Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

RICHARD A. VIRDEN

Interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy
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Preface

In 2011, I was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy for the Oral History Program of the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training (ADST) and the Library of Congress. In my case, the interview was conducted by phone; the transcript of the five phone sessions is the core of this book. I have included here some of my later writings that expand on the subjects raised in this history. The added articles, updates, and parenthetical comments are shown in brackets.

Chapter 1. Origins. St. Cloud, 1941–1959

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 an "orphan train" from New York, around the turn of the 19th century.

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

VIRDEN: Sure, 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. We believe his father was an engineer who was killed in a train accident in upstate New York; Andrew did not know what happened to his mother, except that she died when he was quite 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 wanted 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 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 eventually 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 mostly German community, as were many of the nearby towns and villages.

Q: Do you know anything about that settlement?

VIRDEN: Yes, a little. 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 still stands. He also helped build the parish church, which remains in use today. The nearest town is called New Munich; 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: My dad, Ralph J. Virden, was born in 1920 and grew up during the Great Depression. He went to high school in St. Cloud and for a period was 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 helped build the Alaska Highway. He was not drafted for military service early on due to bad vision—he was blind in one eye—but was called up in late 1944. By that time, he and Mom had three young children at home. [Judy was born in 1942 and Carol in 1944; Tom did not come along until 1949].

Dad went through basic training in Minnesota and was assigned to a military hospital in Colorado, where he worked until the war ended and a few months beyond.

Q: How much education had he had?

VIRDEN: He was a high school graduate.

Q: What did he do after the war?

VIRDEN: When the war ended, he resumed work as a nurse's aide at the St. Cloud Veterans Hospital, where he continued in various capacities until his retirement more than thirty years later. To earn extra cash to raise our family of six, he also worked evenings and weekends pumping gas (gas was nineteen 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 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 ninety-fifth birthday this July. [She did, and her 100th, too! She lived until nearly 103].

Mom 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 a native of Germany. John worked in granite sheds in the St. Cloud area until contracting stonecutter's disease; he died in 1929, when my mother was twelve and her sister, Alvina, fifteen.

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: It was a 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 did not 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, carefree.

Q: Hockey, too?

VIRDEN: No, I loved all the other sports, but hockey was just one my friends and 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 am the oldest, my brother the youngest. [As of 2020, all three of my siblings had already celebrated their golden wedding anniversaries; ours is coming up at the end of 2021.]

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: Today St. Cloud is a town of about 65,000. I suppose in that era it was more like thirty-five or forty 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. 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 central. It was a Catholic upbringing. We went to church regularly. Catholic values were what we grew up believing in as did pretty much everybody we knew. We lived in a Catholic community and a Catholic milieu. We were warned against so-called "mixed marriages," meaning 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 in this area.

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

VIRDEN: Yes, there was a little 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 rigidity.

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 would your family fit?

VIRDEN: You know, politics was not something that was of great interest in our home. We did not spend much 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 did not 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 pull a critical mass together and get a game going, just thrown together. Now kids have tons of organized sports teams. We did not 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 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 was 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 a Catholic education, other than one year in a public kindergarten.

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

VIRDEN: Yes, 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: I was a good student and enjoyed school. I did well in reading, writing and arithmetic, not so great in reading aloud, art, music, or cursive writing; my family and friends assure me my handwriting 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; it was a comfortable environment.

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

VIRDEN: I'm pleased to say 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, which was fun. We were 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, not yet at that stage. We weren't thinking much about college in the first couple of years of high school. It was not like today, when you start building up a portfolio that can get you into a good college. We didn't think in those terms then.

Almost everybody went on to high school, either Cathedral or the public alternative (St. Cloud Technical High School); it was only later, in our

junior and senior years, that we started focusing on what to do next, whether college, vocational school, military service or something else.

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 always something interesting playing: a feature movie, newsreel, and short subjects. For a nickel you could get a candy bar and that was a big Saturday afternoon outing.

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, just a few lay teachers. Cathedral is still in business now, but I think that ratio is reversed; it is primarily lay teachers now.

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

VIRDEN: Not at that time. I thought more about it later 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 math and English. I did reasonably well on both sides of that equation but had no clear path forward 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 realized 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, during the school years as well as summers. I was not on the student council, or playing any varsity sports, though I enjoyed attending the Friday night

football—a great tradition—and basketball games. Buddy Holly, Elvis Pressley and rock and roll music were a great interest then, too.

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 laid 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 up to ten dollars a night to do this and got to bowl for ten 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 date much in high school. A few kids did, but 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. 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: I had decided to go to college, at that point, but did not know where or what I’d study.

It looked like it would be St. Cloud State College until late in the game when I received a partial scholarship from St. John’s University, in Collegeville, where I really hoped to go; it was enough of a stipend that we could afford the balance financially, and I felt very fortunate enough to wind up going there.

Chapter 2. St. John’s University, 1959–63

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 nineteenth century. Eugene McCarthy was a graduate and former faculty member.

Garrison Keillor also worked on campus for a while, 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 women’s 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 an exciting place intellectually, a revelation to me in many ways.

Q: What was your major?

VIRDEN: 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 vocation.

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 more a question of testing whether I wanted to devote myself to that sort of life, to being a priest, to celibacy and that commitment. I gave it my best shot for about four months and decided to take a different path.

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

VIRDEN: I took courses in English literature—Shakespeare, Chaucer—American literature, creative writing. Hemingway was—and is—a 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 class in journalism, worked on the school newspaper, and served as a sports stringer for the AP, the St. Cloud Times and the Minneapolis Star Tribune. I spent the summer between my junior and senior years on the staff of 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 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. 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: I suppose it was more what the hell, or simply ignorance. My political views were not yet formed at all. It was somewhat of a protected, provincial place, St. John's at that time. It did not 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 terribly aware 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, go 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, 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. We were very conscious of the Mississippi, 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: No, students were mostly from central Minnesota, although some came from the Dakotas and a few 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 much more mixed 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 entry-level jobs.

I scored well on the exam and soon received job offers from various federal government agencies, in Washington, St. Louis (a regional headquarters) and elsewhere. The one 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 chose that.

Chapter 3. Washington, D.C., 1963–66

Q: You joined the government 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.

A week after graduating I took 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 twenty-four 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 long 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 [United States Information Agency 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. I was also sent to cover meetings of the National Student Association, one year in Minneapolis and another in Madison, Wisconsin; these were especially lively affairs as sentiment against the Vietnam War was building.

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.

When John F. Kennedy was assassinated, I stood vigil at the White House and on Capitol Hill that weekend; later I read everything I could find about JFK and his administration, including books by two of his

aides, Ted Sorensen and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.. That was the true political awakening for me.

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

VIRDEN: Yes, I was debating whether to stick with USIA or go into newspaper journalism. I investigated such jobs and interviewed with several 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 newspaper offers. Then I passed the written exam and the invitation to the Foreign Service came through. If that hadn't happened, I almost certainly would have left.

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 dominating our public life then, 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 high up on my list, and that's where I was sent.

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

VIRDEN: It was 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." It transmitted material from Washington to our embassies and USIS posts, which then offered selections to local media.

Some of it what was sent—copies of articles in major newspapers, for example—was only for the information of embassy officers, to keep them abreast of events back home that might affect our relations with

their countries of assignment; other items could be released 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 later came to call public diplomacy: to inform foreign publics and try to gain their understanding and support for the United States. The term public diplomacy hadn't been coined yet, 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 countries or regions. I worked mostly on stories meant specifically for the countries in my region, though I also eventually did some reports—about the National Student Association, for example—for worldwide use.

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: 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 feelings were strong on all sides. I remember going to a bar and being shocked when nearly everybody stood up to cheer when the band played *Dixie*.

It was a charged atmosphere. Barely two months after I arrived 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 picked up steam.

Racial tension was clearly part of what I saw and felt in Washington at that time.

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

VIRDEN: I was staying in a fraternity house in Foggy Bottom at the time of the March on Washington and watched that historic event with great interest. At the time, I wasn’t sure the March would help, though I believed strongly in what the protestors were demanding. 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 closely, 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.

Along with the Vietnam War trauma, the civil rights conflict was front and center in our national life, 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 an oral 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 decades 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, but we also talked about Vietnam, the civil rights movement and 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. I was later to change my mind, based on what I saw 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 thirty-seven of us in my entering class, including just one woman, out of thirty-seven. Today, of course, usually 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 thirty-seven 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 1970, in protest of 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 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, and that's where I was assigned.

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

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

VIRDEN: Not yet.

Q: Serial significant others?

VIRDEN: Yes, there you go.

Chapter 4. Thailand, 1967–69

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 [Foreign Service Institute] 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.

[Insert: This piece first appeared in the Minneapolis Star-Tribune in 2019. It is reused here with permission:

Hong Kong, yesterday, today and tomorrow
By Dick Virden

Watching the unfolding drama in the streets of Hong Kong, as police and protestors clash daily over the city-state's future, brings back vivid memories of another distant era when, for visitors like me, the then-Crown Colony was a tantalizing, intoxicating mixture of East and West.

It was more than half a century ago, in January of 1967, when I first stopped in Hong Kong en route to Bangkok for my initial assignment in the Foreign Service. I'd never ventured outside the United States before and was bowled over by the sights, sounds, and smells of this teeming island group off the tip of mainland China.

The British still ruled Hong Kong then, as they would for another three decades; their influence was not only in the language—nearly everyone I encountered seemed to speak the Queen's English—but also in a free press, august banks, a thriving economy, respected courts and efficient administration.

Most of the residents (about four million then, more than seven million today), were ethnic Chinese. They brought the untold richness of China's ancient civilization. Take cuisine, for example. Having dinner at a famed Chinese restaurant with a Foreign Service classmate and other friends, we were each invited to select a dish for the group to share. When I came up with nothing more imaginative than sweet and sour pork—the one Chinese café in my hometown had a simple menu—others quickly provided the guidance I clearly needed. (I did better on future visits).

Hong Kong in that era was also one of world's best shopping emporiums, offering great bargains in everything from TVs, radios and cameras to tailor-made suits, shirts and shoes. The saying was that you could go broke saving money in Hong Kong. For the American and British sailors whose ships made frequent port calls, there were convenient Navy post offices to ship it all home.

The banks were among the most prestigious in the world. In 1968, my future wife Linda, then a college student, went to one of them to transfer money from her hometown bank in Foley, Minnesota. The Chinese tellers conferred in a backroom, returning to say, "State Bank of Foley very small bank." Still, the transaction went through.

From the commanding heights of the Victoria Peak area, where most of the British establishment lived, the view of the city and its storied harbor was breathtaking. (Our son Andrew, an expert on desserts, gave high marks to the many layered "Hilton Tower" ice cream sundae served at a grand hotel in the Peak neighborhood).

For Westerners at least, life was good. A novel about a British judge who made his home in the colony was titled, "Old FILTH," with the acronym standing for, "Failed in London, Try Hong Kong." Many did, some thrived.

Dropping by a half dozen times from the late '60s to the early '80s from my posts in Thailand and Vietnam, I saw Hong Kong as an ideal place to

visit. It was exotic, yet also prosperous and safe. No doubt it felt quite different to the Chinese residents, who shared in few of the riches and answered to an imperial power half a world away.

London relinquished control to China in 1997, fulfilling 19th century treaty obligations, but it did less well in providing its former charges the democratic legacy they dearly sought.

Economically, Hong Kong has continued to prosper in the two decades since the British turnover; local per capita income now better than four times the average for the rest of China, though. Income distribution remains even more skewed than our own. Even more than redressing this disparity or other more specific grievances, what clearly motivates the protestors manning the barricades is their desire for political freedom—democracy.

Hongkongers had a whiff of it under the British, and now they want the real thing. They'd like to make their own choices, to govern themselves. They see repressive measures by Beijing as a giant step backward, toward authoritarian government and restricted rights, away from self-rule and democratic rights.

While that may be how it looks to passengers on the Star Ferry plying the waters around Hong Kong, authorities a thousand miles away in Beijing see a rebellious region that needs to be brought to heel lest the contagion spread to other parts of the country. Their instinct is to suppress the protests, but they are also wary of stifling the region's booming economy (Hong Kong remains one of the world's premier banking and trading centers, a vital source of revenue for China's central government and its business tycoons.)

It's not at all clear whether or how these clashing perspectives can be reconciled. In trying to have both economic openness and rigid political control—Leninist capitalism, as one observer puts it—China is riding a tiger; its hopes for a leading and respected role on the world stage may well depend on finding a satisfactory solution to the contradictions in the "one country, two systems" riddle agreed to when Britain returned Hong Kong to China. Can this circle be squared?

End insert.]

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

VIRDEN: The United States Information Service (USIS) at that time had a big program in Thailand, one of the largest in the world. This was connected to the Vietnam War, with the focus on counterinsurgency.

We had as many as thirteen branch posts in Thailand in this era. 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 string of air bases up in that region that we were using for the Vietnam War effort. The overriding goal of the U.S. mission to Thailand and of USIS was to keep Thailand with us and help the Thai government hold the loyalty of its people.

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

VIRDEN: They were an ally in the Vietnam War. They were one of the few countries—six or seven—that 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. The country had some of the trappings, but it was not a full-fledged democracy. It was still authoritarian rule in those days.

Q: Where were you assigned?

VIRDEN: The first eight or nine months I was based in Bangkok, rotating through different sections of USIS there. In those days, first-tour officers did stints in various 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 with our consulate in Chiang Mai, in the far north.

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

VIRDEN: My first non-training assignment then was as 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 twenty 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 a half dozen Thais. 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 there was a government on their side and worthy of their support.

We took 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 (few of these villages had electricity). We traveled often 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 effort was born out of concern of a spillover from the Vietnam War; we feared that a disaffected population could turn against the national government, as in Vietnam.

Q: Here you are, a young kid, suddenly, 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'd had that rotational training in Bangkok and made some

field trips with experienced officers, so I wasn't starting from zero when I got my first solo assignment. I'd been in the country almost a year by the time I took 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.

But it was indeed isolated in some of these areas. I was often the first *farang,* or white foreigner in Thai, to show up in a village, 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 *pakamas* —a sort of large towel—while pouring water from buckets. It was a risky business.

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

At night we'd show movies. We'd string up bamboo poles, tie a sheet to them for a screen, crank up a generator, and show films (cartoons, Walt Disney type things, public service promotions).

Q: These were basically informational films?

VIRDEN: Yes, and we had had some entertainment features, too, and documentaries about King Bhumibol and his activities, because identification with the King and the royal family was the strongest asset we had for winning the allegiance of villagers.

I was on one of these field trips, in the small town of Mae Sot in Tak province on the border with Burma, when an Air America pilot who'd just landed on some mysterious mission told me Robert Kennedy had been assassinated that day; I couldn't believe it. I also felt very far from home right then.

On another village trip, in Uttaradit province near the border with Laos, we hired an elephant to pull away a fallen teak tree that was blocking our path. That led to the favorite petty cash voucher I ever submitted: 100 baht ($5), 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 villages were remote, many lacked roads and schools as well as electricity.

I believe there were about 50,000 villages in Thailand then, and most of them were quite poor. USAID [United States Agency for International Development] was helping to change that by building highways and market roads in around 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 far. Many areas still had not be reached at all. Farmers were living out there amid their rice paddies as they had for time immemorial. Our presence was a novelty to them—as was the presence of 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: It was often an uphill 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 academy for district chiefs—were willing to go but lacked the means. We had Jeeps, so we provided the transportation and paid for the gas to get out there. It wasn't in their budgets, so we supplied the wherewithal and impetus; it 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. Reversing the order 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 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 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. 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. The Hmong—or Meo, as they were more often called then—were among the most worrisome. 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 Kachin, Yao and Karen, over near the Burmese border, and other tribal groups. I think in some languages, like in Vietnam, they're all called *Montagnards*, or "mountain people." There are 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, and the Thai government did, too. The King and the royal family initiated many programs then. Another concern in those days was that the tribal people were involved either in opium production or in opium transit; one of the major actions of the royal family was crop substitution.

That's not anything I was directly involved in, but the American Mission in Thailand was also encouraging cultivation of crops other than opium.

It's a tough sell and a long-term struggle. I think the effort continues to this day, in Thailand and elsewhere.

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. I moved away from Chiang Mai but got back there occasionally on visits.

Chiang Mai, of course, was wonderfully exotic. There's a book about it called *Consul in Paradise;* it was written by W.A. R. Wood, a British diplomat who arrived as a young man and just never left. It's full of fascinating stories 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 La 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 region. The bases were in the northeastern section of the country. In Phitsanulok, we had only a radar site, with a detachment from the U.S. Air Force, as well as a 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 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, show villagers that the government gave them something valuable, was on their side and could do useful things for them.

That had not been true historically. The poverty in those villages was a rather clear sign of neglect. I think the situation is much better today, I'm told, 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 main unifying forces; for Thais 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 factors that made the Thais a nation. The one region that was dramatically different was the south, the Malayan peninsula, where the ethnic makeup is mainly Malay and the religion is primarily Islam. This is really the Deep South, the southern peninsula of Thailand, close to Malaysia. It's a different situation down there. I visited once 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 little 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: The capital and our embassy seemed very distant. Communication was weak: even phone service was problematic, getting calls to and from Bangkok shaky. You had a long leash in a field program like that 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 an electrical tower was hit by lightning and the entire town was without power for three weeks. This was while temperatures in the lowlands were often a hundred degrees. That didn't seem to matter too much to the Thais, who put on sweaters and jackets when the temperature dips below ninety, but it was hard on a Minnesotan. We had no phone service then either, but if I had to choose between the phone and air conditioning, it would have been an easy call, so to speak.

Working in these conditions helped me learn to rely on my own wits, to use my best judgement and let the chips fall where they may.

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 in 1967–68 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 fourteen miles apart but met 10,000 miles away in Thailand! Through family connections, she learned I was in Bangkok 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: 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 a half dozen major air bases.

As I mentioned, Phitsanulok had only had a radar site and a small detachment of military advisors in town, so not a major presence.

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 conducting missions in Laos or Vietnam, not 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 the area was part of the Chiang Mai consular district. Wever Gim, as I mentioned, was the consul in Chiang Mai. He or his political officer came around occasionally to gather information on political developments.

As an adjunct to my own job, I also did a little 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, presence of absence of young men—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. 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 apparent lack of plans to provide for the hundreds of village families that would be displaced by the huge Sirikit (named for the Thai Queen) Dam, then being built in Uttaradit province.

Q: What about the corruption situation there?

VIRDEN: I assume there was a fair amount of corruption, but 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? We could often detect some distrust, and a record of corruption or exploitation probably had something to do with that.

I don't remember noting particular cases of corruption, but I'm sure 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.

Some plants were grown in Thailand's own mountain regions and some came from Burma and Laos, the so-called Golden Triangle region. Much of the trafficking was controlled in those days by remnants of Chiang Kai-shek's forces, the KMT [Kuomintang], who had been up in those hills since the days of China's civil war. They didn't produce 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.

Chapter 5. Saigon, 1970–71

Q: Well, then, you left Thailand 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. But while I was in Minnesota I got a call from a personnel officer, who said, "Hold on. Your assignment's going to change. You're headed to Vietnam instead. We really need people there."

Already by that point, I was told, about half of USIA's corps of 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 is a list of jobs that are open, choose one.

So that was it. I thought about it for a while and decided to go ahead. One of the open positions was for a Wireless File correspondent; since I had a background in journalism, that appealed to me more than serving, say, on a provincial advisory team.

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: Yes, I was based in Saigon but traveled frequently around South Vietnam. I did so to report on pacification, refugees, military operations and a wide variety of other developments. I wrote both 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, along 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 are 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 country. That was down from an authorized peak of 549,000. We'd started so-called Vietnamization, so the troop level was going down. By the time I left we were under 200,000. But throughout my tour the U.S. military presence was a dominant fact of life.

You had a wide variety of correspondents. It was a huge press corps, with reporters from the U.S., Vietnam and around the world. Many were fine, dedicated reporters. Some had been there for the duration. Others never left Saigon and "covered" the war from their desks in the city. But most

were diligent, courageous, professionally qualified people. I was impressed.

I spent some time with them, including more than a month in a makeshift press camp 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. U.S. Marines set up a press camp in Quang Tri province, which bordered both Laos and North Vietnam, to facilitate coverage.

Here again, I saw some dedicated journalists doing their job; a few 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: No, I really didn't see signs of that. Maybe some looked at us that way, but most reporters had no time to think about us one way or another; they had a big war to report. The journalists I knew seemed to regard me and the other two wireless file correspondents as simply colleagues. We showed up at many of 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: Eighteen 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, then by Jeep through that string of villages, which were coming back to life in this period. Pacification seemed to be having a positive 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 returning home. My feature described 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.

A sampling of other subjects I reported included an event welcoming a group of *Chieu Hoi*, defectors from the Viet Cong who were coming over to the government side; an exclusive interview with a North Vietnamese POW [prisoner of war]; a Vietnamese doctor operating a makeshift 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 all political stripes. 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, there were some 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, did well, and launched big-time journalistic careers. Others were hit and run opportunists or adventurers and shoddy journalists. A mixed bag: not all were of sterling character.

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 Tan 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, 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 recalled 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: That's what gave rise to the term in those days, the credibility gap. Or think back to old computer terminology, "garbage in, garbage out."

That was not what we did. Those of us working for the wireless file and U.S. government publications tried to relate some of the untold or under told stories that also merited attention. We did not rely on the body count or other such statistics to try to measure progress in the war. If you

believed the figures in the hamlet evaluation system, we were always on the verge of decisive victory—until we lost.

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: That's the nature of the beast, I suppose. It's said of commercial media, particularly local television, that "if it bleeds, it leads." To some extent, what we were trying to do was counter that tendency by reporting other events or broader developments that were also part of the picture but 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, there was frequent pressure to make things look better than they were, and I would sometimes 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, the operation failed; they got their tails handed to them.

The United States provided air support, but our forces were ordered not go in on the ground with them, so it was kind of an early measure of how the ARVN, the Army of South Vietnam, would manage on their own. It was not pretty.

There was intense pressure on us to report this invasion as a success story from the get-go, but we were able to fend that off by pointing out that, when inflated claims proved untrue, they blow up in our faces, further damaging U.S. credibility.

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

VIRDEN: I concluded 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, we could not change the stark fact that the government of the South failed to attract the loyalty of its own people.

That's a gross simplification, of course, but for me it's the heart of the matter. The Viet Cong and North Vietnamese and Ho Chi Minh—as a representative or symbol of Vietnamese nationalism—had more appeal than our South Vietnamese ally. Try as we might—and we did try mightily—we could not 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: Great question. Yes, it did; one fundamental conviction I developed then—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 whether we need more U.S. forces or when we can safely hand over the keys to others.

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

VIRDEN: First, 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.

I felt fortunate to be 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 ready to move on.

Chapter 6. Belo Horizonte, Brazil, 1972–73

Q: You left Vietnam in '71?

VIRDEN: Yes, late '71. I left Saigon in October, and Linda and I were married in late December, in her hometown, during a Minnesota snowstorm. 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: Linda was very much anti-war, as was most of the country by then. 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."

Regrettably, we failed to make that distinction during the Vietnam War. Maybe we've learned something from that awful experience. Though the Iraq War was also highly unpopular, the soldiers who were sent out there to fight 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 and has a population of about twenty million people (four times that of my home state of Minnesota). Brazil has lots of superlatives like that!

Linda and I went to Belo as newlyweds in the spring of 1972, spent one year there and then were transferred to Sao Paulo for another year, '73–'74. Belo had been a U.S. consulate earlier, but then it had just—I think a year or two earlier—been closed with only a USIS branch post remaining. There was still a considerable need for consular services, so I arranged with the Consul General in Rio to send up consular officers on a fixed schedule to deal with such issues.

The city and state were rich in political, economic, and cultural life, so there was a lot of work to be done and opportunities to be seized. 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 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." [I was 31, Linda 25 that year.]

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: This was 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. 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 more than enough to do, much of it interesting and stimulating. But it was isolated, too; there were no

other U.S. government officials in the state, and the closest official post— the consulate-general in Rio—was a day's drive through the mountains. Still, communication was better than in rural Thailand; Belo Horizonte was no Phitsanulok.

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

VIRDEN: They were somewhat strained because the military ruled Brazil in those days. The Army had taken power in in 1964 in a coup in which the United States was alleged to be complicit. The military would remain in charge for another decade or so.

We had Peace Corps volunteers in the country. The military rulers were uncomfortable with that, believing that the volunteers were undermining their control by drawing attention to human rights abuses. The tension eventually led to the Peace Corps getting kicked out of Brazil. To this day, the Peace Corps has yet to be invited back, a real shame and loss for both countries. [This remains true in 2020].

Overall, the Brazilians were personally friendly to us, even if things could be edgy with the top leadership.

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

VIRDEN: For one, we had a bi-national center there that we supported with materials and other program help. They taught English and offered a range of American cultural programs.

We also brought in guest speakers, managed an active Fulbright exchange program, identified candidates for International Visitor grants, cultivated local media and maintained contact with political leaders. It was a full-service operation.

Once, when the ambassador came to our city, it fell to us to host a dinner for local dignitaries: the governor, mayor, heads of media organizations, the whole lot. The ambassador spoke little Portuguese, so Linda, who had taken only a short course in the language at FSI, had to not only put on the dinner but also double 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 I think 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, on the contrary, they wanted a lot more from us. They wanted a lot of everything. They were unhappy that the consulate in Belo had closed, feeling that as a major city in a large state with impressive mineral resources and human capital, they deserved more respect. They felt that with so much going on—including migration of many Mineiros to the United States—the consulate should have stayed in business.

So that was part of what we had to try to deal with. Also, the Vietnam War was still going on, and most Brazilians were against it. That was another factor in those days. And then, of course, the country was under military rule and we were advocating democracy and human rights. Some blamed us for interfering, others for not doing more.

In short, a full ration of political turbulence. But in our personal relations with a wide variety of civilians there, we did not feel that; we felt great warmth, as among natural allies, two large countries with mostly democratic tendencies and lots of personal ties. We did not encounter 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 went 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: The capital had recently been moved to Brasilia, and some of the embassies were dragging their feet about leaving the marvelous, romantic, city of Rio de Janeiro to go to the new capital, which was out in the proverbial sticks.

The United States had just gone through most of that migration, and not too happily. Brasilia is 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, was a world class city and Brasilia at that time was just emptiness; there was nothing there. Brazilians built a new capital out of scratch. If you go there now—I was assigned there thirty years later, at the end of my career—it still feels a bit unreal, not like a city that developed organically. It's grown into a fairly large city, but it still feels like an artificial construct—and without the beaches and natural grandeur of Rio de Janeiro.

Q: Yeah, I remember seeing a French movie, That Man From Rio *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 parts of our national 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 substantial presence in both those cities.

Chapter 7. Sao Paulo, 1973–74

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 had a population of about ten million already then; now it's more than double that, 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 an economic powerhouse.

I worked with the press, including Brazilian journalists who were trying to fight the censorship of the military government. For example, the country's leading newspaper was *O Estado de Sao Paulo*; when the paper's editors weren't allowed to publish an item, they would print classical poetry or food recipes, to let readers where they'd been censored. Friends at Estado would sometime privately slip me copies of what had been cut.

Sao Paulo was a thriving media center—big newspapers, publishing houses, news weeklies, nine television stations, even more radio stations—so we had to scramble to keep in touch with what was happening.

Q: Did you, when you were in Belo Horizonte and Minas Gerais, a state bigger than France, get out and around much?

VIRDEN: Yes, as much as possible. The road system was ok; it was possible to move around, to get to the old colonial towns, like Ouro Prêto

and the larger industrial towns like Uberlandia in the western part of the state and Juiz de Fora in the south.

Minas Gerais plays a significant political and economic role in the country. It also has major universities, some outside the state capital; we went to meet key people there, bring them American speakers, identify talented candidates for our exchange programs who might become future regional and national leaders in their fields. Getting out and around was critical; it made the job more interesting, too. .

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

VIRDEN: No. Of course, there was plenty of crime even then, but not like today. The city did not then have—at least that I remember—the reputation for violence that it has today. I heard a statistic when I was there in 2002 or 2003 that the city saw on average 30 violent deaths per day.

Q: Good God!

VIRDEN: Yes, and Rio has almost as many, proportionately. You had asked earlier about drugs. The violence is closely related to poverty and the drug culture; gangs and drug wars are endemic in the big-city 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 widespread. You have millions and millions of people there living below the poverty line, and USAID over the years—it waxed and waned—was deeply involved in trying to aid development in the region. In this era that we're talking about now, the early '70s, the United States was heavily engaged.

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 prominent in Brazil, funding many development projects, and of course, a big proportion of World Bank funding is American money.

There were major assistance efforts—ours, the World Bank and others—going on there, even under military rule. But they were more targeted on poverty, health, and education, not so much on crime, although that obviously played into everything.

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 at least half of it was. The southern part, from Sao Paulo 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 discuss 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. Some Brazilians tried to co-opt us. There was an upper class that wanted 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. It could be useful to have U.S. government people you could turn to if you had a problem. It was 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 are 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 they still to this day suffer discrimination. Claims that Brazil is a fully successful, fully integrated society don't really hold up.

They were making some progress in those days, and they've made more since, 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, 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, making some progress, but we're nowhere near the finish line. 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: Sure, there was a bit of chafing. Suddenly I found myself in a huge post, with lots of people around, multiple bosses, and that took some getting used to. I learned to adjust.

But I took away from my earlier assignments an appreciation for the independence, the freedom, of being out there on your own. I tell younger officers that, 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 a different one.

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

Chapter 8. Washington, 1974–77

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

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

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

VIRDEN: In those days, the information division of USIA was a large, worldwide, press and publications operation. We produced news and feature stories for a daily wire service as well as regional and worldwide magazines such as *Problems of Communism, Dialogue, American Illustrated* and *Economic Impact.*

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.

The magazines were respected; they were made available widely in English and other languages.

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

VIRDEN: There were two major divisions here: the magazine division and the daily wire service division, where I served as chief of the European branch; in that role, I helped decide what was sent out. We chose material we believed was relevant in Europe and could be useful to our posts.

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 [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] allies at that time. I had not previously served in Europe. Later, I would go on to spend about twenty years working in and with Europe, but this was my first familiarization with the bread and butter of our daily dialogue with Europeans, both East and West.

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; it was rare for Brazil to carry something like that, but it was a big story there, too.

Brazilians, like many other foreigners, had trouble understanding what Watergate was all about, why 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: Not really; 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 I was back as a Foreign Service Officer and the only one at that in this unit, the European press branch.

I'm regarded a little differently, now. There was a certain tension between the Foreign Service and the civil service, a different perspective. Some of the civil service staff had spent their entire career in this work;

they had their own perspective that sometimes led to 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 interested in Eastern Europe, since I was working during this period with USIA'S office for that region. As an independent agency, USIA had its own office for each part of the world.

I got intrigued by the situation in Eastern Europe and U.S. relations with that group of countries. When it came time to look for a new assignment, I bid on the Information Officer/Press Attaché position in Warsaw and was selected.

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 with him before. He was the USIS Press Attaché in Bangkok when I was there in the late '60s; I spent part of my orientation training time shadowing him.

He's a smart, experienced guy. As press officer in Thailand when we had all those Thai bases we were secretly 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 remember is that 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. That function had gone back and forth over the decades. At this time, it was lodged in the State Department; at some point it was pulled out of State and joined with USIA, bringing together the information and the cultural parts of what the U.S. government did abroad.

Originally, the cultural function had stayed with State when USIA was created. Of course, in the late '90s, USIA itself was merged with the State Department, a story for another time.

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

VIRDEN: Mostly the Ford Administration. I was only two years in the Washington bureaucracy at this point and then started studying Polish. I spent most of 1976–77 in Washington studying Polish in preparation for the assignment in Warsaw.

Chapter 9. Warsaw, 1977–80

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

VIRDEN: Tough, very tough, complex grammatically, rather intimidating. It's a ten-month program. I'd gone through Thai, French and Portuguese study at FSI previously, so I knew the drill; I just did manage to reach the required 3/3/ level in Polish after all that intensive study.

The FSI immersion method works; I'm a believer in it, as opposed to how languages are traditionally taught in colleges, for example. FSI does a very fine job of helping students learn what they need to know to use a language.

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

VIRDEN: Amen! It's always tough. None of them is a walk in the park, even the so-called easier languages. The more so if, like me, you don't have a natural gift for languages. [I once heard it said that no one is as smart or witty when speaking a foreign language. Sounds right to me!]

I've studied a bunch of them in the Foreign Service and got to the point where I could use them professionally, 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 was reassigned to a country where I'd previously served, and what I once knew eventually came back, but it always was a struggle to make it happen.

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

VIRDEN: Yes, 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 members we were a hostile embassy, out to undermine them; ordinary Poles did not look at us that way, but the ruling powers 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 appetite 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. 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. The incident was that night. 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. Unsurprisingly, he got some stuff wrong, and that was how 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 flood 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 full, verbatim, 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 rich library whose core collection had been spirited out of a Catholic institution 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 went 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. 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 pointed political theater.

I mention that because it's 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 had no instructions yet, no one had told him what he thought 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 fifteen 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 thirteen 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 get caught up in that, being on the ground during that period and watching all this happen. 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 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, by Polish count, something like twenty times. The Poles were all very conscious of that. So that was kind of the dynamics of the situation. Poles were required to learn Russian in school, but many refused to use the language.

In that first homily, John Paul II, I made 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 to help.

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. Once, after a full day of hard, physical work, a member of the Polish work crew sat down at the piano and played Chopin for forty-five minutes. There were no other chairs, so the other workers just stood and listened silently. It told me something about how Poles feel about their culture.

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.

[Insert: The article that follows was published in 2014 in the on-line journal, *American Diplomacy*; it is reused here with permission.

Coming home: different Popes for different times

By Dick Virden

In his first year in office Pope Francis has become a rock star who inspires hope among millions, believers, and non-believers alike. *Time* made him Man of the Year, and other honors and accolades have come his way from all around the globe. The Argentine-born Pope's sure-footed performance—and the enthusiastic popular response he engenders—recall the early days of a recent predecessor, John Paul II, who shook the world with a pivotal return to his Polish homeland thirty-five years ago this June.

That historic event doesn't seem that long ago to me. I was serving then at our embassy in Warsaw and remember vividly the euphoria in Poland that week as the first Slavic Pontiff awed and lifted his countrymen with his charismatic persona and message of faith and hope. "Be not afraid," he told them, and suddenly a people beaten down by Nazi subjugation of incredible cruelty during World War II followed by more than three decades of brutal and corrupt rule imposed by Moscow were joyful and reinvigorated.

Poet Russell Lowell might well have been writing of the mood in Poland at that moment when he asked, “And what is so rare as a day in June? Now the heart is so full that a drop overfills it; we are happy now, because God wills it.”

Poles were clearly heartened, of course, that one of their own had been selected as the first non-Italian to lead the Roman Catholic Church in five centuries. But it was more than simple pride or patriotism. Individual citizens could now see that they had lots of company in identifying with the new pontiff and the values he stood for, not those of Moscow or communism. Many could begin to sense, too, that it was that the latter that would one day end up on the ash heap of history.

The Pope began his journey with a solemn mass in the historic main square in Warsaw, then called Victory Square and at other times Pilsudski Square, Saxon Square and Adolf Hitler Platz. At least a million people attended, some say three million; the rest of the country watched on television, some on their knees in front of their sets. (In negotiating the timing and terms of the visit, flummoxed Polish authorities had agreed to televise the Mass, probably to hold down in-person attendance. They also directed state television to aim their cameras to make it look as though the crowds were small and consisted mainly of the elderly and clergy. None of that or other efforts to contain the damage worked.)

I felt very privileged indeed to be on the scene—courtesy of the invitation and press pass I wrangled as Press Attaché—and to watch John Paul II electrify the multitude. Young (just turned fifty-nine the month before), vigorous, confident, and at home, he commanded that stage like the trained actor he was.

One of the Pope’s core themes was that “Christ cannot be kept out of the history of man in any part of the globe.” There could be no more direct challenge to the leaders who were then ruling his beloved country in the name of an avowedly anti-religion philosophy. Laying a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier on the edge of the same central square, the Pontiff saluted all those who died “for our freedom and yours, ”pointedly reaching out to include the Jewish community that perished in the adjacent Warsaw Ghetto.

An estimated fifteen million people—almost half the population—bore witness to their faith by turning out to join John Paul II at his stops

around the country that week. Their profound new sense of solidarity would soon translate into political upheaval, confirming the worst fears of regime leaders, who'd agreed to the papal visit only because they had no real choice. How could they deny Poland's most famous son, the pride of the nation, an opportunity to return home?

Within a year of the Papal visit, a powerful trade union/protest movement, appropriately called "Solidarność," would burst on the scene. It began on the Baltic coast, in Gdansk, where an unemployed electrician named Lech Walesa jumped over a shipyard wall and into history. The gathering threat to their legitimacy eventually prompted communist party leaders to impose martial law to hold back the tide. They failed. Within a decade, the seemingly invincible communist system was swept away, in Poland and elsewhere in the region.

That the 1979 Papal visit would prove to be such a transformative event was would have been beyond the hopes of the throngs that accompanied John Paul II everywhere his pilgrimage took him that week, but it was clear we were seeing something great, powerful, historic—good. No one could have imagined what would come next, but everyone knew life would not continue as before. The facts on the ground had changed, and the hitherto all-powerful regime would be on the defensive until its demise.

Even in the face of unspeakable atrocities such as Auschwitz, which the Pope visited later in the week, he reminded his followers that evil had not carried the day then and would never defeat the human spirit. The sentiment was similar to what Novelist William Faulkner said in accepting his Novel Prize for literature three decades earlier: "man will not only endure; he will prevail. He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit, capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance."

Closing his homily in Warsaw on the first day of his journey, John Paul II implored God to "let your spirit descend; let your spirit descend; and renew the face of the earth; the face of this land. "

And so it did. It's now thirty-five years since that stirring week, and both the world and the papacy are in very different places. John Paul II would go on to make 102 more trips abroad—more than all his predecessors combined—and lead the world's 1.2 billion Catholics for another quarter

century. But none of his future trips could surpass the drama or the transformative power of that pivotal 1979 confrontation that shifted the balance between faith and oppression and began the end of the Cold War.

The challenges Pope Francis confronts are quite different from those John Paul II faced in Poland. For Francis, internal rot in the Church cries out for reform. Enduring poverty and ever worsening economic and social inequity also demand urgent attention. For the Church, it means coming home in a different sense. Given the new Pontiff's personal modesty, humility, and lifelong concern for the poor, he appears to be the man for these times, just as John Paul II was for the closing chapter in the Cold War.

After his stay in Warsaw on that 1979 trip home, the Pope continued his pilgrimage to other cities and shrines critical to the history of the country and the Roman Catholic Church. He spent the final three days in the region of Krakow, where he'd studied and served as Cardinal, and near where he'd grown up, in the small town of Wadowice. What follows below, verbatim, is an internal report I wrote in the days immediately after the Pope's return to Rome. It describes what it felt like at the time, without knowing what would follow for the man, his church, or his native land.

(Begin June 12, 1979, memorandum, "On the Road with John Paul II in Poland.")

The following impressions are drawn from my travel in the Krakow area for the first three days of Pope John Paul II's visit there:

Decorations. All along the route from Warsaw through Radom and Kielce to Krakow, homes and other buildings, roadside shrines and crosses were decorated with white, yellow, and blue bunting, flags and pennants welcoming the Pontiff. Similarly, driving back from Oswiecim late June 7, small lighted shrines and pictures of the Pope could be seen in many dwellings along the way. Clearly, most Poles were prepared to demonstrate where they stood, and the regime did not dare object. As one Pole observed, if the regime took down any of the displays, the people would put up even more. Even the Polish-Russian friendship society on the hallowed main square of Krakow was decorated, reportedly at the insistence of the building's landlord, a member of the Potocki family.

Krakow mood. The city was in a jubilant mood even before the Pope arrived. Mingling with the welcoming crowd that night on the city squares and along the motorcade route, the atmosphere was one of excited happiness, among old and young. Krakow is a university city, and the well-wishers out for this triumphal return emphatically included a high percentage of students and other youths, putting the lie to regime efforts to portray the Church as the province only of clergy and old people.

As a private party later that night, dozens of young people, students at the Polytechnic, were exuberant about the Pope's presence in the city. Though excited and hopeful, they were also conscious of the state's power and of political realities, and so skeptical about great or quick progress. Clearly, the Church and the person of Pope John Paul II engaged them emotionally and intellectually.

Because of Krakow's relatively concentrated core area, and because of the Pope's special ties to the city, the excited mood was sustained throughout the Pope's stay. Each time he drove to the city's outskirts to catch a helicopter or returned from an excursion to one of the surrounding sites, crowds in the tens of thousands materialized all along the motorcade route. There were also frequent spontaneous gatherings outside the papal residence, often late into the night, with happy singing, and, occasionally, banter between the Pontiff himself and the crowds.

Oswiecim-Brzezinka (Auschwitz-Birkenau). The huge throng of perhaps a million or more was calm and orderly, clearly conscious of the solemnity of the occasion. The Pope's speech here was different in pace and tone from most of the others. He delivered, first, a deeply felt eulogy; every word seemed to be a benediction.

The Pontiff took a Lincolnesque approach in most of his speech, attempting to bind up the wounds of history. The importance of his tribute to the Jewish dead is clear in a country where charges of anti-Semitism continue to be raised and to be bitterly denounced by the regime.

John Paul II's mention of the Russian dead and Russian suffering during the war was a startling addition, not contained in the prepared text. He seemed to be reminding his countrymen that the Russians, too, suffered

greatly. Whether he was also suggesting that the Russians might have justification for wanting to secure their own borders against future aggression is uncertain.

The Pontiff also seemed to be talking to the Russians, saying that he knew their history and that he is no fanatic anti-communist impossible to deal with. (In Nowy Targ, Philadelphia's Cardinal Krol reportedly told a few journalists that the Pope prays every night for the conversion of Russia).

Another major theme was the need of man and of nations for freedom. He said that Auschwitz dramatized what can happen when human rights are subordinate to the demands of the state system. That reference drew applause, as did his assertion a little later that no nation should ever profit as another's expense, "at the cost of enslavement of the other, as the cost of conquest, outrage, exploitation and death." It seemed clear that the Pope's audience perceived contemporary applicability in his words.

The Pope's central theme was the victory of faith and hope over tyranny, inhumanity, and war. His plea for peace, and his quotation from Paul VI ("No more war, war never again.") obviously struck a responsive chord with the participants in this event, as it doubtless did also with the Polish authorities.

In several passages, John Paul II referred to the unifying potential of Christianity; it was a message he had had made explicit earlier in the week in Czestochowa, in a speech to Polish bishops called by many observers one of his most important of the visit. He said then that Christianity, with its spiritual and ethical values can serve as a unifying force for Europe, East and West. As if to underscore this theme, the Pope laid a wreath at the monument to the victims of fascism, pausing in front of the inscribed tablets in each of nineteen languages. He then signed a memorial book, writing simply, in Polish, "John Paul II, Pope."

Nowy Targ. Watching on closed circuit television in the Krakow press center, efforts by cameramen to conceal the dimensions and enthusiasm of the crowd looked pathetic. The warmth of the feeling between the mountain people and the Pontiff was obvious. He appeared on the verge of tears more than once as he spoke and while spectacular gifts were being offered to him (including a vow of abstinence by one group). When the service was over, his car crawled slowly towards his helicopter

through a vast sea of mountaineers on three sides of him; the people kept only just far enough away to permit safe passage, as priests exhorted them to do. A mountain band played hauntingly beautiful tunes as the crowd sang along ("Mountain man aren't you sorry to leave your fatherland, and the woods and the hills…Mountain man, come back to the hills…."). It was a surpassing personal triumph, tinged with sadness because John II may never be able to return to this region he loves.

Papal Impact. During this visit, the Pope came to embody Polish patriotism. He displayed a commanding hold on the imagination and allegiance of nearly all Poles. Much of the attraction is now personal, attached to this figure. But his triumphal journal also confers overwhelming new prestige on the Church itself. He made it clear to one and all, in Poland and around the word, that it is the Church, not the party, which arouses the enthusiasm and commands the respect of the people. The conclusive demonstration of this fact alters the political equation between Church and state, though there remain too many unknowns to say what happens now.

End insert.].

(Resume transcript).

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 started a tradition of having journalists over to see U.S. military circuit movies, and on this particular night some of them were going home from an event at my successor's house when the crackdown was announced.

That was December 13, 1981. 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 win the war.

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: To start with, 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 deliver what 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 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 provide 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 got you littler.

Women went about carrying what they called "perhaps bags." These were big, empty sacks, available bag just in case—perhaps—something would suddenly be on offer on the streets. Whatever it was, you went for it—whether you needed it or not—because you could always trade it for something you really did need. That was how crazy the economy was in those days.

Occasionally, in the middle of such misery, the government would decide to raise meat prices, to increase what seemed to Poles like already-astronomical sums for chunks of meat. The government was chronically broke, desperate for more revenue, and would try to get it by charging more for meat and other commodities. Such moves prompted people to take to the streets in protest; conditions were already brutal, and a tone-deaf government seemed interested only in making them harsher.

The bitter economic conditions put the lie to government claims about a worker's paradise; ordinary citizens saw a different reality in their factories, schools, churches, and pubs.

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 from state authorities.

The government had a monopoly on broadcasting, except for Radio Free Europe, VOA [Voices of America], BBC [British Broadcasting Corporation] and other short-wave radio transmitting from outside the country. But what Poles were hearing from their official mouthpieces was contradicted by what they 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, Poland had a gaping one 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 the few who did accept it did so only to advance their careers; if you wanted to get ahead 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 rise above a certain level. The Army is another prime example; you had to join the party to reach the higher thresholds.

So, yes, in terms of true believers in communist dogma, they were scarce 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 certainly Poles who believed in communist ideals, but by this time, the reality of what theory translated into was clear to almost all.

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: Cynical, right? People just looking out for their own skins and faced with a Hobson's choice: if you want to get a decent place to live, you must be in the party. If you want your kid to go to a good school, join the party. If you want your family to get a week's vacation at the beach or in the mountains, same deal.

Many held their noses and caved into the pressure. I think this was the case not only in Poland but throughout Eastern Europe in those days. If you wanted any of the goodies that life had to offer, you needed to play ball. Everybody had to make tough choices. It was brutalizing.

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 American 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 shifting the focus to 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 close friendships, particularly with Polish journalists, some of whom I was able to keep in touch with over the years.

They knew the risks, so you had to respect their sense of what was possible. A reporter might 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 would have recording devices at any table we'd be assigned.

There were also a few Western journalists based there, and they were a vital part of the mix. We exchanged tidbits of information we'd pick up about dynamics within in the party or 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, I want to 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 than we might otherwise. There was a strong *esprit de corps* among the embassy people in this period, a sense that we were meeting a challenge together.

Some of the friends that I've retained to this day come from that time, 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. The situation can be quite different, depending on the timing. Being in Poland in these years we really did 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 black book 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 those 20,000 Poles at Katyn was a monstrous lie.

This prohibition added to the climate of cynicism and that insidious credibility gap because the official version was known to the whole country to be a horrendous lie 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, 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, during the communist era.

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 predated the communist era and had managed to survive. Its editors found lots of ways around censorship. It had more latitude and used it to push the envelope as much as it could.

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 fifty years editing that newspaper. Most of the legendary leaders of Solidarity and the Polish Revolution showed up at that dinner, a 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: Sure, though I don't know quite how to characterize it. You had a whole variety. Some Polish communities in the U.S were still sending remittances back to Poland, 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 information about developments in Poland, using material smuggled out to them; that was another way to chip away at the government's monopoly on information about domestic events.

The diaspora was a factor in many ways. Many emigrees who wanted to return could not do so until the country opened in 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: Did not feel that, no. They worked hard at it, of course. It wasn't direct Soviet propaganda but the Soviet line coming through their Polish puppets. The stuff would not be attributed to Moscow but to the Polish Communist Party.

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 different leadership, or not?

VIRDEN: No, thinking back on it, I don't remember it as that different. It was kind of just reshuffling things that did not affect the substance of what we were doing.

Now, I should say that of course we had the national security advisor at the time a Pole, Zbigniew Brzezinski, intensely interested in Polish affairs, so that was a consideration.

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 clashed 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 disagreeing.

In the end, they didn't 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 grounds to push for more of an opening and maybe helped prevent authorities 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, though probably 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 manager, who said to him, "All right, you're getting suspended, three days without pay. Just go home and count yourself 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. In my era they were still trying to suppress dissident activity, but not as brutally as they formerly did.

Q: How was social life there?

VIRDEN: It seemed fine to us. 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.

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 stock up at the PX [post exchange]; 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; they came in by short wave, of course, and there were sometimes efforts to try to

jam them, but most of the time the signal got through and we were able to pick it up.

Poland also offered a variety of concerts, still a rich musical tradition that we could draw on in those days. Warsaw had nice parks and there were historic places to explore. The Chopin Society gave concerts in a central park every Sunday and occasionally in the composer's birthplace in the village of Żelazowa 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, not of their doing, whereas in the Soviet Union it was their choice. Russians had adopted communism themselves, through revolution, and that was a fundamental difference in the psychology of the two nations.

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

VIRDEN: People were realistic. 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. The system seemed all powerful.

That the dissidents would eventually win, well that just seemed like a fantastic notion. The most common attitude seemed to a kind of grudging

acceptance of the situation: “We hate the system, but how are we ever going to get rid of it?” Few saw the prospect of systemic change.

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 East 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: 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 impressed with the clergy then. I knew a couple of priests 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 rather open in their hostility to the regime and worked hard and courageously in opposition. They did forward-leaning stuff, like hold meetings of dissident activists in church basements, for example. They’d conduct secret classes, too, flying universities, following an old Polish tradition.

Many of the most talented individuals in the country, not having other avenues open to them, joined the priesthood. Their motivations were

spiritual but also patriotic; they were determined to improve conditions in their country.

I saw a lot of that in the priests I met; they were inspiring.

Chapter 10. Bangkok, 1980–83

Q: Well then, you left Poland in 1980?

VIRDEN: Yes, we went from there back to Thailand. 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 then as the aftermath of war. What we were dealing with in those days, the focus of our mission there, were things related to the aftermath of the Vietnam War.

We had large numbers of refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos in camps in Thailand. We also had concerns about Americans missing in action and trying to find them, or their remains. I would say those were the key 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 three or four in the morning; this must have been at the end of March in 1981.

Two things were happening that night. 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, implying he was barely scratched. We learned only 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: In some ways. Maybe the biggest was that rural life was changing. When I was there in the '60s, so many of these villages were inaccessible, lacking decent roads and communications.

Now a decade has passed and Thailand—with lots of help from outside organizations, including our own USAID—had moved ahead. Considerable development progress had been made in building village to market roads and larger highways and bringing electrification. The result was real improvement in rural life. That's one significant change, and it was continuing.

As for the refugees, the Thais flat out did not want them there. We had to twist their arms to allow the refugees to come in even temporarily, and then only by promising that other Western countries would take them for permanent settlement.

This situation caused tension throughout this period. Which countries would take the refugees and when? We eventually took significant numbers to our own country. Canada, Australia, Germany, and Argentina were also important destinations, as I recall, but the struggle over the fate of refugees 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. Our embassy set up had a large refugee office 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. Since 1945 it's been Polish and called Wroclaw.

Ambassador Dean was an experienced professional. He believed in personalizing how we delivered American assistance. Whenever we gave a grant or completed a project, he staged a ceremony, make remarks, got his picture taken. USIS media teams produced stories and newsclips for tv, radio and press placement. He was so committed that, one Saturday morning he sent his special assistant to track me down at my son's t-ball game because one of these events went unreported that day in the Bangkok Post.

Some people might call this an ego trip, but in fact the Ambassador's presence made U.S. support meaningful for Thais; it showed that we were there for them. It was personal diplomacy, a way to demonstrate that the ambassador and his country genuinely wanted to help ordinary Thais. It was 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 like that with me and Linda. He always treated us kindly, and I saw him do the same with others, too. It was clear he cared about people and that they reciprocated.

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; he often showed up in refugee camps as well. 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. It was around this time I first heard the phrase "compassion fatigue."

And we certainly heard plenty from the Thais. They felt pressure on their own society from housing so many refugees while they had serious problems of their own. They felt threatened and besieged and only very begrudgingly 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, political, social—to their own society than the urgent needs of people forced to flee their homelands because of war.

Thai authorities were reluctant to do much for the refugees or make them so comfortable that they'd get the idea they could stay forever. There was lots of friction. I think some of the people who had line responsibility for this issue could say more about that, but I know it was always tense.

We're talking about large numbers of people. 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. With every person, there were individual as well as group-specific issues.

The United States, of course, had a heavy responsibility for this situation, which was a consequence of our Vietnam War; but Americans were sick of the war and reluctant to continue paying for our failure. Our officers worked hard to convince Canadians, Germans, Australians, Argentines, and others to share the burden.

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

VIRDEN: Lively would be an understatement. 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 twenty-five daily newspapers in Thai and even several in Chinese. [Bangkok has a significant Sino-Thai community.]

There was an equal abundance of radio and television stations; this was a jammed, dynamic, media center.

Many of the Thai newspapers were identified with political factions. And some of them were quite irresponsible, often scatological, and unconcerned with journalistic standards; others were very impressive operations. 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 a large foreign press contingent. Many international media organizations used Bangkok as a regional hub; reporters had their own organization—the Foreign Correspondent Club of Thailand (FCCT)—modeled, I think, on the foreign correspondent's club in Hong Kong.

We had many good times at the FCCT clubhouse, which stood a block from the fabled Oriental Hotel and the Chao Phraya River. Linda and I had the pleasure of meeting Walter Cronkite and his wife at the club one evening, shortly after he'd retired from CBS. He was another of my heroes, and I asked him whether he'd consider 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 also other countries in Southeast Asia. Now, few U.S. media organizations have much 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.

I believe that to this day Thais worry about this part of the country, 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 would not say it did, other than giving headaches to our consular officers who had to try to ensure fair treatment to Americans who got in trouble of any kind. There was sex tourism coming from the U.S., as well as from Germany and some other places.

So that was a factor and likely our consular officers, more than I realized at the time, had their hands full helping get Americans out of jail, a

replacement for a lost passport, or a flight home. There were drug related issues, too. When the Thais, at our insistence, 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 wonderful things for us as a family to see 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. It was a great tour.

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, under something called the "orderly departure program, " we started sending consular officers over to Saigon periodically to interview potential candidates for refugee or immigrant status.

They were looking for Amerasian children, for example, and others with a direct tie to the United States. As I recall, we usually sent one or two consular officers every week or two. My role in this was to set 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 major perennial I remember was adventure stories about guys going in to search for American POWs who were still allegedly being held by North Vietnamese or Laotians.

Nothing ever came of any of those stories or alleged sightings, but many believed them or thought they might be true. Free-lance operators, ex-Green Berets or whatever, would infiltrate into Laos or Vietnam intent on rescuing Americans still being held at this spot or that remote area.

There never was any solid basis for believing 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.

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Notes on Countering Insurgencies, Then and Now

By Dick Virden

We Americans tend to forget that our struggles with insurgencies did not begin (and won't end) with Iraq and Afghanistan. More than a century ago, when we first became a colonial power, we fought such a war in the Philippines. Counterinsurgency was also the name of the game in the 1960s, and not only in Vietnam. Among the other places where we rallied to this banner was Thailand, where I was sent on my first Foreign Service assignment.

With the thought that what took place in Thailand might be of interest to those contending with the insurgencies of today and tomorrow, I offer below some reflections on what I observed in back then, seasoned by subsequent study at the National War College and decades of participation in American engagements abroad.

I landed in Bangkok January of 1967 to begin work for the United States Information Service, the field organization of USIA, an agency later absorbed by the State Department. Our program in Thailand then was

both unconventional and large, with a sprawling headquarters in a leafy compound in Bangkok and as many as thirteen branch posts. We even briefly had a post in the tiny northeastern town of Surin, known chiefly for its annual elephant roundup. Today we've gone to the opposite extreme, leaving mega cities in Brazil, India and elsewhere around the globe with no U.S. government representative on the scene.

We were engaged so intensively in Thailand in the '60s because we feared the communist insurgency in Vietnam would spread there. Thailand was a key ally, one of only a half dozen countries with troops on the ground in South Vietnam, about a thousand soldiers at the peak. Thailand also opened its doors to us, permitting the Pentagon to set up a string of air bases in the northeast region to help prosecute the wars in nearby Vietnam and Laos. We felt we needed to keep Thailand stable and on our side.

Thailand was governed then by the same political dynamic that had prevailed since the absolute monarchy was overthrown in 1932. Power was shared between the King and Army generals. The trappings of democracy were in place, but this was no Jeffersonian state. Those who pushed from within for greater democracy and deeper reforms made little headway.

I spent my first eight or nine months in country working in the various sections of USIS in the capital. In those days, first-tour USIS officers rotated around different parts of the operation—press, radio and television, library, cultural center, executive office, field operations—to learn the business. Such systematic on-the-job training is rare for Foreign Service Officers today, considered a luxury given State's perennial staffing shortages (The Department of Defense sets the gold standard, maintaining a fifteen percent "float" of more people than jobs, so officers can be spared for training).

My final three months of training/orientation was in the northern city of Chiang Mai, a wonderfully exotic place then. W.A. R. Wood, a British diplomat who arrived there as a young man and never left, wrote a book about his experience called *Consul in Paradise.* His charming descriptions and folk stories suggest some of the allure of the region and the diverse peoples who live in the north's mountains and valleys.

After an all-too-short time in this Shangri La, I was appointed as Branch Public Affairs Officer in the north central river town of Phitsanulok, about halfway between Chiang Mai and Bangkok. The ruined temples of Sukhothai, which had been the capital of a Thai kingdom in the early Middle Ages, lay about twenty miles to the west. I was to be the lone USIS officer with a staff of a half dozen Thai employees responsible for a five-province region bordering on both Laos and Burma.

Our job was counterinsurgency, then the focus for most of the U.S. Mission in Thailand. Already intensely engaged in Vietnam, the United States worried that a disaffected population could turn against the government here, too, as in Vietnam. There was legitimate cause for concern, since the Thai government writ rarely extended into the countryside, even in the lowland plains. That many villages still lacked electricity, passable roads and even schools was a telling indicator of long neglect.

The U.S. aim was to help bring the government and people closer together. In short, this was a battle for "hearts and minds," in the language of the day; whatever that struggle is now called, winning the allegiance of the people remains the core challenge of any counter-insurgency program.

For our part, USIS pursued this cause in the field mainly through what we called "mobile information teams," or MITs. The point was to get Thai government representatives out of their offices and out among the rice paddies to show villagers that their government was there for them and deserved their support. The concept seemed simple enough, but getting city dwelling officials into the boondocks went against the grain. Traditionally, state officials stayed put; if the peasants wanted something, they should come to them. The notion of reversing the flow, of reaching out to earn the respect of the governed, was radical change, a value Americans added to the equation.

The suggestion that loyalty had to be earned—not granted automatically as their due—was a novel notion for distant and aloof rulers steeped in a centuries-old authoritarian system. Think of the august (if lovable) King of Siam (the ancient name for Thailand) in the play/movie, *The King and I.*

Some Thai officials—particularly those trained at the USAID-created district academy—were willing enough to venture out but lacked the means. We had our own Jeeps and paid for our gas and often theirs. Our supplying the wherewithal and impetus helped overcome inertia. We sometimes persuaded governors and their staffs to join in. That was a higher hill to climb but also promised bigger payback. A governor was called a *Phuwarachakarn*, a title imposing enough to make almost anyone bow; governors were appointed as the exalted personal representatives of the King, so villagers took note when they appeared.

Even more than prestige, we wanted officials on the trips who brought meaningful help: veterinarians, doctors or other health practitioners, agricultural specialists, educators, along with line district and provincial officials. We encouraged them to bring things to give away as well: medicine, for example, or new strains of seeds. We handed out USIS-produced posters and leaflets about basic health matters and the virtues of freedom versus communism.

At night we showed movies in the open air. We'd crank up our portable generator; tie a sheet between a couple of bamboo stakes, and show whatever we had: cartoons, Walt Disney type entertainments, public service advertisements. We also had some USIS-made feature films as well as documentaries about activities by the Thai government and the royal family. King Phumiphon, who'd been on the throne since the late 40s and had god-like status, was our strongest asset, the revered embodiment of the nation.

Buddhism was also a unifying force in most of the country, except for the far south, where the ethnic makeup is mainly Malay and the religion Islam. To this day separatism is a concern there.

For our field trips, we traveled by Jeeps, often via ox-cart trails, since there were few decent roads. Many villages were cut off and very poor in those days. On one village trip, in Uttaradit province near the border with Laos, we found our way blocked where a huge teak log had fallen across the trail. The solution produced my favorite petty cash voucher: ten baht (fifty cents), hire of elephant to remove log from trail.

Our field officers were often the first *farang*—or, white foreigner, in Thai—to show up in a village, a real curiosity. Watching a 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 brought along sleeping bags and tossed them on the floor of the school or wat (a Buddhist temple). We usually brought our own food and drink. Village food, which it would have been rude to decline when offered, was nothing like the fare served in fashionable Thai restaurants today in America. It could be literally gut-wrenching.

Thailand had an estimated 50,000 villages in the late '60s, and the living conditions in most of them were still primitive. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) was helping build village to market roads as well as major thoroughfares like the *Thanom Mitrapharp*, or "Friendship Highway," from Bangkok through the northeast to the Lao border. Some major dams were in the works, financed by the World Bank among other organizations. USAID also organized "mobile development units" to try to jump start progress in the hinterland.

In the late 60s this vital development work was just getting started, and there was not yet much to show for it. Many areas had yet to be reached at all. Rice farmers lived out there among the paddies as they had since time immemorial, and they were not used to having government officials around, much less foreigners. USIS field officers had all been given enough Thai training to get by in the language, but we tried to minimize our own presence, to stay in the background and allow Thai officials to take the lead. We weren't out to make the village people pro-American, but rather pro-Bangkok. It wasn't about us.

Security was always a consideration, and in fact in early 1970, a few months after I left, three Thai colleagues from Chiang Mai were killed, ambushed by terrorists in Nan province, near the border with Laos. The heavy lifting against the "communist terrorists" (CTs) was done by Army units and the Border Patrol Police, who benefitted from equipment and training provided by the United States. Except for areas considered particularly dangerous, however, the security presence on our MITs was minimal. The "armed propaganda teams" that were reportedly part of our effort in Vietnam at the same time would not have fit with our approach, which relied on soft power—the ability to attract—rather than to compel adherence through force or intimidation. But then, for a country in an all-out war as Vietnam then was, it was too late for preventive medicine.

In the Phitsanulok area and its north central region, there was spillover from the mountainous borders with Laos and Burma. The borders were porous and violence endemic. Most of the trouble, even petty theft, was attributed to CTs. (Neither the term nor the phenomenon of terrorism was invented by Al Qaeda). There indeed was a militant communist party of Thailand and some armed anti-government elements in remote areas. The threat was real enough, if perhaps greatly exaggerated.

In the mountainous north and on the fringe of that region, hill tribes—or "Montagnards," as similar groups were known in Vietnam—were the major threat. There were a wide variety of tribal groups, including Hmong, Yao, Karen and even remnants of Chiang Kai-shek's losing forces, the KMT, who now made a living in the Golden Triangle (Thailand-Burma-Laos) region riding shotgun for opium caravans.

The Hmong—or Meo—moved freely across the Thai-Lao border, practiced slash and burn agriculture, and were seen as the most dangerous (even though Gen. Vang Pao and his Hmong army fought on the U.S. side across the border in Laos). Today tens of thousands of Hmong refugees from the wars of this era have settled in my home state of Minnesota. One young Hmong woman was sworn into the State Department Foreign Service in early 2012, a fitting indicator of how times have changed.

Back in the '60s, the Thai government made special efforts to reach the hill tribe people. King Phumiphon and the royal family launched many developmental initiatives. Since tribal groups were involved in growing or trafficking in opium, one major emphasis was crop substitution. It was a tough sell then—no other product seemed as profitable—and remains so today, in this region as in places like Afghanistan.

For this young officer, the field work was stimulating, sometimes intimidating, often exhausting. Somewhere along the way, I'd read Bernard Fall on Vietnam, some British works about Malaya, and Mao Test Tung's little red book on revolutionary warfare, but that was a paper-then background in the theory or practice of counterinsurgency. Still, I got what we were trying to do and felt it made sense. And, of course, I had a staff of good, experienced Thai employees who were bilingual, knew their country, and kept us out of trouble.

Phitsanulok had only a small U.S. military presence, unlike the major bases in the northeast. A U.S. Air Force detachment operated a small radar site at the town's airport but had little 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. We also had a small U.S. military advisory group in town working with the Thais. I was the only civilian U.S. government official around.

Out in the field, the capital seemed far away and our link to the outside world shaky. At one point a tower near Phitsanulok was hit by lightning and power knocked out for the entire town for three weeks. No phones, no air conditioning. Even in normal times phone service was unreliable; getting calls to and from Bangkok was problematic. That meant field officers had a long leash; you did what you thought was best and reported it later.

It was exhilarating in many ways, but you could also feel a bit cut off at times. A senior colleague from that time described 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 feeling, perhaps, but neither healthy nor accurate. There were smart, experienced officers in Bangkok who had our backs and got us the support we needed, even as in their day jobs they leaned on national-level Thai officials to make the right moves. I tried to keep in mind the feeling of isolation out in the trenches in later year when I was on the other end, supervising officers from afar.

Field officers also did a certain amount of ad hoc reporting, noting what we saw and heard when we traveled. In addition to accounting for our own activities, we described basic conditions—number of houses in the village, availability of water and electricity, the presence or absence of young men—and whatever tidbits we picked up that might interest senior officers in Bangkok.

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 lacked the resources to cope with a new influx of refugees.

We told Bangkok there was a potentially dangerous gap between the message and the reality that would greet anyone who heeded it. Help was soon on the way in the form of food, blankets, and other supplies.

On another occasion, we raised the alarm about inadequate planning for the hundreds of village families that would be displaced by the huge Sirikit (named for the Thai Queen) Dam, then being built in Uttaradit. This seemed to be a matter of an authoritarian government decreeing what would be done without regard to the impact—or collateral damage—on the people who lived there. (A feel for local conditions is part of what is lost today when the United States confines most of its representation to capitals. Another casualty is the talent scout function: identifying future national leaders early in their careers and involving them in our exchange programs).

There was also official corruption, of course. We didn't see it directly, but it was no doubt one reason for the skepticism we would often sense when we were out in the countryside. It wasn't hard to detect a certain amount of distrust—who are these strangers, why are they here, what do they want to take from us—and a history of corruption, exploitation and neglect would help explain such attitudes.

I left Phitsanulok in late '69 with orders for home leave and return to a new assignment in Bangkok, as assistant radio and television officer. While I was in Minnesota on leave I got a call from a personnel officer, who said, "Hold on. Your assignment's going to change. You're going to go to Vietnam instead. We need people there." And so, I went, but that's another story.

It would be more than a decade before I returned to Thailand, after tours in Brazil, Washington, and Poland. It was the summer of 1980 when my family and I arrived in Bangkok, where I was assigned as the information officer and press attaché.

The city and country looked and felt familiar, but the U.S. government's interests in Thailand were different now. Rather than the rural insurgency, which was fading into the background, we were concerned about issues related to the aftermath of the wars in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. Large numbers of refugees from all three of those countries

had fled to Thailand by land or by boat, inundating camps set up to give them temporary asylum and creating a wrenching humanitarian crisis.

Thai leaders saw the newcomers as a threat to their society and economy and had agreed to house them on a short-term emergency basis only until other countries—the U.S. most especially included—gave them permanent refuge. Thais had little patience for what they saw as foot-dragging and "compassion fatigue" in the West that left hundreds of thousands of refugees stranded indefinitely in squalid conditions in makeshift camps just inside Thailand's borders.

Despite the sour taste in American mouths over the failed wars in Southeast Asia, the United States did ultimately take in millions of refugees from the region. Allies like Canada and Australia, among others, also took in significant numbers. To this day, however, there are still refugee camps in Thailand, though now they are mainly for newer refugees, from Burma. Refugee politics—itself contentious and complex—is not this subject of this piece.

But what of the insurgent threat that preoccupied us in the '60s? Why did Thailand not go the way of Vietnam?

Thailand's own strong, cohesive culture was the decisive factor. For centuries the country had managed to stave off would-be colonial powers, in part through skilled diplomacy, in part because of the unifying force of the royal family and Buddhism. King Phumiphon remained a revered, god-like figure for most Thais throughout this period. Only in later years would his star dim as Thais fighting for greater liberalization begin to see Phumiphon as anti-democratic and hostile to their reform agenda. But in the 60s and 70s, loyalty to King Phumiphon helped hold the country together.

Another key element was that rural life measurably improved. Over the years, once poor, inaccessible villages benefitted from roads, electrical power, schools and potable water. The development work by the Thai government and outside entities, USAID included, paid off. Villagers started to share in the nation's progress and with that to perceive a government serving them, too, not only princes and generals.

As for tamping down the insurgent threat, did the U.S. involvement make any difference? Is there a winning formula here that the United States might adopt for dicey situations elsewhere?

The short answers are yes and no. Our insistence that more attention must be paid to rural citizens clearly did change official Thai attitudes. We can take some satisfaction in introducing the democratic ideal that governments must earn the consent of the governed—not take it for granted. Still, much as we might preach that gospel and regard it as universal, it might not take everywhere, particularly in societies without the heft and texture that has held Thailand together for so many centuries. It was already a nation; we didn't have to try to build it.

Developments outside the country, including an end to the wars next door and a lessening of support for revolutionary parties from Moscow and Beijing, also played a role in Thailand's case, as did crackdowns against leading militants and olive branches offered to those ready to come in out of the shadows. Closing the American air bases also took away an issue that had been a rallying cry for rebels.

No doubt all troubling insurgencies are troubling in their own way, but successful counter insurgency programs are alike in that they manage to secure the hearts and minds of citizens. Recognition of that requirement is an essential beginning. The means will vary, depending on local conditions. The overall effort will more likely succeed if local nationals are seen as leading the effort and ideas spring from the local culture rather than from outsiders; that's a principle we recognized long ago, under the Marshall Plan, for example. Allowing the Europeans to suggest what was most needed and would work best to revive their countries turned out well, but too often since we've acted as if we uniquely had the answers.

Others can better tell the story of what's happened in the decades since I left Thailand in 1983. It's clear, though, that the country has not been immune to the revolution of rising expectations. Thais have taken to the streets in recent years to demand greater freedom, better jobs, a bigger slice of the economic pie and more say in who cuts it. The King is now old and infirm; he can no longer play the decisive role he once did, and his heir apparent has a dubious reputation. The Army has worn out its welcome, even if many leading generals have yet to get the word. Thailand, long known for its ability to bend with the wind, now needs

leaders who recognize that today's prevailing wind is blowing against authoritarian rule. Odds are the Thais will figure it out.

As for the United States, the great philosopher Sun Tzu wrote of the "art" not the "science" of war. It's a distinction we might keep in mind if we continue to see a need to involve ourselves in internal conflicts in other countries. We may sometimes be able to contribute, but on the margins. The key will always be the strength of the local society and the ability of its national leaders to gain the respect of the governed.

End insert].

Resume transcript.

Chapter 11. National War College, 1983–84

Q: Today is April 11, 2011. 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. It was a wonderful opportunity. You're probably familiar with how it works there. At that time, three quarters of the 160 students were military officers, at the rank of colonel or the equivalent; the rest were 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 one?

VIRDEN: 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: Things had indeed fallen apart at the end in Vietnam, and it was a very terrible, sour experience for career military people. There was divided opinion about it; many accepted the eventual national consensus that Vietnam was a mistake, but others did not. Some—a minority, I'd say—believed the military hadn't been given a fair chance, that they could have won the war, should have won the war, were blocked from doing so by political weakness at home. Some never let go of this conviction.

There was, of course, also internal professional debate about what should be U.S. national security strategy going forward. Was counterinsurgency a failed doctrine? Should we be doing something else? What?

While there was a lot of debate about military doctrine, the emphasis at the war college is on an overall approach to national security. Students consider all 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 [Central Intelligence Agency] 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 the focus of study at the National War College. One goal is for military officers to come out "purple," instead of Navy blue, Army green, etc. It seems to work reasonably well; most officers certainly seem to acquire a broader perspective.

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 civilians like me. We compared notes on Vietnam, for example. Why did we lose there? 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 remains ever relevant. Even Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, a Republican appointee, argues that the civilian side of what we do needs to be beefed up. We need multiple 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 wrong to assume that military officers always want to resort to arms. It's not really the case. They know the horrors of war better than anyone , what it means to send men into harm's way; most would rather 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. I chose to go to the Middle East, because of its strategic importance and also because I had not served there and probably never would.

My group 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, inspected 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 another assignment abroad yet, because this was my first time back in a long time and I was due to stay three years in Washington.

After a year at the war college I was assigned to the Latin American office at USIA, as policy officer for that part of the world. While there I started thinking about the next move overseas, which turned out to be Portugal.

Chapter 12. Office of American Republics Affairs

Q: You would have been in the Latin American office from '84 to when?

VIRDEN: '86.

Q: In the Latin American bureau.

VIRDEN: That's right. 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 time of Iran-Contra, of unhappy memory.

It was also during this period that we sent what was called a "rescue mission" to Grenada. I was along on the White House press plane when President Reagan went to Grenada to celebrate the mission's success. I had earlier gone to Grenada on an orientation visit, now was there to coordinate USIA's support for the President's visit. The President got the triumphant photo op he wanted, though somehow this superpower raid of a small island felt like less than a great victory.

Throughout this time, we had intense disagreements 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 our public diplomacy 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, through education and rehabilitation, the 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 remember tense meetings with representatives of other agencies in which we locked horns about our policy toward that region, over where our resources should go, what our message should be. I thought we needed an approach that took more account of the perspective of people who lived in the region.

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

VIRDEN: No, I was not, and that's part of what I'm trying to suggest here. We were trying to influence the interagency debate. Our programs needed to convey our national policy and its rationale faithfully, of course, and we certainly did that; but, in our own internal deliberations, we tried to move our policy in what we believed was a sounder direction.

Q: Where in USIA were you?

VIRDEN: I believe it was called 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 minor 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 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 [Deputy Chiefs of Mission] 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 should do so it to the exclusion of other important matters that we ought to be addressing in that country." And we had some sharp 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.

After that two-year stint 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 studied 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.

Chapter 13. Lisbon, 1986–90

Q: You were in Portugal from '86 to when?

VIRDEN: Summer of 1986 until 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 [public affairs officer], hosting a visit by USIA's director and working with an ambassador who once held that job.

On the morning after Director Wick arrived, I attended a breakfast with him at the ambassador's residence. When Ambassador Shakespeare said something complimentary about our USIS program, Director Wick, who was known to be volatile as well 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 there an unfavorable U.S. press item about him that someone had slipped in. Ambassador Shakespeare quickly defended me, saying 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: Right, and at this point they were just getting used to not having an empire anymore and to being in the European Union; the effects of the latter were not yet being felt, but over those next few years there was an acceleration of modernization, really, and economic development of what had been a fairly backward country.

With membership in the EU, Portugal started to see an increase of money coming in from other members of the EU. With that, 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 then was our interest in renewing the 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, an enlightening experience. On the Portuguese side, national authorities were in charge, but regional political leaders from the Azores were very much part of the team and 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, ten-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. Portugal would continue to describe its making available the facilities in the Azores as part of its contribution as a charter member of NATO.

The result was satisfactory to all parties. 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 believe our team leader had a figure in mind, though probably not the balance between economic and military assistance. Of course, the Americans did not know how the pie would be divided between Lisbon and the Azores; that got contentious, but we let the Portuguese fight that out.

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 location.

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

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

As you quite rightly say, many Azoreans made their way to New England, and those communities are a political factor. They helped us secure 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 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 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. And they felt dissed by that.

You would occasionally hear someone quote an old Portuguese proverb to the effect that Portugal got nothing from Spain but bad weather and bad marriages. No love lost between the two countries.

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 an abundance of parties that sprang up immediately after the revolution, and most were still active at this time, a little over a decade later. One was the Socialist Party of Mario Soares, who was president when I was there. The Social Democrats, led by Prime Minister Cavaco Silva, oversaw the government at this time.

There was also a Communist Party, whose old time leader, Álvaro 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 and stale (The Portuguese said Cunhal would "just turn on the cassette" and go off on the same spiel). Cunhal was no longer a serious 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, including President of the European Commission.

There seemed to be a feeling among Portuguese that, we're just inventing our democracy, we're present at the creation. They'd 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 a presence. They were there in Lisbon, and in fact we had a few returnees working in our embassy; they tended to be kind of diehards who couldn't accept the loss of empire or their own status.

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; negotiations to bring peace in Angola were brokered by Portugal, 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. That may well continue to this day, but I believe that as Portugal was drawn into European Union affairs, the importance of Africa lessened somewhat 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 and felt privileged to get to know some of their top journalists and TV people. Portugal had a wide range of papers, some excellent newspapers and editors there that I liked and whose company I enjoyed.

The state television and radio network, RTP, was powerful then. It had been mostly a state monopoly in previous years. That was just starting to change, with private broadcasting still in its infancy.

This was the period when USIA's television service, Worldnet, was going strong. It was quite a coup for us to get Portugal's president, Mario Soares, to grant Worldnet an interview. It didn't hurt that both his senior political aide and the key official at RTP were former International Visitor Grantees—and good friends. Compliments to my USIS predecessors for that; some of the benefits of good public diplomacy appear obvious only over time.

We had good, cooperative, relations with the Portuguese media in this period. It was not a troubled time; they were pleased to work with us.

Q: Could you make contact with the communists?

VIRDEN: They were an open, legal political party. Our USIS section did not have much to do with them or their newspaper arm, but our political officers kept an eye on them.

One related incident that I do recall happened in November of 1989. We had set up a conference with Portugal's strategic studies institute to discuss "NATO in a multi-polar world." This was to be a two- or three-day meeting, a think tank exercise, with experts from the United States, Portugal and several other European countries.

Well, on the very eve of the conference, the Berlin Wall came down! So at the opening session the next day, the first speaker—a French scholar from an institute in Paris—got up and said, "Well, here's the speech I was going to give today" and very dramatically tore the thing up! We had a very spirited discussion after that, though not the one we expected.

Q: Was terrorism at all around at that time?

VIRDEN: Angola and trying to settle the ongoing civil war in Angola was one of our concerns, 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. And the United States was trying to help with the people 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. [It was up to about $14,000 in 2020.]

And the infrastructure in the country was weak. Again, the European Union helped by financing major roads that were 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 before 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 well integrated into the U.S. mission. USIS was physically in the chancery, unlike some of my previous posts, where we were off at separate installations. We were right there, in most of the meetings, an integral part of the country team.

I think back to Edward R. Murrow, who said that as director of USIA he wanted to be in on the takeoffs, not just the crash landings. I felt that in Lisbon we were at the table whenever we were needed or could contribute. Luckily, we didn't have any crash landings, *graças 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 Tower of Belem, 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 loved our time there.

One unfortunate thing was that the school in those days was a disappointment. It was proprietary, privately owned and simply not particularly good. So, after Andrew finished ninth 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 Andrew away like that; we never dreamed of doing such a thing but realized it was the best move for him.

Chapter 14. Bucharest, Romania, 1990–93

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.

And, of course, Romania was in the middle of a revolution at this moment. About the same time my assignment was confirmed, 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 in the central University Square, which protestors called a "communist-free zone."

Later, miners came in from the coal mines to demonstrate at the same spot. 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 for power and the future of the country. The fundamental question was whether the old communists, who'd reinvented themselves, would still control events, or whether new leaders and a true democratic system would emerge.

A few years later, when I was posted 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: Yes, we did, in very basic terms. We were trying to promote a democratic outcome. We were doing all 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, even turning families against themselves. The security forces were a menacing continuing presence there. They didn't just disappear come the revolution. One of the tasks I took on was to periodically to a still-sinister-feeling old Securitate installation on the outskirts of Bucharest to pick up microfiche documents for 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 this material, 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 such reactionaries and young people fighting for democracy, much like those you saw this spring in the streets of Cairo.

We were on the side of the angels this time. We were clearly trying to help those who e working for a democratic future for their country. 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 allow freedom of the press.

Television had been a critical tool 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 was the true opiate of the people. Someone could find a doctoral thesis in how totalitarian regimes used television, I'm

convinced. [The study could profitably extend to our own experience in contemporary America.]

In my section of the embassy, we spent a lot of time 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. The media did gradually open. For example, there was an independent newspaper called *Romania Libera* that was 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 imported into the country. That took an intensive team effort.

Television was even harder, because it requires more equipment and other resources; it also took 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 that effort paid off, in part because we made liberalization one of the conditions for granting most favored nation trade status. The breaking of the state monopoly on broadcasting was an important part of the democratic opening.

On a related issue, I also took satisfaction in convincing Romanian Ministry of Communication officials to lease us 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 a shambles 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 set to go when the ambassador started to get into his vehicle. 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 friendly, 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 was over 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: Romania and Bulgaria are neighbors and tend to get lumped together, in terms of their prospects. Both countries got rid of their communist regimes about the same time, although remnants were still around and still fighting for power.

The countries were also paired in terms of their aspirations to get into the main clubs in the West, that is NATO and the European Union. They were always on the same track, they had common interests, but there was always a certain rivalry, too.

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 our country 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 processed boatloads of books—I can't give you an exact number, but it may have been as many as a million volumes—to sort and distribute throughout Romania.

The logistics of this effort were 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, and public facilities in the capital and outside it.

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 established a Fulbright Commission. We'd had a modest Fulbright program, run out of our cultural section at the embassy. We decided the time was ripe to negotiate a formal agreement to set up a bilateral Fulbright Commission, and we 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 understand it's still going strong.

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

VIRDEN: Yes, it certainly was. 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 an extremely rewarding experience.

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

VIRDEN: It sure 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. Our consular officers were challenged.

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. Our embassy facilities were small and crowded, so the consular waiting area had to do double duty as a baby changing room for a spell. It was a frantic, chaotic time.

It was hard 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 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 other health shortcomings.

So, again, embassy officers really needed to be engaged 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, rom various nonprofit organizations and churches 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 saying. 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 have been 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 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 prevailed 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 abroad.

I don't know whether 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.

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Scenes from a revolution: Romania after the fall

By Dick Virden

When I hear or read phrases like "failed states," or "nations in transition," I think not of such lifeless abstractions but of the compelling human drama we saw and felt in the streets and squares of Romania in the early 90s. Back then, Romanians were digging out from under the rock of a brutal dictatorship that had sapped their lifeblood for decades. Newly

liberated, they sought to improve their lives by joining NATO and the European Union.

To many, gaining admittance to those premier western clubs seemed like an impossible dream. The country was a mess, with a full platter of political, military, economic and social problems to confront. Yet somehow, within little more than a decade, Romania succeeded. It was an extraordinary national achievement made possible by the courage, determination and resilience of the Romanian people. Their struggle was passionate, exhilarating, rocky, sometimes comic, often confounding and always fascinating. It did not fit neatly into any pat political science category.

The reflections that follow are an effort to capture a bit of the flavor of those early, heady times, when Romania's quest was only beginning.

Congratulations—sort of

Our family was in Lisbon in late 1989 when word of our assignment to Bucharest came through, just in time for us to watch on Portuguese television as Romania exploded in revolution and the country's longtime dictator, Nicolai Ceausescu, and his wife Elena were executed—on Christmas Day. The usual congratulatory notes about our upcoming move were muted this time, though one from China, where change had just been nipped in the bud in Tiananmen Square, was openly envious.

After squeezing in a smidgen of Romanian language training, my wife Linda and I landed in Bucharest in the summer of 1990. Our teenage son Andrew stayed back in the United States, since there was no international high school in Romania. Over the next three years he joined us for school holidays and summer vacations and soon became something of a celebrity in the capital as "D.J. Grimace," a volunteer deejay offering English-language chatter and the latest pop music on a makeshift radio station. Such unlikely things happened regularly back then.

A capital in turmoil

Bucharest in that era was a dusty, chaotic, downtrodden city consumed by a struggle for political power that justified the Balkan reputation for intrigue and maneuvering. A National Salvation Front had theoretically

taken charge, but it had multiple factions, personality clashes and conflicting visions for the way forward. Power was truly up for grabs.

Demonstrators gathered frequently in the central University Square, which they proclaimed a "communist-free zone." Not only students came there to protest. Jiu Valley coal miners also favored this ground, which was two blocks from our house, a grand old villa in the center of the city. Once, when the miners decamped after a fruitless siege, scores of weary and dispirited men marched silently down our side street before dawn, guided only by their tiny head lanterns. The scene conjured up images of the "thousand points of light" that President George H. W. Bush had evoked, in another world.

The day before the miners left town, I'd walked among them with our golden retriever, Brava; they'd never seen a dog like her, and were moved enough by her beauty ("*Frumoasa!*") to share some of their meager bread rations. She was shameless enough to accept, too.

There was not a lot of food or anything else to go around in those days. Store shelves were empty. One day, noting an international news report that Romania was running out of light bulbs, I asked our domestic helper whether it was true that Romania lacked light bulbs. "No," she said, "we have one." She and her husband unscrewed it and moved it from room to room, as needed. The bulk of the country's bulb production was sent abroad—for dollars, pounds, and deutschmarks.

Restaurants had little to offer, and what was available was rarely appealing and not always healthy. (When the occasional U.S. military support flight came in, Embassy families would pitch in to unload the plane before drawing lots for such luxuries as grapes and bananas).

Ceausescu's legacy

The country was down on its heels. The capital itself was gray, unpainted, unkempt. Streets, even sidewalks, were scarred with potholes. Once charming old buildings were falling apart; others had been razed in Ceausescu's mad drive to top North Korea's megalomania with a gigantic building of his own. His "house of the people" included seven separate offices just for the glorious leader and his various official titles; each of his suites was several times bigger than the living space socialist planners allotted for families in the poured concrete apartment building

that defaced a once beautiful city. (One wag observed that instead of "little Paris," contemporary Bucharest might better be called, "big Tirana.")

The national currency, the leu, was nearly worthless. To buy anything of value you needed dollars or deutschmarks. Either those or Kent 100 Gold cigarettes, which had become the de facto currency used to get garbage collected, a bandage changed at a hospital, or any other basic service performed. The Kent economy was so established and pervasive that Saul Bellow incorporated it in *The Dean's December*, his novel set partly in Bucharest.

Orphanages spilled over with unwanted children, many plagued with AIDS or other serious medical ailments due to the re-use of syringes and the generally shoddy health conditions. Ceausescu demanded more and more Romanians, without considering whether parents could or would take care of the children he said the state required.

This was the socialist paradise Nicolai Ceausescu— "the genius of the Carpathians," as one court poet dubbed him without apparent irony— bequeathed to his countrymen.

Now what?

No wonder that the execution of the dictator and his wife brought euphoria to long-suffering Romanians. The natural elation proved predictably hard to sustain. In the bright light of the morning after, it was all too clear that the horrors Ceausescu had left could not be quickly swept away. The physical and psychological damage was searing and widespread. There could be no instant deliverance, despite the promises of politicians new and old and the high expectations of an oppressed populace.

Would-be leaders abounded. Pre-communist political parties came back to life, and tens of new ones appeared as well, all offering solutions they could not deliver when given the chance. A series of revolving door coalitions gave governing a shot but inevitably came up short. None could magically cure the nation's ills, which included poverty, disease, corruption, mistrust, and ethnic tensions. Communist misrule had not created any of those conditions, but it had made most of them worse.

Frustration that the overthrow of the hated regime did not immediately reverse the decline led to frequent reshuffling of the deck.

The post-revolution jockeying for political power was literally a royal free for all, since the pretenders included ex-King Michael, who'd been living quietly in Switzerland for more than four decades, sometimes working as a commercial pilot, before returning to Romania to test whether monarchist sentiment was strong enough to put him back on the throne. It wasn't.

The compromise candidate who emerged for an extended time in the sun was Ion Iliescu, a former lieutenant to Ceausescu who claimed to have been a reformer all along. White he served as president (and head of state) under the new constitution in the first half of the '90s, protest signs shouting "Jos (down with) Iliescu" were so ubiquitous that observers could be forgiven for thinking "Jos" was his first name. (Another one-time presidential candidate, with the imposing name, "Caius Dragomir;" stopped by our house regularly to drink gin and tonic and talk politics. After finishing in the middle of the ranks, he was sent to Paris as ambassador.)

Outright nostalgia for Ceausescu himself was a part of the mix, too. Flowers appeared periodically at what was believed to be Ceausescu's burial site, demonstrating once again how quickly we forget. It's as if Shakespeare's Marc Antony had it all wrong: the good that men do lives after them, the evil is oft interred with their bones…

The good that some Romanians looked back longingly upon were the secure jobs and free health care of the communist/socialist period. Most citizens remembered instead that the jobs paid little, health care was horrific, freedoms scarce and the secret police everywhere.

The human spirit

At the Anglican church in central Bucharest one Sunday morning, friends pointed out a Romanian man there with his family. He was a brilliant mathematician, it was said, whose career had been stymied when he refused to swear allegiance to the communist party; his wife and children paid a cost, too, with poor housing and schools, yet by all appearances they were proud of their chosen course and hopeful for the future.

Other fleeting images come to mind: Dirt poor Gypsy (Roma) women and children begging outside train stations and underpasses; an elderly academic, surrounded by books in his inherited apartment, trying to maintain a civilized veneer despite the brutality and primitivism he'd lived through; a princess, one of King Michael's daughters, presiding over a small lunch in a modest, borrowed apartment, near the palace where her father had reigned; students full of energy and idealistic zeal, debating excitedly into the night about what should be done; a dissident intellectual reborn as a Foreign Ministry official learning to maneuver through the bureaucracy to establish a U.S.-Romanian Fulbright commission; a long jailed poet re-born as rector of a provincial university and quickly making it one of the most progressive in the country; some 50 American scholars and their families, accustomed to managing with little on the Romanian economy, reveling in the turkey and trimmings at a Thanksgiving dinner in our home.

A Balkan battle for power

Life in all its complexity continued while politicians of all variety waged their prolonged seesaw battle for power and direction. The fundamental question was whether the authoritarian leaders and camp followers of the old regime, who'd reinvented themselves and still held many trump cards, would emerge on top again or would new, more democratic but untested leaders prevail. In the immediate post-revolution years, elections were frequent and inconclusive; no one knew how this drama would ultimately end.

There remained considerable fear (and for some, hope) that the Soviet Union, which did not itself dissolve until two years into the Romanian revolution, would act to reverse it. There was constant tension and sometimes outbreaks of violence between the security forces and ex-communist, born-again reformers and the, mostly young, activists demanding real democracy. During one clash, a wing of government headquarters caught fire, leaving a charred reminder to join the tattered Romanian flag, with the hammer and sickle cut out of its center, as symbols of revolution.

The topsy turvy struggle was similar to what we all witnessed on the streets of Tunis and Cairo during the Arab Spring of 2011. In both cases, the United States wanted to identify with those fighting for a democratic future. Our task was somewhat easier in Romania, since we hadn't been

so cozy with Ceausescu—despite brief flirtations when he seemed to be tweaking the nose of the Russian bear—as with the long-time authoritarian rulers in places like Cairo under Mubarak and Tehran under the Shah.

No miracle bailout

Romanians told us they'd been waiting for years for the Americans to arrive. Some dared hope for a Marshall Plan type rescue and were disappointed that no such massive effort, no Deus ex machina solution, was in the cards. Romanians soon saw that, while American and others would help, they would have to earn their own passage. As they did.

American assistance was clearly focused and left little doubt whose side we were on. Our basic goal in Romania was not mysterious: we wanted a democratic outcome. To that end, we helped Romanians revive the economy and build democratic institutions, like an independent judiciary, a free press and quality schools. We used our programs and influence to support democratic forces and put a brake on some of the more totalitarian remnants still threatening to dash their hopes.

A few years later, when I'd moved to Warsaw, the new president of Romania, Emil Constantinescu—a former university rector, genuine democrat and long-time friend of the United States—came through on a state visit. One of his aides recognized me in a receiving line and exclaimed, "We did it! We did it!" His party had defeated Iliescu in the 1996 national election and taken power, peacefully. Romanian democrats knew who their friends were.

Among the darker forces that always had to be taken into account was the former *Securitate*, the secret police who under Ceausescu had penetrated every nook of society and turned husband against wife, child against parent. Though the organization was theoretically dismantled soon after the revolution, many of its leaders and operatives still lurked menacingly in the background in the early post-revolution years.

One of my unusual tasks in those days was to go periodically to an old Securitate installation on the outskirts of the city to pick up microfiche copies of archives to mail through the APO [Army Post Office] to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. Maybe my imagination was over active, but I sensed evil there. Romania was being paid in some fashion

for turning over these files, but I was not privy to the terms of the transaction. Museum representatives told me, however, that the microfiche were vital to the historical record of the Holocaust in Romania.

Fitful start to a market economy

Post revolution Romania did not lack for entrepreneurial impulses. The real impediment to jump starting a free market system was not motivation but the threat that the old *Nomenklatura*—the security forces and the politicians affiliated with them—would steal the nation's treasure. Shifting from a command to a market economy offered a potential for huge profits, and the people who had been part of the ruling establishment were well positioned to gain 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. (One of the most notorious of these criminals, Iliya Pavlov of Bulgaria, who'd looted billions from that country's state assets, built a mansion in northern Virginia. He was eventually assassinated by a rival gang.)

Embassy officers did what we could to combat such treachery. As we offered Romania's new leaders political and economic support, we conditioned the aid on genuine reforms. One focus was on the question of whether Romania would get most favored nation trade treatment. The government wanted that desperately to lift economic prospects, and we used the leverage to insist on regulatory reform, free and fair elections, an independent judiciary, freedom of the press and an end to the state monopoly on broadcasting.

Television, for example, had been an important instrument for running the country. During the revolutionary upheaval of 1989 and 1990, party stalwarts and insurgents fought a pitched battle at RTV headquarters for that vital source of power. TV was a primary vehicle for both information and entertainment. Warsaw Pact regimes were expert on using broadcasting to strengthen their grip on power—until his subjects turned

against him and Ceausescu watched in a daze from the balcony of party headquarters as the TV screen went blank.

In my part of the embassy, we spent many hours advising and encouraging groups seeking to get independent television off the ground. The challenge was many-sided: money, equipment and people had to be lined up, the law making broadcasting a state monopoly replaced, and barriers to the importing of necessary equipment lifted. Eventually, under the threat of being denied most favored nation status, authorities fighting a rear-guard action did what was required, and alternatives to government broadcasters became a reality.

The story was similar with newspapers. One independent newspaper, *Romania Libera*, was daring in its early challenge to the old school hard-liners but woefully short on resources. Through a foundation set up with U.S. government money, the International Media Fund, we gave them an old printing press and printing supplies and pressed customs officials to ensure the stuff was admitted into the country. The newspaper's technicians soon had the press up and running.

Romanian journalists knew what to do with their new-found freedom, engaging in a feisty debate on the many issues before the nation. Through our USIS exchange programs, we offered some of the most promising young people in the media, as well as the law, medicine and other professions, opportunities for study or training at home and abroad. Many of the participants in these exchange programs came back to become editors, reporters, judges, doctors, government officials and scientists who helped lead the drive to reinvent their country. (Elena Ceausescu, whose formal education ended after the fourth grade, had been crowned the country's foremost scientist; she was listed as a co-author of most scientific works. Reviving a scientific world thus humiliated and debased took some time and tremendous resolve, talent, and energy.

In another sign of Romania's turn away from its authoritarian past, Romanian Ministry of Communication officials agreed to lease time on state transmitters for Voice of America broadcasts into the disintegrating Yugoslavia, a nice bit of jiu-jitsu.

We kept a light on for them

During this period, we celebrated the twentieth anniversary of the American library in Bucharest. Under an agreement between President Nixon and Ceausescu, Romania had been allowed to open a cultural facility in New York and we were able to set up an American library/cultural center in Romania's capital.

Romanians pulled many of us aside the night of the anniversary commemoration 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 glowing for them. Skeptics about the value of cultural and academic exchanges overlook such direct, personal accounts about how hopes were nurtured, even in closed societies like Ceausescu's Romania. Unfortunately, most of our American libraries are closed now, a casualty of misguided budget priorities.

Light was more than a metaphor in early '90s Bucharest. The city was notoriously grim in the final years of Ceausescu and the aftermath of his overthrow. During the 1991 Christmas season, the cosmetics magnate Christine Valmy made herself popular in Bucharest by brightening the city with holiday lights she brought in from New York. Romanians loved the newfound glitter, and I've never since taken the festive displays in our American cities for granted.

Another shining moment for Romanians came in October 1992, when Michael Jackson, then near the top of his game, performed in Bucharest in a concert later shown on HBO. An overflow crowd in the city's biggest soccer stadium responded with uninhibited enthusiasm, a rare outpouring of pure joy for a populace still contending with hard scrabble living conditions.

Yet another star shooting through the Romanian capital was Sir Ian McKellen, who came to play Richard III on the stage of the National Theatre. Romanians stopped the show with spontaneous applause when the villainous king was slain, the connection to their own recent history obvious to all. When the show ended, theatergoers were obviously still elated as they made their way home through a snowstorm.

One major U.S. initiative in the early post-revolution days was a massive book donation drive. Americans had watched on their television screen as the National Library in Bucharest burned to the ground during the

violence of December ’89; they responded with a nationwide effort to replace the books that had gone up in flames.

Allen Docal, the director of our cultural center, and his library staff made sure the estimated million volumes got into the right hands. Turning our auditorium over to this campaign for the duration, Allen and his crew sorted the books into categories and identified organizations most likely to put them to good use: libraries and schools, churches, public facilities all around the country. Not every book was an intellectual treasure—a treatise on recipes for making quiche comes to mind—but American generosity unquestionably helped nurture countless Romanian hearts and minds.

Saving the children

Adopting children in Romania became such a major phenomenon during this period that both “Sixty Minutes” and “20/20” did feature reports about it and the widespread chicanery that accompanied it. In 1991 Americans adopted more than 2,000 children from Romania, more than from any other country that year. Our consular waiting area doubled as a baby changing room for months.

Americans, of course, were responding to the crisis with their hearts, but they sometimes fell into shaky, dubious arrangements. Our consular officers tried to ensure that good intentions did not lead to tragedy; they urged Americans to work with responsible organizations who did due diligence, rather than the fly-by-night operators who proliferated on the streets. For many, parents, and children alike, the story ended happily.

A national triumph

Romania realized two central goals when it was admitted into NATO in 2004 and the European Union in 2007. These achievements were not the end of history or a magic cure-all for the nation’s problems, which remain plentiful, but they put the country in a far, far better place than it has ever been. Membership represents a huge advance toward greater democracy, security, and prosperity for Romanians. Back when they started down this road, anyone betting that they’d be able to earn this new status could have gotten long odds. Other nations facing what seem like formidable challenges today might well take heart: it may not be easy, but it can be done.

End insert.]

Resume transcript.

Chapter 15. Warsaw, 1994–97

Q: You were in Bucharest until when?

VIRDEN: Until November of 1993, so a little more than three years (We 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 fifteen 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. It was just an amazing transformation 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 simply ran a poor campaign and paid the price for it, so maybe that was evidence Poland had arrived as a democratic country. He repeatedly called the other guy names (In effect, "you're a commie, you're a commie...") and did not perform very well in a televised debate; that was just enough to swing the election. So, the leader of Nobel Prize winner lost, and Kwasniewski 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: We had a rocky start. He'd wanted someone else for the PAO job and didn't make me feel particularly welcome. It took a while for us to appreciate each other, but in eventually 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 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.

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 to swallow. Our USIS post in Poznan had a rich, storied history and was continuing to do great work. To make the best of the decision to close, we turned the library resources we had there into an American reading room at a major local university. 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.

We salvaged what we could, 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.

Today 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 may well want civilian representation on the ground out there 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 become quite influential. Adam Michnik, one of the legendary leaders of the revolution, was its founder and editor.

It was now a free press, with all varieties of political opinion represented: fascists on one end and far left on the other. It was wide open, a great 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 ordinary people got most of their information. Cracks in the state monopoly was just starting to happen. Independent broadcasting wasn't established 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. There were potential American broadcast partners interested in working with those trying to start stations in Poland, to put up money and other resources. That did happen.

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 rare. Most news organizations were poorly financed and could not afford representation abroad, just as

American news outlets find it too expensive to station reporters overseas today.

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 of the Order of Merit 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, though it was a challenge during the communist era to get people of independent mind, not party hacks, for our exchange programs. There was always pressure from the Party to send "reliable people," from their perspective; for our part, we looked for individuals with not only talent but also character and an open mind. There was chronic conflict over this, I would say.

At one point in the mid-'90s, 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?" Solana 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 by this time. I traveled frequently to the second city, Krakow; it was only two or three hours by train and there were many important contacts there. Krakow has a major university, Jagiellonian, that was founded in the 13th century, an extremely high quality, prestigious place. Krakow was also 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 had no on the ground presence, unlike Krakow, where we retained a consulate. Take Gdansk, for example; it was where Hitler attacked on Sept. 1, 1939. Gdansk was also the birthplace of Solidarity, yet we had no permanent presence there. We tried to get up there as often as we could.

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. We tried to make up for that by visiting them, doing as much internal travel as time and money allowed.

One other thing I'd like to mention: 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 interim arrangement, the Partnership for Peace, as a stalling action, a way of fobbing Poland off. President Clinton assured Poles that the Partnership for Peace was a genuine transitional vehicle that would help their country 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.

When President Clinton came back to Warsaw in July of 1997, he could deliver NATO's invitation to Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary to

join the alliance. It fulfilled a U.S. promise and a Polish quest, making for a triumphant occasion.

Like all presidential visits, these two had their stories. I was shocked when for the 1994 event the White House sent advance word that it would need 900 hotel rooms! That was 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. Both visits came off well. I attended 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 overlook 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. Clement Zablocki showed up regularly. (So did baseball hall of famer Stan Musial, another proud Pole).

When I was in Warsaw in the '70s, we frequently granted Poland large agricultural credits to buy American grain. They desperately needed it, of course. The command economy was not working, and Poland was not then producing enough to feed its own people. We could help address

that need, and Polonia made 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.

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: No love lost, you are quite right; it's a stormy history, to put it mildly. The Poles calculate that they have been invaded from the East nineteen or twenty times, something like that, and they were extremely conscious of that bitter record.

They were forced to study Russian in school but were not happy about it and did not use the language. Even when the communist regime maintained tight control of the country, the muttering in the street was not favorable to the Russians, let's put it that way.

Now 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 said to Russians, "Okay, forget about it, Poland is now free and going to stay that way, so deal with it."

To some extent, that has happened. Of course, there's still a boatload of unpleasant history to try to get past, but Poland and Russia do now have productive relations, and that's progress. Memories of the Cold War have dimmed somewhat, as I think we talked about in our earlier discussion.

The Russians have acknowledged that they, not the Nazis, murdered 20,000 Polish officers and intellectuals at Katyn, during the Second World War. Acknowledgement of that monstrous crime is a huge step forward; with that on the record, it became possible to begin confronting other 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 votive lights on many streets marking places where "the Hitlerites" killed a dozen or fifteen Poles; you saw similar shrine like that all through the heart of Warsaw.

This was encouraged by the Communist Party authorities, to justify the alliance with the Russians. A rather cynical political use of a terrible history.

This reminder of the Nazi past continued all through that communist period, almost half a century. 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 after the war and still feared revanchist German claims to some of this territory.

Once the borders were secure, economic relations began to intensify. In 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. Substantial numbers 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, to the benefit of both countries.

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

VIRDEN: For starters, we could now go to restaurants and find that they had the items listed on the menu, and wonderful food at that. Cultural life, too, now flourished. 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 Tina Turner, showed up. 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 country back in the '70s, but now a vibrant political, cultural, social and economic life was re-emerging.

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 met periodically with the ambassador to decide which applications merited support; it was a streamlined process and, I'm convinced, more effective than many of our more elaborate and costly programs.

This was a country suddenly waking up from a disturbed sleep; it was an exciting time to be there and 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 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 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.

A lot of those kinds of academic exchanges now were suddenly possible. As you understand, during the communist era that was all strictly controlled. And many American academic institutions were quite interested. Those who were quick off the mark managed to get some excellent programs up and running.

The language is a bit of a barrier of course. English had not been widely spoken in Poland, but it now became popular; Poles saw English as a

passport to better things. A considerable number learned English well enough to be admitted for study in the United States. English began to be taught in schools instead of Russian (an army 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: No doubt, but some of the professors, just like the politicians, reinvented themselves successfully. I knew some of them, and it was as if their previous incarnation never happened.

As I suggested earlier, there were relatively few defenders of Marxist ideology by the latter stages of the communist period. Those who continued to defend the regime, or communist dogma, did so for career purposes. Some were able to adapt to the changed circumstances and find new ways to prosper.

Q: Where did you go next?

VIRDEN: 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; it was during those two years that USIA was 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 democracy 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 over what had prevailed for decades in Poland. 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 resented 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, though the remaining Jewish community in Poland was tiny; relations with the Jewish diaspora was also part of the equation there.

This is a problem they were still working on and are to this day.

Chapter 16. Georgetown University, 1997–98

Q: Okay, you went to Georgetown. You were there from when to when?

VIRDEN: One year, one academic year, 1997 to 1998. While there I developed and taught a course on public diplomacy. It was called, "The Evolution of Public Diplomacy; from Armed Propaganda Teams to the Age of Internet." I enjoyed putting this together and offering it to students in the School of Foreign Service 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: My course addressed the communications revolution and the start of the age of globalization. We looked at how the revolution in communication was opening 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 and make their own voices heard.

One telling example was the movement to ban land mines, which was basically the work of non-government organizations and individuals. Jody Williams was the Nobel Peace Prize for leading that movement, which resulted in a treaty signed in the end by more than 180 governments. This was an impressive achievement for 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. 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. Georgetown has sent more people to the Foreign Service than any other university. It was the biggest, the oldest and—Georgetown contended—the best school for would-be diplomats in the country. So, a well-qualified 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. They had faculty members there who had had high level government positions, former ambassadors. Tony Lake was there then. Chester Crocker, too. Madeline Albright had just recently left and become Secretary of State.

Adding practitioners to the faculty mix was a well-established thing. They used the term "practitioners," as distinguished from career academics, and they recognized that experienced officials had a lot to contribute. 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: Right, your traditional ivory tower. I think Georgetown and the other universities in the Washington showed the way in 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 continue doing so.

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, although under heavy fire. Senator Jesse Helms 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.

Chapter 17. European Bureau, 1998–2000

Q: How did you feel about the merger of USIA with the State Department?

VIRDEN: Not good. I was right in the middle of it, because after my year at Georgetown I was assigned as the deputy area director for Europe in USIA and that bureau was the first one to move over to the State Department. We wound up scouting the terrain for the other geographic bureaus.

That was a two-year assignment, 1998–2000; midway through it we officially 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 figuring out how to make the thing work.

I didn't believe it was a good idea and I also did not think—even accepting that it was going to happen—that it was done particularly well.

There were various aspects of 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 were lodged and the way authority over resources and programs was set up—this is too much 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 awfully 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 for Western Europe, and I was his deputy. At that time, USIA had 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 1999 merger.

That first year, when we were still independent, my job was to supervise public diplomacy programs in Western Europe. That meant frequent travel to Europe to provide program direction, assess field programs and evaluate the work of our PAOs. That first year I wrote more than thirty personal evaluation reports or reviews, way too many.

That was something that disappeared with the merger. Washington no longer writes evaluation reports on PAOs in the field. That has done only locally, by the DCM and the ambassador. That means a loss of Washington's ability to coordinate and control public diplomacy activities abroad; Washington no longer has any direct line authority over these programs. The Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy—in theory the successor position to USIA director—has no real power.

I believe—and I think most USIA officers agreed—that the net result was a regrettable downgrading of our public diplomacy function.

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 compared to Washington. 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 any given issue or activity, so that's complicated everything.

Also, again, talking about the transition, we felt that as an independent organization, public diplomacy was tied to policy but not a poor stepchild, not just an afterthought. Too often—at least these were the initial impressions when we came into State—public diplomacy's

perspective was shunted aside. We worked hard to try to overcome that, to ensure that public diplomacy considerations were weighed in the balance, but it was an uphill struggle.

Now, these were early days, when the merger was being brought about, basically the first year or so of the merger. We've had more than a decade of experience since then, so others can better say how well it's come along, whether that climate has improved.

My own impression is that the basics have changed little, 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: Oh 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 voice in deciding the budget as well as personnel issues. Allocation of resources was one way to influence policy.

There was plenty 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 unraveled, our office worked intensely to build support for NATO action in Kosovo. The situation there was becoming intolerable; creating a consensus within NATO to address it was an overriding policy and public diplomacy priority. The message was that Serbian treatment of Kosovo was horrible, that ethnic cleansing must be stopped, and that NATO should act without waiting for UN Security Council approval, which was neither obtainable nor required.

This major public diplomacy campaign about Kosovo was carried out at the very time the transition was occurring.

It was also at this time also that NATO celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of its founding with a glittering event in Washington welcoming Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic to the alliance. 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 participated in countless meetings to hammer out issues large and small. We won a few, but we didn't have a strong hand. We were being taken over. We could make our case but were not the deciders.

For example, as I mentioned earlier, we believed strongly that area directors should transfer 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 where public diplomacy fit in the scheme of things.

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 wouldn't say that. It was more that the State Department officers we negotiated with genuinely believed the merger was a good thing and that we should simply accept the new reality. They didn't believe we had any right to tell them how to run their organization. And they thought we failed to appreciate some of the constraints put on by Congress, such as the limited number of high-level positions authorized.

It was not a blatant, "Okay, we won, you guys lost," kind of triumphalism, but the facts were clear enough.

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 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's a thing of the past.

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.

Also, now ambitious public diplomacy officers want to move on to be DCMs and ambassadors, and many more can do so. So, in that sense, for many individuals it has often opened those possibilities.

And that is 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; many people just could not 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, though titillated, did not see it of major political import; they found the possibility of impeachment over it quite 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. Many of us thought that if he had fought as hard as the head of AID, Brian Atwood, did at that time, we could have retained our independence. Mr. Duffy was reportedly a very nice man—I met but never knew him—but perhaps not cut out to be the forceful leader we needed to fend off Sen. Helms.

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 silly notion, and it should have been possible to resist that.

At the founding of our country, we issued our Declaration of Independence out of a "decent respect for the opinions of mankind." We didn't magically shed the need to explain ourselves just because the Cold War was over. It should have been possible to deflect such know-nothing attacks.

Chapter 18. National War College faculty, 2000-2002

Q: Where did you go next? 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. The emphasis at the College is seminars and a team-teaching approach, 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 great couple of years. I loved my experience as a student at the war college and serving on the faculty was at least as exhilarating.

Q: You had been at the war college from when to when, before?

VIRDEN: As a student 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, one change was the inclusion of foreign students. 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 forty 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. The hope was to influence thinking not only about military strategy but also about democratic concepts like civilian control of the military.

Q: You were there during 9/11, weren’t you?

VIRDEN: Yes, in fact, I was at the war college at Ft. McNair that morning when we saw one of the hijacked planes flying overhead. 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 animated discussions at the college the next few days, everyone trying to figure out what this meant; it kind of threw the existing playbook out the window. It was a stimulating place to be for sure.

Q: The case was made that we should invade Iraq. How did that play?

VIRDEN: I left there before Iraq took center stage, though there were already some officers who had Iraq in the crosshairs. Almost from the time of 9/11 there were some making the case—just as they did at the higher, inside levels of the White House—for attacking Iraq.

Most of the debate I heard and participated in then 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.

That was more the focus than going after Saddam Hussein. He 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 navigate through that process.

Military officers were eager for contact with students 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: coordination among military units and between military units and civilians had to improve.

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.

Another aspect you may be asking about is differing philosophies or outlooks. For example, take the old saying, "all's fair in love and war." Well, in war, deception is fair, it's a legitimate tactic, part of warfare.

But deception is anathema to public diplomacy, for which 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 and strategic communication, 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: That'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 that is part of the salute-and-march psychology that may serve us well in war but destroys 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.

Chapter 19. Brasilia, 2002–2004

Q: When you left the war college, where did you go? You left in 2002?

VIRDEN: I went to Brasilia as deputy chief of mission (DCM). 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 did, and we had two great, productive years before we both retired.

Q: All right, well, in the first place, let's talk a bit about her. How did she use you and the embassy?

VIRDEN: Donna and I had both served in Brazil before so were somewhat familiar with 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, was fluent in Portuguese as well as Spanish, and was an acknowledged area expert, having spent all her career in South America except for that one tour in Poland.

Donna has already been an ambassador three times previously. She had excellent relations with the president, other senior ministers, and political and business leaders in the key cities of Rio and Sao Paulo. While she maintained this dialogue at the highest level, I concentrated on directing the rest of what was happening in the mission. It was a large one. We had about 900 employees, representing eighteen U.S. federal agencies, at the embassy, the Rio and Sao Paulo consulates general, and our small consulate in the northeastern city of 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 twenty-two 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—here he was leading the fifth largest country in the world!

It was an exciting moment, a compelling 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 to make it happen?"

We picked everyone's brains, then put the best ideas together in a telegram to Washington. We argued for pursuing a "mature partnership" based on mutual interest. So much binds our two large multiethnic democracies together that we should not allow ourselves to be blown off course by every small dispute that comes along, we concluded.

We spelled out our rationale, goals proposed initiatives and resources needed to pursue them. We quickly got a favorable response from the Under Secretary for Political Affairs, Marc Grossman, who approved the cable and asked what he could do to help. That was a chit we soon cashed.

When Lula was elected shortly thereafter, Brazil's 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 dire warnings. Our response was to say, in effect: "Wait a minute, don't jump to conclusions, give this person a chance; this is not what we're hearing, don't pay so much attention to rhetoric; watch how the man actually governs."

That argument won the day, and President Bush took some of the steps we suggested. He sent a conciliatory, nonprescriptive note of congratulations to President Lula and invited him to the White House. The visit quickly was arranged, and Presidents Bush and Lula—two men who could hardly have had more different backgrounds—got along famously; they really did, the whole six years they were in office together.

In Brasilia, we took some satisfaction in having helped persuade Washington to keep an open mind about Lula, not to jump to premature and negative conclusions. In fact, he governed much more moderately than 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, in the Arab communities 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, Washington had serious concerns about that. When we pressed the issue with Brazilian officials, they'd say, "Well, sure, they're raising funds there but for legitimate charitable organizations that help widows and children."

There was no meeting of the minds about that, but by focusing on specific cases, we convinced Brazilian authorities to arrest—or retrain in jail—several individuals we could prove were 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 (and within the embassy; DEA [Drug Enforcement Administration] agents fought hard for authorization to carry arms, a step inappropriate for their advisory role and an insult to Brazilian sovereignty).

We were also in the middle of a major trade negotiation to develop a free trade zone for the entire hemisphere, all thirty-five nations. It was an 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 officials of both countries met frequently in search of a breakthrough. I sat in on two intense days of discussions as our trade czar, Robert Zoellick, and Brazilian Foreign Minister Celso Amorim probed for 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, were strongly against us on this issue. The evidence for that was not only anecdotal; public opinion polls showed nine out of ten Brazilians opposed to the war.

We had protests in front of our installations in Brazil, and our security officers had to contend with sometimes-violent outbursts. 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 President Lula 's top advisors said to us once 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 must 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 is 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 talked exclusively about terrorism and security; Lula addressed spoke about bread and butter issues. Brazilians are not alone in believing that, in our preoccupation with security, the United States often overlooks other issues that matter as much or more.

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. Brazil's focus was particularly on Portuguese-speaking areas, but it was active elsewhere in Africa as well. It was a leader in this field.

When Lula became president, 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 completed his two terms in 2010, he had a popularity rating in the mid 80s!

Q: How was it during your time, with Lula and his government?

VIRDEN: Lula's was a left of center government and ours was conservative, so there were some stark differences there. But Ambassador Hrinak knew Lula and some of the other leaders of his workers party from her previous tour in their stronghold of Sao Paulo. She had good personal rapport with them.

Despite that, we had our share of battles, over trade questions and other matters 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 then was 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 campaigning hard for this UN reform and its own candidacy.

Q: Yes, well, you've got India, Japan, Germany, particularly.

VIRDEN: Even in South America; if the region is 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 arrangements made in 1945 do not really reflect the world we have now. It's a reasonable argument, but how do you get powers and wannabe powers around the world to agree to a new lineup?

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 some old-line anti-Americanism, but more broadly the country was friendly and 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. As many as a million Brazilians live in the United States. Unfortunately, two thirds of them may be here illegally; they often get in by way of Mexico, which they can enter without a visa.

This, 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 see as continuing discrimination.

Q: How did we see relations with Venezuela, Hugo Chavez?

VIRDEN: I believe the Bush Administration saw Venezuela as a real problem child and worried 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.

I mentioned that among the issues we had then with Brazil were a lot of trade questions. No surprise there since 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. Without an agreement on that, we were blocked from selling any of our properties. We want to dispose 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 fine, well-located site in Sao Paulo.

In Rio, we had a property 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 accessible. 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, rivals. Brazil was doing better than Argentina. Argentina traditionally had been 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 tense; there was no love lost. The rivalry would often be played 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 the many 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 had scientists from the Smithsonian Institution up there in the middle of the Amazon, doing research projects on preservation of the rain forest. 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, Brazil was concerned about its control of the 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 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: We 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 on both sides would have liked them to be 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 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; another was our decision not to join the International

Criminal Court. Restrictions imposed by Congress on ICC members like Brazil barred us from offering training programs and concessionary terms for equipment purchases. The collateral damage included some palpable cooling in our relations with Brazilian military officers. American proponents pointed out that training programs helped foster long term cooperation between the armed services of the two countries; if we can't provide the training and equipment, Brazilians will look elsewhere for it. This was a fierce battle 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. That decision made some officials in Washington quite unhappy.

Q: Oh, yes?

VIRDEN: Yes, 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 carry weapons, which the Brazilians would not permit. The ambassador and I were the heavies in insisting that Brazilian law be respected.

The Brazilians oversee law enforcement in their own country, and that runs against the proclivities of some DEA agents who want to act as they

see fit. This led to some bitter internal discussions. But 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 plenty of that.

Q: This was mainly from Bolivia, wasn't it?

VIRDEN: Bolivia and Colombia, too, up in the Amazonian region in the north, and drugs were having a destructive 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 chronic 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: At one point, Sao Paulo was averaging about thirty violent deaths every day! And Rio had about twenty. Those are huge numbers by American standards, and most of it is drug related crime.

In Rio, these *favelas* are on hillsides overlooking the city. Geographically, they are in a strategic position, they can block the major arteries and they have sometimes done just that.

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: 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. It didn't grow naturally, and that shows; 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 and doesn't have huge traffic messes. The city's cultural life is developing impressively, and the diplomatic scene 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. [Back in the '70s, a wag in our embassy said Brasilia had better weather than it deserved.]

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 moving a capital from a jewel of a city in Rio de Janeiro to the middle of nowhere, literally, and making it work. Brasilia may never replace Rio in Brazilian hearts, but it has become a vibrant city on its own. Bringing a capital to life out there, way back in the hinterland, is a remarkable achievement, and I salute it.

Q: How about relations between the embassy and the huge, dynamic powerhouse of Sao Paulo?

VIRDEN: Yes, Sao Paulo is all of that. Sao Paulo is a consulate general and has a spacious new facility, opened while we were there and badly needed. 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. Relations were excellent.

The business community in Sao Paulo is huge, as you might imagine. More than 400 of our American Fortune 500 companies have offices down there, and the Department of Commerce has a big business promotion operation, second only to its program in China. Sao Paulo is the economic hub 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 large 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 vast 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 rich and the poor during his tenure.

Chapter 20. Retirement, 2004-

Q: Well, you left Brasilia in—what? 2004?

VIRDEN: We did, we left in late June to consult in Washington for a few days. I retired on July 1, completing just over forty-one years of government service; we moved back to Minnesota the same day.

Q: So, what drove you back to Minneapolis? I would think that you would want a sunnier clime.

VIRDEN: Primarily family ties. I'm originally from Minnesota, as is Linda. My parents and Linda's mother were then still alive and in Minnesota, and our siblings were all in the state or nearby. Besides, 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 been happy in either place, but in the end the draw of family carried the day. And I'm pleased it did. We were grateful to be able to host the dinner in our home when my parents celebrated their sixty-fifth wedding anniversary. We were there when my father died in 2007. [Mom lived until 2019, just short of her 103rd birthday.]

Linda and I have enjoyed many holidays and other happy occasions with our mothers, and we see our siblings regularly. We get together with friends, some new, some from our long-ago youth. We go on cruises. I take long walks in the area's many beautiful parks. The Twins play entertaining, winning baseball most of the time, and the Vikings provide melodrama worthy of a Brazilian soap opera. 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, absolutely. 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 is a new challenge that keeps me alert. [I continued this for a decade before retiring or the second time, from St. John's in this case, in 2014].

Under the Great Decisions Program, I discuss foreign policy questions with 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. I also write frequent commentaries for newspapers like the Minneapolis Star-Tribune and MinnPost, as well as longer magazine pieces for American Diplomacy. [See the epilogue for an example of one of the latter].

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 bunch of countries have consulates here. The arrival in recent years of substantial numbers of Hmong, Somalia and Hispanic refugees and immigrants has heightened local awareness of how

events abroad matter. Debate on foreign policy issues is informed and lively.

Q: Okay, well, I guess it's a good place to stop!

VIRDEN: I think so, yes. I've enjoyed our review, Stu. Thank you!

End of interview

Epilogue. A Media Journey: from Edward R. Murrow to Fake News

In 2018, I wrote this article for American Diplomacy reflecting on my decades of experience working with the press. The piece is reused here with permission.

A Media Journey: from Edward R. Murrow to Fake News
By Dick Virden

One of the Foreign Policy Association topics for its "Great Decisions" series in 2018 is "the media and foreign policy." Speaking on this and related issues subject to civic groups around Minnesota has caused me to reflect on my own experience with the press and to look for insights that might apply to our public life today.

We hear a lot now about the rise of social media, a vital new phenomenon that clearly affects both national security and domestic politics. Whether that's good or bad is debatable, but that these the new media influence world affairs is not. The "CNN Effect" once put foreign hot spots on the map; now smart phones, Facebook, and Twitter spark movements like the Arab Spring.

Cyberwarfare is another new entry and a cause of great concern for our national security officials. At its heart, Special Counsel Robert Mueller's investigation is about Russia's exploiting our media, new and old, to affect the 2016 election and weaken our democracy.

We know that Moscow mounted a substantial "influence" or dirty tricks campaign against us. The evidence is overwhelming and no longer in doubt. Such hostile manipulation of media by outside forces is a new, insidious form of warfare that we ignore at our peril.

Then there's "fake news," two four-letter words that put together are poisoning our political process, as is the related growth of highly partisan media, particularly cable news and talk radio.

In addressing these trends and their impact, I mean to be fair minded and non-partisan, as befits a career diplomat who worked for nine presidents (five Republicans, four Democrats). But, like the great umpire Bill Klem, I will also call them like I see them. Readers are free to conclude I'm as blind as other umpires.

Media background

I've worked on both sides of the dividing line between government and the media. As a cub reporter one summer, I covered everything from fatal car accidents to a perfect game. This was for the Daily Transcript, a small paper then published in Little Falls, Minnesota (Charles Lindberg's hometown). When I misspelled a name or got some other detail wrong, I heard about it the next day. (I also heard, from a veteran editor, that if I wanted to stay in the business, I should learn to type; that seemed reasonable, so I took a night course in touch tying that fall at a local high school).

To earn pin money as a student, I reported on St. John's University (Minn.) sports for the wire services and other local media. St. John's coaches—including the legendary John Gagliardi, then just starting on his way to becoming the winningest coach in college football history—were not shy about pointing out what they saw as blown calls.

Those were early lessons in accuracy. There is right and wrong and sometimes fubar (You can look it up in any dictionary of military terms).

After graduating, I worked for three years as a writer-editor for the United States Information Agency (USIA), then led by one of the all-time greats of broadcasting, Edward R. Murrow. I remember seeing him once standing outside USIA's iconic address (1776 Pennsylvania Avenue) beside the plague defining the Agency's mission as "telling America's

story to the world." He was wearing a trench coat and smoking a cigarette, evoking for me his dramatic reporting from London rooftops during the World War II Blitz.

Later, one of my Foreign Service assignments was as a correspondent for USIA's press service during the Vietnam War. My sixteen months as a member of the Saigon press corps was an intense graduate course in politics, journalism, foreign policy, and the difficulty of sorting fact from fiction. It soon became clear why truth is the first casualty of war (whether hot or Cold).

I've also served as a Press Attaché in several countries. One tour was in Warsaw in the late '70s, when Poland's government was communist-controlled and ours was considered a hostile embassy. I had friendly, mutually supportive, relations with the few resident Western journalists, who were under siege themselves.

It was much trickier with Polish media. Contacts with dissidents were understandably sensitive. At great risk to themselves, they slipped us mimeographed copies of their illegal or "samizdat" publications and told us what happened at secret "flying university" sessions in church basements. We gave them bootleg copies of Newsweek and compared notes on local developments. After the transcendent 1979 first return home by the Polish Pope, John Paul II, we showed them videotapes of the reports on American tv networks (much more in-depth than the minimalist coverage seen on Polish state television).

With the official media, relations were adversarial, if generally correct. When Jimmy Carter visited Warsaw in December of 1977, we got Polish authorities to commit in advance to publish the transcript of his press conference in the party newspaper. They did, something of a coup for those times. We couldn't get opposition journalists into the press event itself—said to have been the first press conference by an American president in a communist country—but the morning after Carter left I handed answers to questions they'd submitted in writing.

My next tour, again as Press Attaché, was in Bangkok, then a regional hub for covering the aftermath of the Vietnam War, including the Boat People, other refugees and Americans missing in action. We're still grappling with some of these issues today, though in new guises and other regions of the world. Because of the high costs involved, far fewer

correspondents are now based abroad to provide on-the-spot coverage; it's a real loss.

I'd earlier served as a press officer in Sao Paulo, in 1973–74, when Brazil was under military rule. Leading newspaper printed recipes and classical poetry to alert readers where censors had made cuts. Friendly reporters would invite me to their newsroom to read the excised material on their bulletin boards.

Subsequent Foreign Service assignments included directing our public diplomacy—that is our government's effort to inform and persuade foreign publics as well as governments—in Portugal, Romania, and Poland, during and after the Cold War. Working with local media was a vital part of the brief.

Near the end of my Foreign Service career, I taught a course in media and national security at the National War College—our senior staff college for military officers on their way to becoming generals and civilians of equivalent rank—where I'd earlier studied.

So that's my background for this discussion. That and a lifetime as an avid consumer of information and news.

The First Amendment

Any discussion of media should start with a traditional but fundamental point: democracy requires a free press. That's how we citizens get the information we need to make good decisions. Because our Founding Fathers believed this so strongly, they made freedom of speech the First Amendment. Before the right to bear arms.

The imperative for a free press is bedrock, permanent—Constitutional. It doesn't go away just because a reporter makes a mistake, files unflattering stories, or fails to do his homework. Journalists are far from perfect, but my own experience is that most try mightily to get the story right, the object of the exercise. They seek "the best obtainable version of the truth," as Carl Bernstein of Watergate fame puts it.

I always found that trust and credibility were the coin of the realm for journalists as well as government officials. We needed to rely on each

other to respect facts, each other's word, and the ground rules for using information.

If a press officer lied or deliberately misled a reporter, he and his fellows would never trust you again. Ditto for a reporter who betrayed a trust or made things up. Those who didn't respect the rules were bypassed and shunned by both sides.

Regimes that resort to censorship to get their way only make things worse. I've lived in countries where tyrants tried to control media and information to cement their grip on power. It's not in the public interest.

One knee-jerk move is to reserve broadcasting—radio and television—as state monopolies. That way only the regime's version of events gets out to most people. Among other steps: block websites, ban opposition media, limit circulation, deny visas to outsiders and harass or jail critical reporters.

When the anti-communist revolution came in Bucharest around Christmas of 1989, there was a fierce battle at state TV headquarters. Control of TV was critical since that was where most people got their news and information as well as entertainment. I called TV in that oppressed part of the world at that time the true opiate of the people. Pushing for a free press and independent broadcasting was a U.S. priority in Eastern Europe after the Cold War, and it became a condition for admission into the major democratic clubs, NATO and the European Union.

State control of broadcasting remains a pillar of the state in many authoritarian countries, including Russia, where it's a major reason Mr. Putin remains popular at home. He determines what the mass media report about events, such as his meeting with President Trump in Helsinki or Russia's illegal occupation of Crimea. His ability to control the narrative may help explain President Trump's admiration for the Kremlin leader.

Attacks on the media

Donald Trump himself, of course, is a creature of television. It's how he rose to fame and political power; his ability to dominate the spotlight

earned him countless hours of free TV time during his campaign for the presidency. As we used to say in another era, he sells newspapers.

His persistent attacks on the media, however, are problematic. Mr. Trump frequently denounces the media in general plus specific media organizations and individual journalists. He labels unfavorable reports "fake news," calls the press "very dishonest," and the media "the enemy of the people."

To me, denigrating the press undermines not only one of our vital institutions but also our standing as a democratic beacon to people elsewhere. Nor does President Trump confine his criticism to the media; he also belittles the judiciary, the FBI, the intelligence community and the career civil service. The net result is to reduce the credibility of these vital institutions. And that means trust in them won't be there, at home or abroad, when we need it.

How will we convince others that Iran or North Korea or Syria is cheating on weapons of mass destruction except through believable evidence from our intelligence agencies? That's how we document these things. Ronald Reagan used to quote a Russian proverb, "trust but verify."

Now the shoe is on the other foot. Our say-so alone is no longer enough to convince leaders and publics elsewhere, as it was in 1962 when we discovered Soviet missiles in Cuba. Asked if he wanted to see the evidence, President Charles de Gaulle of France said no, the word of the American president was good enough for him. Polls show consistently that we do not currently command such respect and trust around the world.

The mandate of the people

Donald Trump is hardly the first politician to complain about the press. Republicans do it. Democrats do it. Even Pope Francis has been known to complain about faulty media reports. All leaders do it at times. They'd rather the press be a cheerleader than a watchdog.

Yet all democratic statesmen concede, however reluctantly in some cases, that a free press is essential. That's true even when reporters make mistakes or file reports authorities find unhelpful. A free press is how we

hold our leaders accountable. It's a cornerstone of democracy (As Americans have been preaching to the world for years).

Without it, people stop believing what their leaders tell them, and authorities then lose the right to govern, what the Chinese call "the mandate of the people." I saw that happen in Poland in the late 70s. The communist regime there lost the trust of its citizens because it lied routinely about the reality they lived. What official media reported and what people saw in their shops and factories, schools and bars were different worlds. The result was a yawning credibility gap much like our own over Vietnam.

When John Paul II came home for the first time as Pope in 1979, an estimated 20 million Poles (more than half the population) turned out to see him during that six-day visit. State television tried to make it look like crowds were sparse and mainly old people. No one bought it. The regime never did regain enough trust to remain in power and stop a downhill slide into the dustbin of history.

After that historic visit, I urged Western journalists and media executives who parachuted into Warsaw to station staffers there to cover this unfolding story. The New York Times was the first to do so, sending in John Darnton to reopen their Warsaw bureau. John won the Pulitzer Prize for his seminal reporting on the rise of the opposition movement, Solidarity (*Solidarność*) in the early 80s.

Coherence and credibility

Back to President Trump and the media. His tweets often come early in the day and dominate the news cycle, effectively setting the agenda. Unfortunately, the messages are frequently contradictory and/or fact challenged. The *Washington Post's* running account of "clearly identifiable" Presidential falsehoods or misleading statements had passed the 5,000 mark by the fall of 2018. Others did similar tracking, with Time magazine, for example, finding 1950 "false claims" in 2017.

Conflicting or erroneous messaging blurs coherence and undercuts trust in U.S. policy. One such instance is the gulf on Russia between President Trump and his national security team. That team warned in 2018 that Russia was already mucking around in the off-year elections. All the red lights are blinking, as Dan Coats, our intelligence chief, put it. The

Commander in chief, however, declined to call out Russia for these threats to our national security.

Consider the foreign diplomats who are paid to decipher U.S. positions on issues that matter to their countries, often questions of life or death. Should they believe today's tweet—or yesterday's—or rely instead on the more formal, coordinated statements of U.S. positions on climate change, NAFTA, Syria, immigration, North Korea, terrorism, or our NATO commitments?

Keeping foes guessing can a valuable battlefield tactic, but deception is dangerous and self-defeating in the world of diplomacy and national security. Others need to know where we stand and whether they can rely on our word; they need clarity, not uncertainty or confusion, from the world's most powerful nation.

Objectivity and partisanship

Our turn to partisan media, particularly on cable news and talk radio, has increased polarization and helped make our politics dysfunctional; when every issue is treated as black or white, good or evil, we fail to find common ground or room for compromise. As a result, major national problems like immigration and a decaying infrastructure fester, unaddressed and unresolved.

We've had bitter partisanship before, including at the beginning of our country. But going back to those times is not progress. Partisan media inhibit honest, balanced debate about the challenges we face as a nation. A U.S. senator, Patrick Moynihan, once observed that every man is entitled to his own opinion but not his own facts. That was years ago, but Moynihan's maxim still holds.

We need facts as much as ever, even if the communications revolution has altered how quickly we can get them. My first time in Poland, when it was still behind the Iron Curtain, we got most of our news when the diplomatic pouch brought a weekly supply of the International Herald Tribune. In the same country fourteen years later, I could read that morning's edition of the *Washington Post* or the *New York Times* on my computer at the embassy.

The Way It Was

One of my journalistic heroes was CBS Anchor Walter Cronkite, who concluded his nightly broadcast with the signoff, "and that's the way it is today..." There was good reason that, back then, he was considered the most trusted man in America. We believed him because he reported the news straight, even when it was painful, as when he told us it wasn't working in Vietnam.

We have quality news outlets that still follow Cronkite's model today. I put the *New York Times* on top of my own list for its commitment to all the news that's fit to print. Without fear or favor. This is the gold standard, even if neither the Times nor any other news organization would claim it always reaches it.

The opposite extreme are one-sided outlets like talk radio, cable news, and the comment sections of social media. What you frequently see there is partisanship run amuck. Standards like objectivity and fairness are lost in this thicket. So are basic principles like the double time, double check rule. The double check rule—verification—is too often ignored in the 24/7 media whirl.

The very concept of "partisan journalism" strikes me as a contradiction in terms. Political advocacy or propaganda are more accurate descriptions of what these outlets offer. The negative trend has even extended to the Office of the White House Press Secretary, where traditional standards are no longer observed. The sharp partisanship, disregard for the truth and mockery of reporters displayed during the daily briefings are all foreign to my understanding of a spokesman's role. The bully pulpit should be a place for balanced, civilized discourse; the spokesperson after all, is paid by taxpayers, not the President's campaign or his party.

Foreign interference

The discovery of foreign interference in our electoral process is an unwelcome addition to an already-heady mixture. Russia exploited Facebook, Google, YouTube, Twitter, and more traditional media to try affect our 2016 campaign. They also tried—reportedly without success—to hack into voter rolls and electoral mechanisms in at least twenty states.

Our huge intelligence community, sixteen agencies strong, concluded that Russia intervened to undermine public faith in our political process, to denigrate Hillary Clinton and her prospective administration, and to advance the candidacy of Donald Trump.

As of the fall of 2018, twenty-five Russians had been indicted for multiple, election-related crimes, from hacking into email accounts at the Democratic National Committee to stealing identities and creating phony on-line personas to running thousands of on-line issue ads on inflammatory and divisive issues or events.

To me, this Russian campaign was nothing less than an attack on our system of government and way of life. We should all be outraged about it, not divided on partisan lines. We would not sit still if a Russian ship bombarded Boston or Miami, and we should not tolerate this new form of warfare either. We went to war in Vietnam in 1964 when a North Vietnamese boat allegedly fired at (and missed) one of our warships off the coast of Vietnam.

Special Counsel Mueller's job is to find out precisely what Russia did in 2016. He's also examining whether Americans associated with the Trump campaign conspired with Russians in this effort. He's not trying to establish whether Russia's activity swung the 2016 election, which is unprovable—either way. Countless factors combine to cause citizens to vote as they do (or sit it out).

Still, if you believe in advertising, you have to think all the agitation on social media had **some** impact. Would U.S. companies spend $83 billion a year on digital advertising if they didn't think the media exposure helped their brand?

In any case, the very effort **to try** to affect the result is outrageous and unacceptable. Some offer up the everybody-does-it defense, but notably President Putin himself is not among them. Instead, he apparently finds it more tenable to simply deny actions we know to be true.

The United States needs to react forcefully to this outside attack on our democracy. For one, we must improve our cyber defenses; we have technical experts working on this, but they will never be able to guarantee 100 percent success, given that technology keeps advancing

and playing defense is harder than offense. The most we can expect is to reduce the risks.

The other part of a serious strategy must be to convince bad actors that the price will be too high for the potential gains. In other words, deterrence, the policy that helped us win the Cold War. Moscow (and other would-be miscreants, like North Korea and China), need to know they will be held to account, not allowed to hide behind cutouts or the "plausible deniability" that Mr. Putin learned in his KGB days.

The fact that Russia, according to our national security chiefs, was back at it, resorting to the same tricks in 2018, was proof positive that we've so far failed to impress Russia with our resolve.

Facebook and Google and other social media organizations have plenty of soul searching to do themselves. They've admitted mistakes in allowing their platforms to be abused. That's a start. Now they must work with national security officials—and Congress—to develop workable safeguards. Walking the fine line between preventing abuses and censorship will be tough; but, having invented the Internet, Americans can also figure out how to prevent it from being used against us.

Media, the military and national security

When I was on the faculty of the National War College in the early 2000s, our military experts were beginning to think about how to use social media tools to our benefit and defend against those who would harm us. That task has become even more imperative since the 2016 election.

The fight, as it so often is, will be about getting resources needed for the job. The cyberwarfare and Artificial Intelligence (AI) experts in in our Armed Forces are waging an uphill battle for a decent slice of the defense budget. They're competing with big ticket hardware like tanks, and planes and ships, which create jobs and so have strong Congressional advocates. The military-industrial-Congressional complex can't just expect more of everything. A choice must be made for the wars of today and tomorrow, not the past. Should we keep building more multi-billion-dollar aircraft carriers—we already have more of them than the rest of the world combined—or direct more resources to more modern threats, like cyberwarfare?

Conclusions

Media must redouble reform efforts to grapple with all these issues and others, such as how to report on terrorism without encouraging terrorists. New business plans are needed to make a buck in a digital world while also honoring core journalistic standards. One example is "The Elements of Journalism," a book by two highly respected journalists, Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel. Another is an internet site developed by the Newseum to improve media literacy; it includes some excellent case studies for students.

Google has said it will spend $300 million to combat the spread of misinformation. It will explore tactics such as rankings the reliability of sources to lead people to more authoritative content on both Google and YouTube. It will also try to combat bad actors who exploit breaking news to surface inaccurate content.

Google is also launching a "Disinfo Lab" with the Shorenstein Center at Harvard to study ways to curb misinformation, and will partner with Poynter Institute, Stanford U and Local Media Association to help youths with digital info literacy. Some university libraries are doing similar work by offering instructions in computer literacy and tips on identifying reliable sources.

Facebook's Zuckerberg has acknowledged some regulation of his industry may be needed, as in broadcasting. Facebook itself now requires that political or issue ads indicate their sponsors and that Facebook members get to decide whether and how their data is shared. The European Union has done pioneering work in insisting that social media platforms give users control over their own data. The EU has also levied big fines for non-compliance and required platforms to spot and delete illegal content.

Our federal government must get serious about dealing with cyberwarfare. That includes political measures to dissuade countries to refrain in their own best interests, along with tighter safeguards against lone wolfs, foreign agents or other hostile users. Administration officials, Congress and social media chiefs need to work closely together to develop appropriate and effective forms of regulation.

And then there is we, the people. We can improve our media habits—and support good journalism—by respecting facts and accuracy. We can separate information and facts from opinion and political propaganda. Instead of relying on slanted, one-sided reports, we can look for fairness, objectivity and completeness.

Finally, we can hold candidates and officeholders accountable. We can reject falsehoods, platitudes, empty promises, and bigotry of any stripe. Let's demand that they tell us the truth; we can handle it.