

MONGOLIA

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JOSEPH E. LAKE **Ambassador** **Mongolia (1990-1993)**

Mr. Lake was born in Texas and raised in Texas and Germany, where his father was stationed with the US Army. He was educated at Schreiner College and Texas Christian University. He entered the Foreign Service in 1962 His foreign posts include Taiwan, Benin, Nigeria, Bulgaria and Mongolia, where he served as Ambassador from 1990 to 1993. In Washington, Ambassador Lake dealt with a variety of issues concerning China and Philippine and served the Department's Operations Center. Ambassador Lake was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 1994.

Q: How did you get selected for this job?

LAKE: The personnel selection process at that time essentially involved sending forward two names to the ambassadorial committee. One name put forward by the bureau and one name put forward by the central personnel system. Personnel approached me and asked me if I was willing to be considered. I in fact was angling for an assignment in Toronto, Canada as Consul General at the time. I said yes on the theory that I knew who the other candidate was. In my opinion the other candidate was clearly better qualified. I would not get the job but then everyone would feel sorry for me and I would get the job in Toronto, Canada. Much to my surprise when we were reviewed by the committee, I was the candidate selected. Had I been on the committee I would in fact have selected the other candidate because in terms of the normal foreign service credentials I believe he appeared to be better. In the end, given the environment and what we went through I think I was a very good selection because of my experience.

Q: You went out there in 1990. What was the situation in Mongolia at that time. Most people are not going to know much about it. Go back a little and give an idea because Mongolia is really over the horizon.

LAKE: After Genghis Kahn and his children conquered the world in the thirteenth century, the Mongolian empire crumbled and by the end of the fourteenth century, Mongolia was essentially again a lost area in the middle of central Asia. By the sixteenth century, Mongolia was under strong Chinese influence but still a quasi-independent outer march of the Chinese empire. At that time different factions received support for their wheeling and dealing from within Mongolia and from China. One group of Mongolians signed an agreement with China and were closely allied with the central government. The area which they dominated became what is now known as Inner Mongolia, a province of China. The area where the others lived is now the Republic of Mongolia, which has also been known as Outer Mongolia. One other Mongolian group that had a falling out, literally moved from Mongolia, crossed Russia and settled on the Volga River in Russia and became what are called the Kalmuk Mongols. And in fact the Kalmuk Mongols are the source of the American Mongolian community that lives mainly in New Jersey. Over the years from the end of the Ming dynasty until the Chinese revolution in 1911, Outer Mongolia gradually became a separate entity from Inner Mongolia. Following the Chinese revolution in 1911, the Mongolians attempted to declare their independence and attempted to set up their own state. They had some negotiations with the United States through the American Consul in Kalga, trying to establish relations to obtain recognition by the US and help ensure their own future. They were invaded by White Russians led by Baron Ungern von Sternberg, very blood-thirsty White Russian gentleman, who in fact ruled Mongolia before 1921. In 1921 a group of young Mongolian revolutionaries, mainly communists, decided to organize a resistance and with the help of the Red Army launched an attack on Mongolia. Depending on which source you look at either it was the Red Army using them as fronts, or they with the help of the Red Army, which in 1921 successfully kicked out Baron von Sternberg. They took over the country, and Mongolia then was recognized by the new Soviet Union as an independent country. It became the world's second communist country. In fact Owen Lattimore coined the word satellite for Mongolia--the term we later used for Eastern Europe. Between the wars, Mongolia was essentially recognized only by the Soviet Union. The Chinese maintained their claim to it. In 1938 or 1939--I'm not sure of my years, I'd have to double-check--the Japanese made an effort to invade Mongolia and after a lengthy battle at a place called Khalkin Gol they were defeated by a joint Mongolian/Russian force including Marshal Zhukov of World War II fame. I had never heard of this battle until I went to Mongolia. Much to my surprise, the Mongolians said it was a turning point in the Japanese strategy, because their defeat turned them away from moving to Siberia and Central Asia and toward Southeast Asia. To my even greater surprise, some western military scholars support this theory.

Q: *Yes, it's a famous battle.*

LAKE: The Mongolians did not participate in most of World War II after that. However, they did support the Red Army. But when the Russians entered World War II in Asia in August of 1945 just before the defeat of Japan, the Mongolians also came in and, therefore, benefited as one of the victors of World War II. Following World War II, initially the Nationalist government in China recognized the Mongolians, then withdrew recognition. Following the communist victory in 1949 in China they recognized Mongolia. Then Mongolia had two countries which recognized it. It was a very difficult period after that. There was very little support for Mongolia as an independent nation from the outside world. They and their Soviet allies and initially with

the Chinese made a continuing serious effort to obtain recognition. Mongolia entered the UN around 1961 as part of the great compromise and began to set the stage for Mongolia being seen as a really independent country and not just simply a part of the Soviet Union. In fact in the 1930s there were two countries in that part of central Asia that appeared after the communist revolution in Russia. One was Tana Tuva, the other being Mongolia. In the 1930s, in fact, Stalin annexed Tana Tuva. Mongolia had Choibalsan, the man whom they call their own Stalin, who maintained their independence. Today despite all the horrible things he did to Mongolia, Mongolians say Choibalsan was a great successful nationalist because he prevented Stalin from annexing the country during that period. Although the issue came up later when one prime minister of Mongolia allegedly proposed the Russians annex Mongolia. Seemingly, by virtue of a quirk of fate Mongolia retained its independent status during that period. After the 1960s, Mongolia began to be increasingly recognized. The US in fact made two abortive efforts to establish relations with Mongolia and in the 1960s, two different times, we trained Foreign Service Officers in Mongolian.

Q: It was sort of a famous thing. If they did something, we would do something or something like that? I can't remember what it was.

LAKE: I was not involved in those negotiations although I have talked to people who were. There were two serious rounds. Essentially the view of the Americans who were involved was that we, the United States, made some very specific proposals to the Mongolians which scared them. At that point we were looking for a major listening post between the two communist giants, listening posts both in an intelligence sense as well as in a political sense. It scared them off. However, talking to the Mongolians in Mongolia about this period, I found them very cryptic, not always as helpful as they might be. They suggested that part of the problem was that the Russians simply were reluctant to let Mongolia move ahead. Despite the value they saw in a recognition of Mongolia's independence, they felt there were too many political down sides from their perspective. In 1986, we began another effort at establishing a relationship with Mongolia. Coincidentally, I was at the UN at that time and I was unaware of what was going on. I went to the Secretary's office to work in the operation center in January of 1987, and immediately after I arrived, the Mongolian Ambassador to the UN and Secretary Shultz signed the agreement establishing diplomatic relations between the United States and Mongolia. I went out of historical curiosity as much as anything else, little realizing how relevant this would become in terms of my own personal future. We then set about planning how to establish an embassy in Ulaanbaatar. Remember this was before the break up of the Soviet empire. The question became how, in a period of tight budget, do you establish an embassy. The decision was made in effect to establish it out of the hide of the existing East-Asian bureau on a real shoestring. I believe 90% of the people who worked on it thought this was a fundamental mistake, but that is what they did. The initial plan was to open an embassy in the summer of 1988 for just three months and then close it on the assumption that it would not be ready for the harsh winters in Mongolia. Victoria Nuland, who is now the Executive Assistant to Strobe Talbott and Steve Mann with his wife were selected to go on TDY to open the embassy in the summer 1988. Ironically, Victoria worked with my wife, Jo Ann Kessler Lake. Steve Mann came back from Mongolia to work for me in the Operations Center. Again the Mongolian connection came through even though I did not realize it at the time. They opened the Embassy and had a tremendous experience. They had fascinating tales to tell. Ms. Nuland wrote letters about it which we kept, never realizing it would

again be relevant to us. But the process of confirming Richard Williams as first ambassador took longer than expected. Victoria Nuland eventually came back early, but Steve Mann stayed on. As I understand it Dick Williams came in September to present his credentials as the first American Ambassador. The Embassy closed in early October that year, but the three Mongolian employees, a maid, a driver, and a staff person kept the “Embassy”, if you will, “open” throughout the winter. In effect we had a Mongolian charge at the Embassy. Two other officers went out on a permanent basis in 1989, Mike Senko who was to be charge and Ted Nist who was to be the administrative officer and everything else at the post. They went out in the late spring of 1989 to open the Embassy. Meanwhile, Dick Williams remained as Ambassador and head of the China desk. They began the creation of a permanent Embassy. Ted Nist's wife, Sally, also worked. Mike’s wife, Dita, did not work. Mike’s teenage step-daughter and daughter were also with him. They became the first Americans, probably since 1921 to spend the winter in Mongolia. During the winter in Ulaanbaatar, the temperature goes down to forty below. Spending a winter in Ulaanbaatar is an experience all of its own. The average annual temperature in Ulaanbaatar is twenty-seven degrees, as a matter of fact. It is a very cool and crisp place to live. It gets up to the eighties in the summer, balancing off the very cold winters. Now we are back to 1990, beginning the process of my selection and eventual assignment.

Q: Did you take Mongolian, or prepare for this?

LAKE: We tried to arrange for me to take Mongolian in the spring of 1990, but we could not find anyone in the United States who spoke the dialect of Mongolian spoken in Mongolia who did not work for either the Mongolian United Nations mission or the Mongolian Embassy.

Q: I take it the Kalmuks of New Jersey ...?

LAKE: They speak a very different dialect. In Mongolia, discussing this with both Kalmuks who visited as well as Mongolians, the estimate was about 60% mutual comprehension. Indiana was the National Defense Language Program Center for Mongolian. But I was reluctant to go to Indiana and later I found out that essentially the Indiana program teaches Inner Mongolian, which is much closer than the Khalka dialect of Mongolia but still has some differences, so I was glad I did not. I made a major effort to help FSI get a program started convincing them with the assistance of David Schwartz, who was the head of the Language School, to get a teacher to come from Mongolia. I started the process of selecting a teacher from Mongolia started. He was finally sent right after I arrived. Therefore, I could not study Mongolian. I spent the spring trying to retread my Bulgarian as Russian. Quite frankly it was a disaster. The result was that I now speak neither Bulgarian nor Russian.

Q: I've had the problem ... I studied Russian first then Serbian, then you put them together and you speak sort of bastard Slavic.

LAKE: That's a pretty good description.

Q: You arrived when...?

LAKE: July 12, 1990 I arrived in Ulaanbaatar.

Q: What was the political situation? How did the government run?

LAKE: It was a very chaotic situation. In December 1989, the students in Mongolia started demonstrating and brought the government to a crisis in March of 1990. There were striking similarities with Tiananmen, the huge square in downtown filled with demonstrating students calling for the overthrow of the old regime.

Q: Tiananmen by the way was a major demonstration against the Chinese government which the Chinese put down with horrible results as far as world public opinion, but in this case ...

LAKE: A similar situation, the military surrounding the square, the question of whether they were going to act. I heard a very dramatic story from several sources in a position to know while I was there. When it came to a crisis of decision in the communist government, a politburo meeting was held and it was the consensus of the politburo that as a matter of fact the troops must be ordered to fire on the students in the square. Batmonh who was the head of the party and the government at the time said that he would not be responsible for ordering the death of the children of Mongolia and ordered the staff to bring in a document to be signed by everyone in the politburo to confirm this order. They refused to sign it. That was why instead of a bloody square as they had in China, the government collapsed. By April of 1990, Mongolia established a temporary government and made some minor amendments to the existing constitution through the parliament. The communist party (Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party) set themselves up for elections with opposition political parties in July 1990--immediately following my arrival.

At the time of my arrival there was an interim government waiting for democratic elections. The first democratic elections in Mongolian history.

Q: When you went out there, you obviously had been preparing yourself. What did you consider? Two things: What were US interests in Mongolia? What task did you set yourself about? What were your main goals?

LAKE: Ultimately, from the US perspective, I do not see a US interest in Mongolia-- except for a philosophical one. If we as Americans believe in the democratic process, if we believe in the concepts of a free market economy as we say we do, Mongolia is a place we can make a difference. Therefore, my perspective was that if the Mongolian people voted for a democratic process, we could influence the process of change in Mongolia. The Mongolian people did and we did begin to make an effort to support that process. Ironically, I have no reason to believe that anybody adopted our ideas. Many of the efforts we made in Mongolia, with a much lower level of support, and without the money and institutional organization, were exactly the same things that were later done in the process of supporting the transition in the newly independent states of the former Soviet Union. I think the challenge, the experience was crystallized for me in a very telling way in August of 1990. On the day before the first democratically elected parliament was held, my deputy, Mike Senko, received a phone call from one of the members of parliament, an opposition member, who said: "Do you have a copy of Robert's Rules of Order?" And we said: "No." And he said: "Well, can you tell us how to run a parliament?" These were people who had no idea how a democratic parliament functioned. Supporting democracy was the driving force.

There is an argument to be made, often made by the Mongolians and a few other people, that Mongolia's central location between Russia and China gives it strategic importance. I don't think that's a sustainable argument. I think China and Russia both have strategic interests in Mongolia. China because it is close to Beijing and therefore anybody who controls Mongolia could threaten their capital. Russia because it is close to the Trans-Siberian Railway. Anybody who controls Mongolia threatens this vital life-line.

Q: *The Trans-Siberian railway?*

LAKE: Yes. So, therefore, at a minimum from their viewpoint, their interests are best served by having neither one having the other side occupying Mongolia--creating a potential environment for a neutral ground for these two major countries. Japan has a natural interest because Mongolia is very mineral-rich. Therefore, you could argue there was an American interest in keeping it a neutral ground. I don't argue with that, but it's more a Japanese issue than an American issue per se. Ultimately the American interest is: Can we influence the building of a democratic process?

Q: *Why don't we talk about the living conditions first?*

LAKE: The living conditions. Ulaanbaatar was a classic run-down provincial Soviet city. There was no apartment for the Ambassador, because there had been no Ambassador. We had a TDY apartment with approximately five hundred square foot (410 square feet) with one bedroom. That became the residence. The Embassy was actually slightly larger, almost six hundred square feet. It had two bedrooms. It was downstairs in the apartment building in which we lived. The problem with the Embassy was that when I arrived, there were not enough offices for me, my deputy and the administrative officer.

Q: *That consisted the Embassy?*

LAKE: That was the Embassy.

Q: *You arrived with your wife?*

LAKE: Just my wife. We had a son who was a senior in high school, so my wife was going to come back and spend the first year with him. The original idea was in fact that I would come back because there was a new building being built for new diplomats, which our Embassy would move into. It was supposed to be finished in January of 1991. That was the assumption. However, the day after my nomination was announced, the then Deputy Assistant Secretary Desaix Anderson was testifying on the Hill. He was asked questions about when we were opening a new Embassy or sending an Ambassador to Mongolia. He did not know my appointment had been announced and, therefore, was being careful in his responses. This led to a fairly acrimonious discussion about the Department of State and the unwillingness of diplomats to live in difficult conditions. As a result of this discussion the decision was made that I would go out whatever the situation on a permanent basis. Fortunately, just before I arrived we were able to get a fifth floor walk-up in the same building and the administrative officer moved there. His old apartment, directly above the Embassy, was quickly made into another Embassy office. Secretary Baker was

scheduled to visit two weeks after I arrived, so immediately following my arrival an S/S advance team arrived.

Q: *S/S is ...?*

LAKE: The Secretary and Staff of the Secretary's office. In fact the original idea had been that the S/S team and I would arrive together, but at the last minute the decision was made for me to arrive a few days earlier. Unfortunately, the decision was made while I was in Hong Kong and before anyone had arranged for tickets or anything else at that stage. It's still very difficult to get tickets on the trains between Beijing and Moscow which is the one that goes through Ulaanbaatar. So instead of having three days to prepare ourselves in Beijing, we had twenty-four hours. My wife and I ended up on a Chinese train. The Embassy in Beijing arranged a berth for my wife in a compartment with a Chinese gentleman, first class, and I shared a compartment with three Chinese gentleman in second class. The Chinese gentleman who shared the compartment with my wife was very nice and invited me to spend the night with her and he would spend the night with another friend. The gentlemen who would have spent the night with me in my compartment were all going as workers to Romania. Among the many things they had was a collection of watermelons they were going to eat on the train. But as the train bounced along the watermelons kept rolling away, so I sat in this compartment with watermelons rolling around the compartment, out into the aisles, etc. We had to go back to our own compartment at the border crossing so that they could check us. We also had to get off the train because when you go from China to Mongolia, they must change the wheels as the tracks are a different gauge. (On another trip I was able to actually watch this. It is something to see.) Much to the consternation of the Chinese with whom I was sharing a compartment one of their watermelons disappeared while they were off the train. As I speak Chinese so I was able to follow all that was going on.

We were not certain anyone knew we were arriving in Ulaanbaatar because the communications are so bad. (I did a survey after the Secretary's visit and my estimate was that about sixty percent of the messages got through.) Fortunately the British diplomatic couriers were on the train. After I met them, they agreed that if no one from the American Embassy was there and they would give us a ride to the British Embassy where we could try calling the American Embassy. In addition, just before we left Washington, we had been warned that there was a custom in Ulaanbaatar that all the ambassadors turned out to meet a newly arriving ambassador. Therefore, we were warned that we should be prepared for such a meeting as we got off the train. Just before the train pulled into Ulaanbaatar, my wife and I took turns changing clothes in her compartment. We had to do it one at a time because the compartment was so small. Fortunately for us and the rest of the diplomatic corps, immediately prior to my arrival the new Korean Ambassador had arrived. He had flown in and the plane had been late. The ambassadors had made three different trips to the airport to meet him. Based on that experience, they decided that they would no longer meet new ambassadors, and we were the first ones not met. But the chief of protocol and the whole embassy staff, all four of them, met us when we arrived. In any event, we arrived early and three days later the advance team arrived for the Secretary's visit. We then became deeply engaged preparing for the Secretary's visit.

The key decision on whether the Secretary's would visit was whether we, the observers on the ground, felt that the elections were truly democratic. We brought in four observers, one from Washington and three from Beijing, to look at the political process. Our evaluation was that the election was a fair, open democratic process. Surprisingly so when you consider what they had been through throughout their history.

The Secretary arrived shortly thereafter, within a couple of days. Without checking my notes, I can not give you an exact date.

As we planned before the visit to Mongolia, we had made a survey at the sights. We had scheduled a visit to the Gobi desert, a visit to a fishing area and the city of Ulaanbaatar as well as meetings with the government and opposition. I knew something was up when it was time for the Secretary's plane to land and the plane kept circling the airport. Having worked in the Secretary's office, I knew that he always arrived exactly on time. The plane landed. The Secretary got off. As we were all greeting him, etc., I was asked if there was a tacsat (satellite telephone) available. There was a military representative on the plane and said he needed to get to the Embassy right away, so we got him to the Embassy. As it turned out, as the Secretary was arriving, the Iraqis were invading Kuwait. They had been receiving the word on the airplane and that was why they were circling to find out exactly what was going on. The result was the decision to drastically curtail the planned four day visit. There was a series of brief meetings that day in Ulaanbaatar and the Secretary left on the second day. Changing his plans he flew to the Soviet Union where he meet with the Soviet Foreign Minister Shevardnadze. This led eventually to the understanding between the US and USSR concerning the Iraq war.

The Mongolians were obviously very disappointed. Secretary Baker also found it a very interesting and challenging time. He was fascinated by the experience. The relationship essentially exploded following the brief visit and ultimately led to a second visit by Secretary Baker.

Q: You said you had a couple of points to mention about ... what? The Baker visit?

LAKE: Well, actually no. It was back to the question of giving you some sense of the environment in which we were operating. One about the Embassy and one about Mongolia. Today of course we are very used to the concept of a post-communist society and all this means, but in 1990, the inner core of the old Soviet empire such as Mongolia and what we call now the NIS, the former Soviet Union, had not gone through this. Mongolia was the first nation which had a long communist history to transform itself or attempt to do so. In 1990, when I arrived, Mongolia was still essentially a traditional communist country from the inner core of the old Soviet Empire. Between 1950 and 1990, the World Bank estimates that roughly forty percent of Mongolia's GNP on an annual basis was the direct result of Soviet aid. The changes that now seem so obvious to us were yet to happen in Mongolia.

I also wanted to give you some sense of the Embassy and how resources poor we were. Before I arrived, the Embassy obtained its the first TELEX, but it had a Cyrillic keyboard. They had to type messages to send to Washington in English on a Cyrillic keyboard--a challenge all its own. By the time I got there, they at least had a TELEX with an English keyboard. But when you

typed you could not make a mistake, because if you made a mistake you had to type the whole tape over again. Things got so hectic that Ted Nist, the Administrative Officer, moved the TELEX machine into a closet so he could shut the door and type without all the noise. The Embassy was so small that we took a door down and laid it on a bathtub to make a table for a Xerox machine.

No one had planned for an Ambassador to be resident and when I arrived there was no furniture. The staff were frantically trying to furnish some kind of apartment for me, and a desk. The weekend before I arrived, the Japanese received a load of new furniture. As they installed the new furniture in their quarters, they threw the old furniture on the junkpile. Ted and Mike asked if they could have the furniture the Japanese were throwing away. That is how I got my desk which I used until 1992, and the first table for the residence dining room. It was a very interesting table. It had leaves, but when you extended it to put the leaves in, the ends of the table fell off. It encouraged very small representational activities. The Japanese were happy for us to take the things off the junkpile but after several weeks they came back and asked if we were still using these things from the junkpile. We said yes. And they said: "Well, if you're really going to use them maybe you should pay us for them." Perhaps that gives you some idea, reflecting what we were wrestling with at that moment in time.

Q: Yes, this represents an attitude and a problem. I finished an interview with Sherman Funk, the Inspector General, and he came from outside and he I don't know how he was at the time, but he said it really was awful, the way the Department of State took care of these newly emerging embassies. It was up to you fellows to make do. As he went around and looked at them he found that everyone was surviving but it wasn't as though the Department of State was making any great effort to help. He said that many of the places relied very heavily on the CIA to get their equipment. I'm not talking about anything fancy, I'm talking about paper, things like that.

LAKE: Ironically you are describing the establishment of a new post in a newly independent states of the former Soviet Union. From Ulaanbaatar, we envied the quality of what they got. In fact the two people who worked for me later helped open two of these new posts. They both commented to me how fantastic it was going to these new places where you just said there was no support. They said things were so much better there than they were after two years in Ulaanbaatar. I don't disagree with Funk's statement, but from my perspective those posts had incredible support.

Q: It reminds me ... I don't know how it would be today, but in my day foreign diplomats in Tirana where you're going, used to go to Titograd for R & R, for rest and relaxation. I went to Titograd and I thought: "This wasn't the end of the world, you could see it from there." This is coming out of Belgrade. So, I guess perspective is your ...

LAKE: When we first got to Ulaanbaatar, Beijing was a twenty-five percent deferential post and really considered difficult. We thought a trip to Beijing was like going to heaven. So it all depends on where you're coming from.

Q: Okay. So it was really difficult. You'll tell me about your ...(?) when you were running your sort of family operation. But could you describe dealing with the government. How would you go.

You didn't speak Mongolian. How did you get along? Whom did you see? How did they receive you?

LAKE: First of all the Mongolians received us with open arms. They were excited to have Americans. They wanted another outlet. They obviously saw us as a counterweight to the traditional Chinese and the Russian role. As change began to take place in Mongolia the US was idealized far beyond our capabilities and reality, as in many of the countries of eastern Europe. Because we had been the evil monster for so long, now we seemed perfect in everything that we did from an economic perspective, political perspective, etc. So to put it mildly, we were welcomed with open arms and the Mongolians were cruelly crushed that we did not do more. In September of 1990, the President actually asked me to arrange for a two hundred and thirty million dollar a year assistance for Mongolia figuring this would replace the Russian assistance. They did not even conceive of the magnitude of problems, etc. this would entail in terms of the US bureaucracy. They simply saw us as the answer to everything. Institutionally they welcomed us with open arms.

There were some very conservative people. The Minister of Defense for instance literally shook when I first saw him I should say. I suppose I was the first western dragon he had ever had to deal with. He didn't know how to cope with me. He had come up working very close with the Russians and had heard nothing but the most negative propaganda about us.

Mongolians as people though were the nicest people I had worked with up to now, anywhere in the world. They are open, they are friendly and honest, and there is this incredible clicking between Mongolians and Americans. I have a theory on this. Despite the vast differences between Mongolians and Americans, there is in fact a cultural similarity here. We view ourselves as the descendants of a frontier society. They are a frontier society. Forty percent of the Mongolians today are still nomads. And so we share a set of common values even though we come from vastly different worlds. This has helped tremendously. This is what I call the magic of Mongolia. The Americans who came to Mongolia became enchanted by the Mongolians, sometimes too much so I would add. The Mongolians were not nearly as effective in dealing with the Europeans, or the Japanese, despite all the efforts these countries were making.

Q: Other than you might say your housekeeping things, you know keeping yourself going, what sort of things would you go to the Mongolian government for, how would you do this?

LAKE: You have to go back to the basic description that this post was expected to be-- simply a listening post. Then they had a revolution. Secretary Baker came to believe that we should support the Mongolian people in their efforts. I saw very quickly that this was going to blossom incredibly in terms of the US efforts, as it did. In the course of FY '91, we went from zero planned aid at the beginning of the year to over thirty million dollars in assistance by the end of the year. Anyone who has worked in the bureaucracy, particularly with the AID bureaucracy, knows what an incredible task this became. The other thing was that just analyzing what was happening you could see that Mongolia as it existed in the summer of 1990 was going to cease to exist. This was a country sustained by an incredible volume of Soviet aid. Things were going to change and we had to be prepared for the worst. Remember, this is a country with a capital city where a temperature in January of forty below is considered normal. The average temperature in

Ulaanbaatar is twenty-seven degrees Fahrenheit--the coldest capital in the world. From the point of view of sheer survival, not to mention all the other events that took place in the course of change we had to be prepared.

In September of 1990, we had the first US trade group visit Mongolia. It was an effort launched by the Hong Kong-American Chamber of Commerce looking for export trade opportunities. After they departed I returned to Washington because by that time we had a Mongolian teacher here, and I spent three months studying Mongolian. In the process we worked out an invitation from President Bush to President Ochirbat of Mongolia to come to Washington. I then flew back in order to be in Mongolia for preparations. We had to sort out scheduling problems on the Mongolian side and I had to accompany the president to the United States.

Before I left (Mongolia in September 1990), the Mongolians had elected Ochirbat as their democratically elected president in indirect elections--the parliament had selected him. I attended his inauguration. It was a fascinating blend of Mongolian traditional culture and modern trappings. The President wore the Mongolian traditional dress--banned under the communists. Ochirbat appeared for his inauguration wearing the traditional Mongolian *del* and the traditional hat. The state seal was presented in a very traditional style, in a formal wooden box. The whole inaugural process was something which reached back to the roots of Mongolian history. One of the other currents that was developing in Mongolia at this time was the rediscovery of its own history. It had been suppressed tremendously during the communist era.

Q: Obviously the Russians did not have the fondest memories of the Mongols.

LAKE: Of course you could put a positive or a negative interpretation of the Soviet attitude. In one sense the Mongols had conquered Russia. The Russians had no reason to welcome a remembrance of Mongol history. On the other hand, they had sought to improve life for the Mongolians. One foreign diplomat who had been there several times over the years--a number of them had been, mostly eastern Europeans and Chinese-- recalled dealing with then Soviet Ambassador back in the 1960s who said: "My job is to urbanize the Mongolians, because communism only works if you have a proletariat. If you have nomads, you don't have a proletariat." There was also an ideological drive to change Mongolia's view of itself.

In December 1990 I flew back to Mongolia and came back to Washington with President Ochirbat in January of 1991. This really launched the real beginning of a major American effort to assist Mongolia.

Q: How did this trip ...? Obviously, he had never been in the United States before?

LAKE: Ochirbat had made one trip to New York as the Minister of External Economic Relations. We convinced him to come in across the Pacific to stop in Los Angeles to meet with businessmen there, to get a better understanding of the United States. Then come to Washington, have the official meetings; then go to New York for meetings with the business community, foundations, etc. to generate an increased interest in Mongolia. It was an eye opening experience for him.

However, while in California, we went to the house of a very well-to-do southern Californian. The sort of place with original Picassos hanging on the wall. Ochirbat gave a speech about how pleased he was to be in a real American home. Jody and I thought: "Well, you know, it's very nice, but it's not a real American home." While he was in Washington, his wife visited the high school in Falls Church, while we were doing official meetings. Jody asked the secret service if they could bring her to our house which was only a few blocks away, so she could see a real American home to realize that we don't all live with Picasso's on the wall. They enjoyed it and found it fascinating. I think it was a tremendous experience for them. The visit generated a lot of interest among several groups in the US. The Mongolian charm is very successful.

The lady from the Blair House said it was the first time she had had foreign visitors who didn't eat vegetables. How do you work out a menu with things like this? There were all sorts of interesting problems along the way. But the visit then launched the broader effort. AID sent out people to begin working on a long-term plan in terms of programs that would be suitable for Mongolia. A whole process began to develop-- remember this is all before the collapse of the former Soviet Union. Therefore all these things which became normal later on were new. The attitude was: "Well, we have a three-year budget planning cycle. We can't put Mongolia into it. Why do we want to worry about assisting the Mongolians on this issue, or that issue, because we have never dealt with this before." Of course all this has changed in the last two years. We began a whole new way of dealing with the former Soviet Union. It was an uphill bureaucratic battle in getting the Department interested from communications for Ulaanbaatar, to housing, to any issue that was considered of interest.

Secretary Baker had an interest in Mongolia and part of my problem was convincing people in the bureaucracy that this was a reason to be interested. You can only call the Secretary so many times. Baker made a second trip to Mongolia in the summer of 1991 and that finally began to get people's attention. People really did begin to believe he was interested in Mongolia.

Q: How did that trip go?

LAKE: That trip was quite an experience all its own. We had no reliable communication in Ulaanbaatar. When Baker came the first time we brought in an INMARSAT, the whole ball of wax.

Q: These are ...?

LAKE: These were satellite communications systems which were just becoming increasingly popular at that time. I had been trying to convince the Department since early spring to deploy an INMARSAT, International Maritime Satellite, to the Embassy in Ulaanbaatar. There was tremendous reluctance for a lot a bureaucratic reasons to do it. This became the system we then used throughout the newly independent states when they emerged, but at that point it was an idea that nobody wanted to try. So finally Secretary Baker and I were sitting at dinner and he said to me: "Is there anything I can do for you before I leave?" since he was cutting his trip short and rushing back, I said: "Yes Sir, there is. When you leave our communications are going to disappear. We will not be able to communicate with the world. You could leave one of your INMARSATs behind." And he said: "Well, why has no one mentioned this to me before?" And I

said: "I've been working on this issue and finally I've got sort of an agreement to get us one, but nobody can agree who will pay for it." He said: "Will it create a problem for me?" I said: "Sir, I spent the last three years seeing to it that you were always in communication and I can assure you that leaving one INMARSAT behind will not affect it. I know what's in your inventory." He said: "Okay. You tell them I'll do it and when I get back to Washington, you tell them to send me a memo and I'll decide who pays for it." I then went to see Pat Kennedy who was the director of S/S-EX, the executive office of the Secretary, and told him what the Secretary had said. I then went to see the chief communicator who was the head of the VIP team for communications and told him what he'd said. I said: "Let me know what you want to do." That was late that night. When I got up the next morning there was a cable from Washington telling us that the problem had been resolved and instructing the team to leave an INMARSAT behind.

As a result we had the telephone in the summer of '91 and on one beautiful Saturday night in the summer about seven thirty, I happened to be in communications center and the phone rang. So I answered it and it was Brunson McKinley, the executive secretary's special assistant. He said: "Joe, he wants to come next Thursday. Do you think he can?" I said: "There is no doubt in my mind the Mongolians would invite him and welcome him to come. Trouble is how do I find out?" He said: "We got to know right away." At that point we were doing shuttle diplomacy in the middle east, so he could only call at certain times, etc. And I said: "Okay. I'll see what I can find out." I couldn't find anybody at any number I had in Ulaanbaatar. It was a beautiful night. The weather was absolutely perfect. There was no way in the world anybody in his right mind would be at home. My new deputy, Tom Dowling, had just arrived. He had just graduated from the first Mongolian class at FSI. So I called him over and said: "I know where the Foreign Minister and the Prime Minister spend their summer at this little dacha outside of town. We're going to drive out there and see if we can get in. You speak Mongolian and I'm the Ambassador. Between us we might be able to do it." I put the flags on my car. Got in the car as a driver because Tom didn't drive. Drove up to the gate. You can imagine this. You have this Mongolian draftee who is nineteen years old and who is carrying an AK47 and looking at these guys who pulled up. I gave Tom my ID card because Tom didn't have an ID card at this point, he'd just arrived. He walked up and said to the Mongolian guard: "My driver is the American Ambassador. This is his ID card. He wants to see either the Foreign Minister or the Prime Minister." Well, it was clear that this guy had no idea in the world what to do. So he called his sergeant who finally believed us and called in to the compound and the word came back: "Yes, the Foreign Minister will see you." We went in, went into a waiting room and in walked the Prime Minister. Of course there was no translator or anybody else. Tom then proceeded--he had a Mongolian-English dictionary in hand--to explain what the situation was. Would he like to invite the Secretary of State? Would it be possible? Tom got the message across. At one point when Tom was flicking through his dictionary and he said something, the Prime Minister got this funny look on his face and he took the dictionary away from Tom. He flipped through and said: "That. Yes!" Well the Prime Minister was thrilled, needless to say. Of course they wanted to invite him. I went back and got in touch with the party in the Middle East.

That was late on Saturday night and they were coming on Thursday. There was only one flight a week at that point in Ulaanbaatar and that was on Monday and if we were going to get any help it had to come in on Monday. I called the DCM in Beijing, Lynn Pascoe and told him what my problem was and said: "You know the people I critically need are this person, this person ...Can

you send them up? To his credit Lynn Pascoe sent them up. They were on that flight on Monday. They then proceeded over the next four days to put together a four-day visit for the Secretary of State. I'm certain that it was the first secretarial visit since the '60s, if not earlier, that did not have an S/S advance team. We did it all ourselves with incredibly poor communications, but we did the best we could do and put together a visit he was absolutely thrilled by. The Mongolians were also thrilled by it.

The visit provided a real boost for the Mongolian process of reform because it was a very clear demonstration by a senior-level American of support for continuation of democratic reforms in Mongolia. By the summer of 1991 they were beginning to have a few bumps on the road. As I said earlier, from 1950 to 1990 approximately 40% of Mongolia's GNP had been Soviet aid. On January 1, 1991, it was cut off just like that. It was not just the cut in aid. Mongolia's economy was totally integrated into the Soviet economy. The construction companies were divisions of a southern Russian ministry of constructions. I mean it was complete and total integration economically, even down to the lowest levels. Suddenly an economic barrier came down between Russia and Mongolia. It's hard to imagine what it means but the best example I can think of is to imagine in the 1930s in the United States during the depths of the depression trying to create North Dakota as a separate country. That's what the Mongolians were facing. The worst thing was they didn't really recognize it. After all these years of Soviet aid and closeness to the Soviets, and despite the fact that they'd had their own revolution and were trying to go their own way, they simply couldn't bring themselves to believe that it wasn't going to continue. The problems went on for months as the Soviets didn't reach agreements, didn't solve problems. Meanwhile the Soviets were having their own problems. But at that stage, it was also a matter of we're not sure we're going to really support this revolutionary process. Why do we want to do this? We have our own responsibilities. Things were going downhill on a fairly steady basis economically. More and more problems. The Secretary's visit was able to crystallize for him and more to the point, crystallize American recognition of what the problem was. So one of the results was that the Secretary asked the then Deputy Assistant Secretary for East-Asian Affairs, Bob Fauver, who later became the Deputy Under Secretary for Economic Affairs, to take on the task of seeing what we could do to help Mongolia.

I should go back a step and say that I had come back in June for my family, to pack them out. The Prime Minister of Mongolia had come in June to the US to say: "We're beginning to have problems. What can we do?" That started the process. The Secretary's visit crystallized it. With his support, Bob Fauver's efforts, my efforts, we began a major push to have a Mongolia Assistance Group meeting. This ran into all sorts of major problems as to who was going to sponsor it. Again remember we're before the whole experience of NIS. Should the World Bank do it? The Secretary felt, correctly I think, Japan should be involved. All the focus was on Europe. Everything was being done in Paris. So we pushed for a meeting in Tokyo. The World Bank became involved. There was friction between the World Bank and the IMF which felt it was its role to manage such efforts. Despite these tremendous obstacles, in September we were able to put together a Government of Japan and World Bank sponsored Mongolian Assistance Group meeting in Tokyo, with participation by other major donors countries. We generated two hundred and fifty million dollars in aid commitments at that time. Again a tremendous boost for Mongolian morale. But also it met a real practical need because at that time the economy was beginning to go downhill.

Things continued to worsen in Mongolia and we, meaning the US government through AID, began making plans. How could we best, most effectively use the limited amount of money we have available. We could provide training. I still believe this is the most effective approach. From what I have seen it is certainly the most effective thing we've begun to do since then in eastern Europe, in the NIS. Looking for ways to transfer two hundred years of experience in democracy and in free enterprise to a society that has not shared this experience. This ultimately means technical assistance. And that was initially to be our main focus, people--in terms of the peace corps, in terms of advisors, in terms of people working together. That was the effort we were making. The operating assumption in Tokyo in September of '91 was of course that the Soviet Union would still be there and our problem was not how to deal with what became the collapse of the Soviet Union but how to get them involved in the process. We had invited the Soviets to attend. As I recall they were represented by their embassy in Tokyo at the time.

The effort got started but it quickly became obvious that the lack of Soviet assistance was a critical problem. The Soviets pulled technicians out of Mongolia--the biggest immediate direct threat to Mongolia was the potential collapse of the heating system. Mongolia following the socialist system had a central heating system for the entire city of Ulaanbaatar. The vision that hung over our heads was that in January when it's forty below you would have a collapse of the heating system. Roughly forty percent of the people of Ulaanbaatar, a city of half a million people, would be exposed to forty below weather with no form of heat. I also had to take this into account in terms of planning for the Embassy, and what the Embassy could do.

With pressure from me ultimately we changed the focus of the assistance. In the long term perspective, the original plan (training, technical assistance) was the best plan. In terms of survival for the next twelve months we'd done the right thing. We made a major effort and began to bring in assistance, critical spare parts, advisors. Simply getting it done was the challenge. Again it was the first ...

Q: Bring in critical spare parts for what?

LAKE: For various parts for the power system. It really became a crisis was in the winter of '92-'93. You had a system which gradually began to deteriorate. Parts could not be bought, things began to get worse and worse, things could not be repaired. The coal mine dug the coal out of the ground and shipped it to the city and it was burned. The goal was to build enough of a stockpile in the summer so that you could continue a lower production as was necessary in the winter and gradually pull the stockpile down so that you could keep the system going at an optimum level. But because of the overall economic dislocations they had trouble keeping the coal mines producing enough in the summer so that the stockpile was smaller when the winter began and things began to go downhill. In late '92 the biggest coal mine which supplied mainly the city of Ulaanbaatar had problems, They had drag lines which actually pulled the coal once it's blown out of the ground out to the rail line. They had wire rope that ran it. They had spliced and spliced and spliced to the point where the wire rope wouldn't work anymore. We got an American engineer who was there on another project. I asked him to take a look at this to see if there was anything we could do. He said: "It may be such and such millimeter Russian wire rope, but half inch American wire rope will do the job." So we pressed AID to do something, to use the money we

had to buy the wire rope. It took a tremendous amount of effort. A lot of people in AID were angry at me. I was obnoxious enough and insulting enough that finally in December they flew a special charter flight out with that wire rope on it. By the summer of 1993, the Prime Minister, the Minister of Energy, and the President had all said to me that if we, the Americans, had not done that the system would have collapsed that winter. It was the classic story of for the want of a nail a shoe is lost, for the want of a shoe the horse was lost. But we reversed it in fact, we found the nail to keep the shoe to keep the horse to keep the system working.

But our assistance also took other forms of emergency aid. They were getting engineers in to help them figure out how to deal with issues. The Mongolians are very good engineers. But they had grown up in a Soviet approach which is extremely different from the way Americans do business and does not lend itself well to crises management. Without AID and the assistance from the American companies in the energy sector, they simply would not have survived the winter of 1992-1993 with an operating heating system.

Q: What I've heard is that AID is sort of overgrown bureaucratically and is not very responsive and also tends to have projects which at least in retrospect ... We're looking at this in Africa and wondering: "Was this worth it at all?" And this may be very unfair. You've had experience in other places. But at the time we're talking about, did you find the AID bureaucracy was too big? Was there a problem really, or was this just the guy in the field getting annoyed at the guys back home?

LAKE: There was a problem and it is the problem you describe of the AID bureaucracy but I'm not the right person at this moment in time to analyze what I see as a problem of the AID bureaucracy. When I retire I'll be glad to continue this discussion if you like. But one thing that is true. I believe, and it is true in dealing with any bureaucracy, the key problem is to find the right people who will get the job done, and push that button. Get that person involved. That's in essence what we did. A combination of finding the right person and getting him to act and being obnoxious enough as the American Ambassador to make it happen. That was what we did, the pressure we applied was critical in making it work.

One of the many problems we had was understanding how to deal with the challenges. At our request, OFDA, the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance, came out and did a survey, because I could see these disasters coming. They came out the winter of 1991 after the beginning of the year. It was interesting dealing with them. The problem we faced was that essentially at that moment in history, we had a tremendous amount of experience in dealing with disasters around the world in tropical countries. What we did not have was experience in dealing with disasters in Arctic conditions. We've learned a lot since then, and I think it's also part of the AID problem. AID had devoted a lot of effort to third world development. The third world was by definition tropical. The experience was of little relevance and you could not necessarily transfer this experience. But to convince people who've grown up, who've learned a system like that, that their experience is irrelevant, they first have to go through it. So for a lot of people the Mongolian experience was a learning experience for exactly those kinds of issues.

As I think I've said to you earlier, many of the concepts and ideas that we faced were new. We had a huge conference in Tokyo on the NIS. Many of the issues that were addressed in the

conference were the very ones that we brought up earlier in the Mongolia conference. Some people learned those lessons. I'm not sure they ever directly transferred them in that sense, but yet we went through a learning experience. Because I know some of the key people who went on to work on these things had already learned some lessons. I'm not sure they would necessarily even admit this, but some of the people who had worked on these things suddenly found themselves working on these issues yet again and that was part of their learning experience I think.

Q: Let's say you got technicians to come out. This was your main thing that you were doing.

LAKE: This was our original goal.

Q: Your original goal. How were the Americans coming out, the people who were chosen, how did they deal? In the first place it's cold as hell, second place there's a language problem and all that?

LAKE: You've raised two separate issues and both are interesting in their own way to me. One is on the language problem. The Mongolians learn foreign languages faster than anybody else I've ever run into. I find it fascinating. One can argue culture and everything else. I don't know what the answer is, but one simple example is the Foreign Minister. A senior official who had little time to deal with languages. When I arrived in 1990 he could not speak one word of English. He had a farewell picnic for me the day before I left Ulaanbaatar and the entire picnic was in English. We had a translator with us and sometimes even the translator would disagree about what he wanted to say but he did the whole thing in English. So in three years, a man who was the top level of their government, tremendously involved, had learned English. In six months a Mongolian who had not studied before would be speaking English. Everybody was studying. So there was a great explosion in the learning of English. Mongolian conversely is an extremely difficult language and other than the Peace Corps volunteers I didn't see a lot of Americans who were able to learn it particularly well. Initially, it was the same problem we'd have ahead in the former Soviet Union in that not enough people spoke English. That was one of the many problems we wrestled with while we were over there. The technicians were welcomed with open arms. The guys who knew what they were doing who would get their hands dirty, which to me is an American trait, were the ones who were most successful and really made a difference. We were doing everything differently. Many years ago, when I was in Africa, and trying to explain to Americans the cultural gaps that we were wrestling with, I would tell the story that I had a steward who came to work for me in my house in Cotonou and I'd ask him to screw a screw in. He had never seen a screw driver. That was a cultural gap that you could talk about in real terms. In Mongolia you had a different cultural gap. You had people who were college educated, who understood the new things, but had been trained in an entirely different way of looking at things. Quality and efficiency were not key elements in the Soviet structure.

A simple example on a very basic level is that we had Mongolian technicians who worked for the Embassy. We brought an American to install a generator in the Embassy and build a building for it. The Mongolians had never seen a level. If you go to Mongolia, the windows aren't square, the doors aren't square, because they didn't use levels. These guys quickly learned to use a level and then used it all the time. It was great fun for their people. Suddenly things could be square

and they could be right. And so that's the kind of cultural gap that is hard to understand but it was there constantly. That was the key thing. That is why having Americans who would work with people on the ground made a tremendous difference. Similarly with the American engineers who came to work on the power system. The ones who were really successful were the ones who went into the plants with those guys, who went into the coal mines, who talked about these things and helped them to bridge this cultural gap.

For instance, this drag line of which we have spoken is not the normal style we would use in an American coal mine. It was the Soviet system and because it was big and by definition therefore you got economy of scale. Of course when it broke down nothing worked. As I understand, in a similar American mine you would have earth moving equipment and individual trucks, if one breaks down, so be it. There were problems like, they didn't change the oil on a regular basis. Their approach was you bought it to last two or three years and when it broke down, you'd throw it away and buy a new one. You didn't have to worry about maintenance. So you had to introduce a maintenance concept in all these things, even in the most basic things like this. It wasn't that they weren't intelligent and weren't able to deal with these things, it was just they had never been trained. That was the great cross-over. There was a tremendous success when we had success.

Q: How about the Peace Corps? Again I keep thinking about tossing these kids ... Of course some weren't kids anymore, it's a different Peace Corps, but how did the Peace Corps operate?

LAKE: The initial Peace Corps group was tremendously successful. They were brought in to teach English. I took a very tough approach. I insisted because of the severity of winters, because of the problems they were going into the initial group had to be stationed in the capital city. It was the first time ever that the Peace Corps had had an urban Peace Corps program. I suspect we've repeated this experience again in the former Soviet Union. It was a tough thing for them to swallow, but they were tremendously effective. Because, going back to what I said about Americans and Mongolians clicking, they clicked. The Peace Corps volunteers went out and learned Mongolian. I studied Mongolian as I said and when I went back in January of 1991. When I first got back I spoke on TV in Mongolian. That made a tremendous impression on the Mongolians. As some said to me later, none of the Russian ambassadors ever spoke to us in Mongolian. My Mongolian was lousy at best, maybe it wasn't even that good, but the fact that I had learned some Mongolian and had made the effort made a tremendous impact. The Peace Corps volunteers did that all the time.

There were rough spots, etc. but it was a tremendous testimony on the United States and on the American people. It made a tremendous difference from the Mongolian perspective.

Q: Forty percent of the population out there is nomadic. Did the Peace Corps get involved with that?

LAKE: No. The Peace Corps did not get involved with the nomadic population, but it is also important to understand what a Mongolian nomad is. According to a UN study I saw while I was there, statistically the average Mongolian nomad moves five times a year. He covers a distance of approximately two hundred and twenty kilometers. But it is the same two hundred and twenty

kilometers. You know if it's spring, Batmonh is over there somewhere, and if it's fall, he's over there somewhere. So it's a semi-nomadic existence within a given area. Now in my view Mongolia is one of the few countries which truly progressed under communism because they were so far behind. Under communism Mongolia had a tremendous system of rural health care delivery and rural education delivery. You had schools scattered around the country. The literacy rate was in excess of 95% in Mongolia. You had schools and clinics and hospitals all over the country. So as the new volunteers began to come in the Peace Corps began to put them into the countryside. They went to centers like this around the country. So in one sense, yes, they were dealing with the nomads insofar as they revolved around these centers, but in fact they were "urban areas" wherever they were located.

Q: How did the nomads deal with the winter?

LAKE: I can assure you that the Mongolian ger, what the Russians call yurt which is the word that we have in English, is an extremely comfortable place to live when it's forty below.

Q: It's basically a felt tent, isn't it?

LAKE: It's basically a felt tent and they put more layers of felt onto it depending on how cold it is. Enough layers of felt and it's very comfortable provided of course you have a stove inside. In the middle of winter, I've gone out and visited nomadic camps, gone into the gers and it was warm and toasty. A whole lot more comfortable than in the apartments we lived in in the city of Ulaanbaatar.

Q: Was your principle task running around trying to find out where they needed help? I mean how did you find where help was needed? How did this work?

LAKE: I guess my principal task was to get the appropriate elements of the US government involved to address the problems. Identifying the problems was the key element of the task. Ultimately, I think the original plan we laid it out which was to have a technical assistance program with a long term benefit was the best approach. The critical issue that fell upon us if you will was the energy crisis and the way we found out about it was that more junior officials of the Ministry of Energy went to a personal friend of theirs in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs who then asked me if I would come meet him and he had him talk to me. And that's how the story first came out. I then went back to them officially and we began to build from there. The problem is that if you want to do your job effectively, you have to have people following what's going on. I developed a close working relationship with the Ministry of Energy. We had a first tour junior officer by the name of Alaina Teplitz who came out to Ulaanbaatar in the summer of 1992. In December of 1992, as the Economic/Consular Officer, I made it her job to keep track of coal supplies, energy problems, monitor what the AID people were doing, etc. She did a tremendous job. She also organized the consular warning system because the number of Americans had grown so much,

My wife and I arrived in Ulaanbaatar in July of 1990. We were the seventh and eighth Americans to live in Mongolia since 1921. We organized the July 4th picnic in 1993, we estimated that there were over three hundred Americans living there. In January of 1993, the

number around 160. As a matter of fact I say you don't live in Mongolia unless you are there in January. In January of 1993 we had over 160 Americans living in Mongolia. So we had this tremendous explosion of American presence. So therefore you had to be prepared. What if the system failed? What could we, at the Embassy, do as one of our key roles was to protect Americans? We had to devise a warning system, an evacuation plan, etc. In fact, as a result of her work during her first year in the Foreign Service, Alaina personally received one Meritorious Honor Award and shared in a second one for reporting. I suspect few, if any, other first year, first tour junior officers in history had done such an outstanding job.

Q: What other concerns ...? I mean here is an ancient cultural ... a great culture fallen on hard times. Did you get involved? One: concerns about too many Americans, sort of Roy Chapin Andrews types or something like that running around, not looting but, getting involved with tombs or things like that?

LAKE: Did I get involved in it? No. Was there a concern on the Mongolian side? Yes and No. You have to remember this is a country rediscovering its own history. In 1988, there were roughly seventy thousand Russians living in Mongolia. So two hundred Americans was a drop in the bucket. They had already been through that experience, but of course as they rediscovered their history, they became sensitive to many of these things. It was not as big an issue as one might anticipate. I did things to reflect and show respect for traditional Mongolian culture. During the 1930s most of the temples etc. were destroyed by the communist government. But the largest wooden building in Mongolia was a monastery which was out in the middle of no place. I went there to see the monastery. I met the people who were working on it, the monks and so on like this. I displayed an interest in things like that.

Q: A Buddhist monastery?

LAKE: Yes, a Buddhist monastery. In fact Mongolia is the second largest center of Lamaist Buddhism after Tibet. They view the Dalai Lama as the chief religious figure. Things like that showing our respect I felt were important. Yet, there were sensitivities. For instance, there was a great effort on the part of some to look for the tomb of Genghis Khan. Tradition is that when Genghis Khan died he was buried with tremendous riches, and so on like this, and the people who buried him were then slaughtered. The soldiers who slaughtered them and buried them were themselves then slaughtered, and that a river was diverted to flow over this site, the tomb site. Although they think they know the general area where he was buried. The idea was floated about having his burial site located. The theory was that some of the NASA satellites photography that allows you to look below the ground level might turn up information. I discussed this idea with a number of Mongolians and it became very clear very quickly that it was a very controversial issue as to whether they wanted the tomb of Genghis Khan found. I discouraged any official American effort, or more appropriately I didn't encourage any official American effort to pursue this. Fortuitously, I guess, the major Japanese newspapers launched a big effort to try to find the tomb of Genghis Khan. And so they took all the attention and all the controversy that went along with it.

Q: How about Japan and other countries? In Mongolia of course everything was breaking loose. I can see where this would become sort of the darling of Sweden, Japan, Germany, England, and all that. Did this happen or not?

LAKE: The problem became getting these other countries, Japan in particular, but also attracting Swedish attention, British attention, to notice Mongolia, and that's where Secretary Baker played such a key role. Let's face it, Mongolia is the end of the earth as far as they're concerned. Here is a country which when I went there was the largest land-locked country in the world. In the United States, it would stretch from New York to Denver, from Minneapolis to Dallas, with a population of two and a half million people. It is the least densely populated country in the world. And between Russia and China. How much more forgotten and obscure can you be in terms of the rest of the world? But yes, the Japanese and others developed an interest. There is also some complex cultural history here. The Koreans believe their people came from Mongolia. That is the origin of the Korean people is from Mongolia. There is a tradition among at least some Japanese that Genghis Khan really was a Japanese. And of course you may recall during World War II, the kamikaze pilots, the divine wind. The kamikaze in fact is the divine wind which twice destroyed Genghis Khan's fleet when he tried to conquer Japan. So there is a long cultural context here that predates any of the modern and what it means. All these played into it.

Japan is certain to lead. One of the other efforts I became very deeply involved in was a major coordination effort of the international community, both launching the Mongolian Assistance Group and coordinating this effort. Nothing like that internationally ever works perfectly, but we were able to launch a very successful coordination effort involving the international financial institutions, the World Bank, IMF, as well as the donor countries that were resident in Ulaanbaatar. I realized that it would be impossible for me as the American Ambassador to pull it off because of great power chauvinism, etc. I pushed the, willing I would add, United Nations Development Program director to play the lead and supported him very strongly. We were successful in getting a group organized. I can't compare it to any place else in the world. I can say it was the most successful real coordination effort I have seen to avoid duplication among the aid community. It required a lot of support, of determination, but it really worked.

Q: Could you ... I go back to my recent experience in (Kirgizstan?) where the officers there, I'm talking about the American officers, found it a little difficult to get to know their Kirgiz counterparts because there was sort of a tradition. You went out, what you did was you sat down and you drank, you killed a bottle of vodka or something like that, which is not conducive ... This just isn't our way. How did you find a sort of developing relations other than just ...?

LAKE: The young people of the staff found it worked very well in developing a relationship. For me it was much more difficult because the Mongolians are raised in a very formal atmosphere and they do really enjoy drinking. They learned from the Russian school of drinking as a Bulgarian friend of mine would say, and I'm not a heavy drinker. But I did have effective relations with the key senior people of the government. I would hesitate to say personal friends since I was the Ambassador and they were the President, the Prime Minister, the Minister of Energy. But there was clearly a personal feeling among them when I departed that we had developed a relationship that was important from their viewpoint. Some of the younger people on the staff developed very effective relationships. So the hazard you refer to in terms of the

vodka was a real hazard in Mongolia too. The Mongolians in fact have their own vodka. I am not a vodka drinker, but people who are tell me that the Mongolians produce some of the best vodka in the world. One of the great schemes of every businessman who came there was to figure out a way how you could export Mongolian vodka into the United States. The Mongolians also have, in addition to that vodka which is the Russian style vodka, have what they consider real vodka, arkhi, which is of their two national drinks in Mongolia traditionally. One is fermented mare's milk which is ...

Q: *Kumis or something?*

LAKE: Kumis is in fact the Russian word. Airak is the Mongolian word. It is quite something. It's hard to describe and it varies dramatically in quality, but I would say it's pretty close to buttermilk gone bad. Mongolians also distill a vodka from milk. They turn the milk into yoghurt. Then they heat the yoghurt and catch the fumes. They produce a very clear and powerful vodka that is much stronger than any you can find in the United States. I thought smoother, but then again I'm not a vodka drinker so I'm not the right person to make a judgment on that.

I think the important thing to recognize is that we're talking, you know, about the things that I did, but it was a tremendous effort by a lot of Americans from Peace Corps, from AID, who did a lot of things in Mongolia to help make a difference. The reward that these individuals got out of those experience was the reward of appreciation from people and to really make a difference in the future of a nation. I think had we made the same kind of effort in Mongolia that had been made in eastern Europe, or in the former Soviet Union, the impact would have been even greater. But it was a different moment in time. Bureaucratically Mongolia suffered as East Europe and the former Soviet Union opened up because in everybody's world, Mongolia was in the Asian Bureau and everything else was in the European Bureau or whatever they call the European branch of the organization. Never the twain shall meet if you will. In the view of the Mongolians in this whole period was that they began to awaken to the fact that they were Asians. I recall when I first got there and talking to the Mongolians about their desire to buy a Boeing aircraft and saying: "Where will you fly to?" "Oh well, we'll fly to Berlin if we have a Boeing aircraft." By the time I left the Mongolians were trying to get into to Tokyo, to Nagoya in Japan. They had begun to realize their "Asianness", if you will.

Q: *Where did you find the Mongolians? Okay, they're opening up. They have this huge area which is beginning to grow dynamic again, i.e. China sitting next to them. The Soviet Union has collapsed, Russia has its own problems so for the near foreseeable future is not a problem there. What about China, how do they feel about China?*

LAKE: The Mongolians have a very visceral dislike for the Chinese dating back centuries, and a fear of the Chinese. They see what happened in Inner Mongolia. Inner Mongolia today has a Mongolian population larger than the population of the country of Mongolia. But it has a Han Chinese population that is many, many times larger than the Mongolian population in Inner Mongolia. The driving force is fear on their part. One of their problems is how to wrestle, how to balance these two great powers to find a middle line to protect their independence, culturally, economically, geographically, politically. It is not an easy task. It requires a tremendous amount of ability and leadership.

Q: You as the American Ambassador, did you find that things had normally ... where they normally would turn to their near neighbors. I mean were they going to you. Did they feel the Chinese had anything for them?

LAKE: They turned to the Chinese and to the Russians, and we encouraged them to do so. The thrust of our position was that Mongolia's long term solution does not lie with the United States. Mongolia must turn to its immediate neighbors and develop a modus vivendi with them. But they carry the burden of history with them as they try to deal with both the Russians and the Chinese. In the long run if Mongolia is to succeed it will have to deal with this reality.

Q: What about the Mongolian diplomatic apparatus? They had been a separate nation since the twenties anyway and had representation in the United Nations and all that, but were pretty well isolated. Did they have any real foreign service at all?

LAKE: Oh yes, they had a real foreign service. Many of them were graduates of the School of International Relations in Moscow. They have very impressive people. Of course the younger generation, the generation of the revolution has a different perspective. The older guys many of whom had come through the communist system have a perspective. You carry with you your own history. I recall talking to the man who was the Director of American Affairs when I left who had first come to the United States in 1962, 63. Not in the first group to the UN but in the second group, as a young graduate fresh out of the Moscow school. He remembered very vividly his first impressions on arriving in New York. He said: "What an incredible city this is! What a beautiful city! Why do the Americans want to go to war and destroy it all?" Of course over time he began to understand the world wasn't that simple. Of course some people never moved out of that experience.

Q: Where did you find you fit within the State Department bureaucracy? You were in the East Asian Bureau, but I mean you know, you got Japan, you got China, and then if there's any energy left over you got Korea.

LAKE: Mongolia was part of the China-Mongolia office. That of course meant that the Chinese issues used to get a lot more attention. On the other hand from Mongolia's viewpoint it was fortunate because the Mongolian period was after Tiananmen, the great confrontation in China, therefore the US/China relations were at a low ebb. People had energy to devote to Mongolia; but with the passage of time as US/China relations began to improve let's say Mongolia got less and less attention. Of course when Secretary of State Baker left the State Department it got much less attention. But by that time Mongolia had achieved a place in the bureaucracy. You know we worked and struggled to get it introduced so people would recognize it was there and think about it. It was a matter of trying to cope with this position and accomplish something. I have to say that we faced tremendous challenges in Mongolia, but we were also rewarded. We were one of the thirteen, (was it thirteen or fifteen?) embassies selected by Eagleburger as Secretary of State just before he left, for a special certificate of appreciation for the outstanding job we did.

Q: Are there any other things? I can't remember if the last time you talked about, just on the operational level, about the time when your staff was down to practically It was a family matter?

LAKE: When I first got there we had as I said three people and in the summer of 1991, the first two people left. The new political officer arrived, but the new admin. officer had not arrived. By this time the Embassy was growing like topsy. We had found a new building and the problems were mind boggling. So on a temporary basis, we hired my wife as communicator, and my teenage son who had just finished high-school came out, as assistant GSO. So the Embassy at one point there for a few weeks was my wife, my teen-age son, the political officer, and me. By the time I left, we had seven State positions in the Embassy and I would say that the work load when we had seven was essentially the same as it was when we had three in the summer of 1991. You can imagine the amount of all the things we were trying to do-- not even running to catch up or to avoid falling behind, but running to try to avoid falling too far behind.

Q: One of our major tools in these countries is to have essentially exchange programs of one type or another. That is to get people from a country to go to the United States, either to see the United States or to learn a trade or profession or something. But that takes a lot of man-hours to get those things

LAKE: In the initial aid effort, we were able to launch a training program in the US. But then of course we got diverted into the energy sector. USIA supported us with international visitor grants to bring people to the United States for shorter periods. But as you said it took tremendous man-hours. USIA finally agreed to send a USIA officer to Ulaanbaatar and the first officer finally arrived after I left in August of 1993. But earlier I had got them to hire at least two Mongolian staff with whom we could work. It was just another case of juggling all the different balls in the air trying to spend the time. We could have done a lot more had we had a little more staff and a little more money. It was a matter of doing the best you can with what you had.

Q: Were there any other crises that I haven't covered here during this talk?

LAKE: The major crisis I think that we covered was the energy crisis. Survival was the other crisis. The story I've told many times is that first winter. We had to bring in everything from Beijing-- even nails to use in the Embassy.. (By the time we left things were changing.) We saved old lift vans to use as wood, because we couldn't get wood. We even brought in glass from Beijing at times--that's a challenge all its own as you can imagine. But in the spring of 1991, the Land Cruiser which was used as my official vehicle part of the time was in an accident. It was hit through no fault of the driver. But the grill was damaged and the frame bent. My driver was very creative. He went and got it straightened and put a two-by-four in the frame. We couldn't replace the grill, so he got an animal hide and painted it the same color as the car. We used an animal hide in place of the grill. Eventually we got the parts, but it was that sort of day-to-day life challenge that made it incredibly difficult along the way. You knew where you were.

Q: Did you feel when you left at that time so ... whither American relations with Mongolia and whither Mongolia?

LAKE: Let me look back and then look forward.

Q: *Okay.*

LAKE: Looking backward my thought was we have accomplished a tremendous amount. I was there at a period when a country rediscovered its own history, tried to build a new society on democratic principles, and a free market economy with many ups and downs along the way. We could have done a lot more, we could have accomplished a lot more, but we accomplished a lot with what we had. Looking to the future, the first question in my mind was what is the American interest, which I think goes back to one of the first things we discussed. The only interest in Mongolia is if we support the ideals of free democracy and enterprise, Mongolia was one of the places we could make a difference. We were still making a difference at the time I left. We had successfully gotten the Japanese involved. Japan has a more natural attraction for Mongolia than the United States. That makes a longer term difference in terms of the American interests in terms of Mongolia's future. Beyond that other than the tremendous kinship which developed among that small group of Americans who developed ties in Mongolia, there is not much I can think of to say. There is this body of relationship, but unless major economic ties develop--which is possible because Mongolia is potentially a very rich country in terms of petroleum resources. It also has other natural resources: gold, silver, zinc, copper, things like this. Some American companies have begun to explore into this areas. Major economic ties might develop if American companies became involved.

Q: *When you came back to Washington, when you were through there, was Mongolia still on the radar, or where?*

LAKE: Yes, Mongolia is still a blip on the radar and so in that sense in terms of the ultimate bureaucratic battles in the streets of Washington, we were successful in that battle too. You know AID has begun to cut back in other parts of the world, but the Mongolia mission has remained. Will it remain for the indefinite future? I doubt it as the US government cuts its budget and reduces its involvement. Yet, again it is a place where we as Americans have made a difference.

ALPHONSE F. LA PORTA
Ambassador
Mongolia (1997-2000)

Ambassador La Porta was born and raised in New York and educated at Georgetown and New York Universities. After serving in the US Army, he joined the Foreign Service in 1965. During his career the ambassador had several assignments in Washington in the personnel and administrative field. His foreign assignments include Indonesia, Malaysia, Turkey, New Zealand, where he served as Deputy Chief of Mission, and Naples, Italy. In 1997 he was named Ambassador to Mongolia, where he served until 2000. Ambassador La Porta was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 2004.

Q: Al, just to put down, you were ambassador from when to when?

LA PORTA: From 1997 to 2000.

Q: During your career you'd been in a number of places, but had you heard anything, had Mongolia ever crossed your radar at all?

LA PORTA: In fact it did. I became interested and involved in Central Asia going back to my post-graduate career when I was an area studies instructor at the National Security Agency in 1963 after I left the Army. I spent some time in graduate school studying Asian history dealing with cultures, religions, the geography, etc. Yes, I knew where Mongolia was. It was an area that I've always been interested in and just never had an opportunity to get involved with during my career up to that point.

Q: When you were going out there, what were you getting from the bureau? I mean what were our interests in Mongolia? What were our concerns?

LA PORTA: We were very fortunate to have an absolutely superb desk officer at that time. Her name was Ann McConnell. She resided in the China desk, the Office of China and Mongolian Affairs. Although none of the other officers or any of the officers in that office had served in Mongolia, they certainly had a very good grasp of current events, so in terms of preparation and dealing with the other agencies, in particular the Defense Department, USAID and some others, we were very connected indeed. Mongolian lore is not exceptionally large in the State Department, but going back to the early '50s the State Department had trained one or two Mongolists every ten years or so in the Mongolian language. All parts of the U.S. Government, as well as NGO's and democracy organizations, were very bullish on Mongolia. They felt that, as a transitioning democracy, the Mongols were extremely receptive and hospitable. They were certainly all of that and we had very good support in the executive agencies and the Congress.

Q: I've interviewed Bill Brown later ambassador to Thailand and Israel, but he among other languages I think Chinese and Russian, he learned Mongolian.

LA PORTA: Stapleton Roy was another and there were several more. On the other hand, the important thing that characterized Mongolia in Washington's mind during the entire decade of the '90s was that it was a country in transition from Soviet authoritarianism to democracy. It was really a remarkable treat in every respect to be associated with kind of that kind of democratization experience. Mongolia had a good reputation. It began in 1989 when it began to take advantage of Gorbachev's glasnost and demonstrated political independence.

In the mid-1980's Mongolia, in response to Glasnost, began to demonstrate some independence insofar as internal politics were concerned and began some openings to the outside world. But like the Central Asian countries – Kazakhstan all the way across to the Caucasus – Mongolia was very much a closed country to external influence as compared to the European members of the Warsaw Pact which had a much greater national identity and preexisting histories of independence that gave them a Westward outlook.

Q: When you went there were there any concerns about, were there other than good will and wanting to see this develop this way? Did we have anything like wanting to put bases in there or deny bases to somebody or use it as any trade items? Were there any sort of concrete things we wanted?

LA PORTA: The main thing that attracted the Washington agencies was really Mongolia's geostrategic position lying between Russia and China. There was a very strong interest, whether during the Bush administration or later in the Clinton years and especially under Madeleine Albright, in seeing Mongolia pursue a steadily independent course to become aligned with Western interests in Asia as opposed to kind of a more Eastward looking interest like Central Asia.

Q: It definitely was not considered, although it may have been a part, but one of the Stans as the sort of linked together the countries that were.

LA PORTA: Actually excluded in legislation, they were not included as one of the "Stans" because the "Partnership for Peace" (PfP) which was NATO's Eastward embrace, if you will, if not expansion, stopped at Kazakhstan. PfP swept in the Caucasus and all of the Central Asian countries, but did not extend to Mongolia and the Easternmost portion of what was then the Soviet Bloc. It is remarkable that, in fashioning that legislation under the Bush administration, Mongolia was considered the appendage of the area that most Sovietologists were interested in. It never occurred to them that one of the most Soviet states in fact was in Mongolia and that there was also a job to do there. I personally believe, and I've discussed this recently with the president of Mongolia when he was in Washington for a state visit, that Mongolia should again lobby to become part of the "Partnership for Peace." While I was working in NATO in Naples I tried to exercise persuasion in Brussels with the NATO secretariat to get more recognition for Mongolia, but not with any degree of success. I think that it was just too far a stretch for most of the European countries, even among Asianists in European capitals who knew something about the region.

Mongolia, in addition to its geostrategic location and growing identity toward the West, considered the United States its "third neighbor." The first two neighbors were Russia and China obviously, but for real assurance and protection the Mongols looked to the United States because they said only the United States has the power, the interest and commitment to counterbalance the other two.

Q: This is sort of, for them, the America card. We used to call it the China card.

LA PORTA: Absolutely. The Mongols were not rude about it, but they talked about the "third neighbor" relationship. To tell you the truth, while I was there I didn't do anything to discourage it either. Let me add that during the time I was in Mongolia there were some very significant steps that Mongolia took to align itself with Western and pro-U.S. interests. For example, it became a member – with our assistance – of the Pacific Basin Economic Council (PBEC). This in an economic sense gave it a certain view on the Asian economic community, including Japan, Australia, and others, as distinct from looking to its former Warsaw Pact associations in Europe or furthering relations with Russia.

The second thing is that Mongolia became a member of the ASEAN Regional Forum, ARF. The ASEAN Regional Forum is a political and security body created by ASEAN to embrace ASEAN's partners, including China, Korea, Japan, the United States and others. They also had a low level relationship with North Korea, which has subsequently been admitted as a member of the ARF. Mongolia became a member of the ARF in 2001. That began a new era in officially opening up in the defense sphere. Its multilateral relationships with the rest of Asia have been extremely useful to the Mongols in terms of developing a genuine regional outlook which they were not allowed to do under Soviet control. They have developed a pattern of being very involved and constructive in many of the ASEAN Regional Forum committees and other bodies.

Q: Well, now again before you went out, I assume that you talked to the Russian desk and the China desk. In other words, what were their, would they have any concerns? From our perspective were we concerned about the relations with Mongolia as far as Russia and China?

LA PORTA: Very much and there are a number of issues in that. One is the obvious negative intention to deny either China or Russia any new or further territorial advantage from being in Mongolia. We also had an interest in getting Mongolia's cooperation in a number of sensitive areas. Not bases, but we did have an interest in talking to the Mongols about some issues relating to China and North Korea, but not necessarily Russia. It was a certain proximity to North Korea, although they do not share a common border, but it is separated by Manchuria and there was some flow of so-called refugees from North Korea into Manchuria. Some of those found their way into Mongolia.

Primarily though, it was wanting to see the Mongolians develop their political independence and not again fall under the sway of either of the large neighbors. We did have some concrete interest on the military side and this is something that I worked on actively during the three years that I was there, including the establishment of a resident Defense Attaché Office. We had a desire to promote the Mongolian armed forces as a peacekeeping force because Washington and certainly we in Ulaanbaatar correctly perceived that a good way to achieve some degree of Western professionalism and military modernization was through peace keeping training, improving the capabilities of their personnel, units and so forth. Under the international military education and training program (IMET), and what was also known as enhanced IMET for peacekeeping and force modernization, we devoted a lot of attention to professionalism. Retooling their personnel system, their budgeting system, doing things to assist their parliament to exercise oversight, was some of the things we concentrated on, plus acculturation in the laws of modern warfare, and acquaintance with the Geneva Convention. Also important was English language training because the Mongols only spoke Russian and had a very poor track record in the military with English. We began to do a lot of training of high level officers at the Monterrey Postgraduate School in California, the Defense Legal Institute in Providence, Rhode Island, and some other training of commanders as well.

By the end of my time there in late 2003 we had also initiated a non-commissioned officer training program. We had signed an agreement for a twinning of the Mongolian armed forces with one of our state national guards. We expanded technical assistance activities to do surveys of the old Russian bases for ordinance and chemical contamination and all kinds of things.

Q: Did the Mongolians have a draft or was this going to be a volunteer military?

LA PORTA: They did have conscription and normally it was an 18 month mandatory term for all school leavers. In practice, however, as in most of the communist societies, they gave liberal exceptions to basically anybody who wanted them. But their intention was and still is to move toward a professional military force. To further that along we paid special attention to retraining and equipping an elite battalion, now we're doing the same thing for a second elite battalion and personnel from those battalions have served in Iraq.

Q: One of the great weaknesses of the Soviet military I've heard has been its non-commissioned officer corps. It's not very good. They've got officers way down the line whereas we rely on NCOs to do things and these are very professional, the Soviets really didn't have, they relied too much on the officer corps.

LA PORTA: Oh, absolutely. Mostly lieutenants and captains in the Soviet system do what non-commissioned officers do in Western armies. This is one of the transitions that Mongols have had to make in their military concepts because in a peacekeeping role you have to have non-commissioned officers talking to each other and officers talking to each other on equivalent levels. Non-commissioned officers have a great deal more responsibility in field operations and the conduct of peacekeeping than does the officer corps.

Q: Was there a disconnect or a problem as we moved into this because the Western idea, particularly the American idea, is quite different than the old Soviet model?.

LA PORTA: I always used to say that Mongols were very quick not to let a good idea go by. They're normally so eager to grasp new ideas and to run with them. They did accept that. I think it became a problem in terms of military transformation in two respects. Number one, they have a very heavy territorial structure. They have large bases that were left over from the Soviet period which they continue to keep warm and some of those bases are important economically in the far flung expanse of Mongolia. They're unable to really find a good way to really disengage from that. Although there are now plans to convert one base south of Ulaanbaatar into a new international airport and to convert another base area not far from Ulaanbaatar into an industrialization zone.

The second area in which they had difficulty in adjusting is they have hoards and hoards of junk – tanks, armored personnel carriers, vehicles of all sorts, artillery in incredible proportions that is totally useless. They had gotten this equipment from the Soviets beginning back in the '40s and '50s that they are still maintaining it, waiting for something to happen, waiting for mobilization day and these things of course can't be mobilized. I've had some recent discussion with our current ambassador in Mongolia about the desirability of tackling this issue.

Q: Who's that?

LA PORTA: Pamela Slutz. I have talked with Pam and others about starting a program to cut all that old material up for junk, put it on railcars, send it to China, sell it as scrap, make some

money, put it into a revolving fund to buy new weaponry or equipment. I think that there are some people in the armed forces who would like to do that, but they said we have these end use agreements with the Russians and the Russians won't let us do it. I don't know how far that is the case, but I think there is a good argument to be made for doing something like that. China right now is consuming every pound of scrap metal it can buy and now is exactly the time to take advantage of that, even if you get a few cents on the pound or hundred weight.

Q: When you were there was there any particular concern about a threat from either the Russians or the Chinese?

LA PORTA: Not in the military sense. I think that there were concerns over the range of transnational criminal issues, certainly narcotics trafficking. We did know that there were narcotics moving from Kazakhstan to North Korea and out of North Korea to other places. I think we also had some evidence of cross-border traffic in narcotics from China.

Q: How about border guards?

LA PORTA: The border guards was the next point I was going to mention and I'm glad you did. One of our projects that we did do under IMET and we got a special FMF, Foreign Military Financing, for this was the creation of a border communications system. We got grant aid from the United States to basically build them a border communications network where none previously existed as there was an open border with Russia. Although they had posts on the China border, they had no means of reliable communications. In many remote areas, the border posts communicated with each on horseback. They just put a soldier on horseback and said go over there and tell our neighbors down the line what's going on. We were able to get funding for \$3,000,000 in grant FMF in order to put in a border communications system that was partially line of sight, i.e., cell telephone and partially satellite.

Q: Was there a concern I know in the mid '90s I was in Kazakhstan for a little while and one of their concerns was the spillover of the Chinese population. Kazakhstan had 4,000,000 people and just the other side of the mountains were a billion plus Chinese. They didn't want to have a lot of Chinese come in. What about the Mongolians?

LA PORTA: Certainly the demographic factors play very heavily in the China border lands whether its inner Mongolia or Xinjiang province. In the last 30 years the Han Chinese population in inner Mongolia has moved from around 15% to basically being a majority.

Q: Now is inner Mongolia, part of Mongolia?

LA PORTA: No it is not. Inner Mongolia continued to be part of China after the fall of the Chinese Empire in 1913 and after Mongolia became fully independent in 1921. Inner Mongolia had traditionally been an area of primary Chinese influence. Inner Mongolia comprises the southern part of the Gobi Desert and extends not too far from Beijing. Yes, the fear of Chinese demographic expansionism as well as political expansionism is a major fear of the Mongols.

Now, what's happening now is that, through Chinese aid and smiling diplomacy, Chinese influence in the economic sector in Mongolia is increasing, not only through the establishment of Chinese owned textile factories in Mongolia to take advantage of the textile quotas for trade for the United States, but also through extractive mineral enterprises. The Chinese are now developing a nickel mine in Southeastern Mongolia and plan to build a narrow gauge railway into China. They are investing in oil and gas exploration and development in Eastern China along the Manchurian border. They're also interested in other mining enterprises – copper and gold – in other parts of Mongolia. Today they are the leading importer of Mongolian cashmere and other kinds of wool. They also import camel hair from Mongolia and today they're the major recipient of copper ore concentrate from the large very large Mongolian mine and smelter at Erdenet. The terms of trade have totally shifted from the Soviet period whereas all of the output from the Erdenet copper mine went through Russia. It is now almost entirely going to China.

Q: Let's talk a bit about as you saw Mongolia economically. I mean what does it have?

LA PORTA: Well, Mongolia has a very thin economic base. It is a pastoral country. It has under 3,000,000 people spread across an area that extends from New York to Las Vegas and from the Canadian border south to St. Louis. It's a very wide sausage-shaped country, very sparsely populated, although roughly 60% of the population still is outside of urban areas and are mainly nomadic. The economic base traditionally has been animals and animal products, so to the extent that Mongolia has profited very handsomely in recent years from its exports of cashmere and of wool products, this is hardly the cornerstone of national development.

For the longer term three things that are important. One is mineral resources and I mentioned a number of them, nickel. There are very large copper deposits. There are other minerals, including some exotic minerals that are exploitable in quantity. Probably more important for the longer run are oil and gas. There are provable deposits of both oil and gas in Eastern Mongolia. There is oil production today that is being sent to Chinese power plants in the border area in Manchuria. This kind of development can measurably increase and I think could become a real mainstay of the of Mongolian economy for the longer term. The third area is energy because, whether you use domestically produced gas or coal, with more efficient power plants Mongolia would have a surplus of electricity to export to Chinese cities near the southern border or to locations in Siberia. Prospects for geothermal or hydropower are extremely limited unfortunately as Mongolia is basically a very dry place. It doesn't have any real large rivers that make them susceptible to putting significantly large hydropower stations up.

Q: Let's talk a bit about when you got there. What were the embassy and the capital like? And then we'll talk about the government.

LA PORTA: Before we went to Mongolia, people had alerted us to the fact that a lot of common goods were not readily available, whether food products or just household things even the brand of toilet paper that you liked as well as clothing and household things. So, we were prepared to live in a society of acute scarcity. Indeed a decade before there had been real scarcity when the power system had broken down. The coal mines weren't working. The heating systems in the cities were not producing, the importation of a lot of goods had almost ceased and there was a lot

of hardship. I think you'll have to talk to Joe Lake about the time when he was ambassador from '91 to '93.

Q: He went to Albania, didn't he?

LA PORTA: He later went to Albania.

Q: I did get to talk to him. His embassy consisted of his wife and his son. They put plywood on the bathtub in order to have a place to put the Xerox machine or something.

LA PORTA: Yes, that's true. At the time I went, the embassy consisted of a DCM cum Admin officer and an economic-consular officer, a Public Affairs Officer, and a political officer and that was it. Within the year we added a general services officer and then we expanded significantly when we got a defense attaché office and we split apart the economic and consular positions. That said, we were prepared for spartan living. We took a lot of things that we thought we would need based on our other experiences in Indonesia and elsewhere. In point of fact, what we found was that in 2000 and 2001 the economy really began to open up and pick up. A lot more goods, mainly imported from China but also from other places, began to appear in the local markets. We found that, yes, you could get Tyson's brand chicken that came to Mongolia via Russia. You basically got the chicken parts nobody else was buying; the chicken backs and wings all went to China, while the breast parts stayed in the United States or went to Europe. The rest of the chicken, thighs, legs and a few other parts, showed up in Mongolia. On the other hand, it was better than having no chicken at all because there was no indigenous poultry production.

We lived unexpectedly well on imported goods off the local market and the things that we brought with us. When we arrived in the fall of 2000, the city's first and for a long time only French restaurant had just opened. It certainly wouldn't be comparable to anything here in Washington, but was owned by two Corsicans who had passably good food as well as some pretty good wine. That restaurant had just opened, and there was a Korean restaurant, a Japanese restaurant, and a pizza place that also had pasta run by two Mongols who had lived and worked in Italy. They came back to Mongolia and established what started out as a little hot dog place outside the university and they built it up into a chain; when we left three years later they had four restaurants, including a Mexican restaurant and steak house. They did very well. At least you were able to have some other outlets. There were also a few hotels, most of which were old Soviet style hotels, but at least they were there places to go and places to have receptions and other events.

Our embassy was quite small at the time and, as I mentioned, was located in a building that had at one time been built as a combined EU embassy. The French and Germans never went ahead with that experiment in co-existence. So when the U.S. Embassy wanted to open up full time back in 1990, we began negotiations with the government and were given that property. It is a concrete block building, altogether remarkably serviceable. We had trouble with the heat which came from the city, so they put up a backup heating system, eventually a backup electric generator and we put in our own communications system which was upgraded twice while I was there.

Space-wise it was pretty respectable. The offices weren't bad. We improved some of the interior space, created some additional space for local employees and we built a small annex that housed our administrative offices, a little recreation room and a warehouse. We were all on one compound on the northwest side of the city in a very good location overlooking an erstwhile river that didn't have much water in it except during the spring runoff. It wasn't too bad and we were out of the thick of the smog because with all the power plants burning coal and a lot of households burning wood or coal fires during the winter, the place got pretty smoggy.

Our embassy was also notable for the fact that it had the ambassador's residence embedded, another Eastern Bloc attribute. Our ambassadorial residence was a wing of the chancery building and so we could enter through the main lobby or we had a separate private entrance. We lived in a small townhouse that was fine for the two of us. We thought it was great. I loved it because I was just a few feet away from my desk. Since you were on the embassy phone system everything worked, later on we got the cable TV and the armed forces radio and television network. We were very happy in our snug little quarters. Where the place came up short was in entertainment space, but later in the last year we had the recreation room that was used for parties and entertaining large numbers of people, including the 4th of July reception.

Our American staff in the beginning lived in a ramshackle ten story apartment building called Faulty Towers, located about 300 yards from the chancery building. It was really a trial to try to keep those apartments in livable condition. Finally, for security reasons, not only for regular security threats, but also the threat of break-ins, we had to put in extra security measures and put guards on the door where the foreigners lived. I think the ambassador was reasonably well off in living in the chancery, but the staff were less well off living in Faulty Towers. For that reason my DCM at the time, the first DCM that I had as well as the second, spent a lot of their time trying to establish housing alternatives. Today the ambassador has moved out of the chancery. The former residence has now been converted into more office space. The ambassador lives in, and all the staff live in an apartment and housing complex. The ambassador has a freestanding house. The DCM has a smaller freestanding house and all the staff live in condo type townhouses in the same enclosure. It's not connected with the office. Being in the chancery was certainly a convenience when it got down to 25 degrees below zero and you didn't have to go out in the morning.

Q: All right, let's talk about how you were received by the government and who were some of the personalities and how effective, how did you find working with them?

LA PORTA: The issue of governance and our being able to work with the government was one of a truly superb aspects of being in Mongolia because we were fortunate in being able to deal with not only a government and society in transition, but you were also able to deal with remarkably open, intelligent, forward looking and outgoing Mongols. When I arrived, the Democratic coalition was in power. The first Democratic prime minister was elected earlier in 2000; he lasted about 11 months, then there was the succession of Democratic prime ministers. The government became increasingly hamstrung over the nearly four years of its life by what I called the tyranny of the minority as the former communist party, called the Mongolian Peoples Revolutionary Party or MPRP, basically prohibited the coalition from contracting any business in parliament because it always blocked a quorum. MPRP MPs never came to sessions or sat and

dithered away, and so blocked any possible means of progress on the part of the Democrats. That said, it was really a pleasure to work with the Democratic politicians. We also had good relations with the Revolutionary Party politicians, the leader of the opposition who later became prime minister and also the president. There was a remarkably open system in which we had access to all levels of government.

We had a USAID project which we had a very talented economist who was an advisor in the prime minister's office. We had another AID project that worked on privatization. We had others that worked on energy reform. All of the key issues were being worked on, including military reform, were being worked on by the United States. We provided democracy building assistance by the International Republican Institute (IRI) which did a terrific job in working with the politicians in parliament and elsewhere. We had the Asia Foundation and the Soros Open Society Institute, all of which received grants from USAID and from the DRL, Democracy, Human Rights and Labor Bureau in the State Department, to do different kinds of things including development of civil society, women's rights and so forth.

A year into our tour USAID wanted to develop a project in the rule of law and to craft a strategy for legal reform. So, my wife having been an attorney, was hired for that purpose under an AID contract. She worked with subcontractors to develop a strategy for the judiciary, training the legal profession and other things that the judiciary needed. For two of the three years we were in Ulaanbaatar, my wife was occupied with that project. As we were leaving during the last few months, the reform strategy was accepted by the Mongolian government. Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor visited us in Ulaanbaatar. She was a great lady and had a superb visit. She and her husband were fascinated by Mongolia. The legal reform strategy was launched. The AID agreements were signed. There were a number of contracts that are still ongoing to this day that were responsible for working with the Mongols in that field. We were involved with an exceptionally broad range of activities, including humanitarian and social issues like pension reform, that were terribly important.

Q: What was the role of women?

LA PORTA: The role of women in Mongolia is one of the true bright spots among the transitioning communist countries because women in Mongolia were remarkably well educated under the Soviet system. Being extremely forceful and intelligent they immediately gravitated to the top ranks of the reformers. There were a number of forward looking, progressive women's organizations that were interested not only in women's rights, but also in family violence and crime, homelessness in terms of also in elections and legal reforms. Women moved into prominent roles or pioneering roles in that society. They are indeed remarkable ladies.

Q: Was there any residue of the KGB and its system there?

LA PORTA: There was a residue and there was a local KGB that turned out to be remarkably benign. While people alleged that there might have been some overhang of influence from the current KGB in Moscow, I don't think that that was ever satisfactorily proved, although in the Mongolian body politic you certainly had people who were more pro-Russian than they were pro-Western. The body for state security, or SSA as it was known, was remarkably accessible to

us. They developed cordial relationships with parallel institutions on the U.S. side including the FBI and others.

Q: They must have had a relatively small Foreign Service didn't they?

LA PORTA: They did have a fairly small Foreign Service although again they were quite highly talented. Mongolia joined the United Nations in 1961. Before that they were very heavily closeted; in fact some of the older diplomats told me that the Russian posture toward Ulaanbaatar on matters of foreign relations was don't worry, we'll take care of that for you. The Mongolian foreign ministry although nominally independent, slavishly followed the Moscow line in all respects. They did have separate ties with East Germany and Poland in particular, more than with other Bloc countries. All of the Bloc countries including Cuba maintained embassies in Mongolia and so you still had a few legacies of that. There was a Cuban embassy that consisted of one officer. The North Koreans closed their embassy while we were there. The Lao embassy was right next door to ours incidentally. The Laotian communist link was still considered important enough for them to have stationed an ambassador and a couple of officers there. The ambassador in fact was quite a nice fellow; we didn't have any problems over the side fence with the Lao.

With the establishment of its mission in New York in 1961 the Mongolian foreign ministry began gradually to learn about the outside world. One of the more fascinating experiences that we had was talking with a group of officers who were stationed in New York in the early 1960s about what their life was like. In typical Soviet fashion all of them had to live in the Mongolian mission. They had to take their meals together. They only had minimal contacts with delegations other than the Bloc countries. They were thoroughly brainwashed, even by their own admission, as to what they would experience in New York. One of them told me that they had expected to see tanks, artillery and soldiers on every street corner of New York. They had been lectured at great length by the Russians about the evil ways of the West. They were absolutely shocked and surprised to find that virtually nothing of what the Soviets had told them was true.

In the 1960s the Mongolians began to develop an interest in foreign affairs on the Western style; this included their missions in Western Europe that they began to slowly establish. They began to go abroad for education. Usually two or three Foreign Service Officers a year were allowed to go to the UK, France or Germany for higher study. The foreign minister today was in the recent Revolutionary Party government. He was one of the officers who went to New York in the early days. As a group officers who began to serve in the West in the '60s and early '70s are quite articulate, fascinating people, have lots of interests and they're no dummies. Basically their problem was that they were dominated by the Russians and independent thought was not encouraged.

Q: What was the attitude towards the Russians and towards the Chinese, that you were picking up from the groups, whatever you want to call them the political groups.

LA PORTA: The prevailing view was they don't want to go back to either side. They don't want to go back to the days of Soviet domination even though it was acknowledged that the Soviets were responsible for most of the modernity in the country. After the communist revolution of

1921 basically everything that was modern was built by the Russians and the Russians admittedly had a good educational system. This is why over 85% of the people in Mongolia today are literate, can read and write and have had some schooling. These achievements are remarkable and Russian education treated the Mongols fairly kindly. They had access to good universities in Moscow, in Poland, in East Germany, in the Czech Republic and in Hungary. They also turned out large numbers of artists and performers trained in the Western style. We had an opera in Ulaanbaatar that mostly did standard European works. We had a ballet that performed old chestnuts of the Bolshoi ballet, but it was there. You had good orchestras. If you coupled the Western influence that they had derived during the Soviet years with the underlying Mongol culture, you produced some very interesting things.

Q: I know when I was in Korea I was really surprised about wherever the training was, almost any Korean could stand up and sing beautifully or you'd see the school kids learning how to draw. I mean they were developing talents that I find in the United States we've let go.

LA PORTA: In the American system of values those things tend to go to the bottom. Performing arts is one of the them. As people told me in Mongolia, the Russians consciously developed Mongolians as artists, as well as circus performers, for example contortionists and acrobats today with the Cirque du Soleil or the Big Apple Circus come from Mongolia..

Q: How much did history play a role, Genghis Khan, that whole thing? You have the feeling that the Soviets, particularly tried to sit on some of these nationalistic yearnings and all. How did sort of the Mongolian history play?

LA PORTA: Well, Mongolian history did not fare very well under the Russians at all. First of all they brutally suppressed Buddhism. Buddhism by the 1900s and 1920s was not an admirable institution necessarily and the monasteries controlled vast tracts of land. They provided backward education, backward medicine to the people and were where Roman Catholicism was in rural Europe at the time of the Reformation; Buddhism was thoroughly discredited and a self-serving institution. On the other hand thousands of Buddhists Monks and their families were slaughtered or disappeared. Most of the Buddhist temples were closed. A lot of the treasures of those temples were taken by the people, hidden and remained buried for 80 years.

On the other hand, it was to the Russians' credit that they did allow a few truly historic buildings and some unique Buddhist places of worship to survive. Buddhism was reintroduced in 1989, and about 200 monks remained in the country where as there probably would have been 20,000 in the early 1930s. Buddhism is an inexplicable part of the Mongolian identity and legacy. The words Dali Lama are Mongol words, not Tibetan words. There is a strong, shared history in Buddhist tradition between Tibetans and the people of Western China, Northern India and Mongolia. While I was in Ulaanbaatar the Indian ambassador was a Buddhist monk. He led a sect from Ladakh state in Northern India where he was an independence leader with Nehru. Although he was a Buddhist monk, he sat in the Indian parliament for many years, then retired and went abroad to Mongolia as ambassador where he remained eight years. He established a temple and a small monastery right in Ulaanbaatar.

The legacy of Genghis Khan as known in the West was also suppressed. The Russians wiped out that part of Mongolian identity from schools. They discouraged any celebration of traditional Mongolian festivals. They nationalized Mongolian sports and carefully controlled them so they wouldn't become "national". Archery was a national sport; horse racing was a national sport and only rarely allowed. About the only thing I think that did survive under the Russians because it was also respectable in Russian culture was wrestling. Because Russians are also good wrestlers and wrestling is acceptable in Bulgaria and Central Asia, I think that was the one Mongolian sport that they did allow.

They did everything they could to remove Genghis Khan from the national consciousness. There is a new book written by a Jack Weatherford on Genghis Khan and modern history.

Q: I read the book and they talked about the Soviets destroying the spirit banner.

LA PORTA: Oh, yes.

Q: Of Genghis Khan.

LA PORTA: They removed anything that was large and valuable during World War II, took it back to the Soviet Union and melted it down for the war effort. Mongolia was saved from being completely wiped out in terms of its identity by its small population and its remoteness. In other words, Mongolian society was not 100% Russified as it was in some of the other Central Asian republics.

Q: It didn't suffer from either the transport and movement of those tribes or dumping people in there, either way, so it was quite fortunate.

LA PORTA: No. Unlike Kazakhstan which did have a significant influx of minority populations from Western Russia, for example the Tartars or Germans from the Volga region and so forth.

Q: Well, when you went to Kazakhstan you saw almost all of the artisans were Russian. I had the feeling it was kind of held together by Russians, not necessarily as managers, but the shoe maker or the mechanic or something like that.

LA PORTA: By 2000 the Russian population in Mongolia was very small. Just a few thousand in Ulaanbaatar who were Russian or claimed Russian nationality, most of whom were Mongolian-Russians who intermarried.

Q: Mongolia during World War II. Were there many troops or I mean problems there or do they have much of a memory of World War II?

LA PORTA: For Mongolia World War II really doesn't hold any significance at all. What did hold significance was the war with Japan, which was really fought in 1936 to 1939; and these were the border wars.

Q: There was the battle of Khalkhin Gol, the Japanese were thoroughly worked by the Mongols and Soviets.

LA PORTA: Yes, the Mongols held the Japanese back at this lake in extreme Eastern Mongolia on the Manchurian border. That stemmed the westward advance of the Japanese forces and they turned south toward China.

Q: It showed that the Japanese really weren't up to facing a really organized army at least on a flat plane or something. They really didn't have the mechanized; they were good in the jungle, but not.

LA PORTA: The accounts that I've read of it and looking at the photographs of the battlefield is that the Japanese forces tried at least three times to penetrate the Russian-Mongol line over a period of more than a year. This was an extended enterprise. The Japanese were really strung out along the Manchurian frontier and they were unable to make a breakthrough where they could get on a track to get to Ulaanbaatar which was the only thing that really counted. The Japanese fortified the border with China and there were a series of border incursions that went on into 1941 and 1942 in different places. There were accounts of several skirmishes with the Mongol border forces. Everybody knew the Japanese were there, no question about it, but the Japanese simply gave up any interest they had in moving against Mongolia after the defeat on the Manchuria border.

The only other legacy of World War II was the fact that a lot of Mongolian culture in terms of archeological and cultural artifacts was ripped off from the few remaining temples and Buddhist shrines and national university in Mongolia were taken back to Moscow. In Moscow, Leningrad and Warsaw a lot of the artifacts were stored in tunnels underneath the cities sometimes either built as air raid shelters or as part of the subway systems. In the allied bombing of those cities a lot of things were lost. It is believed that some museum quality items may still exist in the subterranean areas of Moscow, but nobody knows where they are. It's remarkable.

Q: You mentioned earlier that Japanese war veterans returned to Mongolia. Was that big tourism?

LA PORTA: The Japanese have a peculiar fascination for Mongolia which is part cultural, part war-related and part a desire to visit the wide open spaces, ride horses and do things that are impossible at home. The Japanese had a fairly large embassy in Ulaanbaatar and they trained several Mongolian language specialists every year. In addition to looking after Japanese delegations, they acted on behalf of the large Japanese companies (Mitsubishi, etc.) to channel trade and aid contracts to them, for example, for the refurbishment and maintenance of Ulaanbaatar's largest power plant.

Q: When you were there, were the Mongolian authorities trying to revive the Mongol, not the spirit of the Mongol empire, but the feeling we were a great nation before or was this...?

LA PORTA: To their credit they didn't confuse having a past in which Genghis Khan was revered with any pretensions of being something that they weren't. Unlike the Turks, which after

the fall of the Soviet Union wanted to establish with Turkic speaking peoples everywhere, the Mongols never had any such pretensions. Nazarbayev in Kazakhstan established a Kazaks homeland policy and was successful in attracting about 40,000 Kazaks who lived in modern Mongolia back to Tajikistan. Now these people have fallen on hard times because they were not given access to social services and were treated as second-class citizens. They were not given rights as citizens. They did not get the jobs that were promised to them and had really become kind of a bilateral thorn in terms of Mongol-Kazak relations.

Q: You were there at a time when sort of a cyber revolution affected the world, the Internet, the access of the computer, better communications and all. How did the.

LA PORTA: The great fizzle of Y2K.

Q: Yes, everything, we were supposed to have a disaster because on the dating when we came to 2000. I mean how did the Mongolian government people cotton to this sort of thing? Was it a natural meeting, I mean the young people or not, was this an effective?

LA PORTA: The Internet revolution has been embraced by Mongols, no question about it. I think it contributed enormously to the opening up of the country since the mid 1990s and has been the cheapest way for Mongols to learn about the outside world, whether it's entertainment, art, politics or just simply being able to communicate with each other. The only thing that retarded Internet expansion in Mongolia is simply the cost of putting the system through the telephone lines, although great strides in fiber optics and digital transmission have been made in the last couple of years. Mongols, being highly educated, highly verbal and adept at technological things, love the Internet. The computer businesses in Mongolia are doing very well. Telecommunications companies are doing very well. After outsourcing has run its course in the Philippines and India, Mongolia would be a good candidate for software development and other kinds of activities. The Mongols are also good language learners. They're very adept at languages.

Q: The three years you were there, were there any particular issues you got involved in other than fostering better relations and all of this?

LA PORTA: There were several aspects of the way life in Ulaanbaatar is a little bit different than elsewhere. First was that we had almost a mentoring relationship with the current Prime Minister, Elbegdorj, who was a prime minister during the time I was there, so it's "deja vu all over again." To have such a close relationship on a personal and an intellectual basis with a governing group, not necessarily in the sense of establishing U.S. hegemony, but just helping these guys do the right thing. It was tremendously professionally rewarding.

The second thing that was very important was to really help the Mongols get deeper into and understand a lot of what Asian regionalism was all about. In other words, they had made up their mind by the time I got there that their future lay in Asia. They had to learn more and we could help them. The officers we had were good at regional economic and political affairs. We knew the regional issues. We knew the players. We knew the organizations. We worked on how

Mongolia could take advantage of those kinds of opportunities to become a true contributor in the Asia region.

A third area that I thought was very important was social and humanitarian affairs. Like most transitioning societies, there was a breakdown in the ability of the government to provide for the poorest of its people. The fact that you had people who were hungry, number one, because the economy went south and they did not have access to clothing, warm boots and all the other things you need in an extremely cold climate. Hospitals could not get medicines. Their equipment wasn't repaired. The quality of care in government clinics, orphanages and everything else really suffered and went down because when the Soviet economy stopped, so did the Mongolian economy. They lost their markets that they've had to rebuild and those things don't happen overnight. There was a tremendous stress during that kind of transition that really worked hardship on the poorest people in the society. The end of communism also meant the opening up of religion, so who came in, well, lots of Christian missionaries. We went to services at the Catholic mission even though we're Episcopal/Anglicans. The Catholic mission there did terrific work in looking after homeless kids, schooling for young children, mothers and infants and retarded people. You had Christian missionaries who moved in to establish orphanages outside the state system or who did outreach work in state institutions, not only in Ulaanbaatar, but in other towns and cities. Missionaries moved into English teaching; the Mormons were very strong in their outreach in terms of education. You had a void that was being filled by missionary organizations. We had about 350 American Christian missionaries there at any one time and the population usually went up to about 700 in the summer when the weather was good.

We had a lot of relationships with the missionary community. Normally when the Foreign Service comes up against that part of our national character or experience, it usually is not a happy one. On the other hand I found it tremendously rewarding. I felt it was my job to do what I could to help the missionaries in whatever way to do their jobs in civil ways but I didn't shrink from telling them when I thought some of their proselytizing was out of bounds or unfair. We had a number of conversations with different groups about that. I felt that in terms of how they lived, what they were able to bring into the country, medicine, books, clothing, or whatever they needed to help people was entirely worthwhile and within my responsibility.

We also had concerns with the government to make sure that they didn't pass laws that infringed on freedom of religion and disadvantage the open regime that had been created during the previous decade. We've heard from missionary friends who are continuing to do good work, whether they're Catholic or evangelical Protestant or Mormons. We know many young Mongolians who have benefited from missionary education, including schooling in the United States. The Catholic mission now has a permanent church. They've installed the first Catholic bishop of Mongolia and they're now recognized as fully in the Catholic hierarchy, so things do happen.

Q: On my notes, you showed me a picture of a beautiful young lady. You might explain that.

LA PORTA: All right. Well, in 1999 a new foreign adoption law was passed by the Mongolian parliament. My wife, being an attorney, was interested in helping the state orphanage and a couple of other organizations making sure that the rules were appropriate for foreign adoptions

and that all of the legalities for U.S. adoptions were observed. She facilitated the first adoption case which was of the adoption of a young boy whose adoptive parents were cousins of my son-in-law; that family lives in Pennsylvania. He was adopted a little over four years ago and he's turned out to be a great kid. When it came time for my daughter to adopt a child she looked first to Mongolia, about a year and a half ago instituting adoption formalities to an accredited international adoption agency and one of the agencies approved by the Mongolian government. In April she and her husband went to collect their daughter, who is now named Olivia, from the orphanage in Ulaanbaatar and the family arrived back in the U.S. on May 1. We have now a U.S. citizen Mongolian origin granddaughter.

Q: It's a beautiful picture. Did you find, I mean you went out under the Clinton administration. Did you find any change in relations with Mongolia when the Bush II administration came in?

LA PORTA: Well, I really wasn't there for that transition. I was there under the second Clinton administration when Madeleine Albright was Secretary of State, then I left. My wife and I arrived in San Francisco on the election day in 2000. We got to Mongolia in November 1997 and came back in late 2000, then I went on to Naples. I really wasn't there for the transition to the new administration. By all accounts I think the Mongols have found that U.S. interests vis-à-vis Mongolia have largely remained the same. The fact that democratization in Mongolia began under Bush I and George Herbert Walker Bush put a lot of store in democracy and seeing Mongolia become self-sufficient and self-standing politically and economically.

I think that, if anything, the democracy strain is a bit stronger under the current Bush administration. I think Mongolia has benefited in a number of ways. The Mongolians chose to join the "coalition of the willing" in Iraq and they're now on their third rotation of troops into Iraq. Those troops are the ones that we began to retrain and have benefited from the work that we did back in the late '90s and continuing forward.

Q: You mentioned earlier in our interview that there was a murder case in Mongolia. Is there a good consular story there?

LA PORTA: Not long after I arrived in late 1997, an American contractor trying to start a building and timber production business killed a Mongolian employee. Allegedly the Mongolian employee was a well known drunk (Mongolians do not handle alcohol well – it's genetic) and attacked his American supervisor. Unfortunately the forensic evidence showed that the American stabbed the Mongolian 11 times, including several times in the back. I did not want the Embassy to get out in front on the issue so we sent a TDY officer to observe the trial. There was enormous political pressure in Washington state, the American's home, to get him released. In the end, following his conviction, he was repatriated to Washington state to serve his sentence by action of the President who is head of the judiciary. Justice was done from the Mongolian standpoint.

THOMAS R. CARMICHAEL
Public Affairs Officer
Ulaanbaatar (1998-2000)

Mr. Carmichael was born in Iowa and raised in Illinois and Florida. He was educated at the University of Florida and Florida State University. In 1984 Mr. Carmichael joined the USIA Foreign Service and served variously as Cultural Affairs Officer and Press Officer in Madrid, Le Paz, Poznan, Kuala Lumpur, Ulaanbaatar and Hanoi. He also served several tours at USIA Headquarters and the State Department in Washington, DC. Mr. Carmichael was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 2010.

Q: Where did you go after this?

CARMICHAEL: I was there [Malaysia] for two years, and USIA was going to downsize our post there. That meant rather than having an information officer, a cultural affairs officer and a public affairs officer and a deputy public affairs officer. Typically the public affairs officer takes the press responsibilities, if there are only two people at post, so the public affairs officer would have taken my press portfolio, and I would have been, I would get the cultural portfolio -- or leave. I felt it would be better career wise to leave, and USIA was really looking for somebody up in Ulaanbaatar, so I bid on that post. I didn't have to raise my hand very high for that at all. In fact, it was also the first time my wife used the internet. I said, "What do you think about Ulaanbaatar?" She used my office computer one Saturday to look it up on the internet, and said, "Oh, that looks pretty interesting." So we had to go back to Washington to take Mongolian and then we went to Ulaanbaatar for two years.

That post had really opened up just a little while ago. I had visited Ulaanbaatar back in '93 when I was working in the East Asian and Pacific Area office -- just to look at the post and report on what it was doing. We had no facility up there, USIA, but we had donated a dish to the Mongolian government radio and TV station for use with Worldnet programming.

Q: You are talking about an antenna?

CARMICHAEL: Yes, a dish antenna, and it wasn't working properly, so my boss wanted me to take a look at it and try to figure out why it wasn't working in terms of whether there was no maintenance support or what the deal was. That was just part of a larger trip, so I had been up there before and thought to myself as I left, "I'm never coming back here!" -- primarily because I was there in January, it was cold, and infrastructure was very ragged. The lights in the hotel went out several times while I was there, for instance. In any case, I wanted to stay in East Asia and U.B. was the job that was opening up in East Asia and the Pacific, if I were to leave Malaysia. I was only the third public affairs officer up there in Ulaanbaatar. The one just before me had left, just quit and resigned the Foreign Service. I was going into a rather disorganized office at the time.

We had, I think, the old Bulgarian embassy, and USIA had been given the old auditorium in that embassy as our offices. It had a little stage on one end. The only furniture we had was what State Department had given us, and my office was a steel desk and three steel file cabinets that were placed side by side as a wall to separate me from the rest of the auditorium where my four-person staff sat, including two who had desks on top of the stage in the auditorium. The inspectors from USIA's Office of Inspector General had come up to visit Ulaanbaatar, and had

said that this is not acceptable. You can't have a post where you don't have your own furniture, you don't have any sort of real facility or even the sort of support you need. If USIA was going to have a post there, they had to do a better job, so part of my job was not only to run the section, but also to oversee a renovation of that space.

My wife and I lived, and all the embassy staff lived, across a vacant lot from our embassy. The field used to be, we were told and I am pretty sure it was, the location of a slaughter house, so we called the field "the boneyard." Every once in a while, a bone would just sort of rise up through the soil. We lived in what was the end of an old Soviet blockhouse, and we'd just taken the last little wing of that structure, and put extra heat in it, kept it clean, and painted it and that sort of thing. It was still just an old blockhouse. They put a couple of these very small Soviet-style apartments together so that we would have a real apartment, but it was wired pretty basically. You could see the wiring inside and the trim work looked like they had cut it out with a scythe rather than a saw. We called the building 'Faulty Towers' after the British comedy show. They could refer to it in cables as 'Faulty Towers,' because it was so well known. Everybody lived there, however, and it was a nice little community – as pleasant as I experienced. The ambassador was the only person who lived in a different place -- in the embassy itself. He had a smallish place there – certainly no elegant living, but his wife entertained beautifully. In any case it was just pretty rugged living. The Mongolians would store things in big railroad containers just placed wherever they could fit them. There was a line of these old, rusty containers between 'Faulty Towers' and the embassy. We had our own containers for storage scattered about as well. Not very pretty.

Q: You did this from when to when?

CARMICHAEL: I did this from '98 into 2000, so I saw the millennium there in 2000.

Q: What was the main work you were doing?

CARMICHAEL: I was the only public affairs officer, and my main work was really getting to know the Mongolians, and USIA had to establish a more active presence there. As you know, the Mongolians didn't kick out the Russians; the Russians left -- the Mongolians looked at the Russians for a long time as their bulwark against the Chinese. Between Ulaanbaatar and the Chinese border, there were hundreds of thousands of Soviet troops who really just sort of left. In a very short time, they just got on the trains and pulled out of their bases -- leaving several cities almost ghost towns.

The Mongolians were looking for new friends. They had to have new allies, and so they looked at the United States to be their new patron, their new friend, and, you know, we had to be that friend. We had to help support some democratic growth in the country, help economic growth in the country, look at what they had to offer on the international scene and work with them, illustrating that we had an interest in their stability. They were a buffer between two historically hostile countries and maintaining that buffer was to everybody's advantage.

Q: Did you find yourself betwixt and between the Russian and the Chinese spheres? Was this that quite apparent?

CARMICHAEL: That's what we were there for. You couldn't run and hide from that fact. That didn't make things difficult; that made things easy because they wanted us to stay. They typically wanted to be quite helpful and be a partner to us on such issues as the North Koreans, who had an embassy there. The Mongolians had good relations with the North Koreans, relatively good, at least.

Q: What were the North Koreans up to there?

CARMICHAEL: That's a good point. In fact the North Koreans decreased their presence there and were at the edge of closing their embassy while I was there. There were several former East Bloc countries' embassies, such as Rumanians and Bulgarian, as well as the Lao embassy. The Soviets had a big embassy, which became a ghost embassy pretty quickly. The Chinese had a presence there, and they continued to have interest in increased trade to Mongolia, the Mongolians would say larger interests, whatever interests the Chinese have in countries on their borders. Over the decades as Chinese-Russians tensions had risen, the Mongolian government and people showed an increasing hostility towards Chinese and Mongolians of Chinese decent in their country.

Q: Was there much activity on the Chinese part?

CARMICHAEL: They had an active student exchange programs, because, of course, they were very inexpensive to run with little transportation costs and they wanted to bring down Mongolians for education in China that could really just dwarf anything we did. Just getting the flights, getting people in and out of the place for a speaker was very, very difficult for us, but the Chinese you know had very large programs of education exchange with the Mongolians which they could more easily afford.

Q: How did the Mongolians view the Chinese? The history had been pretty much Mongolians going into China more than the Chinese coming into Mongolia or not?

CARMICHAEL: They looked down on the Autonomous Region of Mongolia which was, you know, a part of China; and the movement of the Han into that territory was disturbing. They saw their country as just another step for China in their movement for more land. Mongolia had all the land with no people on it. China has a lot of people, and they want land so the Mongolians were more concerned about the Chinese coming up than the Soviets coming back. They were very concerned about Chinese expansion and watched Tibet, Hong Kong, and Taiwan issues closely.

So they had Chinese expertise. People may laugh at a think tank, it might just be a few people there, but, nevertheless, it was a group of people that needed to think about these things and provide support to the government. So they had some Chinese expertise that was, of course, of interest to us and they would have to be a partner in any sort of discussions in the region, about disarmament, or confidence-building measures, etcetera.

Q: Were the Mongolians able to build a viable state?

CARMICHAEL: They were working on it while we were there. They once had a very solid state, a Communist state. It was the second oldest Communist state after Russia. They were as tightly knit and successful, I guess you would call it, knit into the Soviet economic system so they had, it was not that they had to build a viable state; they had to get into the transition to a free-market system.

In some areas they were handicapped by their former integration in the Soviet economic and military systems. For instance, they had very large wheat cooperatives which were no longer viable. They had an army that was not, did not have the full spectrum of capacity it needed, rather it had just elements of certain capacities that fit well with the Soviets capacities there, and when the Soviets left, there were all these gaps in their military and they needed to build that up. They needed to build up their military education system, for instance. The Mongolians also needed a civil society that works with their political system.

One of our program goals was to promote free-enterprise in the media, and we brought some excellent speakers to address private sector media, including some opportunities for our speakers to speak directly to Parliamentary committees and other officials about these goals. Secretary of State James Baker even did a Worldnet from his Texas office supporting the continuation of advertising in radio and TV.

Q: What about the winters there?

CARMICHAEL: Oh, yeah, the winters. It was a long, long, long, long winter. It gets down, it would be typically for a couple of months minus 20 everyday, but, frankly, it makes it easy because you don't have to worry about what to wear. You didn't need to ask, "Do I have to wear a heavy coat today??" You just always had to have everything on.

Of course, it limited your activity to a certain extent, as I recall because speakers were not as likely to come during the winter to Mongolia. But to me, it was when the culture was really at its finest. You could go down to the open markets – these would be found in large unheated buildings in which your breath would turn white. In the first year we were there during the wintertime, and there were no green vegetables, just like in Poland. More and more in response to the need feed the expatriates there, and some Mongolians were adapting a Western diet, we started to see more lettuce and some nicer things in the markets being brought up by train from Beijing.

In these markets were kiosks with big hunks of meat -- a lot of sheep carcasses. The Mongolians didn't like to eat fish, and their traditional diet was primarily meat and dairy. That is what they think of as their basic diet. A lot of Westerners would go up there for trout fishing, because Mongolia had mammoth trout in the streams, so you'd see these wealthy guys arrive at the airport with leather cases with brass tags for their fancy fly rods. They'd go out as well -- as guys that would come with big, fancy guns to hunt mountain goats, etcetera. What it meant was the waters were full of fish that the Mongolians weren't particularly interested in, but every once in a while you would see someone bring in fish into these markets in the wintertime. They'd be carrying the fish just like logs, because the fish would just be frozen stiff, stacked in their arms

like firewood. You would see, outside on the walls around these markets, sheep carcasses that would be frozen stiff and sort of stacked like lumber against the walls. Massive trucks would come in, massive, old Russian trucks- with lamb skins lashed on top of the engine hoods to keep in the heat. It was quite a scene.

It was a rough, rough place, but at the same time in front of that same market you would have old Mongolian women that would be sitting out in the cold next to a bucket of yogurt or milk in the tin cans and they'd have on their dells, their long native coats, and felt boots. They would be wearing silver fox hats that would be a thousand dollars in New York City today, just doling out 25 cents of yogurt. It was really a beautiful sight.

Q: How about Mongolian hospitality? How did you find that? Was there much contact?

CARMICHAEL: When you were out in the countryside, when we would be taking trips, the roads were pretty minimal. Someone could have a 'ger,' the native round tent, and a little camp pretty close to the road. If we would drop in there with our guide, we'd always get invited in, and they would always want to show us their "ger," the round tents called "yurts" in Russia, and offer us fermented mare's milk. We often would take a picture of them. They really liked that. We could generally send the photos back to them. They were very, very hospitable people. They liked us. We treated them well, and they treated us well.

Q: What about the cultural side? Mongolia has been fairly well known by a couple of films that have come out of there. Camels Crying and there is another one. Was there a lively cultural side of things?

CARMICHAEL: There was. The Soviets had always promoted the arts, and so the Mongolians had opera there, an opera house and two symphonies in this little town of Ulaanbaatar that had perhaps 600,000 total people. So they had that type of formal, Western-oriented thing, and they were very, very proud of their own culture. They generally performed their dances whenever we went out to a small town, for whatever reason. The embassy sent around an exhibit, a photographic exhibit of life in America, that had gone all through Asia on its travel schedule, and it ended up in Ulaanbaatar as its final embassy for showing. My cultural affairs assistant, a great guy, would keep the thing patched together, and we would take it out to little towns and put it in their high school auditoriums to show the local population. They always had a dance troupe in the town that would perform their indigenous dances for the opening. Whether they were truly original, indigenous dances or not, was really sort of beside the point. It was still a promotion of the arts throughout the country.

Q: Was there any real student exchange or visitor exchange going on?

CARMICHAEL: Yes, we had a Fulbright program. We sent about three people from Mongolia to the United States each year and brought teachers there to teach business, English language, and American culture. I was proud of the types of academics we got to come to Mongolia during the years I was there. During the years I was there, we sent a young Mongolian violinist to the U.S. for an M.A. We recorded her demo tape and sent it to the Fulbright program that said, "Yes, this is wonderful." Because they had good schools there, relatively good schools, there was an

educated elite. They were often educated in Eastern Europe, but both in their bureaucracy and in some of their businesses you would find pretty well educated people.

People have a very negative view of Mongolians. It's true that some of them weren't very well educated and a little rough around the edges outside, but some of their bureaucrats and diplomats were sophisticated, well educated people. They had gone to schools in Bulgaria, in Poland, in Russia, etcetera. We saw some Mongolian politicians and diplomats in discussions with Japanese, Koreans, and they held up their own with diplomats from these countries. If we got the Chinese together, we knew they had a line that they had to give in whatever conference discussion, and the Koreans weren't as active in conversations, and the Japanese were more reserved, but the Mongolians didn't feel quite so rigid. They were a little more creative and generally spoke a bit better -- which I thought was great. But I still met colleagues who would infer or say outright their assumption that Mongolians had second-rate minds. But this just missed the reality of things.

Q: Where did you go afterwards?

CARMICHAEL: After that I went back to Washington where I worked for a year in what was left in the State Department of what USIA had called 'Arts America' which carried out cultural programs. Then I went to Hanoi for my last assignment.

Q: You were mentioning there was an incident when you were there.

CARMICHAEL: The president there continued to be from the Mongolian People's Party. New parties grew up, and they were able to take over the parliament, so when I went there, there was new hope for the country with a more democratic group in power there. One of the more dynamic and progressive politicians from that era, one of the ministers, was assassinated fairly soon after I arrived -- nothing having to do with my arrival by any means -- but the question about who killed him continued as a nagging question in the political environment throughout the time I was there. The fear of a renewed Communist resurgence of the People's Party was constantly there those two years I was there.

One of the embassy's International Visitors during the years before I arrived was the Mongolian cultural minister, who was from the only party, the Mongolian People's Party at the time, and was later to become the prime minister. The questions about how truly interested some of these politicians were in full democracy for everybody, in sharing some of the mineral wealth, and the wealth of the state and some of the benefits of foreign aid, was always kind of in doubt.

Q: This was a period too that the Russians were going through the oligarchy time, basically the apparatchiks in the party taking over the wealth in the country. Was there anything like that happening while you were there?

CARMICHAEL: There wasn't an even distribution of wealth and during the transition from communism to capitalism, you know, that has been goal that is often kind of lost. It didn't seem to be that all the Mongolians were happy, because they were basically dropped from a system, which in some aspects appeared to work relatively well.

Q: They were on the receiving end of things.

CARMICHAEL: Yes, the receiving end of things and also their authoritarianism was something for which there was a certain nostalgia – and such sentiments seemed understandable. For instance, the Communists had strict rules about herders not leading their animal into Ulaanbaatar. By the time I got there, several years after the Communist government, those laws had been pretty relaxed, so that herders would bring in horses and sheep, and you'd see animals at the side of the streets, in the median strips. You might have a cow there and such. Foreigners would look at this and say, "Oh, how picturesque this is," but Mongolians saw this as a loss of what they had been working to establish for years and years and years -- to have urban areas that were civilized, and you didn't have country animals wandering around their streets.

They had large communal farms that fit into the Soviet Union system that had acres and acres of grain and big silos that, by the time I got there, by the end of my stay, I could see they had been basically abandoned and the fields were fallow for years, the buildings collapsing. How do you reconcile the image of fields of grain that are no longer there with what capitalists spoke of as progress towards the future?

I saw this paradox elsewhere, whenever my cultural assistant and I walked around Ulaanbaatar, it was always pretty dangerous because you were walking on ice – the sidewalks didn't get cleaned, and he sometimes said, "You know, under the communists the sidewalks were clean. You could walk the streets." We had a couple of our officers hurt, falling on ice. It's not just a little thing. And there were open manhole everywhere, because scavengers had stolen the covers -- because people had pulled them out, pulled the manhole covers, so they could sell the metal. Earlier the children of herders had to go to schools that the government had built throughout the country, but long before I was arrived, the new government had closed the schools because they were not efficient and relaxed enforcement of compulsory education for herders' children.

Q: I remember I was in Bishkek in the '90s and in the Kyrgyz Republic and you didn't really dare walk at night without a flashlight because there were manhole covers gone and no lights.

CARMICHAEL: That was exactly the case in Ulaanbaatar, yes. Their symphony and opera which were an achievement, they were proud of them. Those were marks of civilization, but while I was there, the finest artists were sometimes being hired elsewhere -- outside the country. I worked with a dance festival in the U.S., I think it was in New York, and they wanted to get visas for a couple of Mongolian dancers, so that they could have a Mongolian representative at their event. Our embassy said, "Well, are these guy going to come back?" "Oh, yes," they responded, "they're going to come back. We are going to walk them to the plane to make sure they come back, but we really need some Mongolian representatives here to make this a full, rich festival. We want our festival in New York to be full and rich."

So one of these dances goes, performs, and doesn't go back. He's washing dishes in New York someplace. To me, I ask who was the beneficiary there? The beneficiary was an American festival, arts, good people all of that, but it was not even a brain drain. They just took a body that had great talent, and they used all of his talents and now he is washing dishes. What was the

benefit there? Who benefited? Well, I guess the dance festival was full and rich, the organizers' goal, but Mongolia and the dancer himself lost a lot.

I do have to mention that one of the things that we did to work with the Mongolians was to support a production of Porgy and Bess – the choral version only because of rights restrictions. The Mongolian National opera director had been on a State Department-sponsored trip to the U.S., and he met an orchestra director, who had done Porgy and Bess for years who was working in Santa Fe. The director, an older guy, but very active, had done a version of Porgy and Bess with Cab Calloway. The director wanted this director to come to Mongolia and do Porgy and Bess there, and so I and the State Department Office of Cultural Programs arranged for this director to come. They could only do the choral version, because of the rights that the Gershwin estate permitted. The Mongolians did a choral version of Porgy and Bess, we brought a American culture specialist to talk about the meaning of Porgy and Bess and U.S. racial relations, and had a State Department exhibit on Duke Ellington at the same time in the opera house. I also ordered a bunch of posters of Porgy and Bess opera presentations in the U.S. to put on display at the same time. It was just kind of a great, crazy thing -- a good thing to do which won us great favor with one of the institutions, the National Opera, which was had been built during the Soviet era, but remained something several generations respected. A program like this recognized our respect Mongolia's established arts achievements.

Q: You left in 2000?

CARMICHAEL: Yes, 2000, right. I went back to Washington to work in their arts section – the same section that helped with the Porgy and Bess project, and then I went to Hanoi.

I had worked in Mongolia for two years as the last USIA public affairs officer, there because at the end of 1999, USIA was transitioned into State Department. I left there and went back to work in Washington, D.C. I bid on my domestic assignment, and was assigned to a position in what was the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs' Office in the office of Citizen Exchanges, specifically in an office that was the remnants of the old Arts in America program.

Q: There is one question I would like to ask about Mongolia. There have been at least two films that have come out of Mongolia; one about camels crying and then there is another one I have seen.

CARMICHAEL: Julia Roberts also had a little film.

Q: Was there a nascent Mongolian film industry? Did you have any contact with that?

CARMICHAEL: Yes, we had contact with that movement. It was not an indigenous Mongolian effort. There was one young Mongolian gentleman, a director, but he worked with others --either a Danish or Dutch director, I can't recall which, and did a couple of films, one called State of Dogs. This was quite a controversial film in the sense that it was comparing Mongolia to a dog that had been abandoned by nomadic shepherds who left one morning while he slept. This was a metaphor to the Russians taking off and leaving the Mongolians on their own. There was that nascent film industry developing through foreign cooperation, but there was also a longstanding

Soviet sponsored academy that had created films, as part of the Soviets arts program. Every once in a while at night on Mongolian TV, they'd show an old Mongolian movie. I don't think that academy exists anymore or produces film. It is a shame, because some of these old movies represent Mongolia's history.

MARY A. WRIGHT
Deputy Chief of Mission
Ulaanbaatar (2002-2003)

Ms. Wright was born in Durant, Oklahoma in 1946 and graduated from the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville. She has served in numerous posts including Managua, St. George's, Tashkent, Bishkek, Freetown, Palikir, Kabul and Ulaanbaatar. She was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 2003.

Q: Well, then what?

WRIGHT: Before I went to Afghanistan I had been selected as the DCM of our embassy in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, one of the places left in the world that I've always wanted to go in my quest for isolated, faraway parts of the world. As I left for Afghanistan I got a call from the ambassador in Mongolia who said, "Ann, I hear you're going to Afghanistan. Please don't bail out on me and stay in Afghanistan." It was a real temptation because Afghanistan was so interesting and had all the challenges that I've been trained to do. It was hard not to say that I wanted a one-year assignment to Afghanistan, but I had made the commitment to go to Mongolia and I did want to see Mongolia. So I went ahead and headed on to Mongolia and got there in July of 2002.

Q: And then we come sort of to the end of this particular phase here. What happened? In the first place, let's talk a little bit about Mongolia. What was it like and what were you doing?

WRIGHT: Well, it truly is one of the ends of the earth. It is the most nomadic society, I think, left in the world. Of the two million people that live there, one million live in the capital city and the rest of them live out in gers or yurts – felt tents. They herd millions of sheep, horses, camels and yaks. It's just the stuff that true adventure is made of: endless spaces, steppes, the Gobi Desert, the tundra coming down from Siberia, such a diversity of topographic areas. In a country that's as big as half of Western Europe there are five hundred miles of paved road. The rest of the time you're just out flying around in a four-wheel drive vehicle driving wherever you want to go. Just make your own track and go. It's wonderful.

From the west, on the Kazakh border, where you have eagle hunters – guys that are riding horses carrying around forty-pound eagles on their arms. The eagles fly off the hunters' arms to catch game-foxes, wolves, rabbits. Huge herds of gazelles are in the eastern steppe and dinosaur fossils are in the Gobi Desert in the south. It's just a marvelous country. Having come out of seventy years of Soviet rule fifteen years ago, in the last three years the Mongolians have started moving ahead. While they have the common problems that all of the fifteen former Soviet satellites states

have, they're starting to move ahead in addressing the issues of corruption that they'll have to do to really have to step onto the world stage.

Q: Have the Soviets made much investment there? Because I think of Kyrgyzstan where the Soviets really put more money into Kyrgyzstan than they've gotten out of it. But I was wondering about Mongolia.

WRIGHT: It's the same for Mongolia. Virtually every big building that's there...there would be no buildings there, I don't think, if the Russians hadn't been in there. *[laughs]* They destroyed the traditional life of Mongolia as a Buddhist society. The Soviets destroyed the Buddhist framework, similar to what the Chinese have done in Tibet. They then build Soviet style buildings in every Soviet republic. Downtown Ulaanbaatar looks just like downtown Bishkek. There's the same central square, the same government buildings, the same opera, the same philharmonic. But if it had not been for the Soviets, neither the educational or health systems in Mongolia would have been as developed as they are. The infrastructure has been deteriorating in the ten years the Soviets left and there's been nothing to take its place. The international community is trying in its own way to help. We there has been a lessening of services to the people since the Soviets left. On the other side, the private sector is growing. So there's hope for that place.

Q: How did you find dealing with the government?

WRIGHT: The current government is remnants of the Communist Party. They were the last government in power when the Soviets were there. There was a democratic movement that was elected for four years and they messed up worse than the former Communists. So the former Communists were reelected. Now they've changed the name of the party and say they've changed their way of doing things, and to an extent I think they have. But still they do have a lot of the old Soviet tendencies. They are an interesting group to work with. The prime minister is a very well educated person who has his hands full. The opposition groups need to come together and mount a good campaign to open up the election process.

End of reader