

Interview with Thomas A. Nassif

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

AMBASSADOR THOMAS A. NASSIF

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

Initial interview date: November 19, 1998

Copyright 2003 ADST

[Note: This interview has not been edited by Ambassador Nassif]

Q: Today is the 19th of November, 1998. This is an interview with Thomas A. Nassif. It is being done on behalf of the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training. I am Charles Stuart Kennedy. This is being done in the ambassador's office in La Jolla, California. To begin with, could you tell me when and where you were born and something about your family?

NASSIF: I was born in Cedar Rapids, Iowa on July 22, 1941. My father immigrated from Ein Addab, Lebanon, a small village in the south Bekaa Valley of Lebanon, in 1924 when he was 16 years old.

Q: *Did he come by himself?*

NASSIF: He came over with his older sister on a boat picking up pennies, nickels, and dimes by dancing on the boat for people. When he got to New York, he found some family and ended up migrating to where part of the family was in Iowa. They had gone there to try and make a living by taking items of clothing and other items that were not readily available to the farmers in Iowa, taking them out to the farms, and trading them for food.

Library of Congress

Q: This is very much the traditional sort of occupation of people who came out of the Middle East in those days wasn't it?

NASSIF: Yes. He really followed sort of the traditional track because he eventually ended up doing what so many of his cousins and brothers did and that is being a rug peddler selling rugs and linoleum, and going door to door. Just going out knocking on doors and asking people who didn't have access to stores whether they would like to buy these things. He would cut them, lay them, and do the whole thing for them.

Q: It's a tremendous story. Who's your mother? How did your father meet your mother?

NASSIF: My mother was born in Des Moines, Iowa. She was of Lebanese origin although born in the United States. Her father was born in Lebanon and her mother was Lebanese but born in Egypt. When my father came to Iowa to see some of his family and to start working, he discovered the small Lebanese-American community in Cedar Rapids. Of course, they were not only the same nationality but the same religion, part of the Antiochian Orthodox Church, which at that time was called the Syrian Orthodox Church. It was fairly natural given the small community and the small number of people that he would find someone who was his own nationality and religion.

Q: I know the Greek Orthodox Church where the families really push to make sure the children marry within the Greek Orthodox. Was what was called the Syrian Orthodox also sort of that way?

NASSIF: Absolutely. Like most of these situations, the children naturally rebelled and did their best to find people that did not fit the profile.

Q: How long did you live in Cedar Rapids?

NASSIF: In Cedar Rapids I lived for ten years.

Library of Congress

Q: What was it like growing up in Cedar Rapids in the '40s and '50s?

NASSIF: From '41 to '51. Actually I have extremely fond memories of growing up in Cedar Rapids. I had a wonderful childhood. We had a very stable home. Growing up with all of the seasons, I remember the fun we had in winter. Children never remember the cold or the humidity. I didn't even know that Iowa was humid in the summertime until I went back at the age of 16 and rediscovered this humidity. Until then I had wonderful experiences with the summer rains, the bonfires in the fall with all the leaves, sledding on the mountainous streets when I was a kid. It was a wonderful experience growing up in Cedar Rapids.

Q: How about school? You were there at least through the fourth grade, how did you take the school?

NASSIF: I enjoyed school very much. Up until the time you are in the fourth grade, you don't have to study that hard. I really had wonderful experiences in schools. I liked my studies. I liked the children I was with, and the teachers.

Q: Did you have brothers and sisters?

NASSIF: At the time I had two older sisters. I have a third sister now who was born after we moved to California. My two older sisters are two years, and three-and-a-half years older than I am.

Q: You moved to California in '51 or so?

NASSIF: In '51. Q: Where did you move to?

NASSIF: At first we were sort of transients. I stayed with an elderly aunt of mine for the summer in Hollywood and we ended up actually moving into a hotel called the Guardian Arms which was right on Hollywood Boulevard. It was a little two bedroom hotel so I spent

Library of Congress

my fifth grade sleeping on a couch in the living room and going to school in Hollywood for fifth grade. As most children who make the transition from one state to the other... The first elementary school I went to in the Los Felices area had a lot of very wealthy families and I really just ran home crying after my first day. My mother then transferred me to another school where the first day was one of the better days that I ever had in any school in my life. It was a wonderful contrast for me.

Q: You were in the Hollywood area for how long?

NASSIF: We were there for about a year then we moved to Burbank where we bought a home. I spent my sixth grade year and my three years in junior high school there. We were four years in Burbank before moving back into the Hollywood Glendale area and going to high school.

Q: In Burbank while you were there school began to take hold didn't it? What sort of interests were you developing back then?

NASSIF: About the seventh grade I started getting interested in leadership. That was probably the first time I ran for office. I was the school treasurer and president of my class in junior high school. I got into leadership and into public speaking. I enjoyed speech very much. During our patriotic assemblies I would say by memory the Gettysburg Address. I started to develop my first patterns of leadership and my enjoyment of public speaking actually in seventh, eighth and ninth grade.

Q: Coming from on your father's side an immigrant family, what were some of the pressures, influences? Often you have strong patriotism towards the United States but also the ethnic overlay of where you came from and all. Were you feeling much of that?

NASSIF: I wasn't feeling any pressures. Actually it was sort of fun for me as a young boy having these two cultures because we had all this wonderful food and we had all of these really interesting people. Our social life really centered around our church. Our church of

Library of Congress

course included people from the old country as well as their children so it gave me a very strong sense of belonging and a strong sense of family to have that. My friends would come over and they would get to eat all of this wonderful food and hear about this culture. I felt very special and never felt odd or different because basically I was an American born in Iowa and I never thought of myself as anything else.

Q: I remember how much fun it was for me going to friends who werfrom a different culture and getting that wonderful food.

NASSIF: There's not much food better than Lebanese food.

Q: I've served in Greece as consul general for four years so I have a feel for Greece, but I was wondering in your church and all, did you get any strong feelings about the Turks or anything like this or was that over the hill?

NASSIF: It is very interesting that my father never was involved in discussing regional politics or ethnicity except to say how wonderful it was growing up as a boy in Lebanon and some of the things he did. Of course the fruit was always ten times bigger than the fruit in the United States, the plums were sweeter, everything was better which begs the question then why did you come? As far as politics, it was never discussed. There was no discussion of the Turks, no discussion of the Syrians, no discussion of the Jews, nothing whatsoever. There was no discussion of Christians versus Muslim versus Jews. I never heard any of that.

In fact, it wasn't until I was in high school that I ever heard from anybody that some people were actually prejudiced against Jews. I found that out because I got into a club in high school in tenth grade and the first person that I invited, as a member, to become a member, was a friend of mine who it turned out was Jewish. When I heard my friends in the club, none of whom were Arabic or Lebanese, they were of every background, mostly

Library of Congress

European, mentioned the fact that he was Jewish, I just looked at them seriously and just said "So what?" very innocently because I never heard any of this growing up in my family.

Q: It is interesting because I think things have changed so much. I grew up in California in the '30s and '40s, and in other places, and the discrimination against Jews was really quite pronounced at one time.

NASSIF: My first girlfriend in junior high school was Jewish. I didn't know there was anything unusual about that. Nobody ever said anything. My parents never mentioned it and no one else mentioned it to me. I was completely ignorant of this until high school which I'm not sure says much for me for my historical education but it certainly says a lot for my family.

Q: *It certainly does. In high school you moved back into the Hollywood area?*

NASSIF: Back into the Hollywood area, the Hollywood Glendale area for high school.

Q: *That would have been when?*

NASSIF: That was '57, '58, and '59. I graduated in '59.

Q: *What studies grabbed you?*

NASSIF: The first year in high school, a new area, I decided that I would be a real student so I just threw myself into it. The thing I enjoyed most was my first year of French course. I really enjoyed it. I took to it. I could pronounce the words very easily and I studied my French very hard. I really enjoyed French. I enjoyed physical science very much because at the time, it wasn't really the physical science we got in the university, it was more anatomy. I learned so much about the human anatomy in my first year. That was sort of a strange combination.

Library of Congress

I had taken sort of a pre-algebra course in junior high school when I wasn't very serious about my studies in the ninth grade. My teacher told me that I shouldn't pursue a college education because I would never get through my math. My first year in high school I was the top student in the school in algebra. That made me very proud. It was like thumbing my nose at that teacher who probably at the time had only done it to stimulate me rather than to criticize me. She probably knew I had the potential and wasn't using it and didn't like to see me wasting it.

Q: You'd been interested in leadership in all. This would have beelate Eisenhower period, did politics intrude at all?

NASSIF: When I was young, even in junior high school, for some reason I used to really enjoy watching the conventions. My family were Democrats so I would naturally watch the Democratic conventions. In growing up I was not an Eisenhower Republican, Estes Kefauver was the other guy, and I was enamored by the coonskin cap and all those things. I used to love to watch the Democratic conventions and how the process worked. It used to be a lot more fun then.

Q: Because it was a real mystery then, you didn't know how it wagoing to come out. Now one walks in and it is all sewn up.

NASSIF: Exactly. So I kind of enjoyed this. I guess if anything that was probably the first taste I ever had of politics was in watching the conventions on television. Nobody in my family ever watched it. Nobody was even interested that much.

Q: By the time that you were in high school, '58 was the Americalanding in Lebanon I think?

NASSIF: Yes.

Q: Did your family react to that at all in any way?

Library of Congress

NASSIF: I'm not sure I even knew it happened at the time. I probably did because we probably discussed it in school but it was not something ever discussed by the family whatsoever. It was almost as if my father was not the least bit concerned about what happened in the old country. He made his move when he was 16. He was an American but all of his friends, all of his life, centered around the Lebanese-American community and the church.

Q: Was the Lebanese-American community very big in Burbank and their Hollywood?

NASSIF: In the Los Angeles area, yes it was, but not in Burbank. We had some relatives in Burbank but we never did anything with the community in Burbank. Everything we did we did in Los Angeles. Our church was in Los Angeles and that's where the large community was. I think today the second largest community in the United States is in Los Angeles.

Q: What about being in Hollywood did the movies intrude at all in any way?

NASSIF: Absolutely. We were completely taken by the movies. Before we moved from Cedar Rapids, because we had no television set we used to listen to the radio and we would go to the movies all of the time. We were completely taken. We went to every Hollywood premiere. When we came I had uncles and aunts who worked for the studios, and we would go on tours, we would watch them make movies. We would go to the Commissary and see Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis having lunch, and Alan Ladd, Dorothy Lamour. This was just fabulous for us.

Q: It was the town's business.

NASSIF: It was Hollywood's heyday.

Q: While you were in high school were you thinking about whither, what you were going to do with yourself?

Library of Congress

NASSIF: You know my father always told me I was going to grow up to be a doctor. That's what every Lebanese father told his son in those days: you have to get an education, you have to be a doctor, attorneys are a dime a dozen. So naturally I became an attorney. I thought I was going to be a doctor until I really had to make the decision and I said this is really not what I want to do with my life. I think I had read Clarence Darrow for the Defense and a few other things like that and I really got excited about being a trial lawyer because I had an aptitude for debate and for public speaking. I enjoyed that so it was sort of a natural for me to think I would love to be a trial lawyer.

Q: Did you have any role models other than Clarence Darrow in the book and all that?

NASSIF: For law?

Q: Yes.

NASSIF: Probably not. I read some other books about judges. There was a judge, Louis Nizer, and I read his autobiography which I enjoyed very much. I think that Clarence Darrow for the Defense is probably what turned the corner for me.

Q: He was quite a hero. Did you run for any offices at the high school?

NASSIF: In high school I was on the city council and I became president of my club. Usually it was always a senior but I was elected to be president as a junior and I was president for both years. That really was the center of my social life, everything was through my club. It was a YMCA [Young Men's Christian Association] sponsored club but it was basically a social club although we did some philanthropic things. I stayed very active in that and the city council. In my senior year I did not run for student body president or class president.

Q: How about reading? You mentioned Clarence Darrow for the Defense. Was that Irving Stone?

Library of Congress

NASSIF: Yes.

Q: Did you focus on any particular types of reading?

NASSIF: I didn't like to read at all. I didn't read the newspaper. I didn't like to read books unless they were assigned to me. I wasn't raised to even enjoy reading which really hurt me in college because it limited my vocabulary which I subsequently took care of by reading the dictionary every day. The dictionary became my favorite book in college. I was applying for a civil service job when I was in college because I needed money to get through college and I didn't do well on the vocabulary portion of it. I was so shocked, because I thought I was so smart, to find out that I had done poorly that I made a concerted effort to read the dictionary every day. I would pick out a few words, write them down, memorize them, find out what some of the synonyms were and I would look them up. I just kept expanding from there. That is a very unusual way to build a vocabulary but it was very productive for me.

Q: It reflects often of a family. I take it then your family didn't sort of sit down and books were around and discussions, newspapers, that sort of thing?

NASSIF: No. My father had no education basically. My mother had no education. She didn't even get through junior high school and had to take care of her siblings. My father as I said came when he was 16 and had a limited education in this little farm village.

Q: This so often happens but the dictionary, I've heard of people reading the encyclopedia but not the dictionary.

NASSIF: It was my favorite. I had more fun reading the dictionary. Every day I would keep my little sheet in there and every day I would add a couple of words to it and then I would try and use them in my vocabulary.

Library of Congress

Q: You graduated in 1959. Was it accepted that you were going to go to college by your family? How did they feel about that?

NASSIF: They assumed I was going to college but took no steps to help me get into college. They didn't counsel me. They didn't talk to me about it. A friend of mine suggested that we go to LA State together; it was a new four-year school. It had been a two-year school and it was going to be a four-year school for the first time. I was thinking about playing football. I had played football just my junior year, not my senior year, but I was thinking about playing football in college and I thought maybe a smaller school would be good. My parents didn't know what I was applying to, didn't know how I apply, didn't know how I was playing for college. It was very odd that my father had been so interested in my becoming a doctor but he took absolutely no interest in my education, or getting into school, or how I was going to go to school, or how I was going to pay for it.

Q: Maybe it was lack of knowledge. It is a fairly complicated process when you think about it and if you don't know, being a parent, it just shows your ignorance if you try to give counsel when you really didn't know what you were talking about.

NASSIF: Basically all he was interested in was making sure when I graduated from high school that I went right to work, and I did. I went to work at a gas station pumping gas and I decided that if I was going to go to college I had to have some money and a car, because I had no car. I couldn't do that on my earnings at the gas station so I worked straight eight hour shifts from 6:00 in the morning to 2:00 in the afternoon with no breaks, no lunch hour, which was an option we had. I would go home, grab a bite to eat, shower, change my clothes, and then I went to work at a drug store at 4:00 in the afternoon until 9:30 sweeping out the drugstore, doing stock, and delivery. I earned enough money to pay for my first year for tuition and books and to buy myself a car and pay for my insurance and gas.

Q: This was what, LA College?

Library of Congress

NASSIF: This was Cal State LA, California State University of LoAngeles.

Q: The California school system mystifies me. We're here in San Diego and you have San Diego State, University of California at San Diego, and then there is San Diego University. Where did Cal State LA stand in there?

NASSIF: California basically has two public school systems on the university level. One is the university level which is schools like Berkeley, UCLA, University of California at San Diego, University of California at Irvine. They are universities. Then they have their state universities which were San Diego State, Long Beach State, Los Angeles State, Northridge, those kind of schools. One was called the state university and the other was just a university. The state universities were sort of the second level. The top schools were the university level, the UCLA's and the Berkeley's.

Q: *What was Cal State like? This would be '59 to what?*

NASSIF: It turned out to be '59 to '65 because after one semester in school I decided that I didn't want to get out of school and be drafted. I wanted to get my military service out of the way. There was a program that some friends of mine told me about where you could go into the army or the National Guard and you could do your six months of basic training, your duty training, and then you could spend the rest of your time in the reserves. It was total eight years obligation and you had your obligation out of the way. But you had to go in before you were 18-and-a-half in order to qualify for this program, so I did. I decided after one semester of school that I'm going to go in. I'll only lose one semester of school, plus I'll lose my summer, and I'll be able to go back in September. Basically I went in the army in January, got out in August and started school in September.

I went into the U.S. Army up in Monterey and did my basic training up there at Fort Ord. Your choice was you could either be a cook, you could be in the infantry, or you could go into clerical. Clerical seemed to be the smarter choice so that's what I wanted to do. I met

Library of Congress

a lot of university students, a lot of kids from UCLA and UC who were going before they got drafted.

Q: How did you find the military experience?

NASSIF: I hated it. I absolutely hated it. It was my first experience away from home and I was very homesick. I didn't like the fact that I was being subjected to all this authority. My father was kind of a tough cookie, a very strict disciplinary, and I was getting more of that in the military. I made a lot of good friends there. I had a great time with my friends in basic training but I was so young. They were all 21 going to bars and I was 18 and couldn't go so that was kind of a bummer for me.

After basic training, on the job training, I decided that the only way that I was going to get through the rest of this experience in the army was to start doing some things that meant something to me so I said I had these uniforms and I'm going to go out and tailor them all. I went out and had all my army uniforms tailored so that I really looked good and I felt like I looked good. I decided that I was going to be a squad leader, I wasn't just going to be a grunt. When we were being inspected by the staff sergeant, he looked at me and noticed my brass was dirty because I had just come back to the army from home and he started chewing me out. In response I just bellowed out my answers like I just was not going to be intimidated and I was going to be rather authoritative. In a slow whisper after this happened a few times he said to me, "Were you a squad leader in basic training?" I wasn't but I said I was anyway. He said "I want you to be a squad leader." From then on I was a squad leader. I had my uniforms, I had more pride in what I was doing and I was getting a pretty good education. My brass was always polished after that. I got through it okay but I didn't really enjoy the experience.

Q: Meeting other people who had already gotten quite a bit of university or college, and being with them, did that sort of lift you up?

Library of Congress

NASSIF: Absolutely. It made me that much more enthusiastic about school because the ones I met who were in college were people I really liked and I learned to respect. They were very bright, they were good students and that was just a better model for me. I thought that was one of the more positive things that came out of the army. I did learn a lot of discipline. When I came out I was a lot more disciplined person even though it was only six months. At 18, six months is a lifetime.

Q: Coming back to Cal State, did you have a different approach? Were you a different person?

NASSIF: I wasn't as different probably as I thought I was going to be because I got right into the fraternity scene. Some of my friends had already gone into the fraternity while I was in the army and they encouraged me to get in. I got into the fraternity and I got very active in the fraternity. I held all the offices in the fraternity. I got very much involved in intramural sports. I loved intramural sports. I played football, basketball, baseball and we just had a wonderful time. I just wasn't that interested in my studies.

Q: What was the fraternity scene like at that time?

NASSIF: It was a very typical college fraternity scene, only at Cal State most of them were local fraternities. They weren't affiliated with nationals at the time though they all became affiliated later on. It was a great way to meet new friends and to do all your social activities, all your sports activities. I ended up rooming with some of my fraternity brothers, getting an apartment together. It basically provided the basis for my whole social and academic activity at the university level.

Q: I've done quite a few of these interviews and I've found one of the things that seems to prepare people for the life as Foreign Service officers or Foreign Service things usually was that particularly in high school and often in college they majored in sports and girls.

Library of Congress

NASSIF: That's exactly what I did. I think I probably went out with more people during that college time than I did the entire rest of my life. It was like a quest.

Q: It was also another period where people weren't going steady as much, were they?

NASSIF: Some people were. A lot of people were. In fraternity lingo it was being pinned. You would give somebody your fraternity pin. For the first couple of years I was fine but then in my last two years I was pinned to the sweetheart of all our fraternity and thought I was going to get married out of college.

Q: *It's known as entrapment.*

NASSIF: I think so. I certainly felt trapped after I graduated.

Q: *Did international affairs intrude at all while you were at thauniversity?*

NASSIF: Our fraternity was very mixed. We had people from all walks of life just as I had in high school. We had Japanese, Chinese, Mexican, Italian, everything you could think of. It was a very interesting mix of people in high school and in my fraternity, and that was sort of the way I migrated. I always loved people from other countries. I always had this desire to be around foreigners. I always knew somehow I would be involved with foreigners because I really enjoyed the different cultures, the different languages, and the differences in the people. I guess because my father had come from a foreign country I felt an affinity to anyone else who had sort of an ethnic background that wasn't sort of the cookie cutter European model that we were used to, it was the prototypical American. I really got interested in people not so much politics. Again I was a Democrat. Johnson ran for President and that was my first election. I was a Kennedy Democrat but I wasn't old enough to vote for Kennedy. I turned 21 just after he died and it had a profound effect on me.

Library of Congress

Q: I was going to ask about... It was only three years, or only two-and-a-half, the time that Kennedy was there. It affected an awful lot of young people. I'm not talking just about the assassination but when government service was highlighted, did that...

NASSIF: No question about it. I became much more interested in politics when John Kennedy became President because like so many young people I could relate to him better than I could to any of his predecessors. He was so charming and he was so funny. Just little things he would do and say. When he'd make his trips to Europe you could see how people were giving us the respect that we didn't have before then. Even Jackie Kennedy when she would go out and speak, and she would speak in French, I would be impressed that she would go out and speak this foreign language and these people would rally behind her. And the President's speech in Berlin and all these kinds of things I really took notice of. I did become much more involved in politics and much more interested in politics at that time.

Q: *Were there the Young Democrats and Young Republicans?*

NASSIF: There were but I wasn't involved.

Q: *Did sort of the thought of serving abroad grab you at this point?*

NASSIF: I never heard of the Foreign Service. I didn't even know it existed. I didn't even know that it was a potential occupation out there where I could go to Washington to serve. My wife when I met her in law school said to me one day, "If you could be anything in the world, what would you want to be?" Here I am just getting ready to graduate from law school and I said, "Secretary of State." I probably didn't even know exactly what the Secretary of State did or what the State Department did but somehow I knew it had to do with foreign affairs.

Q: *It wasn't Supreme Court justice or anything like that?*

Library of Congress

NASSIF: No. All my aptitude tests, they kept telling me I should be a mortician or something because I liked people and didn't really want to be a judge. They just assumed because I didn't want to be a judge, I had no desire to be on the Supreme Court, none of those things interested me whatsoever, that I wasn't going to be cut out to be an attorney. I enjoyed very much being an attorney and I think I was a very good attorney when I was practicing law but I just didn't want to be a judge. I thought that would be kind of boring. Everybody else is sitting in the middle of the debate and you are sitting there quietly listening to all this stuff trying to stay awake. That didn't interest me, I wanted to be on the fray.

Q: You graduated in '65. Was law running through your mind thwhole time?

NASSIF: The whole time. The reason I graduated in '65 was I lost a semester because of the army and then I decided I wanted to go to Europe. Everybody was talking about going to Europe but nobody went. I never talked about it but I ended up going. I had no money so I had to quit school and go to work and make some money. A fraternity brother and I went to Europe on almost no money.

We took a third class Italian liner from New York to Sicily. We didn't even have a hotel. I had no idea where we were going. We didn't know how to speak the language, didn't know anything. We didn't have any friends or anything, just all of a sudden here we are in Sicily in Palermo saying now we should probably find a hotel. We traveled for three months that way all through from Palermo up to Naples, Florence, Rome, into Switzerland and into Germany. A fraternity brother of mine was studying at the University of Heidelberg and we stayed with him and traveled with him and some German friends of his. We went to France and then we left them in Paris and went on to Spain, to Majorca and up the coast into the French and Italian Riviera then back up into Germany, Denmark then over to Finland. My brother-in-law is from Finland and I met his family. We stayed there for a week. All of a sudden geography had a new meaning for me because I learned so much traveling. We took third class trains. My friend finally bought a little Volkswagen bus and we lived in the

Library of Congress

little bus and in hostels. It was absolutely one of the most wonderful experiences I ever had.

Q: It was a great time. This was the era of the sort of the wanderer with people getting out and really moving around. It was the heyday before the drug scene that really hit the travel and the hashish and all of that. I think people were just getting out and seeing things.

NASSIF: I was completely oblivious to drugs almost my whole life. I was just never exposed to them. Nobody that I was associated with, if they were involved they knew I didn't like drugs so they just didn't bother me with it. I didn't hear anything about it and I didn't hear anything about it in college. In my travels I never heard about it and never saw anything whatsoever. I was fairly naive in that respect actually until I started practicing law and had to represent people who were accused of marijuana possession and you know what I said I probably ought to see what marijuana looks like because I had no idea. Here I am now in my early 30s representing these people and I didn't even know what a marijuana leaf looked like. I think the travel to Europe was very, very life changing for me.

Q: *Did embassies intrude at all on the scene or consulates?*

NASSIF: Yes, because I got my passport stolen in Germany so I did have to go to the consulate in Frankfurt and get a new passport. They were very helpful in helping me. They said basically I had to pay for a call to Washington, DC to verify my citizenship. Once they did that they got everything organized for me. I did go to a lot of the military bases when I was there because I still had my army ID card and he had his air force ID card so we went to all the military bases and basically got our hair cuts there and went to the movies. We spent a lot of time on military bases in Europe.

Q: *Was this a time off and then you went back to school or was thibetween college and work?*

Library of Congress

NASSIF: This was during college and it was good time because I finally got serious about my studies after I came from there. I went to work full-time. My father had a heart attack. He had diabetes, he had a heart attack and eventually he died of cancer. My dad had a heart attack and couldn't work any more so my mother went to work at a grocery store in the bakery department and I went to work full-time for the Southern Pacific Railroad. I started in what they call the extra board, where you did a different job every day. Anybody who was absent or sick or on vacation they would put me out there and I would do their job whatever it was. I did that for a couple of years. When you get used to finally making some money and supporting yourself it is hard to stop. I worked full-time the last two years.

I went to school at night but very often I would work different shifts because when you don't have any seniority on the railroad, and for the railroad seniority means at least 30 years, 20 year guys can't get a daytime job. I worked all the odd shifts. I'd work four to midnight or midnight to eight. Very often in the summertime I would work 16 hours straight. I would go in at 4:00 and work until midnight then I would roll it over from midnight until eight. I ended up getting my 40 hours in by Wednesday afternoon having just started work on Monday. Any extra jobs that I could get to work overtime I would do so I could save money because I had to get through school. Eventually I had to go to law school and I had no money to go to law school so I wanted to save some money to go to law school.

Q: Where did you go to law school?

NASSIF: I went to Cal Western here in San Diego. It was out at Point Loma at the time. It was a very small school on a private beautiful location overlooking the Pacific Ocean. They had hired a bunch of teachers who had been sort of forced to retire because of their age but they were outstanding instructors from some of the best universities in the country. I thought this was a terrific opportunity. There were just 85 in the class and the second year class there were about 40. It was a wonderful opportunity for individual attention and although I got a wonderful offer from the Southern Pacific Railroad to stay with them (I ended up in personnel doing the interviewing and hiring and testing for the Southern

Library of Congress

Pacific Railroad) I decided I wanted to be a lawyer, that's what I wanted to be in and I wasn't going to let anything stand in my way. I had enough money to go to school for one year. I had no idea how I was going to finish my second or third year but it didn't much matter.

Q: Was this your first time coming down to San Diego?

NASSIF: Basically yes. I didn't know San Diego at all but I knew it was close to home and my dad had been sick. It wasn't too far but I wanted to get out of Los Angeles. I wanted to get away from the place I had been all my life so I just decided I was going to go. Again there were no discussions with the family about are you going to law school and if so where? One day my father asked my mom, "How is he going to law school?" I thought that was a very curious question for a father to ask his wife. He didn't know how his son was going to law school and how he was paying for it. He never bothered to ask me how I was going to go there. That's the way things were. I just knew he didn't have money and it didn't much matter. I knew what I wanted and I was going to get there.

Q: Law school would have been from about '65 to '68?

NASSIF: From '65 to '68, three years.

Q: How was it? Did the school specialize in any particular type of law or was it pretty much a general course?

NASSIF: The school didn't specialize but it did have a desire to move toward U.S.-Mexican relations and to do not necessarily studies, but programming in the area of U.S.-Mexican relations because of the importance of Mexico and our geographical location on the border.

Q: I thought there in San Diego there would be quite an imperative to learn Spanish. Was there?

Library of Congress

NASSIF: There really wasn't. One would have thought that and my father always told me that I ought to learn Spanish but I just didn't have any interest in learning Spanish at the time and I really didn't have the need to, so I didn't. The only thing I had taken was a couple years of high school French.

Q: You said you met your wife at law school?

NASSIF: She was my next door neighbor. She was a dental hygienist living in the apartment next door. I had a small apartment that I shared with another law student. She took pity on us every once in a while and would cook for us. We started dating and we stayed together through law school and after law school we got married.

Q: You had been thinking about law all this time, how did you take law?

NASSIF: I really enjoyed it. It was difficult. It took a lot of discipline but by then I was ready for the discipline so I didn't have any trouble getting down and studying. There were certain classes that I enjoyed and like most people when you enjoy a class you excel and when you don't you sort of do average. I enjoyed it. I really enjoyed the trial aspects of it so I got into the jury trial competition and I got in the appellate court competition. I ended up on the national team for the appellate work where you actually challenge other schools from all over the country. On the jury trial basis we did it within the law school. My roommate was Lebanese also. I happened to meet him at a convention sometime and he told me he was going to law school and it turned out to be the same law school so he said, "Why don't we room together?" Just for fun we decided that we were going to challenge the two smartest Jewish students in the school. We put up signs saying "The Arabs against the Jews" posted all over the school. Everybody came to this trial because they all wanted to see it and of course we were all good friends. The dean of our law school ended up writing his autobiography and specifically mentions this trial and the fact that we did it. Every professor was at the trial. I really enjoyed the trial, I enjoyed the

Library of Congress

debate, I enjoyed that sort of the challenge and that is what really enamored me to law. It wasn't working on wills and estates, trusts.

Q: You got out in '68 which was also the time when we were getting pretty much involved in Vietnam. Did the military start breathing down your neck or were you pretty well out of it by that time?

NASSIF: I had already fulfilled my eight year obligation by then so I didn't have to but I was very conscious of the fact that when I got out of law school if I had not done what I did I would have been drafted and I would have gone to Vietnam. (end side 1)

Q: *In your area in San Diego, was there much of an anti-Vietnaspirent at the college?*

NASSIF: None whatsoever. I never saw any of that in my education at all. It wasn't until after I was out of school that we started seeing that happen.

Q: *You got out in '68 didn't you?*

NASSIF: Yes.

Q: Did you have any idea where you were going to go, what you were going to do?

NASSIF: I knew I wanted to go back to Los Angeles. At the time I had no desire to stay in San Diego because I still considered it sort of a small town and there wasn't that much going on.

Q: *It was a small town.*

NASSIF: It was. It was basically a navy town with a little bit of aerospace. There were no activities, there were no professional sports teams. The Padres were a minor league team and the Chargers weren't even in existence then. I wanted to go back to Los Angeles and

Library of Congress

a cousin of mine who was an attorney, was in a small firm in Los Angeles and they were representing some of the LA Rams.

Q: That's a football team.

NASSIF: Right, now the St. Louis Rams. They were representing Merlin Olsen who became one of our great football players in history. He had his own television show and was a sport broadcaster. They also represented Roman Gabriel who at the time was the quarterback for the Los Angeles Rams. They were down for a Rams-Charger game and they invited me to brunch the next day. I went and go to brunch and here were the two partners of the firm with their wives, Merlin Olsen and his wife, and Roman Gabriel and his wife. They interviewed me and hired me that day. I was absolutely [amazed] that I was going to be working in the firm and doing some of the business things for these great football giants. I moved to Los Angeles and went to work for them.

Q: What was the law firm's name?

NASSIF: That firm was called Masry and David.

Q: How long did you work for them?

NASSIF: Only about six months. We decided that we didn't like Los Angeles. We were a newly wed couple and all I was doing was getting up early in the morning, fighting traffic to go downtown, and coming home late. She was a hygienist doing the same thing trying to get to her job then going home. We had absolutely no life. I didn't like the way law was practiced in Los Angeles.

Q: What was the problem?

NASSIF: At 5:00 they would go down to have cocktails and hustle the cocktail waitresses. They had very low morals and I just thought to myself this is not what I've been working all

Library of Congress

my life for. They did a little ambulance chasing and I just didn't like that whole methodology of the practice. I didn't like the personal aspect of it. I said I just don't want to do this.

I used to go down to Imperial Valley, a farming community in the desert, and play golf with a friend of mine from law school. He said to me, "Why don't you come down here? You can raise your kids here. It is clean. It is safe. You can set up your own practice and there is not a lot of competition." So we started looking into it and we started [hesitating] about it because we thought what an odd decision to go from Los Angeles to this little podunk town with all these locusts and agriculture. I didn't have any friends or clients. I didn't know anybody. How am I going to make a living down there? But sort of on faith we decided to make the move. I went down there and went to work for a sole practitioner and started practicing law with him.

Q: You say Imperial Valley, where was this?

NASSIF: Imperial Valley is about 120 miles due east of San Diego along the border with Mexico. It is one of the most prolific agricultural communities in the world but it is basically the desert. It was turned into an oasis by the Colorado River and the All American Canal. It is all irrigated by gravity from the Colorado and it ends up in the Salt an Sea which is now one of the worst environmental problems that we have but that's where that water is. It just so happens that I went down there at a very interesting period of time when Cesar Chavez was just beginning.

Q: Could you explain who Cesar Chavez is?

NASSIF: Cesar Chavez was a former Mexican-American farm worker who started a union called the United Farm Workers. He was organizing farm laborers into their own unions and he got the support of a lot of the Eastern establishment, the Kennedies and a lot of other people like that. He was very close to Jerry Brown who was governor of California for two terms, and his father was governor of California. During that era the governor and the legislature created a new law that would cover agricultural workers because the

Library of Congress

National Labor Relations Act specifically excluded agricultural workers. At the time the South didn't want the farm workers having the right to strike at a union house so they were specifically excluded. The California Agricultural Labor Relations Act was passed and it was specifically for farm workers. It was modeled after the National Labor Relations Act but was modified to give them more power than the unions had even under the National Labor Relations Act.

Here I was now all of a sudden a young attorney that was befriended by some young farmers who liked me and they needed some representation. Of course I had no background in labor law and no background in agriculture so I was ideally suited for the job. I just did a lot of homework and studied a lot about labor law and agriculture. I got up in the morning and drove to the fields with my farmer buddies to find out about the crops, about the rotations, and all the jobs that the farm workers did so I would understand what I was doing. I ended up representing a majority of California agriculture during that whole period when the farm workers were being organized in California.

Q: Was it sort of the farm owners versus the union more or less?

NASSIF: Right. I was representing the farmers.

Q: How were they? There are farmers and there are farmers. There are absentee farmers, big corporations, and there are people who live on the land and all that. What type of farmers were we talking about?

NASSIF: These were all family farmers and they all lived in Imperial Valley. Their children had all grown up there and worked on the farms. They worked on the farms themselves. Some of them got to be big but they were all family farmers and just probably the most wonderful people I've ever met.

That's really when I went through a political change when I realized what an effect government had on my life and I realized that the Republican Party was more in tune with

Library of Congress

what I believed in and the people I was associated believed in than the Democratic Party. That's when I went through the transition and got active in Republican politics at the time. Even though I was so busy, I didn't have much time, I did get involved with the Republican Central Committee and became a member of the Central Committee in California. I started watching California politics for the first time. That was when Reagan was governor.

Q: How was Reagan as seen from the Imperial Valley from your perspective and the farm owners perspective?

NASSIF: They viewed him very positively. They liked him very much and were very supportive of President Reagan. When he ran for office as governor the first time I had my doubts about him. I just looked at him like most people did: he's a movie star, who does he think he is? Just because he was the head of the union and the Screen Actor's Guild, big deal. After his first term I really was impressed with him as being a man of courage, a man of conviction, and a man of vision. In the farm agricultural community they were very supportive of him.

Q: What about the struggle between the farm owners and the union, from your perspective how did you see this? Was this farm workers who were trying for the first time to get justice, or was the union pushing them farther, or how was this working?

NASSIF: I'm not sure that the farm workers would have cared whether there was ever any union or not but when Cesar Chavez came along it did give them an opportunity to have some power for the first time. He won basically all the elections and all of the farms were unionized. What I learned however was that the union wasn't just interested in improving the lot of the farm worker, the union was interested in power. Chavez wanted to use the contracts that he got with the farmers in California to organize farms in Texas and Florida. He would say see what I did in California.

I became very disenchanted with the union. I found out how violent the union was. They were following farm workers home who didn't want to be part of the union, they didn't want

Library of Congress

to strike, and they were beating them up and setting their homes on fire. They were pulling them out of bars and beating them up. They were lighting their cars on fire. I got an inside view of what unions were really like.

I knew the farmers and though although naturally they would want to save as much money as they could, they weren't really being unfair when it came to hours or wages or working conditions but they did want to preserve the power in themselves. Plus they had a perishable crop. If I've got widgets in my warehouse I can keep those widgets there for a long time. You can't keep lettuce or cantaloupe so a strike during harvest time was pretty devastating.

It was a very difficult thing but all of the violence that occurred, and there was a lot of it, was all of the union. The publicity was exactly the opposite. You would have thought the farmer was the worst thing in the world and that Cesar Chavez was a saint but we proved that all of the violence was in the unions because we ended up suing them for violence and we won millions of dollars against the union, basically shutting down Cesar Chavez because they were such a violent union. There was never one case where a farmer was accused of violence against a farm worker.

Q: What about immigrant, basically Mexican labor that originated in Mexico, was this much of a factor where you were?

NASSIF: Yes. In California there had been a Bracero program which is a program where governments brought over Mexican citizens to work in the California fields and other fields under a special permit because there were just insufficient farm workers in California. Those people ended up getting green cards.

Q: Green cards meaning they were legal aliens in the United States.

NASSIF: Right. They could be resident or non-resident but they were legal aliens in the United States with a right to work and a right to apply for citizenship. What they would do

Library of Congress

is they would live in Mexicali and cross the border every day and do the work on the farms in California. In the evenings they would go back to Mexicali because that's where their families were, and the cost of living was a lot cheaper there. They would take these very valuable American dollars and go down there and have a pretty good living. We didn't have a problem with illegals too much because we had so many Braceros that we had a sufficient supply of legals. Most of the illegals went into other markets: San Diego, Los Angeles, Orange County.

Q: Did you get involved in the liquid gold of southern California, water? Did water intrude in your practice at all?

NASSIF: I probably should have specialized in water because it is the big issue now in Imperial Valley because we had all this abundant water. We did get involved because during the Carter administration the Secretary of the Interior tried to cut off subsidized water to farms that exceeded 160 acres. Nobody could farm 160 acres in those days successfully. You needed thousands of acres to be a successful farmer. He was trying to cut that off and they had hearings. We were very much involved in the issue and ended up taking it to the Supreme Court. We won the case nine-zip. Nine justices of the Supreme Court all agreed that the agreement we had with the Secretary of the Interior in previous administrations which basically gave us subsidized water was valid in perpetuity.

Q: You say you got involved in Republican politics, what was Southern California Republican politics like during what was it the '70s through the '80s?

NASSIF: Basically the '70s for me. I graduated in '68, moved to the Imperial Valley in '69, and left in '81. It was mostly the '70s when I was there. For us, because Jerry Brown was governor and because he was doing all these things to support the union and trying to hurt the farmers, it was very highly political so we were trying to find out all the things that we could. I would go up to Sacramento and testify before the Senate and before the Assembly. I met with Governor Brown many, many times. He became personally involved

Library of Congress

in this thing to the point of actually calling me to Sacramento asking me why my clients wouldn't sign the contracts with Cesar Chavez or showing up at my negotiations trying to put pressure on us. It was really very odd for a governor to do such a thing. Jerry Brown was a very odd guy so no one's surprised.

Q: He still is. He's still in politics, the mayor of Oakland. Did you find yourself sort of entering into the local Republican structure at all?

NASSIF: They sort of got me. We didn't have much time for it but they sort of pushed me into it because I was so high profile on the agricultural side representing the farmers who were mostly Republicans. Because we were working so much with the Republicans in the state on these farm-labor issues, that got me more involved. I never really got involved in issues other than the issues that were related to agriculture.

Q: *You say in '81 you moved out of the Imperial Valley, where to?*

NASSIF: Washington, DC.

Q: *Washington, DC and what was that?*

NASSIF: It was very odd. When President Reagan got elected I had some farm clients, my present partners, who wanted to go to the inauguration and asked me if I could get them invited. I said, "I think I can get you invited but I'm not going because I'm too busy." They said, "No, you have to go. This is a once in a lifetime opportunity. We don't want to go without you." I had never been to Washington, DC, so I decided to go with them. Three of us went with our wives to Washington, DC, where I ran into a friend of mine who was working at the National Security Council whom I'd known from San Diego.

Q: *Who was that?*

NASSIF: His name was Chuck Tyson. We were social buddies. We were hunting buddies. He had worked for Governor Reagan and he was on the transition team who had worked

Library of Congress

during the campaign. He said, "You're just the kind of guy we want in our administration. You're the right age, you're not looking for a job, you'd do real well. You get along with people. Would you be interested in working?" I said, "No." I had just become a partner in the largest firm in San Diego, Anderson, Fry. My labor practice was going just wild and I was making money for the first time in my life and really becoming a successful attorney. I had all kinds of other attorneys working for me and it was just absolutely the wrong time for me to be leaving.

The last day I was in Washington he called me. It was the first day the President was in the White House and he had his first cabinet meeting. The Secretary of Labor designate called me and said he wanted to meet with me at the Roosevelt Room at the White House after the cabinet meeting. I went down there and here I am. I can't remember his name now because he was never confirmed, but he said, "What job do you want?" I said, "Mr. Secretary I'm flattered that you would ask me that question but first of all I didn't come to Washington looking for a job. Second of all, if I wanted a job I wouldn't even know what to ask for because I don't know that much about the Department of Labor. All the labor stuff I've done is at the state level." He said, "Give it some thought. Send me your resume and let me know if you want to do something." I went off and I sent him my resume. I never heard from him and didn't really follow-up much.

A couple of months later I got a call from Chuck Tyson who said "I've got a job for you, deputy chief of protocol for the White House. The chief of protocol is Lee Annenberg, the wife of Walter Annenberg a Republican, and she's just fired Ronald Coleman's son because he tried to assume too much power in the office. You would be working directly with President and Mrs. Reagan. You would meet all the heads of state, heads of government, and you'd be at the White House quite frequently. Tell me you'll do it for a year-and-a-half or two and if you don't like it you can go home. I think you'll be perfect for that." That just sounded so fascinating so I said "I'd better come back and talk about this." The first thing I do is go to the San Diego library and look up protocol because I had

Library of Congress

no idea what the office of protocol did. I found out most people in Washington had no idea what the office of protocol does. Everybody thought they did but they really didn't know.

I go back there on a Sunday and Monday morning I start interviews at the NSC. I ended up interviewing with Ed Meese, Mike Deaver, Bill Clark and Lee Annenberg; basically with everybody who was in power at the time, all of the President's closest advisors. After two days of interviews they offered me the job.

Q: Did you also feel that having the California label helped? Thiwas a great time to be from California wasn't it?

NASSIF: Absolutely. I'm sure that's why it happened but then they kept asking me "Why would you want to come out here to be deputy chief of protocol at the White House? You're a successful lawyer and would you be satisfied doing something like that?" For them it was cookie pushing. I said, "If people like me don't come out here, volunteer our time and work for the government, who are you going to get? The caliber of people that are going to be in this government, in this administration."

Then it was very funny because after they offered me the job Mike Deaver calls and said "We may have a problem." I said, "What's the problem?" He says, "Well you know you are Arab-American and Lee Annenberg is Jewish." I said, "Well it's certainly not a problem for me. I don't know if it's a problem for her or not. I can't do anything about that." He calls back about an hour later. He must have discussed it with her or something and he says, "It's not a problem. You're hired." As a matter of fact Lee Annenberg wasn't Jewish. Basically her family were Jews in history but she was Christian Science, she wasn't Jewish at all but people think she's Jewish. She and I just ended up being wonderful friends. I have utmost respect for her and I would have done anything for her. I took the job and called my wife and said, "My dear, keep the kids in school until June, sell the house and move to Washington."

Library of Congress

Q: You were in protocol from when to when?

NASSIF: I was in protocol from April of 1981 until about April of 1982.

Q: Where was the office of protocol located and what type of work were you doing?

NASSIF: Same place it is now, first floor of the State Department. I was a Department of State employee with a State ID but I also had a White House ID.

Q: I've just finished last week interviewing Molly Raiser. What were you doing? What was the general, and then we will talk about specifics?

NASSIF: Mrs. Annenberg wasn't sure about me because she didn't know what my motives were so she asked me to fill two positions, the deputy chief of protocol and the head of the visits section. The visits section is the busiest section of all because of all the visits of the heads of states. I was sort of pulling double duty there. I basically ended up doing a lot of things. I would work with my colleagues in organizing all of the state visits, coordinating everything with the Secret Service, coordinating all the meetings with the President, the Vice President, the Secretary of State, all the meetings with cabinet officials, all the meetings with the Congress with the Foreign Affairs Committee, and with the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee, all the travel, all the transportation, all the social functions.

After the White House meetings were over and all the Washington visits were over, I would travel with them all over the country: New York, Houston, Los Angeles, Hawaii, San Francisco, wherever they wanted to go. It was either a three day working visit or a seven day official or state visit in which case they would spend a couple of days in Washington and the rest of the time they would be the guest of the U.S. government but they would just travel all over the country and I would go with them.

Q: Protocol in many ways was a highly technical job. NASSIF: Very demanding.

Library of Congress

Q: There had to be somebody who had been doing this for a while to sort of brief you on some of the steps. You gave it the direction and all of that but...

NASSIF: It was really trial by fire. Mrs. Annenberg had no idea because she was brand new. We had a couple of career civil servants in the visits section that were very, very good and I worked with them. They helped me on the visits and they basically taught me everything that I needed to know about the visits which was the most important part of it. There was another career civil servant who took charge of the diplomats, and he was excellent. He basically gave me the background I needed on the outset. They had really good employees, people who had been there forever, and they knew everything there was to know about protocol. I learned from them.

Q: *This was really the early Reagan years...*

NASSIF: The President was still in the hospital from thassassination attempt.

Q: You often have a White House that is sort of pulling in different directions and all in the early part of any administration. All these people are highly charged and running off and trying to establish themselves and all. I would think it would prove difficult to deal with this White House as well as with other White Houses.

NASSIF: It was a nightmare. I was sorry I had ever gone to Washington and so was Mrs. Annenberg. Dealing with the White House was an absolute nightmare. There were so many people who were in to power over there. The President knew nothing about the things they were doing. They were doing all these things in the name of the President. Everyone was undercutting everybody else and everybody was trying to step on everybody else or stab somebody else in the back. A lot of people were trying to undermine Mrs. Annenberg and I just wouldn't have it. It was terrible.

Library of Congress

Q: I was just thinking, what one hears about that White House is you had various people all feeling they were really basically the Deputy President. You needed a real structure to deal with, didn't you?

NASSIF: Oh, yes. We dealt with the White House every day. It was just so difficult. It was painful. It was humiliating but it was just the individuals and their desires for power. The people who really knew who they were didn't do those kinds of things: Ed Meese, Bill Clark and, of course, the President. These were gentlemen and I got along wonderfully with them. But it was the other people, the people beneath them, who caused all the problems and that were into power.

Q: You must have had all sorts of people saying no we won't do it this way, we'll do it that way and all.

NASSIF: Yes. To them I was State Department and what I established very early on was I said "Look, we are not supposed to discuss these issues when we have foreign delegations, anything substantive, but I can't ask my people not to discuss anything substantive unless we understand what it is we are not supposed to discuss. It is too easy to get into a discussion and inadvertently make a mistake." Larry Eagleburger was up at the seventh floor at the time and he was Under Secretary.

Q: No, I think Larry at the time was political... I don't know.

NASSIF: What's the number three position?

Q: Under Secretary for Political Affairs.

NASSIF: That's what he was. He was Under Secretary for Political Affairs at the time. He came to me and he said, "Tom I want you to be my eyes and ears. You are going to be sitting in with all these heads of state, you are going to be in meetings, you are going to be in airplanes with them, I just want you to keep your ears open as to what you hear." I

Library of Congress

said, "Larry there is no reason for me to do that unless I understand what I'm supposed to be listening for. If you will agree that whatever bureau we are working with at the time, that their desk officer, whoever you want to come down, will brief us on the issues so we'll understand what it is all about, what should we listen for, and what shouldn't we talk about." It was a good education. I got to know everybody in all the regional bureaus that way. I got to know all the desk officers, the office directors, the assistant secretaries, so I became a real partisan at the State Department.

I'd go to the White House and they'd say we're not doing it the way we did it for the last visit. I'd say "You can't do that. Every head of state, head of government has to have the same treatment, the same dinners, the same return visits, the same number of vehicles, same number of nights, everything has to be the same." Well of course they would take me to task saying "Don't tell us what we're going to do. We are the White House. We're this and we're that." I'd say, "I'm telling you, you will have a disaster because anything you do for one the next one will know it and he'll say I want the very same thing. It doesn't matter if this is an African leader that's relatively obscure or Sadat, you have to treat them the same."

Finally I think they realized they had to do that and anything they wanted to do special they had to do it outside the scope of the official visit to make those things special. It was a constant battle and here I was, I would be listening to the Nick Velioteses and trying to take my lead.

Q: He was head of Near Eastern Affairs?

NASSIF: Yes, he was Assistant Secretary of Near Eastern Affairs at the time. I'd say you can not do these things for Sadat. Yes, we all love Sadat and want to do wonderful things but if we do it for Sadat we have to do it for everybody else.

Library of Congress

Q: Mrs. Annenberg's husband had been ambassador to the Court of St. James and was a very wealthy and powerful man in the publishing business and all this, how did she fit into this and how was she as your boss?

NASSIF: She was wonderful but she just didn't like the White House politics. She didn't like all the sniping and all of that, and neither did her husband. She worked very hard and she was a wonderful representative. She was very devoted to the President. After a year I think she said finally, "Who needs Washington politics?" and he said the same thing. He wanted her spending more time with him and she decided after a year that perhaps she would go back into the private sector. I think there were just certain people that wanted to interfere with the relationship that she had with the President and make life miserable for her unnecessarily and try to drag me into it. I was always there and would stick up for Mrs. Annenberg because she was a real lady and she deserved to be supported.

Q: *Were there any visits or incidents in your experiences that particularly stick in your mind?*

NASSIF: Oh yes. My worst visit was the visit from the King of Morocco. When Mrs. Annenberg left I took over as acting chief of protocol before they hired Mrs. Roosevelt, Lucky. When she came in she didn't want to come in too fast. She wanted to sort of watch for a while. The first visit was a Moroccan visit and she was sort of sitting on the sidelines participating but not taking over. I was still sort of running things at the time. The Moroccans were absolutely horrible. Joseph Verner Reed was the ambassador. If you know Joseph he is a very special sort of...

Q: *I don't know him but I've heard stories about him.*

NASSIF: They are all true.

Q: *He suffered very much from what we would call clientitis.*

Library of Congress

NASSIF: He spent a lot of time in Morocco with the Rockefellers so he knew them very well and he was close to the King. He had a very special relationship. The Moroccans, when they came, wanted everything. It wasn't the King, it was his people, his chief of protocol. They'd say "We don't treat people like that when they go to Morocco." I said, "You are absolutely right and I wish we could treat all of our guests the way you treat us. The fact is we have to do the same for everybody. We can not give anyone special treatment whether you are a prime minister, or the President, or the King, it doesn't matter. We treat them all the same. You get three limousines and that's it. The rest of them you pay for. You get six nights, seven days. You get one state dinner, one lunch at the White House, a south lawn ceremony, a lunch with the Secretary of State. You can throw a return dinner that the Vice President will attend and the Secretary, but not the President, that's it."

They didn't like that at all and they tried to get around everything at the White House. Even at the last minute just as we are getting ready to go over for the south lawn ceremony, they said "We have some presents we have to take over." I said, "No, you can't take any presents. You've already taken your presents over. The President doesn't like any surprises and they all have to be cleared. We can not do that." They said, "We're not going without them." I said, "What do you mean?" They said, "If you don't let us take them we're not going." I said, "You mean you're just not going to show up?" And they said, "That's right." It's like five minutes until we have to be over there. I said, "Okay, fine. We'll just cancel the visit." They got panicky finally and said "OK, we'll go."

After we are at the White House for about an hour the Secret Service calls me and says "There are a bunch of people in the West Wing and they've got all these gifts on the floor. I don't know how they got to the White House. You've got to take care of this thing." They managed to get around it.

Then at Blair House, the President's guest house, we were there and we had our security and our staff there. They said "You can't have your staff there, we want our staff." So we had to restrict our staff to the first floor. They said, "We don't want any of your security."

Library of Congress

“You have to have security. We are responsible for the safety of the King while he is in the United States.” “No, we are responsible for the security, you're not.” I said, “Do you mean you want me to take all the Secret Service out of Blair House?” They said, “They can stay outside.” “Oh, so you mean they can stay out on the street but they can't be inside the house? Absolutely not.” They said, “That's the only way we will do it.” I said, “All right, fine.”

I sat down with a pencil and paper and drew up an agreement. I pulled out my old lawyer tricks and said “Just sign this agreement and I'll be happy to walk out.” Basically the agreement said that the Moroccan secret service was taking responsibility for the King and if anything happened to the King it was because they had refused to allow the United States government to protect him. They would take all responsibilities for any assassination attempts and anything else that happened to the King. I said, “Just sign this and date it and I'll walk out right now.” Well of course they weren't about to sign it so they finally gave in and said we could keep the Secret Service there.

When Joseph Verner Reed left he said “Tom it was a wonderful visit. Can I do anything for you?” I said, “Yes. Promise me one thing, never come back.” When I got appointed ambassador to Morocco I thought this is my fate. This is my punishment now. I am going to go there and they are going to remember all these things I did to them, all the arguments we had and they are going to make life miserable for me. That was probably one of the worst visits I ever had. Two of the most interesting were Sadat and Indira Gandhi.

Q: Let's talk about Sadat. How did that visit go?

NASSIF: It was a wonderful visit but Sadat was very preoccupied, you could just see it. When he was in meetings, when he was being interviewed, when he was on television, boy he was elective but otherwise you could see that he was very, very preoccupied. It was almost as if he knew that the end was coming.

Library of Congress

Q: He was assassinated very shortly after that.

NASSIF: Very shortly after the visit. He was a wonderful man. His wife and children were there and he had said to President Reagan, "You know President Carter and I went through a lot with Camp David Accords. I'd like to pay a visit." President Reagan said "Of course. We'll provide you with a plane, a helicopter." They asked me to go with him so I went with Sadat. It was the President, his wife, his ambassador, and myself, the four of us. We flew to Georgia to one of our bases there and got a helicopter and landed in Plains, Georgia at the little high school, the baseball diamond. The little high school band was playing and President and Mrs. Carter were there to greet us. We went to their house and relaxed and they had a reception for them and spent some time alone. The rest of us just toured Plains, Georgia. But Sadat was a wonderful man. He really wanted to show his respect and his friendship to President and Mrs. Carter. He was just extremely well thought of by everybody and it was just so sad to see it happen so fast after he left.

Q: What about Indira Gandhi? I thought she was a very difficult lady who really didn't care too much for the United States.

NASSIF: Of course, that's what all of us had heard and we were scared to death of what kind of visit it was going to be. When she left Washington I went with her to New York and then she wanted to go to California. She also wanted to go to Hawaii to give the zoo there an elephant as a gift before she went back to India. The more time we spent together the better I got to know her and I got to know a completely different Indira Gandhi. She was there with her son, Rajiv, and his wife, and the grandchildren. I saw her as a mother and as a grandmother and we would chat about our families. I would talk about my children and we would talk about her children and Sanjay, of course, who had been killed in an airplane crash. She was just a wonderful woman and I got to know the person, not the politician.

Library of Congress

I have a picture when she left Hawaii, she's saying good-bye to me at the airport. She looked at me and said "Tom, I feel like I know your family." I just fell in love with her as a person. I thought this other side of her, this persona the iron lady, this other persona of her, I didn't see any of that. Of course there is no reason why I should because I wasn't involved in politics and I wasn't discussing substantive issues with her. We were talking about personal things. I sat across the table from her all the way to Los Angeles and all the way to Hawaii on an airplane, and I was in the back seat of the car with her everywhere she went so I was the only person she had to talk to.

Q: How did she respond to parts of the United States?

NASSIF: She was wonderful. She was terrific at everything. I never got the feeling that she didn't like the United States, that she was anti-American. All the things we had heard about, there was absolutely no evidence of that whatsoever.

Q: Did you get involved in any visits of Margaret Thatcher because it was practically the love affair between Ronald Reagan, we're talking political, and Margaret Thatcher, the prime minister?

NASSIF: I did but it was a very quick visit. She wasn't here for very long and most of that happened after her visit with all the publicity about how close they were politically and everything. All I remember is we were at Blair House where she was giving a speech to the community of people who had come to see her and it was time for her to leave and she wasn't finished yet. Al Haig was waiting for her because he was supposed to take her to Andrews. He called me and said, "I want her out here and I want her out here now!" I wasn't about to go on the stage and say I'm sorry Madame Prime Minister, the Secretary of State is at the reflecting pool and he wants you to get your rear end over there and get in the helicopter so he can take you to Andrews Air Force Base or say good-bye to you. So here I am, I've got the Secretary of State breathing down my neck and I'm not about to say anything to the Prime Minister of Great Britain, so she stayed. She had her own agenda,

Library of Congress

she was going to do what she was going to do, a very strong willed person. I didn't get a chance to get to know her at all or even talk to her.

Q: During the Reagan White House when you have some of these almost pro forma ones, rulers of relatively small African Latin American countries where I would think the interest of the White House staff and the people that you had problems with would be almost dismissive and it would be difficult to get their attention and to make sure that these things were done nicely.

NASSIF: It really wasn't. They really treated everybody with the utmost respect. They may not have been as excited about things as when Sadat came or when Begin came or when Gandhi came or some of the other high profiles leaders, they were more excited but they always gave everybody first class treatment and that was really wonderful. I saw that at every level of the Department of State and at the White House and all the political appointees, everybody was treated with the utmost respect.

Q: You mentioned your dealings with the various desks and all, did you find there was any tension between say the Indian desk and your office at all when these things were set up or was it a pretty good working relationship?

NASSIF: It was an excellent working relationship. Obviously every time one of these visits came they would realize that their fate was in our hands because they knew how important those visits were. The ambassador knew how important it was, the Assistant Secretary, the office director, the desk officer, this was the big deal. Basically we could make it a success or a failure if we screwed up so they worked very closely with us. In the beginning of course there would always be a little bit of concern to make sure all the details were taken care of but as they saw how we handled visits, we had great support from them. We developed tremendous relations with them, a tremendous amount of respect for the Foreign Service, and they for us because they knew we were going to do a good job for

Library of Congress

them and if there was a problem it wouldn't be because of something we did or didn't do because it was a very close relationship.

Q: How did you get along with Selva Roosevelt?

NASSIF: We got along very well. Mrs. Annenberg asked the President to appoint me chief of protocol because she thought I should get the job and a lot of people on the White House staff also thought I should, but Mrs. Reagan wanted a woman so she appointed Mrs. Roosevelt. When they made the announcement I was at a party and one of those social reporters walked up to me with a tape recorder and the person said, "Oh, this is terrible. You should have been the chief of protocol. What do you think about this bringing Selva Roosevelt in?" I said, "I just think we are very fortunate that we have Mrs. Reagan involved in the process that she could bring in someone as highly qualified as Mrs. Roosevelt to be our new chief of protocol." So they printed it in the paper. I got a call from Mrs. Reagan's office, from her chief of staff, saying she read your comments and was very impressed. If I had said the wrong thing I would have been dead meat at the time. Lucky and I are very close friends to date.

Q: I was wondering did anyone make remarks about saying here is the Lebanese mafia taking over protocol because she is a native born Lebanese too?

NASSIF: She is Lebanese-American. Her mother was born in Lebanon but she is from Tennessee. What they did say is this, they said how could protocol be in better hands than to have two Lebanese-Americans representing our country because no one is more hospitable than a Lebanese. They said just exactly the opposite.

Q: Could you talk a bit about Mrs. Reagan? Often the President kind of does the job- (end of tape)

Library of Congress

You had two Secretaries of State while you were in protocol. How were Alexander Haig and George Shultz? They were both old hands in the government. Did you have any problems with them?

NASSIF: I didn't have any problems with either one of them although they were quite different. Al Haig was basically a guy that terrorized you more than anything else. He wanted to make sure that you didn't make any mistakes and if you were late for anything, god help you. One time when I was in protocol still, I was supposed to go out to the reflecting pool for a helicopter flight to Andrews to pick up Begin. Nick Veliotis had said he wanted me to go out with him and to wait downstairs, not to go out in advance, so I waited downstairs. They went out the basement instead of going out the front door so I never saw them leave. Finally I realized that something was wrong and when I got to the reflecting pool they had taken off. Haig had basically said too bad. I had to try and high tail it to Andrews by car to get there in time because I thought the last thing I wanted, especially being a Lebanese-American, was to not be there for the arrival of the first visit by the Jewish head of state. I didn't want people reading anything into it, but I never made it. Still the visit was very successful.

I must say Haig was a very different kind of guy. If we were doing a ceremony and I was trying to tell him what he was supposed to do he would give me that look like, I know what to do so you don't have to tell me what to do.

Shultz was completely differently. In fact the way I met Shultz was Indira Gandhi was supposed to be coming into town and that was the time when I had wanted to get in the Middle East Bureau. The White House had offered me a position as chairman of the Federal Labor Relations Bureau because of my labor background and I said thank you but no thank you. They said "You've got to be crazy. This is basically having your own agency, your own building, it is one of the most beautiful in town. You have your labor law background, it's like being a Supreme Court justice." I said, "I don't think the Lord brought me to Washington, DC to be a lawyer or a judge. My heart is in the Middle East. If I can do

Library of Congress

something in the peace process even if it is just carrying somebody's bag, that's where I belong." I was told that I would never get into the Middle Eastern Bureau, that no political appointees ever get into the bureau.

Bill Clark was National Security Advisor at the time and I talked to Bill about it and he said, "Why don't you talk to George Shultz?" Indira Gandhi was late coming in because of a traffic jam in New York and so Secretary Shultz had about an hour. I had been up there briefing Secretary and Mrs. Shultz on protocol and what happens in all these state visits so there was an hour to spare. I asked his secretary if I could go in and see him because Bill had said I should try and do it, so I did and I went and told him. He asked me some questions and asked me to send up a resume which I did. He then talked to Ken Dam, who was his Deputy Secretary at the time, and Ken talked to Nick Veliotis who was the Assistant Secretary. Nick knew me and liked me and said, "I'd love to have him. In fact, I could use him to handle congressional affairs for the bureau." They should give him another slot.

They created a slot which stands still today as Deputy Assistant Secretary of State. The responsibility I had was for congressional affairs so I had all of foreign aid for North Africa, the Gulf, the Middle East, Southeast Asia. We had all of India, Pakistan, Afghanistan issues as well as Egypt, Israel, Jordan and all of that and North Africa.

Q: You did this from when to when?

NASSIF: I started in NEA in about April of '83 and I did it until left for Morocco in '85, two-and-a-half years.

Q: Before we go on, and there can be some overlap, was it difficult dealing with the Israelis at this particular time? Begin was a tough cookie and I was wondering whether protocol wise there were any particular difficulties?

Library of Congress

NASSIF: It was just the opposite. The Israelis were probably the easiest visitors of all. Begin was a very relaxed person. All of the people who traveled with him were fairly casual, didn't wear ties, didn't stand on protocol, didn't care whether or not I was in the meeting or not in a meeting. I was very cautious not to be in meetings I wasn't supposed to be in. The Israelis were exactly the opposite. You could be with top level people. We would sit down at Blair House dinner and I would be sitting with Ariel Sharon and Moshe Ariens like I was somebody and I wasn't anybody.

We had a very funny incident one night at Blair House. I was having dinner and Sharon sat next to me and started asking me questions. He said "Nassif's an unusual name. What is that name," as if he didn't know. I told him and he said "Where's your father from?" I said, "Oh, it's just a tiny little village called Ein Addab." He said, "That's an orthodox village, isn't it?" So he knew all about me. He knew all about the village. He knew everything but he was quite a strong character. I had gotten to know the ambassador, Moshe Ariens, very well who later became foreign minister. He was a terrific guy. In fact, Bebe Netanyahu was number two in the embassy while I was in NEA, just as I left protocol and got into NEA. Protocol wise the Israelis were absolutely the easiest to be around and Begin was very easy to be around.

Q: What about the French? I would think the French have a tendency to be quite protocol conscious. Did you have a problem with them?

NASSIF: Oh yes. What happened was when President Mitterand came we went down to Colonial Williamsburg, that's where we met them, so we didn't have the traditional activities that we would have normally had for a state dinner so it was kind of complicated. Basically the White House took over the whole thing. They said, "We don't care if you guys are involved or not. You can come along but we are taking this one over." So they really took the whole thing over themselves basically. But no, we got along fine with the French.

Library of Congress

In fact their chief of protocol ended up being ambassador to Morocco when I was there and then later on became the French ambassador to the United Nations.

Q: In '83 you went over to the Near Eastern Affairs dealing with congressional relations. Of course in many ways the whole thing that drives NEA seems to be the problems of Israel and then what drives that is Congress so in many ways you were sitting on the hottest button in town. Can you talk about during the period you were there, '83 to '85, about how congressional relations were?

NASSIF: As you know in the State Department the office of congressional relations basically is supposed to handle all of those things so this was a departure and I was viewed sort of as competition for them. Because most foreign aid in the world is in our bureau, my position was very important but since most foreign aid goes to Israel it wasn't such a big deal...

Q: And Egypt, too.

NASSIF: Yes, those are the two largest recipients at the time of aid. Also at the time there was a lot of aid going to Jordan, Pakistan, and Morocco. There was a lot more foreign aid than there is today both economic development assistance, military assistance. But you couldn't stay ahead of the Congress. You just couldn't give Israel enough money. It just kept going up, and up, and up. It just seemed like it was a race between the Reagan White House and the Congress to see who could give Israel the most money.

Q: *And Congress was Democratic at that time?*

NASSIF: Yes, but Reagan was such a good friend of Israel so he was pushing for everything for Israel. They were in lockstep. It was just a question of who could give the most away.

Library of Congress

Q: I would have thought you would have run across as you were doing this, I've certainly talked to people within the Department of State who while not being opposed to Israel were really opposed to the largess that we were showering on them. Did you find yourself...

NASSIF: Nobody ever had the courage to open their mouth about that. I never heard it one time. Obviously, we knew it was unfair. There were so many countries in need and we were giving nothing to Africa, nothing to so many countries who needed it, and we were just pouring it into Israel and Egypt. Obviously I think people in their hearts felt that way but nobody would ever say anything because that would be the end of their career.

Q: I've talked to people after they've retired.

NASSIF: Yes, but it's like an ex-President, all of a sudden you have this magnificent candor.

Q: Was there a mister Israeli aide in the White House, somebody who was dealing with that there?

NASSIF: I don't know of anybody in particular who dealt with thaissue at the White House.

Q: What about within Congress, who were sort of the key players thayou were dealing with?

NASSIF: I dealt a lot with Lee Hamilton, Steve Solarz, Dante Fascell, and Ben Gilman. They were most of the players in the House. The Senate wasn't quite as active. I'm trying to remember the one from Minnesota that was on the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee, I can't think of his name.

Q: You can fill this in later.

Library of Congress

NASSIF: He was active. There were a number of people in the Senate of course but nobody was real active on an individual basis much on those issues. In the Senate the issue was India-Pakistan and the fact that we had to go up there and certify that Pakistan wasn't developing a nuclear weapon in order to justify the sale of the F-16s. It was during that period of time when we had the Afghan War and Pakistan was our main ally in that whole area at the time. It was a fascinating time for so many issues because you had the Afghanistan issue, the India-Pakistan nuclear issues, as well as all of the aid issues, and the Libyan issues that were going on.

One really interesting congressional issue was when Tom Lantos, congressman from California, Hungarian European Jew, anyway he was the sponsor of the Jerusalem bill. That was the first time we made an attempt to move the embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem by cutting off all funding for the embassy in Tel Aviv. That was the way they were going to do it. What really was very funny was people like Solarz got irritated because here he was a Jewish-American congressman for many years and here was a relatively new congressman who had taken the lead in this thing. We found them even arguing amongst themselves about who should be responsible and who was for it and who was against it.

I was put in charge of the project over at the State Department. It was my job to see that this legislation never saw the light of day. Since 90 percent of the congress was a co-sponsor on the bill, the idea was how are you going to keep it from coming out of the committee? I worked on this issue for a year. Larry Eagleburger worked with me. Larry Eagleburger has always been a good friend of Israel but Larry and I worked very closely because he said "This is a bad bill. The Secretary of State doesn't want it, and the President doesn't want it. You've got to do what you can to kill this thing."

I just went to work for a year with the Congress. I must have talked to just about every member of the House and Senate. They would tell me we know this is a bad bill, we know this is the wrong thing to do but if it comes to a vote we will vote for it because we can not

Library of Congress

vote against Israel. It was so blatant that it almost made me sick to think that members of the U.S. Senate, that U.S. senators would call me and say “Please keep it from coming to a vote because it is bad, it’s dangerous, people could get killed in some of our embassies abroad. I don’t want to see this happen, but I will vote for it if it comes to a vote on the floor.”

Q: You say you worked on it, can you explain because we’re talkin these oral histories are for people who won’t understand our terms.

NASSIF: What I did was I had to talk to everybody in the Congress and all their staff to tell them what the position of the U.S. administration was, why this was not a good idea and that it should be left to final status negotiations, that had always been our policy. Only a couple of countries in the whole world acknowledge that Jerusalem was the capital and how important that was for final status negotiations with the Palestinians. How dangerous it would be for our posts in the Islamic world if we took a position ahead of that and basically [preempted] the need to negotiate the issue between the Palestinians and the Israelis.

I would also talk with the business community and brief them on what was going on because obviously they were very interested in what was going on and had a certain amount of influence with the Congress. We would try and talk to all foreign Middle East negotiators, all former assistant secretaries of State for the Middle East, all former secretaries of State. Basically we wanted to get as much testimony on the record and as many op ed. pieces written as possible to show that this was a bad idea and that good friends of Israel thought that this was a bad idea as well as people who just believed it was a bad idea because of our position on the peace process. I spent an awful lot of time in concert with people on the Hill and other people who were working on the issue trying to quarterback the issue and keeping a count of all the congressmen and senators and how they would vote on the thing.

Library of Congress

Q: I understand it wasn't even very high on the Israeli agenda either.

NASSIF: It was not. It was more an AIPAC [American-Israeli Public Affairs Committee] issue. That was at a time when AIPAC had its own issues and they weren't necessarily supported by the Israeli government. In fact, I think AIPAC was told to back off on the issue and they just wouldn't do it. A lot of congressmen wanted to push it on their own because they thought this was going to put a feather in their cap if they could get this done.

Q: How can you stop a bill? If you've got everybody afraid to throw themselves in front of the locomotive, how do you keep it from coming to the floor?

NASSIF: Basically the way to do it was we got them to agree not to vote on it in the subcommittee and it was a way to avoid the vote. They understood that the President didn't want it, the Israelis weren't pushing it, the Secretary of State didn't want it, and all these other knowledgeable people were saying it was bad bill. They realized they had made a mistake, and Lee Hamilton I'm sure was very helpful in dealing with the issue, and that basically the best way to do it was to just keep it from coming to a vote in the subcommittee. It never went to the full committee for a vote, so it never went to the floor.

Q: Was it a close one? Was there pressure within the subcommittee to bring it out?

NASSIF: Absolutely. It was up to the last second we were trying to negotiate a deal. I was in negotiating a deal between Shultz and Ben Gilman at the time trying to put together something to see if we could get a compromise position.

Q: How would you compromise on it, you know half-way between the middle of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv?

NASSIF: I'm trying to think what it was. There was a compromise that was proposed and it wasn't obviously to move it or not to move it but it was a compromise as to the fact

Library of Congress

that it could be taken up at a later date or a non-binding resolution. Maybe that's what it was, a non-binding resolution, something like that, was what we were trying to work on as a compromise or something that was said on the record that while the United States supports certain things, at the present time this wouldn't be good. It would be a statement made when the bill was killed. But Shultz stood by his guns.

Q: Was there still residual resentment about your friend Arie Sharon and his invasion of Lebanon within NEA and all that?

NASSIF: If there was I didn't hear about it because at the time Begin said he didn't authorize it, he didn't give him a green light, he didn't blink, he didn't wink, he didn't do any of those things. He said that again very recently because I happened to see former Secretary Haig at one of our events of the American Task Force for Lebanon last March and he said he never did that. And of course the Sabra and Shatila, the massacre of the Palestinians in their camps in Lebanon, was a big issue and of course Sharon was in power then. He was the one who supposedly allowed it to happen.

Q: Which in a way led to our reinserting the marines which led to them being killed. It was not a pleasant period with American-Israeli relations at all.

NASSIF: I was there just after the embassy was blown up in Beirut and just before the marines were killed. I was with the marines, they were my escorts. They showed me Sabra and Shatila. They took me up in a helicopter and showed me all the camps, where the French were, and where the Italians were. They took me out to their hospital ships that were off the coast of Lebanon in the Med. Just after that I left and went to Israel. That's when Begin resigned. It wasn't very long after that when they were killed.

Q: Sticking to sort of that area, what about aid to Egypt? Wathere any problem with that?

NASSIF: The only problem with aid to Egypt was that it seemed we had so many turnkey projects. We were giving them plenty of aid and nobody complained about that so much

Library of Congress

except other Arab countries like Jordan, Morocco and a few of the others who said they ought to be given a bigger piece of the pie. It just seemed like they were having a tough time finding really good projects for Egypt. There is a lot of need but...

Q: We had a huge AID presence there. We didn't have any in Israel because they just took the money and did their own thing.

NASSIF: It was a completely different program for Israel than for the rest of the world.

Q: Moving on a little, what about Saudi Arabia? Were you there during the time when we were always having fights over AWACs, or F-16s, or what have you? Were there any procurement issues or any issues like that with Saudi Arabia while you were there?

NASSIF: There was a awful lot of discussion about sales. Should we make the sale or shouldn't we make the sales? If we make the sale what is it going to cost and what is that going to generate in other countries wanting the same kinds of weapons, and how does that change the balance? There was always congressional hesitation to sell these weapons to the Saudis because they would take all Arab weapons in all Arab countries and then say what do they have versus Israel, as if there is some mass conspiracy that all of them joined forces. Congress would say you've got to keep a substantial lead in Israel. So there was a lot of opposition to that sale and there was a lot of opposition to the AWACs because they thought it might be misused. But we had a big problem after I got to Morocco with the Algerians when we were trying to sell the Algerians F-16s.

Q: *What about while you were in NEA with AIPAC, were you able to have relations with them?*

NASSIF: I had a very good relationship with them. In fact I still see some of them to this day. Tom [Dine] and I became good friends after I became ambassador to Morocco.

Q: *He's now in Geneva or somewhere?*

Library of Congress

NASSIF: He was in AID last time I heard. We had a very good relationship. In fact they used to laugh, I'd go down and see them and they'd tell me that people think that we are so much more powerful, and stronger, and bigger than we really are but the perception of what we can do is what makes us so mighty.

Q: But of course when you get right down to the Jerusalem issue you can see what they can do, in that day, but they lost.

NASSIF: How often do they ever lose?

Q: What about aid to Pakistan? This is a difficult one because we were working hard on this war between the Afghans and the Soviets yet at the same time we were concerned about their doing something about nuclear weapons. The Indians already had a nuclear capability. How did you deal with that?

NASSIF: It was interesting because at the time Pakistan wouldn't accept foreign aid from the United States. They were buying F-16s but they weren't accepting any aid to pay for it. The question was are we going to deliver them when they are ready, and if so what are the conditions? The condition of course was that the U.S. certify that Pakistan was not trying to build a nuclear weapon. Everybody in the Senate felt that they were probably building a nuclear weapon. Everybody in the U.S. felt they were probably building a nuclear weapon. But without enough proof of that they could always say that it is really for peacetime purposes and somehow there would always be a deal struck in the Senate to certify Pakistan for it. Of course Moynihan was always looking over our shoulder because he was very pro-India, and his chief of staff was very pro-India.

Q: Who was that?

NASSIF: I'm trying to remember his name. He ended up as ambassador to Croatia.

Q: Peter Galbraith.

Library of Congress

NASSIF: Right. So Peter was always looking at Pakistan askance but I think everybody realized how important Pakistan was in the Afghan War.

Q: Did you have a feeling, I mean it's all over now, that we were working hard not to work too hard on finding out whether the Pakistanis were playing around with nuclear things?

NASSIF: While I was never privy to any of that kind of information, my feeling was that everybody was just turning a blind eye because Pakistan was just too important in Afghanistan, and to protect the refugees, to funnel funds and equipment. The role the Pakistanis played was enormous and how could we all of a sudden say, sorry we are not going to let you buy (not give, not foreign aid), we're not going to let you even pay for out of your own money F-16s. That's pretty hard to do.

Q: During the time you were there did they get F-16s?

NASSIF: I think they finally got the F-16s, it may have been just after I left. I think they also finally decided to change their foreign policy on accepting aid and finally agreed that they would take assistance.

Q: The F-16 is a relatively advanced fighter aircraft of the period. What about Libya, you mentioned Libya, do they still have those C-130s sitting on the ground somewhere?

NASSIF: I don't know. We broke our diplomatic relations with Libya when I was in protocol. Of all things this was like our first assignment, it was to go ahead and shut down the Libyan embassy. They wanted us to go man it and make sure nobody came in or out. I said "Why would you have protocol officers doing this for goodness sakes? Why don't you have policemen or somebody else out there? I don't want to risk the lives of my protocol officers to make sure that the Libyans don't go back into their embassy?" It just seemed sort of absurd to me but they insisted they do it with protocol because they wanted it to be not a military, not a security thing, it was more of a diplomatic thing. That was my first taste of Libya and of course lots of things happened after that with regard to Libya and

Library of Congress

how we might have to act in the region should something occur. Then of course when I was in Morocco, we bombed Libya.

Q: We will come to that but how about Morocco from your perspective, anything involving Morocco?

NASSIF: The relationship was pretty good during the Reagan years; it wasn't so good in the Carter years. I think the relationship was very good. Aid was increasing, the AID presence was increasing. Our military assistance was increasing although we tried to keep the Moroccans from buying a lot of sophisticated aircraft. They always wanted F-16s and we always said, "What for? Feed your people. Don't buy F-16s for goodness sake because then the Algerians are going to want F-16s and all those people should be using their money for better uses than military weapons." General Dynamics didn't necessarily like that position but that was our position.

Q: General Dynamics is the producer, a Texas firm. Did George Bush weigh in at all on the F-16s since he was from F-16 country, being Texan and all?

NASSIF: Not to my knowledge, he never did. I think there was general unanimity in the U.S. government that it wasn't a good idea to sell them to countries like Morocco and Algeria.

Q: During this period in Congress there used to be, I can't think of the Senator's name, he was from Wyoming or one of the Dakotas with an Arab background who would from time to time raise the issue of...

NASSIF: I think it was James Abdnor from North Dakota.

Q: Yes. Sometimes he would raise the issue that our policy was so pro-Israeli that there were Arab considerations and all. Did this ever come up?

Library of Congress

NASSIF: One time Senator Abdnor was railing against the Israeli bombing of Lebanon. He said his mother is in that village and the area is being bombed and he doesn't know how to get in touch with her. This is just an example of what they were doing to the poor, innocent people in Lebanon. Next thing you know, Sharon flies his people into the village, takes Abdnor's mother out, brings her to Israel, and sends her to the United States. He's complaining to me, "I didn't want my mother living with me. I was just making a point." But the Israelis outsmarted him and brought his mother out.

Q: You were involved in the political atmosphere as an Arab-Christian, sort of a different dynamic. Did you find during this period a beginning of Arab identity within the United States? There was the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee [ADC] and all. Were you seeing a change?

NASSIF: I was noticing it but I didn't know if it was a change because I was new to the whole dynamic. I was beginning to realize that there were prominent Arab-American organizations like the ADC, which was started by Senator Abourezk, and also the NAAA, the National Association of Arab-Americans, that were very prominent. There were also some right-wing Lebanese groups that were basically Maronite groups that were very prominent in the area and they were coming over. I was very happy to see them getting active and I was happy to see them finally get a voice because they needed to hear from these organizations, there needed to be a voice. I was very happy to see that occur. Whenever I was asked who should they talk to, I would try and suggest who I thought were the most credible of the sources from the Arab-American organizations to speak with them on those issues. But it didn't have much of a voice at the time. It is much stronger today even though nothing by comparison with others, but still incredible by comparison with what it was.

Q: *Did Algeria raise any problems?*

Library of Congress

NASSIF: The big problem with Algeria was the gas issue. Algeria had take-or-pay contracts with many of the big U.S. importers of natural gas which meant basically that they would either take the gas and pay for it, or if they didn't take it they would pay for it anyway. Basically they would say you are going to take x-amount of gas whether you need it or not. That was when the price of gas was high and all of that. When they went into those contracts shortly thereafter the price of gas fell dramatically and they couldn't really afford it. They couldn't compete if they were still paying high prices from old contracts with all the people who were buying on at market for the lower prices.

There was a big problem with the whole issue of whether or not they were going to disallow those contracts, whether the Congress was going to get involved. The Algerians to their credit got some very respectable U.S. business people and former politicians involved and I think even Drew Lewis got involved, the former Secretary of Labor. The Reagan administration got involved in representing Algeria to ensure that the Congress didn't intervene in basically what was a civil matter which was a contract matter between U.S. companies and Algeria. On the business side things were really happening with Algeria.

The whole issue of the Western Sahara was always very prominent and the Algerians and the Polisario were always active. The Polisario were on the Hill with the Congress. There were a lot of people in the African sub-committee of the Foreign Affairs Middle East Committee that were pro-Algeria and pro-Polisario and were always very anti-Morocco that were always trying to do things. We were always busy trying to defend the position of the Moroccans on the issue of the Western Sahara.

Q: It is interesting how certain causes pick up support where you think people would leave well enough alone in the United States. There was the Biafran one with Nigeria and the Polisario movement. Algeria was not that benign a country and obviously you got very much enmeshed in this, but during this time you were in NEA what did you see as the

Library of Congress

driving force to have proponents in the congressional staff or even congressmen for the Polisario?

NASSIF: There was one member of Congress who was very pro-Algerian because basically his chief of staff was. He traveled to Algeria. He had gotten to know them. He was a bit of a socialist anyway. He got into the issues and before you knew it he was the cause celebre for that subcommittee. You are absolutely right. I made a very special effort to get to know staff because I knew how powerful they are.

Q: I think earlier on Senator Dole got involved in Bosnia mainly because one of his staff members was related enough to Bosnia. Senator Helms today one of his staff was involved in kind of the right-wing military rulers in Central America and this set him off. This is one of the dynamics that is often overlooked in American foreign policy.

NASSIF: We'd have to sometimes balance off staff against staff. For example Dante Fascell's aide, Toni Verstandig, who is now Deputy Assistant Secretary of State in the Middle East handling Lebanon, was very pro-Morocco and understood the issues and traveled to the regions. That's why she got Fascell interested in the issue. She was very helpful in keeping things from happening, aid from being cut back and everything else. We had basically aides for two Democratic congressmen who were on opposite sides of the fence.

Q: I take it in your dealings and all in the Middle East, you realldidn't have a Republican-Democrat split did you?

NASSIF: Oh no.

Q: It was American policy with internal movement because oparticularly Jewish pressure.

NASSIF: There was no difference between the Republicans and the Democrats but we dealt mostly with the Democrats because they were in power. At the time they had so

Library of Congress

overloaded their committees and their subcommittees that it wasn't even close. It's not like having eight Republicans and six Democrats, it was like seven Democrats and three Republicans. They would have subcommittee meetings and wouldn't even invite the Republicans to the meetings. We dealt basically with the Democratic leadership.

Q: Did you find that as you did this sort of your Republican credentials almost became a matter of indifference or something like that?

NASSIF: Absolutely. I don't know if it did to them but it certainly did to me. I was just basically working with the power structure whoever and whatever it was. We were very fortunate to have a man like Lee Hamilton who at the time was the chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee. He was just so fair, so well respected, so knowledgeable, and he was not biased. Nobody would take him on because they knew he wasn't biased. He was just telling the truth and being fair.

Q: *Did you have any problems with anybody in the White House who was sort of running around, Ollie North or anybody like that?*

NASSIF: No. We had no problems at all on any of the aid issues or any of the Arab-Israeli issues at the White House whatsoever. If there were issues it came out of the NSC and I never saw it.

Q: *Had the Iran-Contra business developed while you were there?*

NASSIF: It happened afterwards.

Q: *Luckily for you.*

NASSIF: Which is funny because Ollie North was working for the NSC in offices I worked with all the time and I never heard of him, never heard his name, never saw him, never met him. In fact the guy who supposedly hired him, I can't think of his name now, who

Library of Congress

also lost his job over the issue, I worked with all of the time. I never met Ollie North, never heard of him.

Q: Did you find that during this period George Shultz was taking a strong interest in things you were involved in? There wouldn't be a direct connection, but was George Shultz sort of focused on the Middle East or was this left to Nick Veliotos and others?

NASSIF: He got very focused obviously during the time when we sent troops to Lebanon and of course he got very focused on the peace process. He was instrumental in the Reagan plan which was the peace agreement between Israel and Lebanon. When at the last moment that agreement was basically vetoed by the Syrians, it was a bitter, bitter defeat for Secretary Shultz and from that point on he had absolutely no interest in the Middle East whatsoever.

Q: I thought with Shultz working on that, apparently what I've gathered talking to other people was that it was assumed Assad would go along with the deal and Assad is a very astute person and you couldn't assume that Assad would do that.

NASSIF: I don't know why anybody would make an assumption like that knowing the history of the relationship between the Syrians and the Israelis and the Lebanese. Basically he was adamant and there was no support for anything out of the White House after the bombing of the marines because they had been so involved. You know I think the big battle was between Weinberger and Shultz because originally it was Shultz that wanted to send troops to Lebanon and Weinberger that didn't want them in.

Q: These two did not get along. There was this feeling that once the marines were put back in, they were put in originally to get the Palestinians out of Lebanon, and then you had the massacre at Shatila...

NASSIF: Then we were supporting the government that was in.

Library of Congress

Q: Then we just put them in without any real... I think we were feeling guilty or something like that. While you were in NEA, before the bombing, was there any sort of disquiet about what we were doing there?

NASSIF: There was quite a bit. In fact I got there at the time when we were going around the country trying to explain why we were in Lebanon. I would go all over speaking to Kiwanis groups, Elks, Masons and Rotaries all over the country giving speeches on Lebanon and why we were there. It was really funny because one day not too long ago I was going to give a speech on Lebanon and I looked through my old speeches and the facts are almost exactly the same; very little has changed. I could give that same speech today.

Q: Did you get a feel at all about the terribly confusing situation in Lebanon at that time? We're talking about a civil war within a civil war and it was just a very, very difficult time in Lebanon.

NASSIF: I was always surprised when I would go to a Lion's Club meeting and I'd finish my speech and some guy would get up and say, "Isn't this really a question of Lebanese factions all fighting each other?" I thought to myself these people are listening to what is going on. It is always complicated. Here you had within the Maronites you had Maronites fighting Maronites for goodness sake not just the Maronites fighting the Druze, who were fighting the Shiites, who were fighting the Sunnis. You had all these things and then you had Libya supporting one group, Iran supporting a group, the French, the U.S., the Israelis, the Syrians. You had so many foreign countries involved from the outside because every time a group would get into trouble they'd look for a big brother somewhere and whoever they could get to be their big brother, whether it was Qadhafi, whether it was Assad, they would go out and get him and that would just bring in all these outside influences to bear. Of course it was very complicated and then of course the Palestinian presence complicated it.

Library of Congress

Q: When you left NEA you went to be ambassador to Morocco?

NASSIF: Yes.

Q: How did that come about?

NASSIF: It's a very interesting story. When I went into NEA as I said I was responsible for congressional relations. After about a year Arnie Raphel came in as senior deputy to Dick Murphy who was the Assistant Secretary. The traditional role of the principal deputy in NEA was, in addition to being an alter ego to the Assistant Secretary, that he had policy responsibilities for North Africa. Arnie was very active, very political, and later became ambassador to Pakistan and was killed in the assassination of President Zia al-Haq of Pakistan.

When Arnie came in I went to see him and said "Arnie, I know you're too busy to take on North Africa and I've got all of the congress, I've got international labor, I've got USIS." Basically I had every dog and cat that nobody else wanted in NEA that I could get. I said, "I would like policy responsibilities for North Africa." He looked at me and said, "Tom, nobody is going to give a political appointee policy responsibilities for a geographic area. The Congress is one thing. But let me just talk about it because I really don't want to do it." So he started talking to people and I guess he got some very positive feedback about me and he said, "You're the only one in the whole bureau that wants more work. Everybody else is trying to do less." He said, "OK, I've talked to people and they like you. You're respected and they think you can do the challenge so we're going to do it." I took on policy responsibilities for North Africa which gave me Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria and Libya.

When it came time to making selections of ambassadors and making suggestions I made suggestions for Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia; we had no relations with Libya. All of the deputy assistant secretaries got together talking to Dick Murphy making our recommendations. My career Foreign Service officer colleagues all said "The obvious

Library of Congress

choice for Morocco is you. The King would rather have a political appointee, someone who is close to the President. Nobody knows more about Morocco than you do. You've done all the protocol stuff, all the congressional foreign aid stuff and now you've done all the policy stuff. You've met everybody. You've traveled with the Moroccans, the Algerians, the Tunisians." I knew all the heads of state, all the cabinets, and all the governments in North Africa, most of the people in the embassies and all the people in the U.S. government in every bureau that basically dealt with Morocco. They said, "You're the obvious choice." (end side one)

Q: I've never had any dealings with Ambassador Reed but from what I've gathered he was considered very close to the King and it was difficult dealing with him from Washington. Sort of the devil they knew was better than the devil they didn't know as far as if they were to turn the process loose. They knew you, you knew the policy and all that, and otherwise they might end up with another political appointee who could get off the range. Morocco is probably the easiest country in the world to get absorbed by the King and that's why he likes political appointees.

NASSIF: That's right and many Foreign Service officers had very baexperiences there.

Q: *Dick Parker.*

NASSIF: Poor Dick Parker, he was a very qualified guy but he didn't have a very good time there. I think that is exactly right. We had some very important issues. When I went out, Morocco and Libya had a union agreement. They had the defense [agreement], they had foreign policy, they had everything. The President said "I want you to break that back." Second of all they had a war going in the Western Sahara which he wanted to get quieted down. And third, they had no diplomatic relations with Algeria, which they wanted to establish. I had a big job.

Of course Morocco had the largest military exercise program in the world outside of Germany. You had all the navy coming through the Med. You had all the carrier activity

Library of Congress

and all the airplane activity off the carriers. You had all the beach landings with the army and the marines. You had all the low-level flights that took place in the north of Morocco. Morocco was an ideal sight for military exercises and because it was becoming more and more difficult to do these things in Europe, Morocco was a natural because we had bases right there and in Spain and Germany.

Q: You were in Morocco from '85 to when?

NASSIF: '88.

Q: Did you have any problems getting confirmed?

NASSIF: No. My confirmation was held back because Helms held back everybody because he had somebody he wanted to get confirmed in the State Department that wasn't even nominated so he held everybody up. Finally they let a few of us go through and I was one that they let go through. I had no problems with my confirmation.

Q: Could you talk about the political-economic situation in Morocco when you arrived in '85?

NASSIF: The relationship of course was very good because Ambassador Reed had been a very successful envoy to Morocco from the perspective of the Moroccans. It is just that we had so many difficult issues that we were dealing with at the time and the question is exactly what are we going to do and how are we going to do that? I think in the beginning the King was a little bit leery of having the U.S. send out an Arab-American. It was almost an insult to him I think but in Morocco you make your reputation within the first six months. I think after the first six months he realized that I really wanted to help Morocco and I was really interested in doing something for the U.S.-Moroccan relationship.

They were extremely good to me when I was there. They gave me the access I needed. I could call the foreign minister at any time of the day or night and see him. I even had the French ambassador tell me he had a hard time getting appointments to see him at all. I

Library of Congress

could call him at a moments notice and be down there five minutes later. They were that good about the access. I had extremely good access to the King. Everybody had talked about this relationship that Joseph had with the King, but he was very good to me.

Of course, the King is always very interested in the Middle East and the peace process but he had no real issues because he had no border in dispute so it was hard to become a player in the peace process. What he did was he decided that he would use the fact that the largest minority in all of Israel is a Moroccan origin Jew. Unfortunately from his perspective they were Likud and he was supporting Labor because he felt it was easier to get peace with a Labor government than with a Likud government which obviously is true. At the time Peres and Yitzhak Shamir were sort of tied for the job so they took a couple of years each and split it up.

When Peres took over he decided that he was going to have a summit meeting, the first public summit meeting in the history after Sadat, between an Arab and Israeli head of state. Tom Pickering was ambassador in Israeli at the time so Tom and I had to put it together. We had to keep it very, very quiet for security reasons obviously and to make sure that it happened, and we did. I told the Moroccans, "I don't want to read about this in a cable from Tel Aviv. I want to report it first. The minute there is anything to report, please let me know so I can send a cable in."

I get a call at midnight from one of the marines from the embassy and he says, "Mr. Ambassador, the King is on the phone." I thought, he means the palace. I get on the phone and say "Hello. Hello. Yes." "Mr. Ambassador?" "Yes, who is this?" He said, "This is His Majesty." I was absolutely shocked that the King is on the telephone placing this call himself. He gives me the whole layout and tells me exactly what is happening, the whole thing. I woke up everybody, ran to the embassy and put a secure backchannel to the State Department. I was the first to report the meeting between the two so that was very exciting. But that was the kind of cooperation I had got in Morocco.

Library of Congress

When we were going to bomb Libya I was told, not details obviously, very specifically that if we discovered that the Libyans were behind the disco bombing in Germany that killed a couple of our soldiers, we were going to retaliate and we were going to be looking at Morocco to see how they responded since they had a union agreement with Libya. I told the minister of the interior and I don't think he took it too seriously. After we bombed Libya of course they called me immediately and said, "We didn't realize what you were saying. My god, we've got to make a [statement], we've got to send a letter, there's going to be a headline and all of this. We would like you take a look and see what you think of the letter that is going basically from the King to Qadhafi." That was really the beginning of the end. Between that and the fact that the King met with Peres, that basically ended the relationship with Libya and they broke relations.

Q: This relationship was in place before you arrived. It is such peculiar one. How serious were people taking this?

NASSIF: The United States government was taking it very seriously because here we had our ambassador that supposedly had the best relationship of any ambassador, that was Joseph Reed. While he was home on vacation or on leave, this thing happens and he knows nothing about it, so we took it very seriously. Everybody understood the reason for it. It was because of the threat from Algeria to the Moroccans in the Western Sahara. That's what happens in that whole region is the enemy of my enemy is my friend so they end up making these sort of alliances. The Tunisians had done the same thing with the Algerians against the Libyans for years and that's basically what was happening here. Because Morocco was so strategic for us, we didn't want to have a relationship that was strategic with Morocco when Morocco had a strategic relationship with Libya.

Q: When you arrived you said one of the things was the hope this relationship would break up. That's a very tricky thing to go in and try to destabilize a relationship. What could you do?

Library of Congress

NASSIF: It was very interesting. One time I was called in by the King to a meeting. Instead of the meeting being in the palace we met in a little building out in the garden. It was very cozy, just the two of us. We were there speaking and it was one of the few occasions where he spoke all in English to me, which he speaks very well. All of a sudden in the middle of the conversation the phone rings. His Majesty gets up and goes answer the phone. This just doesn't happen. He's talking in Arabic and all of a sudden he comes back and says, "Mr. Ambassador, it's Qadhafi on the telephone. He would like to have a meeting with the President of the United States. He would like to get over this problem that you've got. He would like to speak with you." I said, "Your Majesty, I'm not authorized to speak with Mr. Qadhafi. I can only relay to the President what you've said, which I will do."

As we were walking out of the garden he is trying to convince me how important this is. Probably because I was not as experienced as most Foreign Service officers are when they go, I looked at the King and I said, "Your Majesty, you have to understand, one of the reasons I was sent here was to ensure that the relationship between Morocco and Libya ended." The King looked at me absolutely in shock and didn't say another word. It was really interesting because it was probably something I shouldn't have done but it was probably very useful because I don't think he ever understood how serious we were about this. I was really fairly un-diplomatic in the way I did it but I think he appreciated the honesty of it.

Q: I think often this does help put things into real perspective rather than the diplomatic niceties may cloud over where we stand.

NASSIF: Exactly. It was perfectly clear to him after that and think he couldn't believe what I had said.

Q: What was the impression of Qadhafi of the people both when you were in NEA and when you arrived at the post?

Library of Congress

NASSIF: He was always a pariah and no one ever had any sympathy for him. No one ever wondered why we didn't have a better relationship with him. Everybody understood why and that there was no percentage in trying to cozy up to this man because he couldn't be trusted. Nobody trusted him. His neighbors didn't trust him. His relationship with Egypt, his relationship with Tunisia, his relationship with Algeria, his relationship with Morocco, he was a pariah to them.

Q: While you were there did the actual union of these two countries dissolve?

NASSIF: Yes, absolutely.

Q: How did it come about? Did it just sort of kind of happen?

NASSIF: As I said the thing that precipitated it was when we bombed Libya. That's when the King knew that we were absolutely serious that there was no future in the relationship with Libya. I think the King knew that if he met with Peres that would end that, so he could kill two birds with one stone. He could show the West and the United States what a good friend he was because he was trying to promote peace with Israel and he was willing to meet and take all the risks of being alienated and ostracized by the Arab world, which to a certain extent he was after that. It would also cause a rift between him and Qadhafi which it did because basically after that Qadhafi said, I don't want to shake the hand of the man who shook the hand of the enemy. Those two things really led to the demise of the union agreement.

Q: Did Qadhafi exert any sort of political pressure or evesubversive pressure at all? Was he playing around in Morocco?

NASSIF: He was certainly active in Morocco. They had their office, especially for their airlines, they were using quite a bit. Of course right after we bombed Libya, the embassy and myself we were under high alert. I had more death threats and bomb threats. My security was really rather terrified. What people don't realize is that U.S. ambassadors

Library of Congress

don't have any security to speak of. We don't have marines guarding us. They don't realize that the marines are there to protect property and not people, and that the Marines don't guard my house, Moroccans do. I only had bodyguards because the King gave me Moroccans, his own CIA, to be my bodyguards, otherwise I wouldn't have any protection. That is really all the protection we have over there. I don't know why that fact isn't better known. People were constantly shocked to find that out.

Q: How did you respond to these threats?

NASSIF: After the bombing of Libya, we took them very seriously. Basically only essential personnel ever came to work and we wouldn't allow our families to go out even to shop for quite a long time. But we never closed the embassy one bit. No bomb threat, no threat ever, closed our embassy. For about two weeks there we were sort of on high alert just to make sure that everybody was protected.

Q: How did the newspapers, broadcasts, and all that react right after the bombing?

NASSIF: Basically the headline in the newspaper was the letter that didn't show much sympathy for Qadhafi. Anyone who knew how close the relationship was supposed to be, when they read it they said this is the beginning of the end because His Majesty was more interested in satisfying us than in satisfying Qadhafi. I'm sure that offended Qadhafi because it didn't condemn the United States and that's what Qadhafi was looking for. He got sympathy but he didn't get any condemnation.

Q: Moving to the Algerian-Moroccan relationship and the Polisario thing during the time you were there, could you explain who the Polisario were and the Algerian and Moroccan connection to this?

NASSIF: Basically Polisario is an acronym that is supposed to designate people that were the indigenous people of the Western Sahara. The Western Sahara had been the Spanish Sahara. When the Spanish got tired of arguing over it they basically gave the southern part

Library of Congress

to Mauritania and the northern part to Morocco. The Moroccans didn't quite agree with that so finally the Mauritians gave it all up and the Moroccans took it over. It is that whole desert region south of Morocco and along the coast of the Atlantic just north of Mauritania and west of Algeria, that's basic desert there.

There are people who felt they were the indigenous people there and should have an autonomous state. They were supported by the Algerians both politically and financially. They would have these little guerrilla activities that they would conduct in the Western Sahara against the Moroccans. It was a way for the Algerians to put political pressure on the Moroccans. The Algerians basically wanted a warm water port on the Atlantic. From the Moroccan perspective, to have the Algerians on the east and the south in the Atlantic and west and then Mauritania on the north was absolutely impossible. You can't get landlocked like that given the state of the relationship with Algeria.

There were constant little wars going on all the time and what was happening was that the whole world through the United Nations was trying to get the two countries and the Polisario together to have a referendum. Basically the issue was, who is entitled to vote? They knew that depending on who was on the list, they knew who would win so no one was ever going to agree to a list that was going to cause the other party to be victorious. To this day the issue still remains outstanding but the Moroccans control it all.

Q: What was your impression of the view from the Moroccan side of the Algerians and what the Algerians were doing to their country?

NASSIF: There was always a very strained relationship with the Algerians. The Moroccans never trusted them. They never were very friendly with them. Even after they reestablished diplomatic relations they tried to do a number of things but nothing ever worked out. They have never resolved their border issues. They were always afraid that Morocco was going to have the kind of fundamentalism that was present in Algeria and that they saw in Tunisia. They were afraid that that might bleed over so they were very cautious about

Library of Congress

what was happening in the mosques. They monitored obviously what was said by the imams in the mosques to make sure that no one was propagating fundamentalism or as the King used to say, integrism. He distinguished between what was an integrist and a fundamentalist, that most good Muslims were fundamentalists; they were just conservative in their religion. The integrists were someone who went beyond that into the type of activity that we've seen in Algeria and elsewhere.

It was always a strained relationship, always nothing friendly. Even when they'd meet nothing good ever really come of it. Trade agreements never really meant very much. But there was obviously a lot of communication between the two because they had common problems. But Algeria wanted to have F-16s and that was a threat to Morocco. We had to lobby very hard to keep the Algerians from being able to get F-16s and of course Algeria could afford to pay for it because they had a lot of natural gas reserves.

Q: Were you and the embassy watching the religious movement within Morocco closely because we got burned so badly in Iran before '79? Here you have a monarch who also was a direct descendant of the prophet and all that. Was this a concern?

NASSIF: It was a concern but the Moroccans were monitoring it so closely because they were so concerned about it that it did not become a priority issue with us because we never felt that there was that much threat. The only problem would be a succession question.

Q: How well do you think King Hassan knew the United States? He had been over a lot of times but do you think he really understood the political pressures and how we operated?

NASSIF: I think he had an appreciation for it but still not a real understanding of it because he didn't spend much time in the United States unfortunately. He knew the French much better than he knew the Americans. It was always difficult because people in foreign countries always thought the President of the United States had more power than the President of the United States really has. They just didn't realize how many limitations

Library of Congress

there were. So when they wanted something, if I couldn't deliver it, even though the President was for it, it was hard for them to understand. I was constantly trying to make that clear to them how our system worked. Of course, it was convenient for them to feign ignorance anyway but I think there was a certain lack of understanding.

Q: How did we feel about the political system in Morocco at thtime: democracy, human rights, what have you?

NASSIF: I think basically we were fighting very hard to open up the country. We were trying to get the government to become a more democratic government. The parliament was elected but basically the results were cooked and we knew that. We were trying to move that into an honest election where whoever got elected actually took office. We were trying to get more powers in the local areas so there was a decentralization that we were trying to do. We were trying to open up the economy so that everything wasn't held by the government or by a preferred few. It was a very difficult process and we could only go as fast as the King would allow us to go. We could only put so much pressure on because Morocco was important to us strategically. We always used to refer to it as the soft underbelly of the earth and of course a very strategic country like Spain and France.

Q: French influence?

NASSIF: The French were very active, the largest aid participant. They gave more foreign aid than we did. But they still never had the kind of influence they used to have or the kind of influence they wanted. We were still sort of the best friend to the Moroccans. It was a very strained relationship with the Spanish because the Spanish were supporting the Algerians and the Polisario. I used to go to Spain and meet with he government there and tell them how crazy they were for doing that and how that was not in their own interests. They insisted that's what they should be doing. Then of course they finally came to their senses and realized that that was not what they should be doing and became more neutral on the issue. The French were very jealous of our relationship to Morocco, our access.

Library of Congress

Q: I've talked with people who said in the foreign ministry, Quai d'Orsay, that the French believe strongly that we are trying to replace them throughout Africa. In Morocco I suppose there could be some justification because Morocco is important but the rest of Africa, as long as the French are playing a positive role, we're delighted.

NASSIF: Yes, go to it. That's absolutely true but Morocco was different and we obviously were very active there. At the time we had an aid program of about 120 million dollars. Compare that to what they've got now, it is probably ten times.

Q: Any problems with our military going in there? When you fill a lot of troops into a place, they are young men and particularly in a pretty fundamental country...

NASSIF: During my time most of the military presence was just military assistance group so it was a small group. They were there only to deal with the military to make sure that they got the right parts for their airplanes or whatever other equipment we were selling them, and to help counsel and advise them on what to buy, what to repair, and what to maintain. We didn't really have active troops there except during the exercises and they were always kept out of the city so there was never a problem. The fact is, when there was an active troop presence from World War II and after World War II, history is wonderful. You talk to Moroccan people and they love the Americans. They miss the Americans and wish the Americans were still there in the bases.

Q: What about Soviet influence at this time? We are talking about really the waning days of the Soviet empire and Reagan and Gorbachev were getting closer together, things were changing. Had there been any residue of activism by the Soviets?

NASSIF: Absolutely. A lot of spying was going on. Most of our time was spent basically with the Russians looking at what they were doing, and what their surrogates were doing, and they were looking at what we were doing. We were cautious and not very friendly with them, or with any of the Eastern Europeans as a matter of fact. When I made courtesy

Library of Congress

calls I purposely didn't call on the Russians or any of his Eastern European colleagues except Romania. Later on the relationship started to change and we became more friendly.

Q: Were there any other countries that were active, politically or economically, in Morocco or was it pretty much the Americans and then the French?

NASSIF: It was probably mostly the Americans and the French but of course we were very active with the Germans, the British and the Italians when we were there. There was a certain amount of South American presence there but no real trade going on. There was hope of some trade with the Europeans but nothing significant.

Q: *Spain wasn't much of a player at that time?*

NASSIF: Spain was a player but there wasn't a lot going on. As I said there was this friction between Spain and Morocco. What happened was that the King was very close to Juan Carlos but he wasn't close to the prime minister, that was the problem. Juan Carlos didn't have the power of the government. The government was socialist though I think the friendship with Juan Carlos helped.

Q: *Was it Gonzales?*

NASSIF: Yes, Felipe Gonzales.

Q: *Is Ceuta in Morocco?* NASSIF: *Yes, Ceuta and Melilla were the two Spanish enclaves.*

Q: *Did that cause any irritation at all?*

NASSIF: In fact if you ask the King about it he'd say "I'm sure that when the Brits give Gibraltar back to the Spanish that we'll get Ceuta and Melilla." How can the Spanish complain about Gibraltar when they've got Ceuta and Melilla? They've done the very same thing.

Library of Congress

Q: How about your consulate? You had one in Casablanca at the time and nothing in Tangier?

NASSIF: We did at the time but we had to close it. The State Department recommended closing it.

Q: Was that a problem? Tangier was probably one of our first consulates.

NASSIF: We hated to see it go but we couldn't defend it because we needed to cut back for economic reasons. We really didn't need it there but it was nice to be there.

Q: How about Casablanca? That was more of a commercial area wasn't it?

NASSIF: Yes, very strategic. That was a very important post for us because some of these very important people in Casablanca, there was so much going on in Casablanca that it was very important to have a relationship. Dick did a terrific job.

Q: You're talking about Dick Johnson?

NASSIF: Dick Jackson. Dick Jackson was my consul general. He had been my political advisor and I recommended him for the consul general position in Casablanca. He was just terrific. He got to know everybody there was to know there, all the important people, and was always excellent at giving me advice. I knew I could count on Dick. Whatever he said I knew it was an honest and accurate response.

Q: Do we have many commercial interests?

NASSIF: We didn't. We were starting to have more but it was still very difficult to get anything done there. U.S. companies would come and I would try and help them but not a lot was going on. I think much more is going on today than ever went on there at the time I was there.

Library of Congress

Q: Was the problem making deals, or cronyism, corruption, or just the approach to how one did things?

NASSIF: No. Unfortunately, we never got to that point. Americans just weren't interested in doing business there. There were too many places to make money without going to Morocco. They kept saying to me why would I go to Morocco when I've got all these opportunities in the United States or I can go to China, Taiwan, or Thailand, why would I go to Morocco?

Q: Speaking of going to Morocco, what the French or the Italians call the glitterati, these are sort of the fancy people with too much money, Americans and all. For Forbes and others, Morocco was sort of a place to go. It's exotic but it's sort of safe and all. Did you find that this sort of absorbed more time than you liked?

NASSIF: It didn't absorb more time than I liked but this certainly was a presence. But it was not the Americans, it was the Europeans, the French especially. Anybody who was anybody in Paris was in Morocco. You would meet some of the most glamorous people from all over the world so it was kind of fascinating in a way. It didn't take a lot of time out because you only saw them during social events or activities like that, the anniversary of the coronation of the King, those kinds of activities where you would see the Hermes and all the famous couturiers of Paris coming in there. There were the would be Kings and would be presidents of other countries, the pretender to the throne of Bulgaria was there, and to Egypt the former king's son who was living in Paris, all those people would come. The young Hapsburgs from Austria would come. You would meet these people but it was really rather comical. Those were the friends, that was the inner circle.

Q: What about at one point there were real problems with young Americans going and getting caught up with drugs and stuff like that. Had this time sort of passed by?

Library of Congress

NASSIF: We never had a problem with it. We never even heard incidents when I was there.

Q: I understand that earlier on this was one of the points where the kids would come. They would be sold some hashish and then the hashish dealer would report them to the police. It was a real mess.

NASSIF: I'm sure that there were a lot of drug dealings going on especially up in the north there in the Rif area. Their marijuana was called keef, keef from the Rif, and I'm sure that there was a lot of that going on. There was cooperation with the U.S. at that time on drugs. I know the Europeans were very sensitive about anyone coming into Europe from Morocco because there had been a lot of drug trafficking.

Q: How did you find dealing with the Moroccan bureaucracy and althat?

NASSIF: It was never a problem for me. They were just so good to us. We had access to anybody and anything any time we wanted it. We could get almost anything done that we needed to get done so we never had a problem.

Q: Did you find Americans want to have something done and they want it right away and all and I would think the Moroccans would be more laid back, or not?

NASSIF: Moroccans could get things done faster than we could. When they want to do something they get it done overnight, what might take us six months to do. You could actually get decisions made much quicker in Morocco than you could anywhere else because the King makes all the decisions himself.

Q: So it mostly went right up to the King?

Library of Congress

NASSIF: If it was important, it went right to the King. You would be amazed at how many decisions I would ask them and they'd go ask the King and I'd say, "I can accept it from the minister." They'd say, "Oh, no, His Majesty wants to make those decisions."

Q: Any visits?

NASSIF: Nothing but visits.

Q: Did the King make any visits or did the Vice President or an President visit?

NASSIF: No, the King didn't make any visits to the United States because he had already just been there. He was supposed to go again then canceled at the last minute and that was quite an embarrassment but we got over it. Vice President Bush wanted to come just after Peres had been in Morocco but the King didn't want to see him because he didn't want it to look like he was being repaid for being the lackey of the U.S. government. He wanted everybody to know that it was his idea, and it was his idea, so he basically told Bush thanks but no thanks.

Q: You said the King canceled his visit at the last minute. What precipitated that?

NASSIF: I don't know why he did. He just said basically it was difficult for him to go at the time and he'd changed his mind. It may have been perception. It may have been that he was thinking about this visit with Peres. He didn't want it to look like he was going there to set it up with the President, and then he was going to come back and have a visit with Peres, and then there was going to be a visit by the Vice President. I think he was trying to distance himself from the leadership in the United States before and after the visit with Peres.

Q: When Peres came, did we get involved at all or were we kepsomewhat removed?

NASSIF: We were fairly well removed from it even though we set thwhole thing up.

Library of Congress

Q: Transportation and all?

NASSIF: Yes with everything, keeping everything a secret. Basically we set the whole thing up but none of us were present, none of us were around. We didn't have a part to play in the agenda or anything else.

Q: Were there any other major issues you were dealing with when you were there? We've covered quite a bit.

NASSIF: We had the Western Sahara, Algeria and Libya and as I said we had a very large aid program. Of course we were very active in wheat sales at the time competing with the rest of the world, especially the French. Everybody was trying to undercut us. Basically we developed the policy that whatever anybody else does we'll sell for a dollar cheaper. If you want a price war we will give it to you but we weren't going to get cut out of the wheat market worldwide. We did it. We were very aggressive in protecting U.S. agriculture during that period of time and trying to set up a lot of banking facilities.

We then got very active on the aid side and immunizations because most children in Morocco were dying basically from dysentery. We were trying to set up health programs and that sort of thing for them. We got very active in the Peace Corps. We probably increased the Peace Corps presence to one of the largest, maybe top ten in the world was in Morocco.

Q: How effective did you find the Peace Corps?

NASSIF: Very effective. They were very well received. Everywhere went I had very positive feedback from everybody about the Peace Corps.

Q: What were they doing?

Library of Congress

NASSIF: They were doing things on potable water, to electrical generation, to teaching English. They were extremely well received. These were hard working people who had learned the most remote Berber dialects and lived out in the countryside. They were just wonderful and very well received. I played a very active role with the Peace Corps because I thought they were doing a dynamic job.

Q: When you left there in 1988 was that because of the election angetting ready for it, or had you had enough?

NASSIF: I had had enough. Getting ready for the election I was going to go back and I wanted to help President Bush. I was asked to stay; the King asked me to stay. I thanked him. He even brought it up to the Secretary of Defense, Frank Carlucci, why aren't you staying, so he asked me, "Doesn't the President want you to stay?" I said, "No, I can stay as long as I want. I don't want to stay. I'm ready to go home. I've done enough." I need to start making some money again and get back in the real world. I'll never retire in the Foreign Service so I might as well do it now before the election and get a head start on it. It was very positive but I was ready to leave at the time. Three years is a good amount of time.

Q: Oh, yes. I was just wondering at this, you had been gone for about seven years really. Having done a variety of things for the government I think it would very difficult to pick up a practice again.

NASSIF: My law firm wanted me to come back and head up their international law division but I just couldn't go back to practicing law by the hour again. I wanted to get into the international business. I wanted to stay active in the region so I accepted a position as chairman of Gulf Interstate Engineering based in Houston. It was basically with an oil and gas engineering firm which allowed me to stay active in the region. I was out in the Gulf a lot, and North Africa.

Library of Congress

Q: When you talk about the Gulf you mean?

NASSIF: Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates.

Q: What type of engineering were they in?

NASSIF: In gas pipeline.

Q: In a way we are concentrating on your foreign affairs experiences, this is a carry-over. How did the Gulf crisis of '90-'91 affect you all? We're talking about the Iraqi seizure of Kuwait and our counter thrust.

NASSIF: Our company had just negotiated a contract with Occidental Petroleum to be part of a consortium to exploit the Ramola fields in southern Iraq on the border between Iraq and Kuwait. We had been two years in the making going in there. I had been to Baghdad a couple of times meeting with the ministers. It was about a week before we were ready to move in that they went into Kuwait. It completely wiped out millions of dollars in potential revenue and probably a couple million dollars just in costs that we had incurred over a couple of years. It dramatically hurt but we thought it was going to give us opportunities after the war in places like Kuwait and in the Emirates.

I went to Kuwait right after the war. I got there when the fires were still raging. I got there when you still couldn't see the sky. You couldn't see the sun in the middle of the day because there was that much smoke in Kuwait. It was just shocking to see. It did have a big effect on us and of course things weren't as active in Saudi Arabia because the war cost them a lot of money, too. Nobody had a lot of money to be spending so it had a very profound influence on our business.

Q: You're still with them?

Library of Congress

NASSIF: I'm no longer with that company now. I created this consulting company called Gulf International Consulting to do whatever I wanted to do basically on the consulting side. I slowly got away from that business and now am basically in the development business although I stay active in the Middle East as chairman of the American Task Force for Lebanon which is a Washington, DC based organization.

Q: How do you find things dealing with Lebanon? How is it workinout now?

NASSIF: It is working out very well. It had been very frustrating for a long time trying to get successive secretaries of State to accept our notion that the travel ban to Lebanon should be lifted because as you know for about ten years there was a prohibition against the use of American passports to go to Lebanon. Our organization lobbied very hard to get that travel restriction lifted. I met with Secretary of State Christopher about it and I met with Madeline Albright about it. It was Secretary of State Albright who finally agreed to do it. I've had several meetings with Secretary of State Albright and she's been just terrific about staying in touch with all the Arab-American organizations.

Q: In a way we are talking about a new political world aren't we, in that the Arab organizations are no longer seen as, if you deal with an Arab organization at a meeting it means you're an enemy of Israel and you almost sort of make yourself a pariah in the political world.

NASSIF: You're absolutely right because most of us are working very hard to bring peace between Israel and either Lebanon or Palestine or Syria. Most of the Arab-Americans who are the head of all of these organizations, especially the ones that are trying to help the Palestinians, are all Lebanese-Americans. We are very active and I think the government has realized that there are several organizations that are very credible, are very trustworthy, and very much interested in trying to bring peace to the region, so we get invited to things. I've been on at least three conference calls with Secretary of State

Library of Congress

Albright. Nobody else ever did that before. I've been to meet with her three times. Nobody else did that. No other Secretary of State did that. She's just been terrific.

Q: It wasn't very long ago that one of the political candidates for President I think returned money because it was from an Arab organization.

NASSIF: That's right. There is an investigation going on right now, Congressman Rubin's idea. An Arab-American ran for Congress and lost in the last two weeks because the guy started talking about Arab money, Arab associations, Arab-Americans donating money to him. There was real Arab bashing. There's a brand new movie out (I haven't seen it yet) called The Siege where they intern Arab-Americans.

Q: It's a real problem. The Arabs because of some terrorism have been sort of the generic term for terrorism. This must be kind of one of your battles, isn't it?

NASSIF: It isn't for me so much because the thing I have found is that even though we had all the terrorism in Lebanon, people don't equate Lebanon the same way because most of them know some Lebanese people. If you know Lebanese people, you know how hard working they are, and how entrepreneurial they are. The Lebanese-Americans in this country have been extremely successful. It is just incredible. Our organization has got some names in it that just knocks your socks off. They are just wonderful people, wonderfully successful people: Senator George Mitchell, John Sununu, the president of Ford Motor Company is an Arab-American, Joe Hagggar of Hagggar Apparel, Michael Dubecky. (End of tape)

Q: You were mentioning how many people were Lebanese-Americans.

NASSIF: Right, very active in the United States.

Library of Congress

Q: Do you find that you pretty well have to draw a... In a way it is almost ducking the issue by saying Lebanese-Americans as opposed to Arab-Americans, by saying we're really different.

NASSIF: No, we don't try and duck the issue. We support all of the organizations and we call ourselves Arab-Americans. We go to all the meetings with the other organizations and we support what they are doing to the extent that we believe what they are saying. We don't try and duck it. I'm just saying that it's not us; it is rather the American people who know Lebanese who think of us differently. They think of us as Lebanese and they think of all other Arabs as Muslims even though most Muslims aren't Arabs but people don't know that. When you tell somebody that the largest Islamic country in the world is Indonesia, they go into shock.

Q: Yes, I know. How about just as sort of a last question, are you involved in Republican politics any more?

NASSIF: I support a lot of Republican candidates. I help do fund-raising for Republican candidates all over the country but through the American Task Force for Lebanon we are non-partisan so we support Democrats and Republicans through our organization. Anybody who helps us on our issues as far as I'm concerned, I don't care what party they belong to. In the state of California I am very active in trying to help raise money. Right now a good part of my time is really taken up with my church and our Christian activities, as it was during the Reagan years.

It was amazing how many Christian activities there were in Washington, DC. You had Bible studies at the White House council's office, the U.S. Senate, the Congress, the Pentagon. I went to a meeting with the Joint Chiefs of Staff where they sat down and basically said that peace in the world will only come through Jesus Christ. It is kind of shocking to hear the top military guys in the world saying that's what their belief is but it is also rather refreshing and also I think very encouraging. I had Bible studies at my embassy

Library of Congress

when I was there. The two groups that attended, the largest, were the CIA and the military; the fewest were unfortunately the Foreign Service.

Q: I think this is probably not atypical. Maybe this is a gooplace to stop. I want to thank you very much. I appreciate this.

End of interview