

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

**ARLEN RAY WILSON**

*Interviewed by: Don Kienzle*  
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## INTERVIEW

[Note: This interview was not edited by Arlen Wilson.]

*Q: Okay, today is Friday, November 26, 1999. I'm Don Kienzle, and we're at the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training. I have the pleasure this morning of interviewing Arlen Wilson, who served as labor attaché in at least five different diplomatic posts. Arlen, thank you very much for agreeing to give an interview to the project. Can we begin with a little bit about your personal background, where you were born, came from, education?*

WILSON: My pleasure. I was born in Denver in July 1942. When I was five, I moved to Casper, Wyoming, where I went through grade school, high school, and Casper Community College for my associate's degree. While my family was in Colorado, my

father was a trade unionist. He was a boilermaker. When we moved to Wyoming, he was the vice-president of a Teamsters' Local in my hometown. I eventually went on to finish a bachelor's degree at Oklahoma State University and a master's degree back at the University of Wyoming, both in history, and developed a serious case of *Wanderlust*.

*Q: You mentioned that you majored in history. Did you specialize in a particular type of history?*

WILSON: As an undergraduate at Oklahoma State I focused more on East Asia than anything. Going back home to save some money and accelerate my master's degree, the University of Wyoming really didn't have anything other than American history courses, so I did basically an American diplomatic history master's degree. But keeping my interest in the Orient, I wrote my master's thesis on a massacre of Chinese workers, miners, in Rock Springs, Wyoming, in 1885, which was a very interesting story, ultimately effected the election of 1888, may have in part explained why Cleveland was a two-term president but with Mr. Harrison in the middle. The Chinese immigration issue became a hot political topic at the time. It launched the political career of Francis E. Warren. Most people who haven't heard of him but know his son-in-law. He was the father-in-law of "Blackjack" Pershing, and also chairman of the Senate Armed Forces Committee, which may explain one reason why Mr. Pershing was promoted over all of his peers so rapidly. But yes, as I say, even my master's thesis was written on labor issues. [Ed: see <https://www.sweetwaternow.com/the-1885-chinese-massacre-not-rock-springs-finest-hour-part-2/>]

I started teaching at my old community college in 1965 and took the Foreign Service Exam in 1966.

Because of the budget strain of the Vietnam War, the State Department undertook the BALPA review of its personnel needs and cut Department staffing. Consequently, the Foreign Service did not hire in 1967 [Ed: or 1968 or 1969], therefore I was invited to take a management position with the Civil Service Commission in 1968 pending entry into the Foreign Service. In 1970 finally the Foreign Service came through, and in April 1970 I joined the noble 91<sup>st</sup> A-100 class at the Foreign Service Institute. [Ed: Other 91<sup>st</sup> A-100 classmates who have been interviewed to date by ADST are Ed Abington, Sally Beth Bumbry, Lynn Lambert, and David Reuther.]

My first assignment was to a two-person consulate in Medellín as vice-consul [Ed: Arlen arrived at post in January 1971, probably after Spanish language training. The Consul may have been Cabot Sedgwick.] ---

*Q: In Colombia.*

WILSON: —in Colombia, a lovely city that nobody had heard of in 1970.

*Q: It's well known now.*

WILSON: Well-known now. What happened at that point was the Foreign Service in 1970 did not have a cone structure [Ed: The Foreign Service developed, like the military, occupational specialties called “cones:” political, economic, consular, administrative and public affairs], and during my interval in Medellín, the current Foreign Service cone system was created. The understanding was, essentially, for those of us who didn’t have a cone, that you would be assigned a cone of the functional area of your ongoing assignment. Having been in Medellín and in a two-person post, having no contacts with anyone in the Department, there only seemed one way of becoming a State Department political officer, rather than staying on the consular side, which I really did not want to do, and that was to take the State Department year-long labor attaché or labor officer training program. And so I applied for that, and I and three others were selected and in 1972 began the labor training program, basically spending most of the time at what was in effect the first semester of the school year with the Department of Labor in Washington and then the second semester at the Harvard Trade Union Program (TUP) in Boston.

*Q: Now do you want to backtrack just a little bit to Medellín? Did you have any contact with trade unions while you were there?*

WILSON: No, in a two-person post with a heavy consular load, I was pretty much locked in the building. I was the administrative officer, I was the communications officer, I was the post security officer, I was the cryptographic officer, I was the consular officer.

*Q: Jack of all trades.*

WILSON: I did everything. Anything that was done outside of the building, in effect, was done by the consul. Medellín was the center of Colombian entrepreneurial activity in Colombia. The local labor leaders were really not on our radar screen.

*Q: How about the drug trade? Was that active at that point?*

WILSON: Well, only in that you could buy a giant baggie of marijuana for about a buck and a half, but no. Medellín was an exceptionally energetic and violent place. Colombia had not too much earlier escaped its 12-year civil war, *La Violencia*, and had created a system of alternating political parties in power. But the inheritance of violence was still very great. It was a real rough town.

*Q: Okay, now you entered the labor training program in the fall of 1972. Who were the others in the program at that time?*

WILSON: Peter Dodd, Peter Mayer, and Ken Longmeier. We all went through the same process. We spent basically three months knocking on doors at the Department of Labor and calling on trade unions around town. Then I think the Labor Department really didn’t know what to do with us for a full year, so it was really a nice relief to dump us off at the Harvard Trade Union Program, which started in January [Ed: 1973] and went through the

whole semester. I think we finished that in May. Then following that, I had a two-week internship with the Oil and Chemical Atomic Workers' Union in Denver, and then off to Honduras for my first labor assignment.

*Q: How did you like the TUP program at Harvard with Joe O'Donnell?*

WILSON: Uh, I guess if I'm allowed to be indiscreet here and undiplomatic, I think all of us, the four labor officers, were disappointed in the program. It was not really, I think, an intellectual examination of the labor movement. It was really sort of a program of boosterism for the AFL-CIO. In our cynical view of the way the program worked, I think we kind of developed the notion that perhaps—and this is said in jest as much as anything—having the American trade unions in there was a way of Harvard looking as if it were being impartial and seeing things on both sides—and also maybe a message to the future captains of American industry that here is American labor: you have nothing to fear. But the programs that we had, the classes that we shared with the MBA students were superb, but the rest of it was really, I think, of an academic level you would have expected in any American community college, and the AFL-CIO—this was not a program for senior trade union leadership; this was a program for mid-level AFL union leadership and often was a reward for people who were going to be retiring. Its substance was not what at least I had hoped for, but it was an interesting learning experience, sharing a dormitory with Pete Fosco, for example, out of the Laborers' Union—our dorm mate was grandson Pete, not the old man Pete. The old man Pete was our commencement speaker.

*Q: Oh, is that right?*

WILSON: But several of the foreign students boycotted that because young Pete Fosco, in his inimitable accent, had suggested that maybe the foreign students who were attending the program ought to have an American read their paper because he had trouble with their accents. So, on balance, the foreign trade union people there were probably at an organizational level above the people from the AFL-CIO, on balance. And I shouldn't make generalizations. There were some really good people from the AFL-CIO unions who were clearly going to be on their way up. But aside from the programs that we shared with the MBA students on labor-management relations or labor law, for example, the academic level was pretty basic.

*Q: How about the training program overall? Any comments on that?*

WILSON: Well, this, I think, was probably the first time that the training program had been done for a year like that, and I think it was sort of feeling its way. There were days when we were expected to do nothing more than stay sitting around in the Department of Labor library reading because we didn't have appointments. So I had the impression that there had been a bureaucratic fight between State and Labor about who was going to control the Labor Officer Training Program and Labor had won it, but hadn't really spent a great deal of time organizing a detailed program that would keep people really busy for the whole time we were at labor. It was useful, though, for the times that we had it,

particularly the going around town and visiting the unions that are headquartered in Washington. It was also helpful to knock on doors at the Department of Labor and meet the people who ran the various programs and the various bureaus. I don't think, in effect, that we really needed a year. The good substance that we had in the program probably we could have done it in six weeks at labor, and then, if they wanted to go to the Harvard program, they could have. What they ultimately did, because my class at Harvard was so negative on the benefit that was received after such an investment of time, the training program actually evolved to where you didn't spend the whole months at Labor, at DOL; you went to Harvard and went to the Kennedy School of Government for a semester and then took the Labor program for a semester. Ultimately, it was dropped altogether. I think the reviews on its attendees indicated that for the labor officer the Harvard program was probably of minimal use. So, I'm kind of being an iconoclast here. I thought the program could have been shorter and we could have moved along to post or done something, but I found the most useful parts the knocking on the doors in town and the two weeks I spent with the Oil, Chemical, and Atomic Workers—and then there were some field trips, to New York and Delaware, visiting some factories and seeing some people. I remember we went to the Domino sugar factory in Boston; we went to the Chevrolet plant in Tarrytown, New York. And so actually getting out and seeing private sector labor-management relations folks, there were interesting parts and useful parts. I just felt it could have been accelerated.

*Q: Who was the coordinator at the Labor Department?*

WILSON: Harold Davie.

*Q: Moving on, what was your assignment to Honduras like?*

WILSON: Well, Honduras, my first labor assignment, was wonderful. One of the now-deceased but superb labor officers, Jack O'Grady, had been there first, and Jack was a wonderful man, and when the banana workers' unions were developing in Honduras had worked with them very closely, and AIFLD had gotten in there and had developed a relationship of trust that was just remarkable. [Ed: The American Institute for Free Labor Development was established in late 1961 by the AFL-CIO in the western hemisphere. It received funding from the U.S. government, mostly through USAID.] And for me to have access to anybody who was in the Banana Workers on the north coast was just to mention that I was one in a direct line of Jack O'Grady, and suddenly I was a brother. I have never seen anybody who was more effective in capturing the attention and the affections of the people he was working with and the trust. He was there at a very exciting time for them, when American banana companies were resisting unionization, and Honduras, through that process, built probably the most effective democratic trade unions in all of Central America, certainly, and probably as strong as any in Latin America.

My frustrations in Honduras were not at all with the substance of the job, but typical Uncle Sam frustrations, in that I didn't have any travel money, and the Embassy where I was assigned was in Tegucigalpa and the unions were on the coast. Therefore, getting up to see the people that I needed to see became a real problem because the embassy

couldn't even give me 50 cents to take a taxi ride downtown. I became sort of dependent on the charity of the very lavishly funded AID mission in Honduras, which had bought itself an airplane to fly their people around the country. I was able to hitch a ride on the AID aircraft from time to time, but for the first six months I was there, I didn't have any travel money or any representational funds.

But Honduras certainly had a fascinating trade union environment, and one in which you had democratic trade unions on the north coast and essentially a Communist-affiliated one with Standard Fruit, altogether different international parents. Also growing at the time were the Christian Democrats, who had a very healthy skepticism about the U.S. Embassy labor officer because of the closeness that the embassy was seen to have with the AFL-CIO and the hostility between the AFL-CIO and the international Christian trade union movement. So it took some doing to worm my way into the confidence of the Christians, and we found them very important. Honduras was a military dictatorship at the time, but we saw the Christian Democratic movement as having real prospects in Honduras in politics, and the trade union movement was a very, very strong part of that. So it took me months before they would even see me, and when they finally did, I saw the entire executive committee every time I went over there. Nobody was trusted to see me by themselves in case I would corrupt them. And finally, I'd been over there about four or five times when I called on the president and he and I were alone in a room, and I said, "Where is everybody?" And he says, "It's okay, now. You and I going to now talk by ourselves." But that was shortly before I left.

*Q: Was there an AFL-CIO representative in the country at the time?*

*WILSON:* There were two: Jack Haeberle and Bruce Jay, and Bruce was the assistant and Jack was the senior. And I found Haeberle just an absolute delight, charming man, principled, great to work with. He and I made a fine team. The way we did things in Honduras and later in Ecuador was, even though the AIFLD contract was an AID contract, I administered it. So I worked out the contract and the terms and did the evaluations, working very closely with Jack. We're still friends. He's retired now from AIFLD. They did some very good things, but there was a real difference between Honduras and the rest of the countries that I worked on in that Honduras had a really, really effective, powerful trade union movement, and the difference between that and others was our effort, I think, in trade unionism in Latin America and Africa and partly in Asia was really pretty much a Cold War sort of enterprise, and if the Communists and create trade unions, so will the democrats. Honduras, the historical circumstances cried out for the creation of effective trade unions, and they were going to have their trade unions come hell or high water because of the abuses of the large multinational employers, and the AFL-CIO was very helpful in creating those unions. But those unions would have been powerful and strong and democratic even if there hadn't been 20 cents worth of help or advice from anybody.

*Q: And the multinational corporations—what United Fruit and—*

*WILSON:* United Fruit and Standard Fruit.

*Q: Those were the two main ones?*

WILSON: Those were the two. Ecuador later, the efforts had been, “oops, the Communists are here, so we have to create a trade union movement.” Now, when you create a trade union movement out of whole cloth when the historical circumstances in the country are not propitious, then it’s really very difficult to create substantive, vital, genuine organizations. You can prop things up, and you can pay the bills, and you can have people, and they’ll sure be trade unionists if you want to pay them money to do it, but in terms of the real crying need, workers responding to protect their interests—that was certainly present in Honduras and was not present at my next labor assignment, Ecuador.

*Q: To backtrack just a little bit, you said the AFL-CIO had trouble understanding the role of the Christian Democrats in Honduras.*

WILSON: I don’t know if they had any trouble at all understanding the role. It was that the international trade union movement was divided into three groups, the WFTU [World Federation of Trade Unions], the ICFTU [International Confederation of Free Trade Unions], and the Christians. And each of those three groups were separately organized in Honduras and saw themselves as adversaries. And so the Christians, knowing the relationship of the AFL-CIO with FESITRAN [National Union Federation of Workers of Honduras], which was the democratic trade unions—and FESITRAN themselves, didn’t have a close relationship with the Christians—they were all competitors, so that was where the suspicion came from. But Honduras was just a microcosm of the way the international trade union movement was divided in the early ‘70’s, and I had always suggested to Bill Doherty that there were, it seemed to me, the Christians and the ICFTU-affiliated unions should be natural allies, considering the larger picture of what you were trying to achieve, because those unions were indeed democratic, as were the ones that were AFL-CIO. But the way the world was divided at that time, the competition was. . . . I can’t remember, what were the Christians called? The WCL?

*Q: WCL, I think.*

WILSON: The WFTU the Communists, and the ICFTU the democrats.

*Q: And did Bill listen to your arguments?*

WILSON: Oh, Bill never listened to me at all. No, I don’t think he ever did. And I think over time the logic of that did work out. I think there has been over the years a growing closeness internationally, and not just in Honduras, but between the genuinely democratic arms of the trade unions. And I think with the collapse of the Soviet Union and WFTU, this is probably going to continue.

*Q: And your relations with Bill Doherty were—*

WILSON: Oh, they were fun.

*Q: —rocky, or—?*

WILSON: Oh, not at all. Bill was a wonderful guy, but Bill—did you know Bill?

*Q: Yes. We've interviewed him, as a matter of fact.*

WILSON: Bill is a political personage. He's wonderful and full of bluster, and I was young and new to the business, and I think maybe he patronized me a little bit, but we got along fine. We didn't see him very often. We saw Andy McClellan of the AFL-CIO from time to time, and Jesse Friedman. Friedman was down. But the person I had trouble with running the AIFLD program was Ed Marsciulu, the AID director, not anybody on the trade union side. And Marsciulu had a massive AID program. The State mission was really small, and he was nagging me about the way that I was dealing with AIFLD. And what happened, they got a young program director—well, I guess he became one of three program people at the AID mission—who had a visceral dislike for Doherty and the whole idea that the American taxpayer would be giving any money to trade unions.

*Q: Do we want to name this individual?*

WILSON: No, we don't. I have no idea what he's doing now, but he was awfully young and naïve, I think. But that view of the impropriety of using development money to help trade unionism was not unique to this person, and I think what happened, AID had a prejudice of where they were going to put their money and how they were going to do it. They were going to do these government-to-government programs and they were going to build these clinics and schools and all of these things, and they saw AIFLD's purpose as being a political purpose, not as being a developmental purpose. They did not accept the notion that effective democratic trade unions were a necessary development tool, so they felt that, in effect, AID should not be charged with managing the AFL-CIO institutes abroad, because it was really politics, and it had nothing to do with economic development. So, I found a lot of institutional hostility in all the areas, all the countries I worked in where we did have AIFLD missions, that is, the AID mission at large not liking the notion that they had to administer the AIFLD contract. And I did it in Honduras, but basically, with Marsciulu and this other guy on our case about how we were dealing with it, they had 23 officers and we had eight, and I was spending a lot of time on running the AIFLD program, and I just told Marsciulu, "Here, take it back. You don't like the way I'm doing it? You do it." And I refused to administer the AID's AIFLD program anymore. I worked it on the substantive side, and sort of the political side to be certain that what they were doing was consistent with U.S. national interests and we weren't going to be embarrassing each other, but in terms of following the money around, AID took that over. And when I did that, my relationship with Marsciulu improved remarkably.

*Q: Is that right?*

WILSON: Marsciulu ran the country, really. The ambassador [Ed: Phillip Victor Sanchez] was a political cipher, and Marsciulu, with his incredible amount of money, for that little country, really, I think, was probably the most powerful person in the country, including the president. I was in his office one day, I remember, when he called up the finance minister and just literally chewed him out, like he was an errant teenage son, and explaining to him that he had to take this particular program that Marsciulu wanted him to take because if he didn't he'd pull the money from something that the minister wanted. So I thought the AID mission in Honduras was very arrogant.

Q: Hardball politics.

WILSON: The notion of not liking tax money going to support trade unions abroad was illustrated to me when I gave a briefing to the new military group commander, and when I talked to him about what I did and the AIFLD program, and he said, "Wait a minute, let me make this clear." He said, "You watch these people, and they come here, and they've got these two people here, and they're giving hundreds of thousands of dollars to Honduran trade unions. Is that right?" I said, "That's right." And he says, "Oh my God! Does the Congress know this?" This is a brigadier general. I said, "Indeed, the Congress knows it, and the Congress is appropriating the money." But he was stunned by the very notion that there would be American foreign assistance money going to unions.

Q: *Any other observations about Honduras you'd like to make?*

WILSON: No, as I say, I had a great time in Honduras, and the trade unionists were marvelous, but as I say, the difference for me, why Honduras. . . . AIFLD was inclined to take credit for the success of CIPATERCO, the banana workers' union, and the FESITRAN, the federation, and certainly they played an important role of support, and it was a success story, and I think you take your successes where you get them; but my own analysis as a historian was why they were successful was not because of the AFL-CIO—they were successful because they had to be successful because the behavior of the fruit companies was just outrageous. So they had created, of years of abuse of the workers, a very strong need for this to be balanced by effective trade unions. I think they would have gotten there even without the AFL-CIO, but I think they probably got there faster.

Q: *Was there grievance and a need for countervailing power of some sort?*

WILSON: Yes, so no matter how much money we put into the AIFLD pot in my next country, in Ecuador, they never built genuinely independent trade unions.

Q: *Okay, shall we move to Ecuador, then, and you left Honduras in—*

WILSON: —in '75 and went straight to Ecuador.\*\*\*

Q: *In fall of '75?*

WILSON: Yes. And Agustín Torres was the AIFLD country rep, and he was a Nicaraguan by birth, had gone to school with Tacho Somoza, had taken a bachelor's degree in Salamanca University in Spain, and he was, I thought, very, very effective in developing superb relationships with the trade unions. The most effective of the democratic trade unions was in Guayaquil, and I used to travel to Guayaquil, oh, about once every six weeks to see the unions. But both in Honduras and in Ecuador I was a part-time labor officer. That was the one part of the portfolio I did, but probably only worked at it a third of my time.

*Q: What were you doing as your other responsibilities?*

WILSON: Well, in a two-person political section, I was doing everything. We were trying to move Honduras toward democratic government and the same later in Ecuador, so just doing the traditional Foreign Ministry stuff, Labor Ministry contact, political reporting. In Ecuador we were making real progress. The Ecuadorians were making progress in democratic government. My job was to reestablish contact with the political parties that we had lost contact with during long years of military government. They wanted a mid-level officer to do that, not a senior one, so maybe to make it a little less visible what we were doing. So as well as doing the AIFLD and the labor work, I really spent more time on internal domestic politics than on labor.

And it was a pretty routine thing. Torres was a very good country program director, and Pepe Chávez the head of CIOSOL—in Spanish it's the same acronym for ICFTU—C-E was the Confederación Ecuatoriana and C-I was the Confederación Internacional, or the name for ICFTU in Spanish, so they were very similar. Pepe Chávez was a very young, charismatic independent-minded trade unionist who was going to be nobody's man, and he just about drove everybody nuts, because he got very involved in politics. He took public positions that caused the AIFLD leadership just to shudder, that he really wasn't following the party line very well.

We had one problem. He took on the government, contrary to my advice and that of Gus Torres, and got himself put in jail. And we were very concerned about his well-being. We thought he might just well end up dead, so I made several strong approaches to the minister of Labor, who at that point was a military officer, trying to educate him a bit about trade unionism in the United States and how strongly we felt about this. He was altogether inclined to let Pepe sit in jail forever, but I think this is the one time that I've made a civil rights or human rights approach that it actually worked. And Pepe did get out of jail, and he was all right, and I think he recognized that without the United States Government going to bat for him he would have been there a lot longer.

*Q: He owed you one?*

WILSON: Well, if he did, he had an interesting way of showing it. He was ambitious and he was independent and what he was doing that drove the AIFLD people crazy was that he was in touch with the Communists. And they would do joint general strikes or demonstrations or things, and the AFL-CIO didn't like that at all.

*Q: Not amused.*

WILSON: But Pepe felt that it was much more necessary for there to be trade union solidarity on issues against the military government than it was just him. Torres went on to be—I can't remember where Gus went—but they brought in somebody who had come from their office in Washington who was one of the most difficult human beings I have ever dealt with—absolutely no personal—how would I say it?—no people skills whatsoever. And he was determined to bring Pepe Chávez to line, and he started acting like he was the president of the union rather than Pepe Chávez, and it got to be very, very bad.

*Q: This was the AID—*

WILSON: No, no. This was the AFL-CIO guy. I'm sorry, this was the AIFLD guy.

*Q: AIFLD representative in country. Nameless, or—*

WILSON: Yes, I think he has to be nameless. You can check the records and find him, but I think since I'm probably slandering him or libeling him. . . .

*Q: This would have been 1977?*

WILSON: Probably '77, yes, exactly. We put up with this quite a bit. I finally concluded—we had a very nice-guy ambassador, and the guy was driving us nuts, and I asked the ambassador [Ed: Richard Bloomfield -May 1976-January 1978] to give Doherty essentially an ultimatum that the guy had to leave. And we called him in and had a really profound conversation about how you're going to have to change your behavior and stop making these public remarks that the press are picking up and doing all of these things. He said, "Oh, please don't send me home, don't send me home. I'll be good, I'll be good." And then I can't remember what atrocity he pulled, but I was I don't know if you remember the funny money, the Tunisian dinars and excess currency labor attaché conferences we had. The first one I attended was in Tunisia in 1977, if you can imagine going from Ecuador to Tunis for a labor officer conference. And at that point we had essentially. . . I had convinced the ambassador that this gentleman had to go. And so I sat down in Tunis with Sam Haddad and Doherty and Jesse Friedman, and we worked out his departure.

I can't remember who he was replace by, kind of a rough-hewn—I can't remember his name. I can see his face—wonderful person. And those problems just evaporated. They were gone. And Bill brought this fellow back and put him at Front Royal at their little training thing and just kept him there forever, because it became very clear that he was not, I think by his very psychological makeup, well suited for the kind of job of being politically sensitive in someone else's country. So I have no idea what that person is doing now, but I do remember that I think he left AIFLD ultimately and was working as a lawyer in Front Royal.

I tried to get Jack Haeberle back. Haeberle had been so good in Honduras I tried to talk Doherty into sending Haeberle down there, but he had other things for Haeberle to do. So I think that's about . . . I left feeling that CEOSOL was a pretty vulnerable trade union confederation, that its component parts were in better shape. The Guayaquil region federation was, I think, in good shape. The sugar workers unions in that part of the country were pretty strong. But it's my conviction that had AIFLD not been there, that was a trade union that would not have survived, that it was sort of an artificial imposition, more created out of Cold War practice than really reflecting a crying national need for democratic trade unions. So I don't know what ever became of Pepe Chávez. He was still in business. I went to the ILO meeting in June of 1982 in Geneva and ran into Chavez there. He was still president of CEOSOL, but I don't know whatever became of him ultimately or how strong the trade unions are in Ecuador at this point.

*Q: What were the major trade unions there and what effect did . . .*

WILSON: I think the Communists was the CTE, the Confederación de Tabajadores Ecuatorianos. I don't remember what the Christians were called, but the divisions were the same as they had been in Honduras, with the Communists and the Christians and the democrats. The issue that Chávez, as I say, was having with AIFLD was his inclination to want to work jointly with the other confederations, and the AFL-CIO didn't like that very much.

*Q: What economic sectors were prominent in Ecuador?*

WILSON: Well, sugar—Ecuador didn't have much of an economy, so the sugar workers on the coast and I think the Guayaquil port—that was about it. It was not a country that had large-scale employers. This was the advantage that the trade unions had in Honduras. You had these massive companies with thousands and thousands of employees, and it created the necessary critical mass to be able to organize, but that never happened in Ecuador.

*Q: You didn't have major multinationals active in Ecuador?*

WILSON: Well, Texaco, ultimately, from oil, but I don't think the unions were succeeding in getting into the oil side very much. I just remember the sugar workers and the Guayaquil port. I don't recall any other major unions in Ecuador.

*Q: How were your working relations within the embassy? Did you find the State side supportive of the labor function?*

WILSON: Yes, we really didn't have the traditional AID operation in Ecuador, so it was not like Honduras. If you remember, Ecuador was an OPEC member. We were banned from having foreign assistance programs to OPEC nations. We had, in effect, and AID office, a liaison office, but we did not have a whole fully-fledged AID mission. We did have AIFLD, but it depended more on my office in doing the programming than anybody

in AID, because as I say there was no genuine AID mission. So the problems we ran into with the AID mission, resenting the very presence of AIFLD in Honduras, was never an issue in Ecuador—but it might have been had we had an AID mission.

*Q: I see, so that explains a lot.*

WILSON: It could be. I think we only had a two-person office. We had an AID director and, in effect, no troops. So ultimately, I think, we were able to do some programming in Ecuador, but at that time, the U.S. sensitivity to the OPEC (Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries) was key. Ecuador was a country that had nothing but its pride, and while it realized after a time that its own particular best interests were not served by being in OPEC, it's pride kept it from withdrawing. It could not accept the fact that it had made a really fundamental mistake and that it was such a tiny player in OPEC that other people were running its interests for it.

*Q: So the exports were fairly limited in oil?*

WILSON: Yes. And Ecuador—and amazing country—could never really understand that sovereign states needed to fulfill terms of contracts as much as companies and people. So over the years they brought in Shell, I think, and Texaco that did the oil exploration in the Amazon Basin and then built the pipelines up over the Andes and down the Pacific ports, but once that got up and running, they saw this as a cash cow and they would unilaterally change the contract terms and make Texaco pay them more money. And ultimately, they had just essentially stolen all of Texaco's benefits from the work. So all exploration ceased, and here's poor little Ecuador, with its limited production and heavily increasing consumption, discovering that it's really not exporting much oil anymore and that the multinationals are simply not interested in dealing with Ecuador because it kept changing the terms and wouldn't live up to its agreements. I don't know what the situation is now. There was a military government, so I don't know if when democratic government was reestablished, in fact, they had done a better job. I do think they have encouraged some further exploration in their Amazon region.

*Q: So there was still a military government event though you were reaching out personally to the political parties?*

WILSON: The whole time I was there it was a military government, but we made pretty serious progress on that. That would be after I left in '78.

*Q: Any other comments you'd like to make about Ecuador?*

WILSON: Oh, I can't think of anything except maybe just a general one of the incredibly different culture between Quito and Guayaquil, in that Quito is a stunningly beautiful city, or at least the surroundings are spectacular, and the people are remarkably cold and reserved. In three years there I was in two Ecuadorian houses. One was the first communion of the senior Ecuadorian local, who worked for AIFLD, and one was for a Foreign Service officer who was coming to Washington and wanted to talk about life in

Washington. Guayaquil was quite the opposite. I had to learn quickly not to let the trade unionists know I would be there overnight because if you were ever there overnight you had to have a party, and they would gather everybody up, and if you were still walking at the end of that party, you were not having a good enough time. I'm not much of a drinker, and so I learned quickly, when I went for two days, I would do politics the first day and then I would do unions the second day, and when the unionists would day, "Are you here overnight?" I'd just say, "No, it's just a one-day trip, and I have to leave on the five-o'clock airplane." So—

*Q: You saved your liver.*

WILSON: I saved my liver that way. And Gus Torres saved my liver on several occasions because he could drink, and he protected me because he knew I didn't. And he and I went off with his local from Guayaquil to the sugar workers, and they started the afternoon—there were 20 of us in a room—and they shut the door and they brought in a case of Scotch whiskey and one glass, and they set this case on the table in the middle of the room, and there were no chairs, and two people went around that room with that glass pouring half glasses of Scotch and handing it, and people just took that Scotch straight down, and it went around the room and I made some crack about not wanting to drink, "What is this? Sugar workers giving us Scotch when *aguardiente* is the sugar workers' drink. Don't you have any of that? I can at least manage *aguardiente*, but not Scotch." They looked at me like I was nuts. They went off and got a bottle of something they called "*crystal*." The only sensation I can remember that was at all similar was when I was working construction and got a mouthful of gasoline when I was siphoning gasoline out of a truck. This taste stuck with me for a week. Immediately I put the glass down, and a fly that had been circumnavigating the room took a dive into that glass and drowned. And we all laughed that it wasn't much of a drink but it was a great insecticide. But at that point, Torres came to my rescue, and told them to leave me alone, that he wanted to have a good time, he wanted to drink, he wanted to play cards, and he didn't want to get killed driving back to Guayaquil. And therefore, I was in effect the designated driver. "And so I don't want Wilson drinking." And so the other 23 of us in that room drank that entire case of Scotch whiskey, and so, in effect, everybody in that room had a half bottle of Scotch in about, maybe, an hour and 15 minutes. So I was the only one who wasn't wobbling on the way out of that room. Gus got to play cards, and they served us some interesting thing that I was told was chicken, but I'm not quite certain what. I think it must have been because the chicken feet were still sticking out of the pot.

At that point then the trade union president's wife took off hiking down the road, and the president got into our car, and I couldn't guess what's going on. And he says, "Well, we're going to the brothel. You and me and the union president are going to the brothel down the street." This was a Tuesday night, mercifully, and it had closed, so we didn't have the embarrassment of. . . .

Gus slept the whole way back to the hotel, about an hour's drive. He had his keys, so he went up to his room, and I had to stop to get my key, and as the door opened, I found Gus Torres lying prone on the floor, face down in a kind of a frozen soldier's attention

position. He had passed out in the elevator, leaned up against the door, and when the door opened he had just sort of tumbled out like a totem pole out onto the floor. So I got a couple of bellhops and managed to get him to bed. But thank Gus Torres, because he saved my life in Ecuador.

*Q: Or maybe you saved his life on the way back to the hotel.*

WILSON: Could be.

*Q: That's a neat story. Okay, any other neat stories you'd like to tell us?*

WILSON: Not about Ecuador.

*Q: Okay, and from Ecuador in 1978—*

WILSON: In 1978 to the El Salvador Desk in the Department [Ed: ARA/CEN]. And I think you probably already are aware of what AIFLD was trying to do in El Salvador and the tragedy that got Mike Hammer killed [Ed: at the Sheraton hotel on January 3, 1981]. Hammer had been a good friend of mine. And when I was the Desk officer, I did work with AIFLD on their efforts to get involved in democratization in El Salvador, and they were basically working with *campesino* unions, which was sort of a new area for AIFLD, I think. And I think El Salvador was a tremendous change for them because suddenly they're doing something that supports US foreign policy in a very dramatic way. The United States was putting a lot of money into El Salvador, seeing this as a very, very important challenge to our interests. So I think that going from, if I remember right, the amount of money they eventually put through AIFLD in El Salvador was probably equal to the money that AIFLD's entire budget previously because it was such a sharp focus.

And then, of course, the tragedy of the three people being killed, and Mike was sitting in a hotel with Mark Perlman and Rodolfo Viera, head of the *campesino* union, and they were all machine-gunned. So that was a tragedy, but I have no idea, I haven't followed Salvador since that time to the point of really knowing how it all turned out, whether—

*Q: Did they ever find the perpetrators?*

WILSON: Oh, I think they know who did it.

*Q: But they didn't \_\_\_\_\_ prosecute them, did they?*

WILSON: No, I don't think so.

*Q: The AFL-CIO was unhappy for a long period of time, and I don't know if they got satisfaction.*

WILSON: They know what political force did it. I don't know if they knew names of people that pulled the trigger, but they certainly know it was from the extreme right.

Salvador was an interesting case in which the right just believed that they'd killed everybody in 1932 on the Communist side and they could do it again, if they would just be turned loose. And that's essentially what happened in Salvador. I was Salvador Desk officer during the Carter Administration, and basically people from the Republican right here had basically gone down to El Salvador and told the right just to cool it, wait for the Carter Administration to be out because when the Ronald Reagan Administration is in then you can start over and kill all the Commies. They were brutal. And it was to my mind a very sad thing, because oppression like that really doesn't work, but it really did create a horrible civil war, and we ended up with Bob White, our ambassador to El Salvador [Ed: March 1980-February 1981], who insisted that the Salvadoran left, which is passionate democrats, were forced into this. He could not believe that the guerilla organizations were genuine Marxist-Leninist organizations with guns and no intention of being democratic.

He screamed at me in the office one day. I've never been treated like that by a fellow Foreign Service officer, when I was trying to explain to him who these people were and their links and ties to Cuba and beyond. He just screamed, "Enough of that bullshit! That's what the CIA's been telling me. It's wrong. I'm going to go down there and create a new government of passionate social democrats." Well, that was just a bunch of crap, and for my mind, Bob White was more of a self-promoter than an ambassador really concerned with advancing U.S. interests. He actually did ask out of the assignment because he had made his mark with the American left by telling Stroessner that he was a human-rights-violating SOB, and when he started looking at what the next place, he could do that, he picked El Salvador. But by the time he actually got down there, we had a government we wanted to support, not oppose. And I don't think he was very comfortable with that, because there had been a military coup. Suddenly we're no longer opposing this rightist government, we're trying to support a reformist military government and an altogether different environment than I think he was happy with.

*Q: Did he resign or just retire?*

WILSON: No, well, the Reagan people—one of the things that about the Reagan folks that distressed me on Central American is that they could not believe that a Foreign Service officer was just a loyal Foreign Service officer and would be carrying out policy for whatever administration was in power. And people, even at my level, I had been threatened by some people who had come over from Jesse Helms's office, the guy who eventually became an assistant secretary for economic affairs in the State Department [Ed: probably Richard T. McCormack, Assistant Secretary of State for Economic, Energy and Business Affairs, February 1983-February 1985.], who threatened my job because as the El Salvador Desk officer I would not do what I was told to do by those people. They'd sent somebody over for a briefing—his name was John Carbo—and he's a real right-wing political operator. I don't know if he's still with Helms or not, but he wanted an in-depth classified briefing, and I don't know what provoked me to pick up the phone and call State Department security and see if he was cleared. I just presumed he was if he was working on the Hill, but he was not, and when he got to my office and started asking me these things, I wouldn't tell him because he wasn't cleared. The things he was asking

were regularly classified, and he was not cleared to have this information. So, he just was furious. And so I got a call from Jesse's office with a very strong voice on the other end, very unhappy with me for my treatment of Mr. Carbo.

*Q: Was this Jesse himself?*

WILSON: No, no. I'd give you his name if I could remember it, because people found it very surprising that he would use such rough language with me because he's such a gentleman, and as I say, during the Reagan Administration actually went to work for the State Department. But he says, "I'll tell you, Wilson, when we Republicans come to power, we're going to come down on El Salvador like a load of shit." And so, well, we all know what happened in Central America during the Reagan Administration, so we don't need to go too far with that.

I didn't really, as I say, do too much with labor on the Salvador Desk, only working a little bit with our friends in AIFLD, but they were really dealing more with the AID mission on the site than they certainly were with the Desk, although I did see Doherty from time to time. I really should have seen Doherty. He always promised me a job, you know, when I left the Foreign Service, I was going to go to work for AIFLD.

*Q: He's retired now.*

WILSON: I've never called him on that. I went off to take a year's vacation. I was the El Salvador Desk officer; in the Pearson Program I became in the assistant city manager of Fort Collins, Colorado, for a year.

*Q: Fort Collins, Colorado?*

WILSON: Yes. And then—

*Q: Do you want to describe that briefly? It sounds like a—*

WILSON: It was wonderful.

*Q: —real change of pace if nothing else.*

WILSON: You know what the Pearson Program is, which has been, of course, corrupted as everything gets corrupted. It started off with Senator Pearson from Kansas believing that a Foreign Service officer who spends his time by living in this city easily forgets what heartland America was all about, and it was a notion of re-Americanizing the Foreign Service. And I think there was also the view that it would help develop a constituency for the Foreign Service in heartland America. And so it started off with a lot of people going—not a lot, I think we didn't have more than 20 or 30 a year—but working for state and local governments, voluntary organizations, think tanks, state trade associations, and a small number of people here in Congress. As I understand it, over time, it grew to where a larger and larger and larger proportion of the people in the

Pearson Program are actually working in the Congress, which is clearly a violation of the very spirit behind the whole idea of getting people out of this political city and re-Americanizing them. But what it did for me was seeing the mess that we were in at the Carter Administration, the election of 1980 and Reagan and the changes here, pessimism, I think, in national politics, and then going to Fort Collins, which is a very conservative city, meaning hard-working and don't borrow your money and be careful, and I went to the City Council meeting and I was just so pleased at how civil everybody was, how things got discussed and things got done and everybody was heard, and it just seemed . . . so nice. I apparently had a silly grin on my face as I walked out of that. That was my first day on the job. It coincided with a City Council meeting. And one of my new colleagues says, "What are you smiling about?" I said, "You know, Washington may be in trouble, but America's in great shape"—just to see democracy at that level and how it was working and then to spend almost a year working for a high-quality city government that was remarkably efficient, that the quality of the employees was superb.

We Foreign Service officers have this myth of how great we are, and the hardest civil service bureaucracy to get into, and you're with the cream of the crop and all of that. And to go into that city manager's senior staff meeting and look around the table and see the performance of those folks and compare that to the State Department, they in no way were secondary in quality to anybody I ever knew in the Foreign Service. They were superb. And so it sort of tended to knock my Foreign Service arrogance back a notch to see how well that city ran and how important it was, because that's the level of government that actually touches people. And in the State Department I had worked with a lot of abstracts and as Desk officer done some real things that I thought maybe had actually helped. I started off my own little personal crusade to get the Peace Corps removed from El Salvador because I was afraid the Peace Corps volunteers were going to be getting killed, running afoul—I mean, not targets necessarily, but with that sort of violence it was just a matter of time. But every day I dealt with concrete issues, and it was a wonderful experience, and it makes you realize that that's . . . city government and state government are really where government does its work more than we do at the federal level.

*Q: Did you choose Fort Collins, or did Fort Collins choose you, or did the State Department assign you by random?*

WILSON: No, you had choices. You could bid generally for the Pearson Program, or you could bid for one specific job; and I bid for two. I'm from Wyoming, and I wanted to go back to Colorado. My mother had had cancer surgery the previous year. I wanted to be in Colorado if I was going to do this, and so I bid on executive assistant to the governor in Denver and then the assistant city manager job in Fort Collins. The city manager came to Washington and interviewed me, and it all worked out very well. And we're still in touch. He's now city manager in Kansas City. But it was a wonderful experience.

After that, Nairobi, two years as regional labor officer.

*Q: And this would have been what time frame?*

WILSON: Somewhere of '80 to '81. So I went to Nairobi as regional labor officer for the countries that were, in effect, in the East African Bureau, so starting in the north we had Djibouti, Somalia, Sudan, Ethiopia, Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, Malawi, Zambia, Mauritius, and the Seychelles—was my beat. And there was a regional labor officer also in Johannesburg, who had Botswana, Zimbabwe, Mozambique. I also did domestic regular foreign ministry things, and I was also, in effect, the attaché for the Luwo and Kamba tribal groups in Kenya. Kenyan politics are very tribal, and the Kikuyus are the dominant tribe, and the Luwos were the second largest and were seen in part by the Kikuyus as a bit subversive because they had been a little bit to the left. And the airlift of Kenyans during the Kennedy Administration studying the United States had been headed, or facilitated, by a young, charismatic Luwo politician named Tom Mboya, and Mboya was assassinated, but those ties to the American Democratic Party still exist, existed then. So this was one of these labor jobs that probably didn't need to exist because there were no trade unions in Africa.

*Q: In any of these countries?*

WILSON: No, not really.

*Q: Even in Kenya?*

WILSON: Well, not . . . not really. What you had was the AFL-CIO's strong insistence that there ought to be a labor officer in Africa, and the only real unions in my region that were independent of government, when I got there the railway workers in Sudan were a political force, but they struck and were smashed by the government. So that just took care of that. The copper workers' union in Zambia was strong and important, and it was headed by a fellow named Freddie Chiluba, who happens to be president of Zambia now. And then Mauritius. Mauritius was filled with vibrant democracy and more trade unions than you can imagine. I think they had something like 96 trade unions in this little, tiny country, and they were strong, they were democratic, they were important, and I traveled to Mauritius three or four times.

*Q: That would have made a nice trip, didn't it?*

WILSON: That was a wonderful trip.

*Q: It's very idyllic there.*

WILSON: Mauritians are some of the nicest people on the planet, just superb. They're wonderful. But Mauritius at that time was the only member country in the Organization of African Unity that had ever had an election in which the opposition won and was allowed to take power.

*Q: Is that right?*

WILSON: Now that has happened subsequently in others. But no, the unions in Kenya had been pretty much coopted by the government and were really not independent of the government by any means, and we did have—what were the initials? AFLE? Or ALC? I can't remember. I remember American Labor Center.

*Q: AALC—African-American Labor Center.*

WILSON: We had a regional representative in—boy, my aged brain is going. I can't remember his name, Italian last name. . . . Very good guy, and we did well in Kenya. It's just that the unions really didn't count much on the political side. You had ostensible parliamentary democracy, but not really. You had a one-party state, very corrupt. It continues to be. But the unions just really weren't heavyweight players in the that.

*Q: Did you have a leader named Joseph Mugabe there?*

WILSON: No.

*Q: Who am I thinking of?*

WILSON: The president of the trade unions was Jonah . . . Jonah? Last name Jum'a. His name was Jum'a Boy.

*Q: Okay.*

WILSON: And he was from the coast, from Mombasa, and a very brusque fellow, but as I say, not really independent of the government. He died of a heart attack shortly after I left. I had no idea who's there. Most of the countries of the region had this tripartite collaborative enterprise by which labor policy was really worked out between a government, a private sector association, and the trade unions, so—there's a term for that, and I can't remember it—that was really the most common way of doing business, that you actually had a formal organization and a formal way of working out these issues, and you really didn't have a free and open competitive process of strikes. It just didn't happen. It was pretty much a controlled process.

*Q: "Guided democracy," as we used to call it?*

WILSON: Well, it's something like that, but I didn't visit all the areas. The ambassador in Uganda [Ed: perhaps Gordon Robert Beyer, June 1980–May 1983] didn't want me there because one of my jobs in Nairobi was dealing with dissident political groups of exiles, and so I was in touch with people in Nairobi that he didn't like, so he wanted me not to darken his embassy door in Uganda. So I didn't go to Uganda, but there was no union activity going on anyway. Tanzania, the ambassador said I was welcome, but there wasn't much of a point because there weren't any union activities going on there. Malawi was the same. I had trouble seeing unions in Zambia because Freddie Chiluba—this was the Kenneth Kaunda presidency period—and the copper workers were seen as a bit subversive, and the embassy was a little nervous about the government's reaction to a

U.S. diplomat calling on the president of the Zambia copper union. So they wanted essentially to establish diplomatic relations with Chiluba, but they didn't want it done in Zambia. So what I did was I arranged to meet Chiluba in Geneva at the ILO so that I could deal with him and establish a relationship with Chiluba during the conference. And it turned out to be cheaper, because the ticket to Geneva was cheaper than the ticket to Lusaka anyway—

*Q: Is that right?*

WILSON: And while I was there, since I hadn't been to Uganda and hadn't been to Tanzania, I made appointments with all of the trade union reps and labor ministers of the countries that I had not visited. So in a week's work in Geneva I got a lot more done for less money than I would have had I actually visited those countries. But Chiluba now has his own problems, of course. Zambia's not doing very well. But that was essentially it, being a labor attaché in a region where there really isn't a lot of union activity going on. So I spent more of my time being a traditional embassy political officer and working with the Luwos and the Kamba and doing some human rights work.

My successor several times removed, whom I met later, actually became . . . the job changed, and he became an instructor at the Kenyan trade union labor education institute.

*Q: Who was that?*

WILSON: I can't remember the name. I only met him once.

*Q: Now, let's see. We do have a list.*

WILSON: The famous list. I left Kenya in '83, so whoever . . . I think one or two removed. George Dragnich replaced me, and he's now labor minister counselor in London, so we're looking at the guy after Dragnich.

*Q: Harry O'Hara?*

WILSON: I think that's it.

*Q: And then later, Howard Cavalier.*

WILSON: No, I think Harry O'Hara was the one. It was kind of interesting—I wanted to extend in Kenya (I had a good time in Kenya), and the ambassador came to my office in embarrassment and he says, "I just realized that if we let you extend, we would lose all three of our political officers in the same week, so we can't do that." He says, "The other two asked first, so you're stuck. You have to leave." The State Department named a fellow who didn't have any political experience and was too senior for the job. This was an FSO-2 ranked job, and I was a 2; and they had this 1 who had done nothing but labor work, and the ambassador saw this job as being more than that. And the ambassador eventually just said no, this officer is not acceptable to us. And it was because of the lack

of general political officer experience. And so they named George, who had been the head of a one-person political section in Lusaka; but they had to send him to labor training. So I think we ended up with a six-month gap between my departure and the arrival of my successor.

*Q: General observations you'd like to make about Kenya?*

WILSON: I had a great time. I very much enjoyed it. Kenya's a tragedy for me because its potential is so great, and yet it is so badly led by a gang of thieves. I think it could be a prosperous democracy, but it is so controlled by these thugs; and it's afflicted, like a lot of countries, by real serious tribalism in terms of the way politics work out. A poor Luwo would rather vote for a rich Luwo than a poor Kikuyu. It's a very tribal . . . Your tribe is your life. Of course, I'm sure that the Kenyans are taking a certain comfort from the Europeans who looked down their noses at them because of this when you see what happened to Yugoslavia, when the tribes have taken Yugoslavia apart, the same sort of phenomenon. I don't know. If you could ever get a genuinely democratic government in place in Kenya, it could be a tremendous place. Our problem there was that we chose not to lean on the Kenyans very hard because the Cold War was still at its peak. We had a resurgent Soviet presence in the Indian Ocean. We had leased Diego García from the British. After Somalia fell apart and Berbera was no longer a decent port for liberty—not that it ever was, I guess—the only decent liberty port for the American Indian Ocean fleet was Mombasa, and we spent millions and millions of dollars dredging the harbor of Mombasa so big American military vessels.

*Q: When you say, "liberty port," do you mean—*

WILSON: Liberty, meaning where do you park the ships and let the sailors get off and blow off some steam.

*Q: Okay.*

WILSON: And it's the only place. So we felt that we needed Mombasa, so as I say, I think it was millions and millions and millions of dollars we put into dredging the port of Mombasa to allow access to American ships. And even then, we couldn't put a carrier in there; carriers had to anchor out. But I went down there. Just coincidentally it was one of the fleet visits, and there were 5,000 American sailors in Mombasa.

*Q: Is that right?*

WILSON: And it was the only place on the continent that you could do that. It drew, I think, every prostitute from probably every surrounding country, too, all the way to Mombasa. It was an interesting place.

*Q: Any thoughts on how African governments can overcome the problems of tribalism. It seems to be endemic in almost every country.*

WILSON: I don't know. Having seen the trends in the world to break up in to smaller and smaller ethnic pieces, I don't know. Maybe that's the only way it will ever work, is to have real devolution of political power to tribal hands. I mean, look what the Brits are doing. You've got a Welsh Parliament and a Scottish Parliament. Maybe the thing to do is to create less of a centralized state and have more of a federal one, where your administrative districts are more precisely related to ethnic lines and have a loosely confederated state in which the national government takes care of certain things and you have a great deal of authority in local government. I don't know.

*Q: But the economic side is going in the other direction.*

WILSON: Watch how our companies are eating other companies, and countries are coming apart. So I don't know.

*Q: That's a tough one.*

WILSON: But there is a solution to it.

*Q: Okay, any other observations you'd like to make about Kenya before we turn to the next thing?*

WILSON: What's next? Well, I think we can pretty much skip Venezuela and . . . we wanted to do labor, because in Venezuela I was the consul in Maracaibo and I did deal with the unions there, but like in a lot of the Latin American countries, the unions in Venezuela were very tied. . . . It's very interesting: instead of the Communist-Christian-democratic division, Venezuela's unions were allied with the principal political parties, with COPE and ADENCO, and as far as I could tell, probably about as corrupt as the parties themselves. I did not see a lot of really vigorous, effective representation of workers interests in Venezuela. The unions were, in effect, just arms of the party, so in my job I didn't deal with them anyway.

*Q: What was your position there?*

WILSON: I was consul of the consulate at Maracaibo. Maracaibo is the oil capital of Venezuela. In the Dominican Republic I really didn't do much except one of my officers was—

*Q: Can you give us the years for the Dominican Republic.*

WILSON: Okay, Maracaibo, 83-'85; the Dominican Republic '85 to '88; and I really didn't do much with trade unions at all. My deputy was labor reporting officer. We didn't have an AIFLD rep. But that program was just pretty much the traditional trade union education and I think probably some administrative subsidy. There were no real issues.

*Q: So, you were the political counselor in the Dominican Republic? What were the main issues there?*

WILSON: Well, the main issue at the time I was there was trying to keep the government that was in power at the time I arrived from stealing the election. And I don't know if we managed to keep it from being stolen, but the person who won the election actually was able to take power, so that was certainly a happy result for us. One of the things that I did while I was there was, after nagging the ambassador about it—do you remember the 1965 invasion of the Dominican Republic by the United States and throwing out Juan Bosch's government, his presidency?

*Q: No, we had a large military force that came in by helicopter, I think—*

WILSON: And occupied the country. Juan Bosch had built a political party that was democratic and had earned the acceptance of the Dominican voter. And I felt that the United States, if we were going to be a positive force in the Dominican Republic, we had to deal with that political party as well as we dealt with the others. And so after much nagging about it, I was finally cleared to approach Bosch. We didn't want to do it at the ambassadorial level. We thought that would be seen as too much of a deal. So I started seeing Juan Bosch about once a week, and I think because he had been a professor and I was interested in history and I had a degree in history, I think he sort of saw me as a pupil. So we hit it off very well. And my successor was able to follow up and develop some serious, normal relationship with the PLD, the party of Juan Bosch. So I was pleased to see that. In fact, that party is in power right now.

*Q: How would you describe it ideologically?*

WILSON: What, oh, it's to the left. It's a social democratic party.

*Q: To the left. Social democratic?*

WILSON: Yes, sure. The larger party, the Revolutionary Democratic Party is a Socialist International party, too, but I don't know if the PLD actually is a member of the Socialist International. I don't think there's much ideological difference between those parties. The political environment in the Dominican Republic is so corrupt that when you're out of power it's easy to be ideological; when you're in power it's a different question.

*Q: A lot of white envelopes going under the table?*

WILSON: I suspect money plays a big deal.

*Q: How do you clean up—*

WILSON: I don't think you do.

*Q: —a régime like that?*

WILSON: Well, it's democratic.

*Q: It's democratic. They're sharing the spoils?*

WILSON: Yes, I think, as one cynical person, a Foreign Service officer that I worked for years ago, said, that what democracy does is it broadens the base of corruption. You just have to spread it further. I've sort of lost touch with the Dominican Republic. I don't know what's happening. But I do know that the PLD is in power and the constitution forbids presidents from succeeding themselves. So the likelihood is that Revolutionary Democratic Party, that was in power when I went to the Dominican Republic in 1985 will again be the new government. They've been out of power since then.

*Q: That provision applies to parties, or individuals?*

WILSON: No, individuals. Some people deal in the thesis that the current president does not want his party to be reelected. He wants to lose because if he steps out of the presidency and his party loses, he can control the party. If he steps out of the presidency and the party elects a new president, then he obviously the president has the handles of power, and he won't be able to. . . . So it's an interesting notion about how much do you really want your party to win, and it depends on whether you want to keep control of it or not, I guess.

*Q: Sounds pretty cynical to me. Okay, what is after the Dominican Republic?*

WILSON: Four years as labor counselor in Ottawa. I don't know what I'll be able to tell you about Ottawa and the job. Obviously, Canada is a real country with a real trade union system, and it really doesn't need an AID mission and it doesn't need the AFL-CIO in there doing anything. I think there was in the Canadian Labour Congress a little bit of the same feeling that pervades the country at large—Canada looking at the United States and the trade union movement looking at the United States—is “don't patronize us.” You know, don't take us for granted, we're important in our own right. And there were some unions who were still international, in the aspect that they had Canadian branches of American-based unions. Steelworkers were among them. The Canadian steelworkers, I felt, the leadership was probably the best of the Canadian leadership, really good. And I think they were well respected inside the international.

*Q: Who was the president?*

WILSON: Gerard. Well, I think it was Leo Gerard, if I remember correctly. They also had a Quebec union, a Quebec nationalist union that wanted Quebec to secede, which was not really much respected by the mainstream unions, and I did develop relationships with those people as well because I thought that if, in fact, Quebec ever makes its own way, at least we ought to be knowing who to talk to. We had a fairly decent relationship with the Canadian Labour Congress. I did personally, knew the people quite well. I'd be invited to their Christmas parties and things like this, and we would make a point of knocking on their door every year about the trade union issues at the ILO and approach the Labour Ministry. They were quite pleasant to me at the Canadian Labour Congress. A

guy by the name of Jackson was the guy who ran the international affairs department, but it was pretty clear that they would listen to me with a smile, but they didn't need any lessons from the United States or from the American Embassy on where their interests lay. So it was kind of just a benign tolerance.

What I think I enjoyed as much as the union work in Canada was—because the unions really overlap a good deal, the leadership, the New Democratic Party—that I was also assigned to work the New Democratic Party.

*Q: Would you say it was a social democratic party in outline?*

WILSON: Yes, it's a socialist party. It's a member of the socialist international. It's to the left, probably, of the American Democratic Party. They've never been a power nationally. They have controlled provincial governments from time to time, particularly British Columbia, Manitoba. A few years ago they did, for one electoral term, manage to capture the government of Ontario, but that didn't last. They're probably, of the three major political parties in Canada, the most ideological. You'll find ideological purists in the NDP, where you won't in the Liberals or the Conservatives. But I enjoyed a great deal getting to know the parliamentary delegations from the New Democratic Party. But Canada's such an important country that even your person carrying the title of labor counselor can't be a full-time labor officer. So I was the deputy to the minister-counselor for political affairs. I did, it would be, regular internal political analysis. I worked the NDP, the trade unions, and I had a portfolio with the Foreign Ministry also that I worked, so issues—in fact, when I got there, I was probably busier doing Latin American issues at the Foreign Ministry, particularly with Central America.

*Q: Because of your personal background?*

WILSON: The fact that every political officer had regional responsibilities to conduct business with the Foreign Ministry, and my predecessor had done Latin America, and so I took that over, but also the background I had was good for it. And eventually we made a switch, because I was doing Asia, and we had a guy there who was doing Africa, and he'd been in Asia and not in Africa and I'd been in Africa, so we swapped. So for my four years there, if we had regional issues—I also did the UN General Assembly work—but if we needed to do a *démarche* on something on Africa policy or Latin America, I was the person who did that. So it was really very routine. Of course, this was the NAFTA period, but the labor officer in Ottawa was only very tangentially connected to that issue. The real substantive work between the Canadian Government and the American Government on labor first took place between the ministries directly, and generally in Washington.

*Q: Between the Minister of Labour and the counterpart—*

WILSON: Yes, the Department of Labor and the Ministry of Labour were working very closely without the involvement particularly of the Canadian Embassy in Washington or the American Embassy in Ottawa. The ministries worked very, very closely and directly.

*Q: Did you have trouble following what they were doing?*

WILSON: No, I'd sort of keep up, because there'd be some reporting written, about I was certainly not a player in this at all. The most interesting issue on the labor side, I think, that we got involved in was a case before the Supreme Court in Canada for the Argentina, Newfoundland, naval base. We have a naval base in Newfoundland that came out of the Bases-for-Destroyers deal in the beginning of World War II, and this is where we listened to submarines and things, at this base in Newfoundland.

WILSON: The base had a union, and it invoked privilege under the Canadian labor law, and the United States Navy decided that they weren't subject to Canadian labor law, asserting sovereign immunity. And so it found its way through the Canadian courts and ultimately to the Canadian Supreme Court. And we had U.S. Navy representatives coming up and the Department of Justice. The Office of International Affairs of the Department of Justice got engaged in fighting this matter before the Canadian Supreme Court and employed counsel in Canada to argue this before the Supreme Court. And so part of my job was coordinating a bit of correspondence communication between the Canadian legal staff and the United States Government. And much to our surprise, actually, the Canadian Government came down on the side of the U.S. Government.

*Q: Is that right?*

WILSON: And so the court said, indeed, the US Government base at Argentina has sovereign immunity and not subject to Canadian law. That was a surprise to all of us.

*Q: And what happened then to the union?*

WILSON: Oh, the union's still there. It was not a question of organization; it was just a question of bargaining with the management of the base on the issues and not being able to do so invoking Canadian labor authorities and getting Canadian Labour Ministry in there telling the base what they were going to do.

*Q: Were they able to work out an amicable \_\_\_\_\_ ?*

WILSON: Well, this happened toward the end of my tour, so I don't know what happened. I think probably yes. The issues weren't all that bad; it was just a question of authority, who had authority. And the base resisted the notion that the Canadian Labour Ministry or the Newfoundland Labor Ministry was providing instruction to them on how they were going to settle this matter. I don't think the issue was that severe. It was not a major issue, but it was just a question of who could tell whom to do what.

*Q: You didn't get involved as a mediator of any sort?*

WILSON: No, but all the issues had been festering through the courts before I ever arrived, so I was only there for the final tort arguments. It was kind of interesting.

But as I say, I'm not quite sure how important it is to have a senior labor officer in Ottawa. From the reporting standpoint, probably, you don't need that kind of rank, and the substantive issues were never really that great. I don't remember—well, in four years' time the United States Department of Labor invoked me to do something only once.

*Q: Is that right? What was that?*

WILSON: There was a mine accident, I think, again, in Newfoundland, and I got engaged in finding the right people and putting people in the right touch with the United States—I can't remember the name of it any more—Mining Administration to get some accident investigators up there.

*Q: Mining Safety something?*

WILSON: Yes, but aside from that, I was almost, you know, being sent off and never being heard from again as far as the Department of Labor was concerned. And Canada, as I say, it's really a grown-up country. I don't know how important it is to have a senior labor officer there. The notion it's a G-7 country and we have them in others probably would be one argument. If you have them in France and you have them in Germany and you have them in the UK, it's a G-7 country, it's an important country; so you ought to pay attention to that. The embassy is so small. We only had five political officers. In the Department of State Office of Canadian Affairs, there were only five officers.

*Q: In Washington?*

WILSON: In Washington. Five.

*Q: And how many officers in Ottawa?*

WILSON: I don't know how many in the embassy, but not that many. The Canadian Office for American Affairs in the Foreign Ministry up there had 22 officers.

*Q: Is that right?*

WILSON: So you can see how much more important the United States was to Canada than Canada was to us.

*Q: Did you encounter much resentment from the fact that some people thinks the U.S. takes Canada for granted?*

WILSON: You bet. The Canadians are schizophrenic about the United States. They in one way grudgingly admire the military power, the economic power, some even the greater entrepreneurial spirit of the United States. But at the same time, Canadians on balance regard themselves as superior human beings to Americans because their values are purer and cleaner and they're a "kinder, gentler nation." And a lot of the troubles that

they have now—in Montreal with drugs and places like that—the common reaction is to blame, “This is just an American import, all of this stuff.” And I think it’s fair to say in certain ways that they’re right about Americans. We do take Canada for granted. Most Americans without any direct knowledge of Canada just sort of presume they’re pretty much just like us. And they’re not. They are more like us than they would like to admit, but more different from us than we realize.

*Q: What are some of the differences that struck you as a diplomat?*

WILSON: Well, I liked most of what I saw that was different, frankly. As a bureaucrat, I liked that Canadians, on balance, have more confidence in their government servants, their civil servants, than we do, less inclined to think that they’re a bunch of lazy thieves. I very much like the Canadian health system.

*Q: Is that single-payer basically?*

WILSON: Yes, the doctors are all private. You select your own physician. I found it a very, very effective system. I’m from Wyoming, you see. You’ve got to keep this in mind. I grew up with guns, and I have guns. I like guns. But I like the way Canadians deal with guns a lot better than we do.

*Q: Which is?*

WILSON: The variety of weapons that are available for retail sale in Canada is much smaller than here. You cannot get a semi-automatic assault rifle in Canada. You cannot buy one. If you want to own a firearm, you go to the local police and you get a firearms acquisitions certificate after they review your record, and it’s got a validity of something like three years. And you can present that certificate and buy a legal weapon, and you can have it at home. But as I say, you can’t buy an assault rifle in Canada. The biggest distinction is the way they deal with handguns. You can have a handgun in your house, and you’re free to defend your castle with your handgun, but you don’t take that handgun out with you. Don’t keep it in your car. You don’t have it in your back pocket at the bar. If you are found with a handgun in anywhere but a direct line between your house and a gun club of which you are a member, you are guilty of a very serious crime, and so you don’t have the handgun violence in Canada that you do in the United States. It’s just a different way. But it’s not just the way they treat them; it’s just an altogether different culture.

You see, Canada never had the frontier experience. Americans don’t know this. You think of the Yukon and the Gold Rush and all of that as sort of like the American Frontier. It wasn’t at all. The Yukon Gold Rush—and there’s a guy in a big red coat with a Stetson hat on a big horse, and say, “Now, now, boys, you’ll behave yourselves.” The government had control of the country before it was ever really settled. And it was settled by the Hudson Bay Company, not independent people with a gun on their shoulder and a couple of dogs and a brace of mules, having seen smoke on the horizon and decided that

it's too crowded here and you're moving on. It was originally peopled by the Hudson Bay Company, which was in effect the government, at the time.

So the government was much engaged directly in populating the parts of Canada that are indeed populated. And because it is so vast and there are so few people, the government is really very, very important, and so the Canadians look at government differently. They look at it as a partner. They don't look at it as the enemy, like we do. And so it's a different place. And the Canadians, of course, are very civil to each other. I can't think of anything else to tell you about Canada?

*Q: How about the minorities? Are they very prevalent there?*

WILSON: They have their problems, much like our own, and when I was in Canada, one of the revelations that kept coming that was a real embarrassment was the efforts in earlier years, particularly in the church schools to essentially eradicate just regular Indian culture, in effect, by Anglicizing everybody. So they're living that down, and I think the Canadians, I part because they didn't want to be anything like us. This is the only country in the world that defends its nationality by what it's not. And when you ask a Canadian to identify what a Canadian is, he says, "Well, we're not an American." Essentially, that's the only distinction that they can come up with. But Canada is emphasizing its openness. Instead of the melting pot where you take minorities and try to put them into a homogeneous mix, like has been our national myth, their national myth is "multicultural mosaic": and so you will find government services being provided in a lot more languages than here, minorities having greater rights in certain ways than here, a lot greater government effort made to reach these people, and I think a collective guilt feeling about the way the Indians were dealt with.

*Q: What about the Inuit. They recently—*

WILSON: They have their new province, self-governing. I've not paid much attention to how that has worked out, but it certainly was an issue when they were there, and there continues to be the issue now of what happens if Quebec secedes. Quebec is huge. If you look at a map it's just massive, and there are a lot of Indian groups in Quebec that don't want to secede and threaten that if Quebec secedes, they'll take their tribal lands and secede from Quebec and associate with Canada. So it's kind of interesting to see where this will lead.

*Q: Were you involved in that issue at all?*

WILSON: We tried not to be involved in that issue at all. We tried to understand it and to report on it, try to figure out where it was going and how our interests would be affected by a split in Canada. And basically I don't think we ever figured out how our interests would be affected by a split in Canada. And you could argue, if you really want to be perverse, that U.S. interests could be enhanced by Canada's splitting because the sections of it might not be self-sustainable any more, and we might find our own "54-40 or fight" 1840's slogan finally realized.

*Q: What's your personal view? How do you see it playing out?*

WILSON: I don't know. I think it's still an open question. I think Quebec's departure is altogether possible. There is a sense of resentment and differentness in Quebec that is so pronounced that they may well leave.

*Q: Cultural identity as well?*

WILSON: Yes, very, very important to them. And it's kind of interesting, as one of the Canadians made a crack while I was up there, I thought it was perfect. He says, "What Quebecers want is a strong and independent Quebec inside a strong and united Canada." So basically, what the Quebecers want—and they're never going to get it—is for the other Canadians to say to them, "You're special. Please stay. You're special." And the Anglophone Canadians resent that Quebecers want to be seen as special within Canada. And that specialness doesn't really have to mean anything concrete; it just has to mean that the rest of Canada says, "We love you, you're special." And that just sticks in the craw of every Anglophone Canadian that the French must be seen as something special. So the Quebecers are never going to get that from the rest of Canada.

*Q: Trudeau can't pull that off?*

WILSON: No, Trudeau couldn't do it, and you have a Quebecer as Prime Minister now.

*Q: He can't sort of schmooze with them a little bit?*

WILSON: Nope, no, the governing party of Quebec is a separatist party, and whether you will actually ever get to where they will pull the plug—and one of the things that we sort of mentioned to them very quietly and privately was they'd always presumed that the free trade agreement between Canada and the United States would prevail if there were a Quebec too, but no, we try to say, "Mmm, don't count on this."

*Q: They'd have to renegotiate the terms?*

WILSON: That's right. Don't count on the fact that if there's suddenly a new country of Quebec that it has all the derivative privileges that Canada does, because without a really good relationship with the United States, they'd be cooked. Just look at the map. It will be isolated. It'll be very difficult. . . .

Quebeckers like Americans. It's kind of an interesting thing. We had a young lady from Quebec working in our embassy. She went to school in Kansas. She brought home a fellow student, a young gentleman to whom she was then engaged, to meet her family in Quebec, and they gave him a severe cold shoulder. They thought he was an Ontarian. They didn't realize he was an American. So when they discovered that he was not from

Ontario, that he was an American Anglophone, that's great. Well, how nice, welcome to the family. But when they thought she'd brought home an Ontarian, that was a bad thing.

*Q: Okay, any other observations about Canada you'd like to make?*

WILSON: No, I had a great time in Canada.

*Q: And after Canada?*

WILSON: Spain.

*Q: Spain, and this would have been in 19—*

WILSON: —92 to '95. My observation is the unions in Spain really matter, but there's a bit of a hangover, I think, from the corporatist period of Franco in regular practice today in Spain. The trade unions in Spain are not fully independent. They sort of are organizationally, but they live off of government subsidy and not off of members' dues. And so virtually every sector of the economy is organized, and if you're going to start a new plant, you're going to have one that's going to be organized. That's almost certain—although Dupont has managed to get away with this in a plant they have in northwestern Spain, or at least they were holding their own against unionization in 1995. I don't know how that is going right now. So it's an organization that is different than we're used to in this hemisphere. So what happens is there's a bunch of government money that is given to the trade unions, and they get their money based on trade union elections that take place every four years and working on certain numbers of delegates.

So this is the big effort in Spain. It's not so much to organize areas of the economy that are not organized—because everything is organized—but rather to win and compete against the other unions in these quadrennial elections, because this is where the government subsidy comes in and this is where the bulk of your money comes from.

*Q: Sort of like zero-sum game for the players.*

WILSON: Yes, so you have \$100 million that will be given to the unions, and how much you get will depend on this one-time election. So the unions are forced to put most of their efforts into these elections on the shop floor rather than organizing anything. So every union that would be available to be elected will have a delegate, and if you're working at a particular factory, you will vote for your delegate from one of these organizations, one of these unions. And however that turns out. . . . Then what happens, this means—it's horribly frustrating for a manager because you don't have a union. It's not a winner take all like it is here.

*Q: So they all negotiate simultaneously with the management?*

WILSON: So what you have is a negotiating committee that management deals with based on how those elections turned out. So you're not dealing with one union, and you

can't just make a deal with one union and work with one union, the one that wins. You have to deal with all of them.

*Q: Do they coordinate their bargaining position pretty well?*

WILSON: Well, sometimes. But if they get really unhappy with each other, you can have a really nasty problem on the shop floor that has nothing to do with labor-management issues but all to do with the labor politics. So this is a way of organizing unions that was new to me when I got there.

The real problem for the labor officer in Madrid was the AFL-CIO. There are two Spanish principal trade unions: the UGT (the Union of General Workers) and the Comisiones Obreras (Workers' Commissions). And of course, then there are the Basques, and Basques are different. They have their own regional union, although the UGT and the Comisiones Obreras are in the Basque region, but they don't have anywhere near the power or the union delegates that the Basque regional union has. So what happened was that the only real. . . . When Franco took power, he essentially exiled the UGT unionists, kind of broke the organization. The unions that just sort of stuck around and survived were the Comisiones Obreras, and interesting that they could survive at all, because they have a Communist origin. But they were able to make some deals with Franco, so they didn't leave the country, but they kind of put their ideological stuff on the back burner. Following the fall of Franco, when things start moving along again, you have Comisiones Obreras because they were in business during the Franco period, and not the UGT is coming back, when the democratic age comes, and you have real competition between the UGT and the Comisiones. But ultimately, over time, in the 20 years that existed from Franco's death to the time I arrived in Spain—or I guess 17 years—the Comisiones and the UGT are working more often closely together and working on national issues than they had before.

But in the meanwhile the AFL-CIO is fighting the Cold War, and the Comisiones Obreras never joined the WFTU. They had domestic Communist roots, never were a part of the International, and by the time when Franco disappears, even what their roots are, they are a democratic organization. Communist origins, to the left politically, but with internal processes being democratic—actual competition within the union—

*Q: —and free elections.*

WILSON: —and free elections, and maybe some guys on the left win. The guy who is running it now is a real pragmatist. So you have a labor officer in Spain who is forbidden to call on the Comisiones Obreras, which by the time I got there was actually, in terms of delegate numbers, probably number two just barely to the UGT, but the trade union with all of the energy and the bright future. But the labor officer at the American Embassy cannot see, cannot call on the Comisiones Obreras because the AFL-CIO doesn't like that. It had always been to me, in my view, unfortunate how we allowed the AFL-CIO to essentially run the American labor diplomacy function, and the idea that I had to be sure it was okay with AIFLD before I called on the Christians in Honduras because this is

AFL-CIO. So I am just flat told I cannot. So why do you have a labor officer in Spain when the labor officer can't call on or deal with the most important trade union in the country? Why would you send now, from England, the labor attaché here and tell him you can't see the AFL-CIO? I mean, it's nuts, absolutely nuts.

*Q: Would you talk to the AFL-CIO about this?*

WILSON: Oh, yes, yes, yes. It had been talked to death. And we did sort of sneak around it a little bit. I was allowed to go to the Comisiones Obreras convention. I could go to their lunches. As long as every other labor attaché in the country was invited, I could go. So the Comisiones Obreras once a year would host the whole labor attaché corps, and I could go. As long as I was in the company of my fellows, I could be in the company of the Comisiones Obreras. A couple of my friends. . . . They all thought this was the stupidest thing that they could imagine, that the American labor attaché could not see the most important trade unionist in the country. They would concoct opportunities to have me and the president of the Comisiones Obreras in the same room.

*Q: Sort of back door effort.*

WILSON: So I could see this guy, and he could talk to me, and you know, personally we got along just fine. He was bright and able and charismatic, and it was in our interest to get to know this guy. We were just flat not allowed to. And as I say, it was a matter of great joking on the part of my colleagues that they had to go to such insane measures because the AFL-CIO was such a Cold-War troglodyte that they couldn't catch on to what was actually going on in modern Spain.

*Q: Even in 1992? That was after the collapse of the Soviet Union.*

WILSON: Yes. So the new ambassador comes [Ed: Richard Gardner arrived at post September 1993; departs July 1997.]. He's a political type. He's an international lawyer from Columbia, been ambassador to Italy. He is a friend of Lane Kirkland's, and he agrees with me that it's insane to be restrained like this, and it's just downright stupid, and that if the AFL-CIO wants to keep its head buried in the Cold War sand, fine, but our interests are broader than that and we shouldn't let them dictate this. And so the ambassador comes to Washington, and he calls on Kirkland to make the case. Timing couldn't have been worse. It was the day the Congress signed the NAFTA agreement, and he got word about the final passage of the law while the ambassador was in his office [Ed: The House passed NAFTA on November 19, 1993; the Senate passed the bill on November 20, President Clinton signed it December 8, 1993 and it came into effect January 1, 1994.] So he was not in a good mood—

*Q: Not very happy.*

WILSON: —otherwise. But the answer, again, was flat no. “No, you're officer cannot see the Comisiones Obreras. This is a former Communist union. It would complicate *my* life because *I* don't have relations with that union, and it would cause *me* problems of

precedent for *me* to deal with other former Communist unions in Europe.” One of the problems was that the Comisiones Obreras was going to join the ICFTU. The AFL-CIO was going to object to this and be just steamrolled over it.

*Q: Did that happen actually?*

WILSON: Yes. As far as I know. The membership was to be brought up at the next meeting of the ICFTU executive committee as I was leaving Spain in 1995. Well, what has happened is— because I have always felt that you shouldn’t try to make the labor function *look* important; you should try to make the labor function *be* important, and if it really were important in the State Department we wouldn’t have all these gestures to make it look important. I had felt that if we were going to insist on it still being a Cold War relic, the labor function, we should abolish it. We should declare that we have won, thank you very much, you’ve done a good job, congratulate ourselves, and shut down the shop. My proposal was to not shut down the shop but to revitalize the function and make it what it is for most European countries, a sort of a social affairs position.

*Q: Labor and social affairs?*

WILSON: Call it “labor and social affairs.” The people from the EEU countries, that’s what they do; that’s what they focus. It’s labor, social security, health, all these other issues they’re dealing with. My suggestion here was, let us broaden the scope of the agencies involved in this function. Let’s no longer have it be a State-Labor duopoly. Let us go make a pitch to HUD and Human Resources and Social Security and all of these people, and let’s make a genuine labor-social affairs office. A lot of these people have much to learn from European and other world practice, and it’s really silly to think that labor, anymore, because of our Cold War orientation, is really where we ought to have it, just that.

*Q: How did you present this proposal?*

WILSON: Just orally.

*Q: Orally?*

WILSON: To everybody within earshot. Well, in fact, no, I did it in writing.

*Q: Pardon? You did it in writing?*

WILSON: And I’ll tell you, what frosted me most while I was leaving Spain, and my recommendation had been that my job be abolished, that if you can’t solve the problem with the Comisiones Obreras, it’s silly to have a labor officer. And by that time I was doing everything but labor. Oh, I was doing some labor, but I was doing internal politics and the Foreign Ministry work. If you’re going to have a dedicated labor officer, let’s do this. Now, you’re going to have a new emphasis on a function? Let us broaden the function. Let’s get other players. Let’s get other government Departments here to help

put up the bill, pay for it—I mean, tap into these other folks. No, the AFL-CIO insists on having a labor officer that doesn't do anything else. Well, it's nonsense. It is all cosmetics, because the AFL-CIO has never given a rat's patootie about what the labor officer really did or said. The AFL-CIO for years now hasn't bothered to even read the reporting. It's just stuff they're not interested in anymore. And what's happened, what really frosted me when I got to the end of this process in Madrid, as I was retiring, was to discover that the people at the State Department who—was it HIL at that point or SIL? I don't know what it was—weren't reading my reporting either.

*Q: Well, SIL was absorbed in the human rights sphere. They weren't reading your reporting?*

WILSON: No, they were so seized with the question of saving labor jobs and getting involved in the personnel question and saving the labor function that they didn't have time for labor work.

*Q: Is this while Tony Freeman was still—*

WILSON: No, he was gone, I think, by that point. I think there was. . . . Whoever the new guy. . . . Yes, I don't even know if he'd been in place yet at that point. I think that was still vacant.

*Q: Paul Hilburn, I think, probably.*

WILSON: You see, I had been an off-and-on labor officer. I had never been one of these labor officers come hell or high water that's all I'm going to do. And it always rankled with me in places when I was given a job that I couldn't do because of these problems. So it bothered me in Spain about the Comisiones Obreras. That was the principal thing why I recommended that the job be abolished, but the notion that "who's our audience back here?"—if I'm doing this work and I'm spending Uncle Sam's money and I'm traveling and I'm trying to influence people and I'm writing reporting, why? Who's reading it? And who's reading it is a GS-12 in the Labor Department, maybe—

*Q: The Foreign Service coordinator there?*

WILSON: Yes. That's about it. Never, as far as I know, was a decision made by the United States Government on the basis of all the hundreds of pieces of analysis and reporting that I ever did. So I find it a poor investment, that if no interest can be identified that we're advancing, no information that we gather is used, and no decision are affected by what we do, what's the point of the function? And so it bothers me now to hear that we're doing all of these things to reinforce the labor function, we're going to have more money and spending with it more jobs and whatever, when you haven't. . . . As far as my mind goes, they Department of Labor and the Department of State have really never reconciled the fundamental questions of "Why do we have a labor officer?" And the reason we have it, really, is the sheer bureaucratic politics. Until we change what happens to the product—that is, the product used by anybody, either for information and to learn

or for decision-making—I don't see that there's much of a . . . certainly not worth *my* money, as a taxpayer, to support this function any more.

*Q: How would you define the goals that you'd like to see?*

WILSON: Well, just as I said. I think it would be very useful, because in our area it says as the superpower we tend to think that we know it all. There's a lot that we don't know. There's a lot of wisdom in other countries. There's a lot of useful information in other countries' practices. And I would like to see an alliance put together by State and Labor and all of the agencies in the United States Government—the Department of Justice, I don't know; Health and Human Services, HUD—those issues that they're engaged in to give them experience abroad, to let them learn from what other people are doing, to get them engaged in overseas activity—say, a fruitful exchange of information and ideas and practice—and do it through embassy officers seized with those issues and as the advocate, in a way, of the international interest of health and human services or HUD or whatever. And then let them share the costs of supporting the program.

*Q: What about the sort of global economy? What types of information do you think they might provide on that?*

WILSON: Well, certainly you have access to a different group of people than anybody else in the embassy—I mean, in terms of labor ministries and trade unions. Considering the collaborative way that Europeans work and the role that national trade unions have in national decision-making policy, we ought to be in touch with these people. And if you don't have a labor officer you're not going to be. But so far, to my mind, because of the virtual Cold War orientation of what we were doing, we missed lots of opportunities. But as I say, most offensive to me—that if our own people in State are not reading the reporting of labor officers, why do we have them?

Now you do have some regional labor types in the bureaus. You have one in the Latin American Bureau. But unless the Latin American Bureau is different than it was when I was there, that person has no influence. There are no decisions ever taken. There's no real work. They put him to work on the Human Rights Reports during the cycle to help with that, but in terms of any genuine substantive function or importance given to labor issues in our government, internationally, it really doesn't happen. And it ought to.

*Q: How about the labor assistance issues, for instance, building democratic institutions, the kind of thing that Jack O'Grady did in Honduras? Do you see that as future area?*

WILSON: I don't know. It could be. Certainly democratization is one of our issues, and putting labor officers in places can be very helpful for this, and I don't know. I don't know particularly if you're going to end up with—the way things look right now, you're going to end up with a Republican Administration, and interest in labor affairs, you know, ebbs and flows, depending on what party's in power. And I don't know if you're going to find in a Republican Administration or Republican environment any significant interest in seeing the development of trade unions as important in democratization,

although it damn well is. So, whether that will more effectively come out of the ILO—I don't know, maybe a place to put it, put your money into the UN and let them do it. I understand that the AFL-CIO's interest in international labor affairs is significantly diminished in recent years—not a whole hell of a lot of interest anymore.

*Q: I was wondering whether you were still in Spain when the shift from Kirkland to Sweeney took place.*

WILSON: No, that took place after I left. And now the embassy can see the Comisiones Obreras.

*Q: So the new folks at the AFL-CIO didn't feel that it was—*

WILSON: Yes, the question was asked. "Well, sure, of course, why not?" But now you don't have a labor officer in Madrid.

*Q: We do or don't?*

WILSON: Don't. Unless they created one since I left. I was not replaced. And as far as I was concerned, that was exactly the right decision.

*Q: Under the old parameters.*

WILSON: At that point, yes.

*Q: How about the current parameters?*

WILSON: If you could have some program money and do something, yes, sure. But I think that the labor function itself, in its present incarnation, is too limited to be particularly useful. What real interest does DOL have in international labor affairs? Hmm? What do they do? They go to the ILO and they vote. That's once a year. What else? What are they doing?

*Q: Well, they did have some assistance programs in Saudi Arabia....*

WILSON: But ultimately what genuine, day-to-day, real interest—and I mean U.S. national interest—what is our interest in labor developments abroad? What does the Department of Labor need the information for? What does the Department of Labor do with that information? Are we going to have someone that influences these people, gets information, reports on it, and that feeds a need, and actions follow that affect US policy in certain areas? I think right now the labor issue, labor standards for the WTO, really ought to be a very major interest for us, and we ought to be beating the bushes on this with our significant trading partners.

*Q: Worker rights issues?*

WILSON: Yes. But as I say, I don't get the notion, in my 20 years of doing labor at the Department of State, they never took it seriously. Political officers who never did labor work always looked down their noses at labor officers as somehow being inadequate or inferior or not being able to "make it" otherwise. They're always patronized. It was never really seen as a genuine priority issue—the same issue as the commercial function. It was always beneath the dignity of a Foreign Service officer to go out and flog products for the United States. That's why we lost it. The State Department, in its arrogance, put its weaker econ officers in the commercial jobs, and that's why the Commerce Department finally got fed up and took it away from them, because the State Department was not doing that well. I would much prefer, if we're going to have labor officers, I would much prefer Labor to take it over.

*Q: Do you think that would be preferable to the current—*

WILSON: It's preferable to the current situation, yes. But what I would really like to see—I believe in an integrated foreign policy through the Foreign Service, but I just think that the interests we have abroad really transcend labor. I don't think there's enough to it to make it stand on its own as an important and vital function in an American embassy anymore. It exists only for political reasons. It exists because of the AFL-CIO. But if we wanted to do this because of U.S. Government interests, then we should do it like the European embassies do it and make these people counselors for social affairs, and you put the whole social mix together—health policy, housing, unemployment, trade unions—all of this stuff—

*Q: Safety net issues.*

WILSON: —one bag, and I think that that would make a lot more sense. And then if we could do that and engage other US Government agencies and Departments in the enterprise, create a council of international social policy that has DOL and State, Health and Human Services, HUD—whoever—Social Security, in particular—all of these people, and you have a policy body that works on international affairs in these areas. And the social affairs counselor at the embassy is the instrument for advancing our interest in this and getting information that we have. But I don't see this happening. I've never seen any genuine interest in senior Department of State leadership in the labor function. It's always just been a political interest and an inconvenience.

*Q: How about SIL? How have you viewed their contribution? When there was an SIL; there isn't any more.*

WILSON: It was all right. But as I say, recently. . . I probably shouldn't criticize them because I wouldn't mind coming back and doing one labor assignment as a reserve officer. But right now, it's understaffed. It has lost influence. If you'll take a look at how it used to be when Tony Freeman actually headed an office with direct access to the Secretary, then that was important. But you see, what's happened is that by moving it into the Human Rights Bureau, it has been weakened; it's been watered down. And the head of that is no longer effectively a DAS [Deputy Assistant Secretary], even. So it was a way

of showing, really, that it really didn't matter. I don't know that it still does, and it did bother me to learn that the SIL's energies are more seized with the bureaucracies of protecting labor jobs, keeping them from being abolished and working on the personnel questions, than it was on doing anything substantive on labor policy or labor information.

*Q: Did you see a vision there at all?*

WILSON: Not lately. I don't know. I think we had one, but the vision when I came in was participating in the Cold War fight, that the Communists were out there and we were going to compete with them as to prevent them from taking over these important instruments of political power. And I think it certainly lost its focus once the Cold War was over.

*Q: Do you think it was an effective instrument while the Cold War was still going on?*

WILSON: No.

*Q: No?*

WILSON: I think it was effective. . . . I just sat in Latin America. I mean, Irving Brown in Europe—I mean, yes, certainly on the European battlefields it was probably a much more important matter. I'm not sure, looking at it at the end, that it really would have mattered if those unions in Ecuador had been Communist or democratic or Christian or whatever. I don't know that ultimately it mattered much, because the unions together never really amounted to much. But at the time, you know, you can't look into the future. I think it probably did succeed in keeping a lot of workers out of Communist Party machines, yes. But ultimately, how important that was to the final outcome, I don't know. Probably marginally. But at the time, it certainly did do that.

At this point in my tour, I had decided that I'd had enough of Spain and not being able to see the trade unions. I had actually extended for a fourth year, and then I rescinded my extension and had accepted a job as counselor for economic and political affairs in Bogotá and was about ready to go to Colombia, and I got a call from Casper College, where I used to teach, asking if I would consider taking an administrative position there in the newly created thing that they were doing.

*Q: And this was in Wyoming?*

WILSON: Wyoming. And it seemed like an interesting thing to do. I didn't think that I was ever going to see another promotion. I was an OC [Ed: held the personal rank of Counselor], and I didn't think I was ever going to be an MC [Ed: the next highest personal rank – Minister Counselor]. So it just seemed the thing to do. And it turns out four years later probably not to have been the thing to do.

*Q: Oh, really?*

WILSON: Yes, moving from a European capital of five million people to a town in Wyoming of 45,000 probably is not smart. The college had lost a lot of its energy. Much of what I had enjoyed about it when I had taught there before government service had been lost. And this little town, isolated, very provincial, very little interest in the broader world—I just never really settled into it very well.

*Q: Did you teach there, or were you an administrator?*

WILSON: No, I had an administrative position. I taught a couple of U.S. government classes on the Internet, and I taught a class in Latin American civilizations with my wife, but it really was clear that teaching there to that particular audience was not going to be sufficiently fulfilling.

*Q: So, you've made another career change now?*

WILSON: So I've made another career change, and now I'm in the private sector selling software [Ed: became the corporation editor of Databasics a small software company]. So whether this will work. . . . The thought would be that it would be something new and something to try, and if I'm good at it it's going to pay awfully well. And having spent my career—Uncle Sam, I mean, the pay was decent, but not all that great—so in my last working years to make some serious money would be kind of nice. And at least if it doesn't work out, and I don't like it, at least I'm in Washington, where my background might make a little more sense to a potential employer than it does in Casper, Wyoming.

*Q: Any final observations you'd like to make?*

WILSON: No, I don't think so, other than that I think that I'm really grateful to have been able to have spent 25 years in the Foreign Service. It was a great adventure, and I can't think of any job better suited for grownups who have attention deficit disorder than to—

*Q: Do you have attention deficit disorder?*

WILSON: I don't know. Probably. I'm easily bored, with the notion that new job, new people, new problems every two or three or four years certainly keeps you alive and awake.

*Q: I found that very nice myself.*

WILSON: So, I miss that. I miss the quality of my companions. Foreign Service officers as a group are just exceptionally sharp and verbal and quick-minded. And on the other side you're dealing with equally sharp counterparts in other countries, you sometimes—at least I did—sort of got used to that. I guess was just sort of making the assumption that that's what people were like. And then I go back to Wyoming, go back to this community college, and people aren't like that.

*Q: You were actually going back to your roots, in a sense.*

WILSON: Yes, so it was a tremendous mistake. I was just bored silly.

*Q: Foreign Service officers also have to live with frustrations from time to time.*

WILSON: Oh, of course.

*Q: Did you find that the labor function hurt your career advancement in any way?*

WILSON: No, I don't think so. I was actually promoted to the senior ranks as a labor officer, so I don't know. It's hard to know, had I not done that, had I not done the labor function in 1973, I would have probably been a consular officer and probably left the service, because I didn't want to do that. So I think without the special labor track across the threshold, I think it would have hurt, because I really think that genuinely there continues, at least throughout my career in the Foreign Service—to be a subtle and unspoken prejudice against labor officers, that labor officers somehow aren't quite as good as the non-labor political officer, which is nonsense, of course, but I think that prejudice exists. I really do.

*Q: Thank you very much. It's been a fascinating discussion here.*

WILSON: It's fun to remember some of these things that I hadn't thought about in years.

*Q: Thank you again.*

*End of interview*

*[Ed: Final note: Arlen Wilson died on February 13, 2014 of mesothelioma. His obituary noted that in 2003 he returned to the Department of State where he worked as Deputy Director of the Office of International Labor Affairs. In 2006 he was recruited by the Northrop Grumman Corp to manage its Databasics software applications, but ill health forced his retirement in December 2013.]*