movement to ban land mines, which was basically the work of non-government organizations and individuals who put that together. Jody Williams was the Nobel Peace Prize for leading that movement, which led to a treaty signed in the end by more than 180 governments. That was an effort carried out by individuals and NGOs, not governments.

That was just an example of how the communications revolution was changing so much. From my own experience with a closed society, as Poland was under the communists, effective communication was a critical challenge. Well, the possibilities were magnified many times over by the new means of communication.

Q: Did you find the student body different from the one you'd experienced?

VIRDEN: Yes, well, Georgetown has sent more people on to the Foreign Service than any other university. So there are more graduates of Georgetown in our Foreign Service. It was the biggest, the oldest and -- Georgetown contended -- the best school for would-be diplomats in the country.

So this was a kind of specialized student body, exceptionally talented and much more knowledgeable about international affairs than I'd known in college.

Q: What was the attitude toward government per se *among the student body?*

VIRDEN: Georgetown was one of the leaders, I would say, in recognizing the value of practitioners. So they had people there who had had high level government positions, former ambassadors. Tony Lake was there part of the time that I was there, Chester Crocker, too. Madeline Albright had just recently left.

This was kind of a well established thing already. They used the term "practitioners," as distinguished from academics, and they recognized that practitioners had a lot to offer as part of the mix. So government service was valued there.

Q: One of the things that has struck me, I'm a history major, so I come out with a certain prejudice, but what I consider the disconnect between the political scientists and practitioners.

You get these sorts of formulae and various writings on foreign affairs full of graphs and all which have no particular pertinence to somebody who's faced with a problem of how I run my embassy, or something like that.

VIRDEN: Well, that's your traditional ivory tower. I think Georgetown and the other universities in the Washington area are kind of the leaders in trying to overcome that aloofness, in recognizing that people with practical experience have something different to offer from what lifetime academics do and that both are valuable and that a mixture is a good thing.

That recognition is found less often in universities outside Washington. Back here in Minnesota, where I live now and do some adjunct teaching, I'm more of a rare animal. There isn't as much readiness in universities here to employ practitioners as there is in the Washington area.

That's natural enough, because there's so many former in and outers who have been in government and then in the academic world in Washington, less so elsewhere in the country.

Q: Yeah, I hope as you teach you will direct some of your students to our collection.

VIRDEN: I certainly will, now that I know about it and am aware of what's there. In fact, I've already called my university's attention to the oral history collection and will be doing that more energetically, now that I know it better myself.

Q: Well, anyway, while you were at Georgetown, was USIA disappearing, or had it disappeared, or what?

VIRDEN: Not quite yet. It was still an independent agency at this time, although it was certainly under fire. Senator Jesse Helms, in particular, was going after it. He was hell bent on eliminating one of the foreign affairs agencies. My understanding was that his real target was AID, but it had too many supporters, so he settled for the scalp of USIA as a consolation prize.

Q: How did you feel about this?

VIRDEN: Well, I was right in the middle of it, because after my year at Georgetown I was assigned as the deputy director for Europe in USIA and that bureau was the first one to move over to the State Department. We wound up scouting the way for the other geographic bureaus.

That was a two year assignment, 1998-2000; midway through it we made the transition, USIA was submerged into the State Department. Our European unit had already moved to State the year before and was in the vanguard for trying to make the thing work.

How did I feel about it? Well, not very happy. I didn't think it was a good idea and I didn't think, even accepting that it was going to happen, that it was done particularly well.

There were various things about how the merger was conducted that made those of us coming over from USIA, at least many of us, feel like it amounted to a hostile takeover. The resources were transferred, but the public diplomacy function was not given the respect we felt it deserved and needed to be effective. It was all one-way: USIA had to adjust to State's way of doing things.

The level at which the positions and the function was lodged, the way authority over resources and programs was set up – this is inside baseball, maybe – but all of it had the effect, in my perception, of downgrading the function.

Q: It's interesting, I wrote a history of the consular service, going back to 1776 and I'm revising my book, now, but it's been out there. In 1924, when the Consular Service and the diplomatic services were combined into the Foreign Services under the Rogers Act, there was considerable concern among the diplomatic service that the Consular Service, being quite frankly much more professional by this time, the diplomatic service was still sort of an area for dilettantes and all, American wasn't playing much of a role in the world in those days, that the Consular Service would take over the Foreign Service and to those of us who came along later, it's au contraire*, the Consular Service was made very much a junior partner and it's a little bit like the British class system, the upper class looked down upon people who had made their money "in trade."*

VIRDEN: That sounds very familiar, what you're describing.

Q: to me, I've served on a number of country teams. I've always found the USIA representatives to be probably the most interesting and in touch with what was happening people at an embassy.

VIRDEN: I appreciate your saying that. Certainly, those of us who served as public affairs officers felt that we had to be well informed in order to do our jobs, we had to be in touch with the whole range of what was going on in the society and what our government was trying to do in a society, in order to be effective.

Q: Well, all right, then you moved from Georgetown to USIA, you were there from when to when?

VIRDEN: From '98 until 2000.

Q: Well let's talk about, you were in charge of European affairs. Before we get to the amalgamation, what were your responsibilities?

VIRDEN: Well, there was an area director and I was deputy to that person for Europe. That was Western Europe. At that time, there was a separate office for Eastern Europe. As part of the amalgamation, we brought all of that together into one area office at the time of the merger.

That first year, when we were still independent, my job was supervising a lot of the public diplomacy programs we were doing throughout Western Europe. That included a lot of travel to Europe to provide program direction and to assess field programs so I could write evaluation reports on PAOs as well as on our staff in Washington. That first year I wrote more than 30 evaluation reports or reviews, way too many.

But that was one of the things that was lost as part of the merger. Washington no longer does an evaluation report on PAOs in the field. They're evaluated only locally, by the DCM and the ambassador. So that is a loss of direction over public diplomacy activities, Washington no longer has that direct line authority.

Nor does the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy have any direct role in supervising field operations. Those were brought under the regional bureaus.

I believe – and I think most USIA officers agreed – was that the net result was that the public diplomacy function was downgraded.

Q: Well, one of the things I've noted is the apparent, the tremendous authority and power that a public affairs officer has in the field, but when they come back to Washington they end up writing efficiency report, so there wasn't much connect with the State Department. Did you find that?

VIRDEN: Somewhat. I think it's true of Foreign Service Officers generally, too. Most of them enjoy their work overseas more than in the Washington bureaucracy.

This is one of the things that struck us when moving from USIA over to the State Department, the whole clearance process and the levels of bureaucracy you have to touch base with to get anything done, to conduct programs or to get anything approved, it seems. Of course it's a much bigger organization and therefore more people have an interest in anything you're going to do, so that's complicated everything.

Also, again, talking about the transition, we felt when we were an independent organization public diplomacy was tied to policy, but it wasn't a poor stepchild of it, it wasn't just an afterthought.

So often, at least these were the initial impressions when we came into State, it was shunted aside. We worked very hard to try to overcome that, to see that public diplomacy

considerations were weighed into the process as we went along, but it was a very difficult struggle.

Now, that was the initial days, when the merger was being brought about, so that was basically the first year or so of the merger. We've had a decade of experience since then, now, and others should offer their perspectives on how well it's come along, whether that climate has improved.

My own impression is it has not changed dramatically since those initial days, though recently the regional public diplomacy chiefs were made deputy assistant secretaries instead of mere branch chiefs, the bureaucratic level we'd argued was appropriate at the time of the merger. Well, better late than never.

Q: Did you have any sort of real program direction in Western Europe?

VIRDEN: Well, yes. Again, half of that two year assignment, we were still independent, so in the area office we had a role in management, selecting people for assignments in Europe. We had a decisive say in that, in deciding the budget, in deciding when positions had to be cut or increased. So we were helping to influence policy by determining where resources would be directed.

There was a good deal of substance as well. We were dealing with the Europeans on a ton of issues, from arcane trade matters like airliner hush kits and genetically modified food to questions of war and peace. For example, as the former Yugoslavia continued to unravel during this period, our office was intensely involved in building support for NATO action in Kosovo. The situation in Kosovo was becoming intolerable, and building consensus within NATO to address it was an overriding policy and public diplomacy priority. Our essential message was that Serbian treatment of Kosovo was horrible, that ethnic cleansing there needed to be stopped, and that NATO could and should act without waiting for UN Security Council approval, which was neither obtainable nor required.

And so this huge public diplomacy campaign was carried out at the same time the transition was occurring.

It was during this time also that NATO celebrated the 50th anniversary of its founding with a glittering event in Washington welcoming Poland as well as Hungary and the Czech Republic to its ranking. Given my tours in Poland and regard for that country, it was quite satisfying helping put that event together.

Q: Were you given any particular bit of the transition process?

VIRDEN: I remember going to countless meetings to try to hammer out operational details; we won some points, but again, we didn't have a strong hand. We were being taken over. We could make our case but didn't get to decide.

For example, as I mentioned earlier, we believed strongly that area directors should come over as deputy assistant secretaries, rather than as lower level office directors. State refused then and held out for more than a decade, before Secretary of State Clinton conceded the point last year.

Again, this is very much inside baseball, but it mattered, in terms of what public diplomacy could do.

Q: Did you sort of sense hostility, triumphalism or something on the part of the State Department, when you're sitting around the table working on things?

VIRDEN: No, I didn't feel that. I felt that they genuinely believed that this was a good thing and that the State Department officers that we were negotiating with believed we needed to make the adjustment, that they had a broader perspective and that we had a narrow one.

That's what they genuinely thought: that the decisions were proper and we had no right to come in and have a say on how these staffing decisions should be made and we didn't understand some of the constraints put on by Congress, that kind of thing.

I did not sense, "Okay, we won, you guys lost," that kind of triumphalism, no, I did not perceive that.

Q: Well, one of the things that, again, looking at this, I've never been personally involved, but as I've done these interviews, I keep hearing that back in the good old, bad old, days of USIA, when you came back to Washington, there was very little input into you might say policy and this was the one place where maybe by the amalgamation you could bring public diplomacy in at the beginning of policy development.

VIRDEN: Yes, to some extent that has worked, I think, that has happened, because people who are trained and focused on public diplomacy are in all of the meetings over at the State Department and they can bring their perspective there. So that does happen at that level.

But we no longer have a really senior voice, as we had back in the days, for example, when Edward R. Murrow could be an independent power at National Security Council meetings. That kind of input at that level we no longer have.

Another thing that has happened as a result of this is in the field the public affairs officer -- I served as a PAO in several countries – the PAO doesn't have the independent control of resources he used to have as representative of an independent agency. PAOs used to control their own budgets and staff.

And now ambitious public diplomacy officers want to move on to be DCMs and ambassadors and many more are in fact doing it. So, in that sense, for many individuals it has often opened up those possibilities.

And that's a good thing in many ways. Those officers can bring grounding in public diplomacy with them when they move up to those higher level jobs.

Q: How did you view sort of the waning years of the Clinton Administration? You want to offer any reflections about the various currents that were going through that period?

VIRDEN: Not really. The one thing that comes to mind is the whole scandal over President Clinton was hard to explain overseas. In many countries it was just kind of incomprehensible, just as in an earlier era the Watergate controversy was hard to get across to many people, they couldn't quite understand why it was such a big deal.

In both cases, you could explain what was going on and why it was a problem, but many of our audiences were titillated but didn't understand why it was a major political issue and the question of possible impeachment over that was mystifying.

Q: Who was the head of USIA at this point?

VIRDEN: Joe Duffy.

Q: I've had several accounts of Joe Duffy. What was your impression of him, from your perspective?

VIRDEN: Not a strong leader, at a time we needed one and there were those of us who thought if he had fought as hard as the head of AID, Brian Atwood, fought at that time, we could have retained our independence, that Mr. Duffy was a very nice man, but perhaps not cut out to be the forceful leader we needed to fend off the political attacks.

Basically, again, I think at the end of the Cold War, the idea that, well, now the Cold War's over, okay, you don't need a Cold War agency like USIA. I think that was a stupid idea and it should have been possible to resist that.

We didn't suddenly lose the need for public diplomacy because the Cold War was over. It should have been possible to deflect such know-nothing attacks.

Q: Where did you go from there? This would be, what, 2000?

VIRDEN: Yes, 2000, I went back to the National War College and spent the next two years on the faculty there. They emphasize seminars and a team teaching approach and so I helped teach basic core courses on national security strategy as well as elective courses on strategic communication and on Central Europe.

I also led field trips, one to Paris, where we had an exchange program with the French Academy of Higher Military Studies (CHEM), and then to Romania and Hungary as part of the spring field program for students.

It was a very interesting two years. I loved my experience as a student at the war college and I enjoyed being there also on the faculty.

So I did that for two years.

Q: You had been at the war college from when to when, before?

VIRDEN: For one year, from ’83 to ’84.

Q: Did you sense a different attitude, or a different war college, student body or faculty?

VIRDEN: Yes, well, one thing that had changed was we now had foreign students there. When I was there as a student, we had a total of 160 of us; the student body was one quarter Army, one quarter Air Force, one quarter sea services (Navy and Marines), and one quarter civilians.

Now we had added about 40 international students. These were generals or colonels from the military services of other countries. Egypt, for example, was represented, as were Romania, Poland, a lot of other allied countries, which was quite a positive development, I thought.

You might even be able to make a case that the fact we had that kind of a close relationship with the Egyptian Army had something to do the way the army played what appears to be at this stage a positive role in how things have worked out with the revolution in Egypt. Just a thought.

Q: You were there during 9/11, weren’t you?

VIRDEN: Yes, in fact, I was there at the war college that morning when we saw one of the planes flying overhead on its way to the Pentagon, as a matter of fact. It was shocking to us, as it was to everyone in the country. I remember driving home that day and seeing smoke coming out of the Pentagon. Pretty traumatic.

We had lots of seminars at the war college in the next few days, lots of people trying to figure out what this meant; it kind of threw the playbook out the window, in terms of figuring out where we go from there and what the strategy should be. So it was a good place to be, in that time.

Q: The case was made that we should invade Iraq. How did that play?

VIRDEN: Well, I left there before that happened, but there were already some officers focusing on Iraq. Almost from the time of 9/11 there were some who were making the case, just at they did at the higher, inside levels of the White House, about attacking Iraq.

Most of the debate that I heard and was part of there at the war college was not about that. Instead, the discussions were about the proper strategy for fighting terror. It was not

like other wars. It was not the kind of war that you win by having more tanks or more fighter aircraft. It was a different kind of struggle. It was not a war that could end with surrender aboard a battleship.

So there was more that kind of thinking at the war college than, rather than, okay, we have to go after Saddam Hussein. Saddam Hussein was talked about, of course. A few students wrote papers about him, as a concern out there on the horizon, but I don't recall anyone maintaining that war with him was a necessity; there was instead recognition that the terrorism threat was from military extremists, non-state actors, principally Al Qaeda.

Q: Did you find that sort of your perspective melded in well with the military's? They've always had a propaganda organization. Was there a meeting of meetings of minds, or what?

VIRDEN: They talked a lot about the interagency process. That's sort of an article of faith with them, how policy is getting made, through negotiation among all of the agencies in Washington and that's part of what military officers hope to learn by being at a war college, how that worked and how to work effectively through that process.

So they were very glad to have contact with people from civilian agencies. That was the theory behind, or part of it, at least, for setting up the war college in the first place after the Second World War, that coordination among military units and between military units and civilians was not very good. So the war college was one effort to try to make that work better.

The military would put it in their own terms: instead of wearing Air Force blue or Army green, at the war college you're supposed to become "purple suiters." Fostering a broader perspective is part of the rationale behind the institution.

But another aspect of what I think you were asking about there is that the military always has its own kind of propaganda. Yes, all's fair in love and war. Well, in war, deception is a legitimate tactic. It's part of warfare.

But deception is anathema to public diplomacy, because credibility is everything. That was some of what we tried to convey in the elective course that a colleague and I taught about the media and strategic communication.

There is a fundamental conflict there, and that's one reason why it's dangerous to have the military playing a growing role in information programs, as they are.

Q: Particularly in Iraq, because we were there for so long, the military is kind of doing its thing, which is not necessarily winning credibility.

VIRDEN: Well, it's a great point, because trust and credibility are absolutely central to any effective public diplomacy. You will forfeit any credibility if you start practicing deception, if you paint everything in black and white, if you refuse to entertain any

dissent or counterarguments and insist that everyone just "Get on the team." All of that is part of the salute-and-go -forward military psychology that may serve us well in war but will undercut effective public diplomacy.

I personally think that our military establishment has gotten into some of these things, like media and information operations, in large part by default; they have the resources -- people and money -- while civilian agencies are being starved.

Q: When you left there, where did you go? You left in 2002?

VIRDEN: I went to Brasilia as the DCM. So my final two years in the Foreign Service were as the deputy to the ambassador there in Brasilia. The ambassador, Donna Hrinak, had been a friend since we'd studied Polish and then worked in the embassy in Warsaw together in the late 70s. She asked me to take on the Brasilia job, so I went down there and we had two great, productive years together.

Q: All right, well, in the first place, let's talk a bit about her. How did she use you and the embassy?

VIRDEN: Well, both Donna and I had served in Brazil before, so we both knew something about the country. In my case, it was a long time ago, back in the 70s. She'd been there as a political officer in Sao Paulo in the 80s. She was fluent in Portuguese as well as Spanish. She was an area expert, having spent all her career, but for that one assignment in Poland, in South America.

She had been an ambassador three times before this elsewhere in South America. So she was a real expert on the region. She maintained very high level contacts with the president, other senior ministers, and political and business leaders in the key cities of Rio and Sao Paulo.

Her outreach meant I spent more time running the mission. It was a large one. We had about 900 employees, representing 18 U.S. agencies, at the embassy and in the Rio and Sao Paulo consulates general as well as a small consulate up in the northeast, in Recife.

We had been there only a few months in 2002 when Brazil elected a new president. This was Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, a lathe operator and union organizer who never went beyond an eighth grade education. He grew up in a family of something like 22 kids, part of the time living in the back room of a bar in the port city of Santos.
And now suddenly -- well, not suddenly, he'd run several times previously and lost – he'd been elected to lead the fifth largest country in the world!

It was an exciting moment, and a great personal story, but what might it mean for relations between our two countries? Here, I believe, we in the embassy helped ensure that the answer was positive.

Shortly after we arrived, Ambassador Hrinak organized a strategic planning meeting, a wide open brainstorming session in which the members of the country team were asked to muse about questions such as, "What are we doing in this country? What should we be doing? What do we need in order to make it happen?"

We picked everyone's brains and I then put the best ideas together into a long range planning telegram we sent to Washington; it said our goal should a "mature partnership," one in which both countries acknowledge that so much binds our two large multiethnic democracies together that we should not be blown off course by every small dispute that comes along.

We laid out our rationale, goals and proposed initiatives to pursue them. We quickly got a favorable response from the Under Secretary for Political Affairs, Marc Grossman, who said he really liked the cable and asked what he could do to help. That was a chit we soon cashed.

When Lula was elected shortly thereafter, Brazil choice was met with considerable skepticism in Washington. Many in the Bush Administration feared he might be another Hugo Chavez who would join forces with Venezuela and Cuba. There were lots of dire warnings like that. Our response to such thinking was to say, in effect: "Wait a minute, don't jump to conclusion, give this person a chance; this is not what we're hearing, don't pay so much attention to rhetoric, but watch how he actually governs."

That argument won out, and President Bush took some of the steps we suggested. He sent a conciliatory, non prescriptive note of congratulations to President Lula and invited him to an early visit to the White House. The visit took place and Presidents Bush and Lula, two men who could hardly have had more different backgrounds, actually got along famously; they really did, the whole six years they were in office together.

I those of us in Brasilia then can take a little of the credit for persuading Washington to keep an open mind about Lula and give him a chance, not to jump to premature and negative conclusions. And in fact he governed much more moderately than from the extreme left, as critics had warned.

Q: When you got there, were there any major policy differences with Brazil, or not?

VIRDEN: Oh, there were lots of them, sure. How to deal with terrorism was one. There was fundraising going on, in our view, down in the Arab communities down in the tri-border area with Paraguay and Argentina. Are you familiar with that area?

Q: No, no, I'm not.

VIRDEN: At any rate, there was concern there and the answer we would get back is, "Well, they're raising funds there for legitimate charitable organizations that do good things for widows and children" in the Arab world, and so forth.

There was not a meeting of the minds about that, so there would be a lot of back and forth about people who were allegedly raising money that was ending up in the hands of terrorists.

And then there were the drug wars and how to deal with drug trafficking, a perennial bone of contention between us.

There was also a major negotiation going on trying to develop a free trade zone for the entire hemisphere, all 35 nations. It was a very ambitious undertaking, a goal set by the hemisphere's leaders a decade or so earlier. A deal between the two giants, Brazil and the United States, was essential to the overall pact, and we spent a lot of time trying to reach an understanding. I remember sitting in on a full days of discussions as two brilliant officials – our trade czar, Robert Zoellick, and Brazilian Foreign Minister Celso Amorim – bobbed and weaved and tried to find common ground. In the end, though, the mountain was too high to climb.

Q: Well, let's look at terrorism and Iraq. How did our action in Iraq play while you were there?

VIRDEN: Very badly. The Brazilians, who are basically pro-American, friendly towards Americans, were strongly against us on this issue. That's not just anecdotal, public opinion polls were done and showed nine out of ten Brazilians opposed to the war.

We had protests in front of our installations in all of the major cities in the country, too, and our security people had to contend with sometimes violent outbursts. Brazil has an Arab community and that's part of where that was coming from, but basically Brazilians saw the war as unilateral and unjustified.

Q: Did they understand our efforts in Afghanistan?

VIRDEN: Yes, they did, but let me mention an anecdote that I thought was meaningful. One of the senior advisors to President Lula said to the ambassador and me one day that "You know, when America was attacked on 9/11 we were with you on that. Three thousand innocent people died. That can't be tolerated. We have to condemn terrorism and fight against it. Everybody is with you in that effort." In fact, Brazil had demonstrated that support by joining in voting for the Organization of American States resolution condemning the attacks of 9/11.

Lula's advisor added, however, that "It's also true that every day 30,000 innocent children die of poor health care or malnutrition. Where are you in that battle?"
His comment reflects the priorities of a country like Brazil, where the struggle against poverty, hunger and disease remains front and center. When Lula ran for president in 2002, his campaign theme was '*Fome Zero*," or "Zero Hunger." And once he was inaugurated, that's where he directed a lot of his effort, to notable success.

When Presidents Bush and Lula spoke back-to-back to the annual UN General Assembly meeting in 2003, Bush spoke exclusively about terrorism and security and Lula talked about bread and butter issues. Brazilians are not alone in believing that in our preoccupation with security the United States often overlooks other things that also matter greatly.

Q: Speaking of that, was Brazil in a position where it could do anything for hunger abroad, but did it have to sort of concentrate on its own problems?

VIRDEN: It was doing a lot in Africa, not only about hunger but also fighting AIDS. It was and is one of the leaders of the world in coming up with new drugs, generic drugs at an affordable cost to fight AIDS.

Again, it was particularly in Portuguese-speaking areas, but also some of the other countries of Africa as well. There was a real partnership there and Brazil was out front and one of the leaders in that area.

When Lula came into office, Brazil had an estimated fifty million people living below the poverty line, most of them in the northeastern part of the country. By the time he left office eight years later, thirty million of those had been lifted above the line. It's no wonder, then, that when he left office at the end of 2010 he had a popularity rating in the mid 80s!

Q: How was it during your time, with Lula and his government?

VIRDEN: Well, it was a left of center government and ours was conservative, so there were some stark differences there. But Ambassador Hrinak actually knew Lula and some of the other leaders of his workers party from her previous tour in their stronghold of Sao Paulo. Her personal relations were excellent with them.

Despite that, we had our share of differences, often over trade questions and some of these issues that we've just been taking about. Brazil wanted some things from us that we could not give them. For example, one of its highest priorities is to become a permanent member of the UN Security Council; wherever their president and foreign minister traveled they pushed for a firm commitment to support Brazil's aspirations.

As you probably know, Brazil is a member of the BRIC group of countries and is campaigning hard for this UN reform and its own candidacy.

Q: Yes, well, you've got India, Japan, Germany, particularly.

VIRDEN: Or in South America. If South America's going to get one permanent seat, should it necessarily be Brazil? The Argentines say, "Well, why not us?" and Mexico says, "Why not us?" and you've got that in every region of the world.

Brazil makes the case that the arrangements in the UN Security Council were made in 1945 and reflected that world but don't really apply to the world we have now. It's a reasonable argument, but how do you get beyond that to a new agreement?

Q: How were relations between Brazilians and Americans? What was Brazilian opinion about Americans?

VIRDEN: I would say Brazilians are essentially pro-American. You had certain leftist elements within academic circles that harbored a certain amount of old line anti-Americanism, but more broadly the country was very favorable to Americans.

Most of the families that can afford to send their children abroad to study send them to the United States, rather than to Europe or Australia or anywhere else.

There was lots of movement back and forth. Something like a million Brazilians live in the United States. Unfortunately, as many as two thirds of them may be here illegally; many of those get in by way of Mexico, which they can enter without a visa.

And this is, again, is one of the points of friction between us. Brazilians believe we should give them the same status we give our European friends, who do not need visas to visit the United States. We explain the law, but they continue to push the point and resent what they saw as continuing discrimination.

Q: How did we see relations with Venezuela, Hugo Chavez?

VIRDEN: Well, I think the Bush Administration saw Venezuela as a real problem child and was concerned initially that Lula might lead Brazil into the same category, but he did not. Even though Lula tried to be friendly with Chavez, he seemed to regard Chavez as a poor politician, a military man with an authoritarian approach lacking the flexibility required in a democratic society. But still, Brazil wanted to have it both ways, to have good relations with us and with Venezuela, too.

As I was saying a little earlier, I'm glad that our government did not fall victim to painting Lula with the same brush as Chavez, because he was a very different sort of leader.

Now, among the problems we did have with Brazil at this time were a lot of trade questions. After all, Brazil had become one of the top ten economies in the world.

We also had a lingering internal tax dispute over whether we should be paying into Brazil's retirement system for our 600 or so Brazilian employees. Because there was no agreement on that, we were blocked from selling any of our properties. We needed to get rid of some of our unsafe, no-longer-appropriate installations, particularly in Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo. We did a lot of wheel spinning over this but eventually did acquire, remodel and dedicate a good, well-located site in Sao Paulo.

In Rio, we had a property right in the heart of the city with a splendid view of Guanabara Bay, but it fell far short of today's security standards. Even if we could find a way to divest ourselves of it, we were challenged to find an affordable alternative that was safe and also allowed us the access to people needed to do our jobs. This has become a classic dilemma for U.S. installations in many parts of the world. We were still stymied in Rio, as of the time I left there in mid-2004.

Q: How about Brazil and Argentina? How stood relations between those two powers?

VIRDEN: Very tricky. They were skeptical of each other, kind of rivals. Brazil was doing better than Argentina. Argentina traditionally had often been much more developed than Brazil, and those roles had been reversed. I haven't served in Argentina, but the perception in Brazil was that Argentines were jealous of how well Brazil was doing.

The two countries were trying to negotiate a trade pact, as part of a small regional group, but I would say the bilateral relationship was still kind of tense; there was no love lost. The rivalry would often be manifested out in soccer, where both are traditionally among the world leaders. Brazil, of course, is in a class by itself in soccer, but Argentina would challenge that status at times.

Brazil won the World Cup again in 2002 and returned home to a jubilant welcome. About a half million people turned up for the occasion in Brasilia – the capital's biggest crowd ever. The excitement was infectious. In Rio, the celebration on Copacabana and the other beaches went on all night.

Q: What about the Amazon? Were we raising the ecological issue of the Amazon?

VIRDEN: Yes, we were, and so were some of our congressional delegations that came through. A couple of those went up to Manaus, in the heart of the Amazon, looking into that among other issues up there.

By the way, we did have, the Smithsonian Institution was up there, doing some projects on preservation of the rain forest. They had some people based up there in the heart of the Amazon. NASA and the Center for Disease Control were also engaged in the Amazon.

One of our defense companies, Raytheon, had sold Brazil an electronic surveillance system for the whole Amazon region and was putting equipment in place during this period. Primarily it was supposed to help detect drug trafficking, particularly by aircraft.

This was more than a billion dollar deal, with lots of questions about getting the contract completed in time and how the information collected would be used. Among our concerns was avoiding an incident such as happened in, I think Peru, where an aircraft carrying missionaries was shot down in the belief it was ferrying narcotics. That was very much on our minds.

Brazil wanted the surveillance system for lots of reasons; drug trafficking was one of them, but so was identifying mineral deposits and other valuable resources in these remote, inaccessible areas.

And, of course, control of Amazon. As I said earlier, Brazil's sense of vulnerability about its hold on that vast region, its fear that a vacuum might be filled by others, was the main reason the country's capital was moved from the coastal port of Rio to the inland city of Brasilia, back in the 60s.

Brazilians are determined to defend their sovereignty over the Amazon and very alert to potential inroads by others. More than a half dozen other countries border on the Amazon, and the potential for border friction is huge. The U.S.-provided surveillance system was meant to help Brazil maintain control and also better harness the region's resources.

Q: Our military and the Brazilian military, were there efforts made for them to sort of get along?

VIRDEN: Well, we do have a long history of military relations with Brazil. They fought with us in the Second World War. Many military officers studied in our country. And historically, a lot of their equipment has come from the United States, so there is a solid formation to work with.

I would say that our bilateral military relations at this time were reasonably good, though many of our military relations were frustrated that they were not even better. We do not have any military bases in Brazil, but we do have a variety of military units within the Mission. During my time, that included Army, Navy and Air Force Attaches; Marine Guards; and a small military assistance group that was helping with training and acquisition of U.S.-made military equipment, such as fighter aircraft.

That latter involved a spirited competition with the French and Russians, among others. Ambassador Hrinak, I and other senior officials spent considerable energy in the effort. Our limits on technology transfer were one barrier we had to overcome. U.S. prospects were hindered by our earlier decision not to join the International Criminal Court. Restrictions imposed by Congress on ICC members prevented us from providing training programs and concessionary terms for equipment purchases. The collateral damage included some palpable cooling in our relations with Brazilian military officers. Our officers would point out that training programs promote long term cooperation between the armed services of the two countries; if we can't provide it, they will go elsewhere for it. So that was one of the fights we were waging at this time; Brazil hadn't yet made a final decision when I left in 2004.

Another contentious issue back then involved some overzealous U.S. security elements who wanted to come to Brazil, undeclared to the Brazilians, to scope out how they might do certain antiterrorist actions, such as in extreme cases snatching alleged terrorists in Brazil without coordination with Brazilian authorities.

We refused to allow them to come down, declined to give the required country clearance. So that was a fairly rough internal battle we waged at that time.

Q: Oh, yes?

VIRDEN: Well, had the Brazilians learned of any such thing, it would have done great damage to our relationship.

Q: Oh, yes. There is this element that has no conception of the repercussions of something like that.

What about the Drug Enforcement Administration? Was this a difficult element to deal with, or not?

VIRDEN: Yes, it was, because the DEA agents are used to carrying weapons and this is where the rubber met the road for us. They had trouble accepting that they were only to be there as kind of liaison and advisors to the Brazilians. That's not what they're used to doing. They wanted to be operational and to be authorized to carry weapons, which the Brazilians would not permit. The ambassador and I were the heavies in insisting that Brazilian law had to be respected.

The Brazilians are in charge of law enforcement in their own country and that runs against the proclivities of DEA people who want to go out and do the job. So this was another major conflict. Brazil is a sovereign country that gets to create and enforce its own laws; if they don't want foreign drug agents carrying weapons around Brazil, then you can't do it.

Q: Was drug smuggling a major problem?

VIRDEN: Not drug production, but smuggling, yes. There was a fair amount of drugs passing through.

Q: This was mainly from Bolivia, wasn't it?

VIRDEN: Bolivia and Colombia, too, up in the Amazonian region in the north and it was also having an effect on Brazilian society. Those slums, or *favelas*, as they call them, in Rio, in particular, but also in Sao Paulo and some of the other big cities, there's a drug culture in there. It's illicit drug money that makes these places run and causes perennial security problems.

This issue is going to be in the spotlight soon because Rio is scheduled to host the World Cup and then the Summer Olympics, the World Cup in 2014 and the Summer Olympics in 2016; Brazil will have to find a way to cope with the crime and drug problem in Rio and Sao Paulo during those games.

Q: One reads about the criminality in those cities.

VIRDEN: Well, yes, Sao Paulo has an average of thirty violent deaths every day! And Rio has an average of about twenty. Those are huge numbers by American standards, and most of it is drug related crime.

In Rio, these *favelas* are on a hillside overlooking the city. Geographically, they are in a strategic position, they can block the major arteries and they have sometimes done that in the past.

There was a major movie about this called "Cidade de Deus", or "The City of God," that came out four or five years ago. What it depicts is the violent world of those slums and the drug and crime bosses who run them.

It's a major internal threat for Brazilians, one they're grappling to resolve; they have tried various things and are still doing so now in a major push to get ready for these huge sporting events.

Good luck to them! Some of these favelas are in areas that the police can't even get into, much less control over time, because of the criminal hold on the people who live there.

Q: How'd you find Brasilia? You're back after some time. Had it become a real city, yet, or what?

VIRDEN: Well, it had grown considerably and become a genuine metropolitan area. It's a planned city, of course, laid out by a socialist designer according to his concept of how people should live, not their own natural choices. So it didn't grow naturally and you can sense that; some of the government buildings seem sterile and dated. It doesn't yet feel like the capital of one of the world's biggest countries, an emerging power.

But Brasilia is a pleasant place for family life; it's calm, orderly; you don't have huge traffic messes. The city's cultural life is developing impressively, and the diplomatic whirl is quite active. There are many attractive neighborhoods and more home swimming pools per capita than anywhere else I know of. There are spectacular sunsets, and the weather is comfortable all year round.

We had a beautiful home in Brasilia with a view of the capital's skyline that prompted one of my predecessors to exclaim, on first seeing it, that he'd died and gone to heaven. We enjoyed the house and especially the marvelously friendly and competent three-person staff who made us feel so at home there.

You have to admire the boldness of the Brazilians, to move a capital from a jewel of a city in Rio de Janeiro to the middle of nowhere, literally, and make it work. Brasilia may never replace Rio in Brazilian hearts, but it has become a vibrant city in its own right. Bringing a capital to life out there, way back in the hinterland, is a remarkable achievement, and you have to salute it.

Q: How about relations between the embassy and the huge, dynamic powerhouse of Sao Paulo?

VIRDEN: Well, yes, Sao Paulo is all of that. Relations were very good. Sao Paulo is a consulate general and it just got a spacious new facility, opened up while we were there and in fact we needed that. The consul general and I and the ambassador were in regular conversation and travel in both directions was frequent, as was the case with our consulate general in Rio.

The business community is huge there, as you might imagine. More that 400 of our American Fortune 500 companies have offices down there, and the Department of Commerce has a huge business promotion operation there, second only to its program in China. Sao Paulo is the economic hub of all of South America; it produces cars, airplanes and a whole range of advanced, sophisticated products to complement Brazil's world leadership in agricultural commodities like coffee, soybeans, corn and sugar.

Rio de Janeiro remains an important center as well, and not only for its cultural life and tourism. The huge oil deposits discovered off its coast in recent years will only add to its economic significance. Cities like that make Brazil in many ways an advanced modern economy, but the country also has some very poor areas, a land of real contrasts. Here, again, President Lula deserves great credit for the dramatic gains made in reducing the gap between the very rich and the rest of society during his tenure.

Q: Well, you left there in, what, 2004?

VIRDEN: We did, we left on June 30th, 2004 and I retired the next day, July 1.

Q: So what drove you back to Minneapolis? I would think that you would want a sunnier clime?

VIRDEN: Well, primarily family ties. I'm originally from Minnesota, as is Linda. My parents and Linda's mother were still living in Minnesota, and our siblings were all in the general area. And we genuinely like Minnesota. We had wavered over the years between settling there or in the Washington area, where we had a nice home in Reston.

We could have settled happily in either place, but in the end the draw of family – and our feeling that we wanted to be there when our families needed us -- carried the day. And that's how things have worked out. We were home to host the dinner when my parents celebrated their 65th wedding anniversary, and we were there for my father's final years. Linda and I now get to spend considerable time with our mothers and see our siblings regularly. We go on cruises. The Twins play entertaining, winning baseball, and the Vikings provide melodrama. I finally found time to read War and Peace. Life is good.

Q: Have you found an internationally aware community which you can plug into?

VIRDEN: Yes. I serve now as diplomat in residence for my *alma mater*, St. John's University and the College of St. Benedict; teaching and mentoring students keeps me alert. Under the Great Decisions Program, I talk about foreign policy to civic groups in the Twin Cities area, and I'm a member of the Upper Midwest chapters of AFSA and the Council on Foreign Relations, both of which are active here. I also write occasional op ed pieces for local publications.

And, yes, there is an engaged international community, particularly in the Twin Cities area. Minneapolis and St. Paul are cosmopolitan cities. Minnesota has a substantial international trade, and not only with our Canadian neighbor. A number of countries have consulates here. The arrival in recent years of substantial numbers of Hmong, Somalia and Hispanic immigrants had added to the awareness of the consequences of our actions abroad. Debate on foreign policy issues is spirited.

Q: Okay, well, I guess it's a good place to stop!

VIRDEN: Well, I think so, yes. I've enjoyed our review, Stu. Thank you!

End of interview