

Interview with Roger A. Sorenson

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

ROGER A. SORENSON

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Q: Roger, I wonder if you could give me a little bit about your background. Where'd you come from?

SORENSON: Utah. I was born and educated there and joined the Foreign Service at age thirty-two very simply because I did not want to spend the rest of my life there.

Q: You went to Brigham Young University, didn't you? What were you looking towards doing, and what were you doing before you joined the Foreign Service?

SORENSON: After university, I went into business. I had studied music for much of my earlier life and had become a frustrated musician of sorts, which eventually got me into the music business. Among other things, I ran a music store that sold Steinway pianos in Provo, Utah.

During a visit to Washington, my wife and I met someone who had been in the Foreign Service — a life that seemed rather more appealing than selling pianos — so I applied to take the examination the following year. Happily I passed.

Q: Well, you came in in 1960, is that right?

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SORENSEN: That's correct.

Q: You were trained at the Foreign Service Institution before you went out?

SORENSEN: Yes. I took the A100 Course.

Q: Could you give a little feel, who were the junior officers you were with? What were they like, would you say?

SORENSEN: It was an interesting mixture. The class consisted of perhaps eighteen or twenty new officers, including an additional person from Utah to my surprise. Although there were two women in the class, there were no blacks, so it could hardly be considered a cross section of America from a modern perspective. On other hand, the Department had deliberately tried to assure broad geographic representation which, at the time, was considered to be a liberal advance in its recruiting practices. In a sense, I was a beneficiary of this greater open-mindedness

Q: Your first post was Genoa. What were you doing there?

SORENSEN: I learned during the A100 course that around April of each year members of the Foreign Service could signify their assignment preference. What was it they used to call the form we filled out? The April Fools sheet, if I remember correctly.

Q: Because it was due on April first, I think.

SORENSEN: That was the reason. In any event, I filled it out, naively requesting a European assignment, specifically an assignment to Italy. To the surprise of everyone — not least of all, my own —, an opening was available in Genoa, and I was sent there as a Consular officer. It was a particularly interesting assignment because Genoa, as I later learned, was one of the first posts opened by the American government after achieving its independence. At the time of my assignment, it was the second largest port in the

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Mediterranean and it presented an opportunity to do some economic reporting as well as to engage in the full gamut of consular activities which were the post's bread and butter.

Q: How did you view the Foreign Service after you got your taste of it in Genoa?

SORENSEN: I loved it. My encounters and the dramatis personae were not dissimilar to something out of a Graham Greene novel: a distinguished Consul General tarred during the McCarthy era and consigned by destiny and the Department to what he clearly considered a diplomatic backwater; the disconsolate wife of a staff member hanging herself from a bannister, apparently rather than facing the rigors of playing her assigned role in the American Women's Club; sailors plunging in delirious abandon from the third floor of local brothels during visits of the Seventh Fleet; a drunken American tourist threatening to call his Congressman if he weren't immediately sprung from the local pokey and the joy of telling him that there was no habeas corpus in Italy — these were new experiences flooding upon me every day, and it was ever so more exciting than selling Steinways in Provo, Utah.

It was against the stimulation and excitement of this first assignment that I learned with some reservation that my next post would be Calgary, Alberta.

Q: Why reservation?

SORENSEN: Because I feared the ennui that I had known in Utah. Even so, I went, and retrospectively I am glad that I did. I confess to having enjoyed all my assignments.

Q: What were you doing in Calgary? You were there from '62 to '65.

SORENSEN: It was my first exposure to the more vicious side of the bureaucratic life and an enormous contrast to Genoa. To go back again, the Consul General in Genoa had been a man of some distinction — a gentleman in the old fashioned sense of the word. A cloud had fallen over his career during the McCarthy era, as it apparently did over

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the careers of many, and I have the impression that it was not one of the Department's finer hours. In the case of my first boss, a man who should have been an Ambassador was consigned to a diplomatic backwater, but he nevertheless bore the ignominy of his situation with dignity. He came from an old family; he had been well educated; he was cultivated; his wife had been the daughter of an American General; his first post had been somewhere in China; he had had a wealth of experience; he represented the best of what had been the old Foreign Service.

My new boss in Calgary, on the other hand, represented the new Foreign Service of the time — a service that had been democratized — and the irony of my own situation gradually came home to me: the considerations that had led the Department to recruit from universities so far afield as Brigham Young had been the same considerations that had led it to move people laterally into the Foreign Service from areas of the bureaucracy where they had had little to do with the practice of diplomacy. I would meet a number of these people during my career. Too often, their major skills were self-promotion and the art of bureaucratic infighting.

I should have prefaced this part of my reflections by noting that one of the considerations that persuaded me to accept the Calgary assignment was an assurance I received from the Department that it was a post of some importance. Not only was American investment in the province's petroleum industry substantial, but the consular district had the distinction, it was said, of having the largest number of American citizens of any consular district in the world. Indeed, according to the Department, such was Calgary's importance that consideration was being given to elevating the post to a Consulate General.

However, it didn't take long after my arrival in Calgary for me to realize that the Consul — the officer in charge — was scheming to get the Consulate in Edmonton (which was the provincial capital) closed in order to get the Consulate in Calgary elevated. I would not fully appreciate the extent of these machinations until the man had succeeded, in the process

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of which he was transferred to Auckland and I was left temporarily in charge of a much enlarged consular district until a Consul General could be named.

In retrospect, much of what happened now seems amusing. For example, I found upon my arrival in Calgary that the post was issuing visitor's visas to the United States valid for only six months, whereas the Department's practice was to grant two-year visas. When I pointed out the irregularity of this practice following my arrival, my new boss hinted darkly that there were matters to which I, as a mere junior officer, was not privy, and he reminded me that his former jobs in the Department had been in the security area (I discovered later that he had managed a program having to do with monitoring locks on security vaults and bar-lock cabinets). After his abrupt departure for Auckland, I came to realize that the sole purpose of issuing visas valid for only six months was to multiply by four the number of visas that the post issued, thus creating an impression in our statistical reports of intense activity.

Unfortunately, this wasn't the only activity that had been artificially rigged. We were inspected shortly after my arrival, and I found to my surprise that several day's of normal appointments for consular work had been concentrated into the two days that the inspectors were with us. For some time prior to their arrival we saw nobody; while the inspectors were with us, however, the office suddenly assumed the aspects of a refugee camp. Dismal lines of visa applicants and citizens requiring consular services at times trailed through the entrance into the outer hall and up to the elevator itself. I was stunned, but the inspectors were impressed. Machiavelli had become our mentor.

The long and the short of it was that the Department finally became convinced by the post's reports and the apparent statistical evidence that Calgary was indeed a post of considerable importance; what the Department was not convinced of was that its man in Calgary had the requisite stuff to manage a larger operation, and he was forthwith consigned to play golf in New Zealand. The Consul in Edmonton was ignominiously sent packing — poor devil — and I was temporarily placed in charge of a consular district that, I

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had been told, already contained the largest number of Americans of any in the world and which had suddenly doubled physically in size.

Under instructions, my first task in this new role was to call on the provincial premier in Edmonton to explain Washington's considered decision to close its post in the provincial capital while elevating Calgary — the province's second largest city — to the status of consulate general — not an altogether easy task. Following a script written in the Department, I explained that one of the factors justifying my government's decision was the number of Americans resident in the Calgary area — some 30,000 according to the consulate's reports. Imagine my consternation when the premier asked how this could possibly be and whether anyone in Washington had ever examined the Canadian census. There were not as many Americans as I had averred, he said, in the whole of Alberta, British Columbia, Saskatchewan and the Yukon, with the Northwest Territories thrown in, much less in the environs of Calgary alone. Like all the statistics coming from Calgary, this too had been rigged.

Even now, I am still amazed when the notion crops up in various quarters, including the Department, that Calgary teems with Americans. My old boss in Calgary, whose only interest was in getting himself promoted, might have had his limitations, but he was a superb propagandist.

Q: You were there until '65, and then you came back to Washington.

SORENSEN: Yes. I came back for my sins, one might say, predestined for a job I didn't want but which, in a way, was of my own making. You see, on those long winter nights while I was in Calgary, I developed a plan for automating the visa function in the Foreign Service, using computers, which resulted in a 60- or 70-page memo to the Department outlining how such a system might work. It outlined a program for automating a great deal of clerical work that was fairly routine, both in the Consular Affairs Bureau and in the field. This was being done without computers and all that at the time.

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Q: This was the pre-computer time, wasn't it?

SORENSEN: Essentially it was. Of course the Department was using computers, but it was using them primarily for book keeping procedures, such as keeping time-and-attendance records and doing payrolls, for example. It wasn't using them for anything like this.

What I saw — and this was new at the time — was that, once someone had applied for an immigrant visa and had provided the essential facts regarding his or her status and application, the entire process of determining the appropriate quota and priority — as well as the attendant procedures of keeping the applicant advised with respect to his or her status, sending notices to assemble certain documents, to initiate security checks, etc., and ultimately the scheduling of an appointment to meet with a Consular Officer — was all of such a regular and routine nature that it could be automated.

In short, I set forth a way in which the visa issuing process could be automated in a long and fairly technical memo to Washington. I didn't hear from them for a long time, but, when I did, it was to receive a letter from the Under Secretary for Administration advising me that the Department was intrigued by the concept and was looking into it. And when I was next reassigned, I suddenly found that I had become an “efficiency expert” working for the Under Secretary for Administration — the same who had written the letter.

Q: Was this William Crockett?

SORENSEN: I shall never forget the name. He was a man of daring and imagination, but I'm not so sure about his judgement. It was clear that he was determined to shake the Department up, but he appeared to me to lack any clear independent vision regarding where he wanted to take it after giving it a good shake. This was a time when McNamara and his wunderkinder at the Defense Department were evolving new concepts in respect of how to maximize the use of Defense Department resources. Following McNamara's

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lead, Crockett assembled a group of revolutionaries — most of whom came from outside the Foreign Service — who were determined to remake the Department by looking at new ways of allocating resources in order to achieve stated policy objectives. These management experts derided the notion that diplomacy might be more an art than a science. They generally despised the career Foreign Service. And their collective goal was to do something spectacular enough to quickly make a name for themselves — nothing else — and then move on to another bureaucracy, hopefully having been duly rewarded with quick and easy promotions. It was among this calculating crowd that I unhappily found myself.

Q: We have a long interview with Crockett that Tom Stern went and did on this, so I'd be very interested in what your impression was of Crockett and his effectiveness within the Department.

SORENSEN: My impression was that he unleashed a lot of glib, fast moving sharpies on a service that he probably regarded as staid, set, and too full of the remnants of the Eastern establishment to welcome change. My impression was that he had probably read a book somewhere on management that had expounded on challenging old structures (a great idea among the young at that time, especially as we got deeper into the Vietnam bayou), inducing competition, shaking up vested interests, etc., etc. Concerning my own position, having urged the Department to automate certain routine aspects of the visa function, I suddenly found myself assigned to work with a crowd that was incapable of discussing the diplomatic, historic, political and economic aspects of a policy issue, but was rather consumed with trying to quantify the importance of policy goals as part of a new management technique.

Specifically, this technique consisted of locating each policy within a “matrix” of policies and then determining the imputed value of total resources devoted to pursuing it by different mission elements. Following the example of McNamara's “Whiz Kids” who were looking at optimum delivery systems to “deliver the biggest bang for the buck,” Crockett's

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minions' approach was to require policy makers to rank-order US policy objectives in each country with a view somehow to re-allocating resources among mission elements in proportion to the importance of each objective.

Such an approach implicitly assumes that money can be and should be budgeted in proportion to the relative importance of the objective on which it is spent. It ignores the fact that objectives — often our most important objectives — may frequently be achieved by skilled diplomatic efforts that have little to do with the amount of money spent. Crockett's penchant for modern management, in this case, led the Department in the direction of making the same stupid mistake that we make in so many other areas, that is, in assuming that problems can be solved by throwing money at them, or will be solved in proportion to the money thrown at them. What this approach fails to grasp, for example, is that getting France to support the American colonies during the Revolution was indispensable to the American success, but that it probably didn't cost much more than explaining to the French that it was in their best interests to do so. It was a triumph of diplomacy, and of economy.

In any event, I soon found myself engaged with Crockett's other minions in trying to impose on the Foreign Service and our embassies an approach to the practice of diplomacy that struck me as being not only unsubtle and unsophisticated, but downright anti-intellectual, mindless, and irrational. I guess, that's what I think of Crockett.

Q: Was this sort of the matrix system that you're talking about?

SORENSEN: Correct. The technique, as I suggested, was to require each ambassador to list his mission's priorities in rank order. Crockett's minions then fanned out among members of his staff to ask how much time and/or resources he or she had spent working on each priority. A value was attached to each person's time and a computer — this crowd loved computers — was utilized to arrive at a total value of the expenditure of time and resources on each objective. The results were, of course, nonsensical.

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Q: How many man hours, how much money do you put towards this particular goal...

SORENSEN: Not only were the results nonsensical, but the effects of this approach, to a certain extent, are still with us. This can be seen in the current evaluation process, I believe, in the way we require officers to establish goals which they will try to achieve within the next reporting period and then try to evaluate their relative success or failure. The unfortunate consequence is an activist approach in our relations that frequently yields trouble and amazes our friends, most of whom still incline to the views of Talleyrand: "Surtout, n'ayez pas de zèle."

I frequently observed during the latter part of my career that I and my colleagues, usually on instructions, seemed frequently to be making almost compulsive representations, running in and out of foreign offices, prying for information, dropping gratuitous advice if not shamelessly lecturing, self-righteously expounding our own moral vision of the world, and otherwise involving ourselves in issues peripheral to our more fundamental national interests in a way that only confused our interlocutors.

Looking back, some of these experiences would be laughable if they were not so sad. I recall, for example, an international meeting where my French counterpart confided that he had at last perceived our strategy, which he said was to keep everyone confused. Members of our delegation had had so many meetings with the members of his delegation where the discussions had been so varied and unfocused that he and his staff, being unable to discern any thrust to our thinking, had decided that we could only be deliberately obfuscating. In fact, our delegation was so badly split along not only agency but bureau lines that there was indeed no coherence in our position. Being French, however, my friend found it inconceivable that we could possibly be in such disarray; with misplaced admiration, he characterized our uncoordinated position as a "brilliant tactic."

On another occasion, I unintentionally embarrassed the Under Secretary for Economic Affairs (for whom I worked) by sending a highly classified message requiring a certain

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embassy to make hotel reservations and render appropriate assistance when the Secretary arrived for a crucial meeting. In fact, the meeting (which was to arrange the bailout of a certain major country on the verge of defaulting its loans) was so sensitive in terms of its impact on foreign exchange markets that the Under Secretary didn't want even the embassy to know that he was coming.

He gently chided me for having been so helpful as to advise them of his arrival, noting wryly that every economic and political officer in the place would immediately feel compelled to tip off his or her contacts, if for no other reason than to appear to be on the inside track and to “make points.”

Thereafter, I would observe that the more successful Secretaries of State were those who let the Foreign Service get on with its run-of-the-mill activities while real diplomacy was conducted at a higher level, usually through an elite band of select people, some of whom might be Foreign Service officers, but who, by and large, bypassed normal Foreign Service channels in order effectively to get important things done. My personal conclusion: the best diplomacy is minimalist — letting situations mature, keeping one's government informed, and having the perspective and good sense to move at those crucial moments when resolutions with optimum results can be achieved.

Unfortunately, these skills are sadly undervalued in our modern Foreign Service, which seems to have been taken over by the so-called “managers,” the spiritual descendants of Crockett's crowd — people who are more interested in technique than substance. Thus, the Department no longer refers to its career officers as diplomats — the term having acquired an elitist and therefore pejorative connotation. Instead, we demean ourselves as “foreign affairs managers,” anxiously “buying” the proposition that our highest calling is to be directors of foreign affairs emporia where input and output can be scientifically measured and the bottom line judged by the number of programs managed, the hours clocked and the money spent. I'm sorry. Call me old-fashioned, but I don't believe we're well served by this kind of approach.

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Q: I've often thought that many times our purposes could be taken care of by a man and a boy at an embassy rather than the whole staff. They could just keep a presence and report in from time to time.

SORENSEN: I found this again when I later worked with the UN system. We harry not only the UN agencies themselves but also our friends with minutiae of little interest to anyone but our own petty bureaucrats. While serving as Permanent Representative to the UN Agencies in Rome, I recall receiving an urgent instruction to make immediate representations to my Western counterparts and get their support in presenting a demarche to the Director General of the FAO before the end of the week. I might explain that the month was August when everyone in Europe is on vacation. I duly made the rounds of my counterpart's offices and found that everyone of them except the Canadian was away, their governments having no interest whatsoever in our preoccupations. Even the Canadian was in his office for only two hours each day, the remainder of his time more sensibly being devoted to improving his game of golf.

The point is that our proposed demarche was a silly concoction dreamed up by some minor functionary in Washington mindlessly trying to demonstrate that he or she was “on top” of what was really a minor issue. I was later much to admire my successor in Rome, Ambassador Fenwick, a former member of Congress and political appointee who could afford cavalierly to ignore some of the Department's more inane instructions. One of my regrets is that, as a career officer, I could rarely afford to take such latitude.

Q: Coming back to the Crockett period, although this was relatively short, I think it's very important to understand how things worked in the Foreign Service. Here you were, you were a member of...

SORENSEN: Crockett's so-called “Rockets.”

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Q: ...Crockett's "Rockets." But at the same time you were a Foreign Service Officer while many of these other people weren't. How did you yourself get along with other Foreign Service people? I mean, were people saying oh, my God, here comes one of these guys? Did you find a resistance or interest or what?

SORENSEN: Resistance generally...and a fearful resistance in many cases. That is, people feared the career consequences if they did not accept and become partisan supporters of the Crockett approach to management. And I could understand why. Because Crockett's Rockets were, by and large, bureaucratic terrorists. I shall never forget their arrogant manner in demanding that senior Departmental people explain their goals and how they planned to achieve them. The technique was to summon them to Crockett's conference room for an interrogation conducted with the kind of strident zeal that we would later see in China's cultural revolution.

The conference room was, of course, adjacent to Crockett's office, which gave the appearance of Crockett's personal imprimatur to the operation. Senior officers would appear quaking with fear in a hearing-like atmosphere that was deliberately contrived to intimidate by freewheeling junior staff. Keep in mind that those doing the interrogations were people more or less on a level with myself, and I was an FSO six or seven at the time, the lowest form of diplomatic life that still has a spine.

Q: This is about the equivalent of a first lieutenant.

SORENSEN: Right. And my colleagues — Crockett's minions — were calling in the equivalent of bird colonels and generals, people who directed major administrative programs, confronting them in what amounted to an adversary-type crossexamination during which the colonels and generals were required to explain their goals and objectives. Think about it for a moment! If you're an administrator of some sort, what do you say in a situation like this? Obviously, if you're a bookkeeper, your goal will be to balance your books; if you're a recruiter, your goal will be to recruit. It was not only ridiculous, it was

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mean! The fun came when the victim had finally been cut down and was permitted to drag himself out the door with as much dignity as might be left to him, which usually wasn't much. Crockett's minions (or young Turks, as they were sometimes referred to) would nearly collapse with merriment as they recalled the baiting. Having worked for Mr. Crockett is not a pleasant recollection.

Q: Whatever the group dynamics, had you been in the Service long enough by then to have a feeling that his group really didn't know about goals and what the State Department was all about?

SORENSEN: Indeed, that was precisely my conclusion. Not only was the basic management approach to foreign affairs being pushed by Crockett and his minions flawed, but it was bound to inflict a kind of corruption when it was applied. Asking officers how many hours they spent each week individually pursuing perhaps as many as forty different embassy policy objectives was a ridiculous approach. The outcome of this kind of research was bound to yield spurious results, if for no other reason than the vanity of those interviewed.

For example, I remember one case where the DCM of a major embassy reported that he had spent some ninety-two hours during the week — which must have included time shaving, eating and performing bodily functions — pursuing with single-minded devotion one or another of the embassy's stated policy goals. When, in reviewing the reports of his subordinates, we discovered that the most junior of these had spent even more hours than the DCM in the pursuit of recognized objectives, the DCM felt compelled to once again review his own efforts and — wonder of wonders! — realized that he had not taken into account his efforts on Saturdays and Sundays. By the time I left his office, he had further inflated his time to make him the hardest working man in the embassy, which perhaps, in fact, he was.

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Of course, the reports and purported insights that flowed from this kind of matrix analysis were meaningless. And what struck me then, and still strikes me now, is the way in which people who knew nothing of the substance of foreign policy were empowered to take over and arrogantly impose an approach to foreign policy decision-making on those whose careers had been focused on the substance. It was a most upsetting experience, and my chief aim, once I realized what Crockett and his crowd were doing, was to ease myself out without, if possible, breaking any crockery in Crockett's shop (pardon the pun). Happily, I succeeded.

Q: Did you find there was sort of a residual resentment against you because you were identified with this particular effort?

SORENSEN: Not really. Not that I was aware of.

Q: How did you get out? I mean what did you go to?

SORENSEN: My memo on automating the visa function was meanwhile being seriously considered in the Bureau of Consular Affairs and in the office responsible for computer support services. This gave me some credits around the building, and I was able to discuss my views quite frankly with my career advisor in the Department's Office of Personnel. Mind you, these people also worked for Crockett, but it was clear that they were as upset by what he was doing as I was. A direct transfer to another office would have been difficult to effect, they felt, without raising hackles, so they deftly managed to have me presented with an opportunity to spend an academic year at SAIS and to have it offered in a way that made it very difficult for my boss to refuse.

Q: School of Advanced International Studies.

SORENSEN: That's correct.

Q: So you left in '67.

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SORENSEN: In '66, if I remember correctly. In '67 I left SAIS and went to work for the Bureau of Economic Affairs in the Division for Trade Agreements.

Q: What was your impression of the Bureau of Economic Affairs, as far as its competence and clout within the Department?

SORENSEN: I felt at the time that it had considerable clout and that it was made up of enormously dedicated, effective, hard-working officers. We were involved in wrapping up the Kennedy round at the time that I was there.

Q: Kennedy round being...

SORENSEN: The Kennedy round of tariff negotiations. Unlike today, that was a period when the State Department was still one of the major players in the trade negotiations, together with the Office of the Special Trade Representative. Years later this function was largely taken from the State Department, or perhaps it would be better to say that its role in this area was severely attenuated. Its views were always too internationally oriented and balanced to suit the protectionists, and since, unlike most other departments such as Agriculture and Commerce, the Department has no domestic constituency, it eventually lost out in the internecine struggle among Washington agencies for power in this area.

Q: In 1969 you were assigned to Dublin.

SORENSEN: I was assigned there originally as the economic counselor.

Q: How did that assignment come about?

SORENSEN: Initially as part of the regular assignment process, so far as I could see. On the other hand, Ireland at the time was in the process of joining the European Economic Community, which meant that there would be a gradual realignment of Irish trade away

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from traditional trading partners in favor of those within the European Community. Since I had been working on trade matters, the assignment seemed to be a good fit on that score.

In addition, the United States and Ireland were deeply involved in a long-standing dispute having to do with airline landing rights. In the aftermath of the Second World War, the Irish had negotiated a treaty with the United States that was extraordinarily favorable to Ireland, allowing Irish airlines to land in Boston, Chicago, and New York while restricting American airlines to Shannon, which of course is not where the Irish population is. The result of this arrangement was that the bulk of the traffic was with the Irish carrier. We were determined to change this arrangement, that is, to renegotiate the agreement to get landing rights for our airlines in Dublin as well as Shannon.

Q: Were you involved in the airline negotiations?

SORENSEN: Very much. It was one of my major fields of activity while I was there.

Q: How does one go about...I mean, if the Irish have got a favorable agreement, how do you get them to alter it? What do you use?

SORENSEN: The Treaty itself contained a clause that allowed either side to give notice of termination. The only thing you can do in a situation like this, then, is threaten to invoke the clause of termination if the other side is unwilling to modify the agreement. However, it was tough. Our government had been trying without success to renegotiate the treaty for several years.

And the reason that our negotiators had failed was that the Irish were especially skilled in mobilizing the Irish- American lobby in the United States where there are a good many people who are still proud of their Irish descent. They had played the State Department off for years by the simple tactic of agreeing to discuss the treaty a year later, the year agreed to always coinciding with congressional elections at which time congressional candidates

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from districts with large numbers of Irish-Americans would unfailingly signal the State Department that it was an inopportune moment to try to change the treaty.

It took us five years, but we finally broke their pattern of maneuvering to negotiate only on election years and succeeded in getting the treaty rewritten. I was on the inaugural flight of the first TWA plane to land on a scheduled flight to Dublin.

Q: Once again, how was this accomplished?

SORENSEN: Not to put too fine a point on it, by playing hardball. First, by breaking the pattern of negotiations so that treaty reviews no longer coincided with U.S. domestic elections, then by threatening their rights in either Chicago or Boston at a time when congressmen with large Irish- American constituencies could afford to ignore the issue. It was an interesting experience. Between the Ambassador and myself, we deliberately agreed to play differing roles to ease the process, that is, to be at once tough but not too destructive of Irish-American relations. My role was to be the unfeeling and unbending representative of the Department, ruthlessly pressing its demands, while the Ambassador's role was to be that of the peacemaker, whose aim was to find an accommodation that everyone could live with. By making extreme demands and by making them public through the media, we created an atmosphere that allowed the Irish government to acquiesce to a less extreme outcome or settlement, one that we had already determined would still be satisfactory in terms of U.S. interests.

Q: While we're on this, could you talk about the role of the Irish constituency. Because, in many ways the oldest pressure group, really, in the United States has been the Irish one. I mean, a contentious one. One hears much about the Israeli lobby, but the Irish lobby is much older. How effective did you find the Irish lobby to be both in Congress and outside of Congress?

SORENSEN: Very effective, to say the least. As I think I've suggested, the landing rights issue had gone on since the Second World War and was not finally resolved until the

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early seventies, due entirely to the effectiveness of this lobby and the skill of the Irish government in mobilizing it. There were, therefore, roughly twenty-five years during which they fended off every effort to do anything about it, even though what we were trying to do was in our own national self interest.

And this was not the only area where the lobby had looked after the “auld” country. I found, for example, that Ireland had benefitted from the Marshall Plan even though it was not one of the belligerents, had suffered no war damage, and had remained neutral....

Q: In fact, somewhat to the side of the Germans — as much as they could be.

SORENSEN: Certainly, they've always had a love-hate thing with the English. In any event, when it came time to rebuild Europe following the war, Congress guaranteed that the Irish would be among the beneficiaries of American largesse, notwithstanding their lack of involvement in the war. Thanks to the Irish lobby, they received a fairly substantial loan. It would be unfair, however, to suggest that the Irish lobby always acts at the behest of the Irish government. In particular, the support that the IRA receives in the United States has been a source of considerable and genuine embarrassment to the Irish government. Unfortunately, much of the money that keeps the IRA going comes from Irish-Americans who still think romantically of the old IRA and its role in the Irish Rising.

I remember attending a meeting in Seattle where the Irish Consul from San Francisco argued all evening with IRA supporters from the Irish-American community, imploring them to discontinue supporting the IRA, noting that the continuing terrorism and killing in Ireland and the UK is largely financed by the Irish-American community. The Consul's pleas fell largely on deaf ears.

There was a great deal of violence during my tour of duty in Ireland, and inevitably members of Congress would arrive demanding to go wherever they thought there might be a photo opportunity, usually to a funeral, a demonstration, or sometimes even to the border to be photographed looking at British outposts. On occasion, their activities were

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directly contrary to the wishes of the Irish government, which made its views known to us while turning a blind eye to the offending activities of the congressional member. It was the way the game was played, but it was certainly a demonstration of the power of the Irish-American vote in the United States as perceived not only by members of Congress but by the Irish government as well.

In short, the Irish government could mobilize this constituency for its own purposes in certain areas; in other areas, however, they contravened its interests.

Q: Of course a power in Congress was, and still is today, Senator Kennedy. Did you find his hand laid heavy on relations with Ireland or not?

SORENSEN: Not really. Senator Kennedy visited Ireland while I was stationed there. The Irish adored the Kennedys. Several presidents have been of Irish extraction, but Kennedy was the first who was also Catholic, which carries with it a tribal identification in Ireland. This was the reason that John Kennedy ignited a such a flame there. If you traveled in the country you'd find in humble cottages a picture of the Pope, one of the sacred heart of Jesus, and a third of President Kennedy.

Q: When I was in Yugoslavia, you'd find pictures of Tito and Kennedy. Roger, what was our attitude at the embassy while you were there towards the troubles in Northern Ireland?

SORENSEN: I don't recall ever receiving instructions on this difficult issue from the State Department, which wisely wanted to remain neutral. I became DCM after I'd been there about a year, so I would have been in a position to see everything that came and went out in the way of instructions and reports.

The ambassador, John D. J. Moore, was an extraordinarily decent man, and he himself was of Irish extraction. Indeed, his father had met de Valera when the later visited the United States on a fund raising trip early in the period just after the Rising. I should note that de Valera was President of Ireland during the first part of my assignment, so that it

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was a significant experience for me to have been there and to have dealt with one of the founders of the Irish state.

More importantly, Ambassador Moore was very well connected, not only with de Valera but with several others in the Irish government who were the fathers, one might say, of the modern Irish state — men who had been present at the founding of the state and had worked to bring about the revolution. I mention this to illustrate that Moore had enormous sympathy for Irish aspirations, but he also understood that the Ireland that they had created was one which recognized the division of the country on the basis of which the predominantly Protestant counties of the north had remained at least for the time being within the United Kingdom.

This division was part of the settlement between the Republic and the UK, but the fact of the settlement remains to this day a major source of contention within the Republic, and its major political parties have their roots in the ideological views they held at the time with respect to the settlement. It would ill behoove a foreign government to involve itself in this internal debate.

Q: Was it not even the basis of their civil war?

SORENSEN: Indeed, the two major political parties in Ireland — the Fianna Fail and Fine Gael — have their origin in that historic conflict. And to give you some notion of the intensity of Irish politics, consider for a moment that, at the time I was stationed in Ireland, the fathers of some of the party leaders who were sitting in the Irish Parliament, or Dail, had actually put one another before firing squads during the civil war. One could therefore understand that their sons still felt deeply about the political issues that continue to define the two parties, which was all the more reason for us to remain aloof.

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The one point that both parties had agreed to, happily, was that the only way to settle the long outstanding problem of the North was through negotiation, not by violence, as advocated by the IRA.

This is not to say that Ambassador Moore did not occasionally dream of trying somehow to play a mediating role, especially when the violence became particularly appalling. I remember his recalling to me one day the role that Teddy Roosevelt played in arbitrating the Russian- Japanese War...

Q: The Treaty of Portsmouth, I think.

SORENSEN: That's right. I recall his referring to Roosevelt's role and wondering whether there weren't some way that the United States, as a friend both to Britain and to Ireland, could play a similarly mediating role.

My advice was that this was a tribal conflict that had gone on in one form or another for several hundred years, at least since the invasion of Strong Bow. Essentially, it was a struggle between two tribes. In its present form it was a continuation of the religious wars of three centuries earlier, which had also been expressions of political and/or tribal identity. The last thing that the United States should or could do would be to become involved, especially since no national interests of our own were at stake. To involve ourselves would have been the ultimate in folly.

Q: How did we view the IRA?

SORENSEN: The Irish government itself viewed the IRA as an illegal organization, and still does. We could hardly view it otherwise.

Q: I mean, what did you feel were the motivations and the driving force behind the IRA?

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SORENSEN: Of course, the original Irish Republican Army had played a crucial role in the struggle for independence, and a number of the older Irish political leaders whom I knew, such as de Valera, had been IRA officers. He still attended almost weekly the funerals of former comrades in arms while I was there. The modern IRA broke off from the original group, took over its name and the aura of its history, and has continued a militant struggle against the settlement that came out of the civil war.

Q: Was it a problem with ties to other terrorist organizations at that time?

SORENSEN: Indeed it was. Interestingly, it was split into a number of splinter groups, some of which had a strong Marxist orientation. Clearly they were tied as well with other terrorist organizations around the world, even operating joint training camps in some cases.

I might note that the IRA group that identified itself as Marxist was quite hostile toward the United States. Since it obviously thought of itself as a liberation movement, it was especially active in its opposition to the United States, particularly because of what it saw as our imperialist role in Vietnam.

For me, it was an interesting period. Like other American embassies around the world, we saw frequent antiwar demonstrations. In our case, the IRA crowd on one occasion poured pigs blood over our steps. Even so, we fared better than the British embassy some blocks down the street and around the corner, which they burned to the ground after three days of demonstrations over incidents in northern Ireland.

More seriously for us, we had an American sailor shot in Dublin during the visit of a small naval group. Beyond this, the media was definitely opposed to the Vietnam war, which made for an unpleasant atmosphere at times. Finally, while members of the government were personally friendly, they too made it quite clear that there could be no sympathy for the American course in Asia.

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Q: Were you able, as an embassy, to transmit this back to Washington, or was it difficult for the ambassador to allow this type of reporting to go out? Was there such a mist of nostalgia about Ireland that no matter what one said about it, nothing would penetrate the fact that Ireland and the United States always seemed such close friends and allies?

SORENSEN: Not really. All members of the embassy staff were surprised on occasion to encounter deeply felt negative sentiments with respect to the United States among certain groups of people. And to give Ambassador Moore the credit that is due him, as soon as he recognized that these sentiments were fairly widely held, he moved vigorously to counteract them in two different areas.

First of all, he insisted upon expanding the embassy staff to include a USIA public information officer who would have direct responsibility for initiating programs to better explain US policy, to cultivate media contacts, and to reach out to the cultural and intellectual communities. Secondly, the Ambassador sought private funding for and ultimately succeeded in establishing a permanent chair of American studies at the University of Ireland. These were substantial policy initiatives taken in frank recognition of the problems that we found.

Q: How did you become DCM? Normally, one isn't moved up to DCM.

SORENSEN: The DCM who was there decided to retire about a year after I arrived in Dublin. To my pleasant surprise, Ambassador Moore requested the Department to make me his DCM, and the Bureau of European Affairs agreed.

Q: How did he and you divide the work?

SORENSEN: Obviously, since he was Ambassador, he made the basic decisions. Each morning about ten, after having digested the incoming traffic, I would meet with him for perhaps 45 minutes to review the issues that confronted us and decisions that had to be made. When appropriate, we called in other members of the staff to get their views on

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matters of immediate urgency, and of course we met with them weekly on a regular basis in country team meetings.

Ireland had a very active program aimed at promoting foreign investment, so we had a large number of American businesses located throughout the republic whose representatives frequently sought our advice on various problems that might arise with the Irish Development Authority or with Irish labor unions. We were, thus, continually involved in interceding or working behind the scenes to promote commercial ties and American direct investment.

Q: You mentioned Irish labor unions. What was the problem?

SORENSEN: In Ireland, the labor movement is highly fractured. That is, it is divided into numerous, rather small union organizations, any one of which can bring work in a company to a halt. There was a separate union for elevator operators, for example, and even though a company settled its differences with all the other unions with which it dealt, the elevator operators could bring work to a halt if they chose, as could the union that represented truck drivers, or janitors, or electrical workers, etc.

In the United States, if a company once settles with the federation representing these different trades — the AFL- CIO, for example — the business can depend on the overall agreement being adhered to for its duration, which is usually two or three years. Not so in Ireland. Some small group of workers in a plant were always closing things down, holding the whole operation (including their fellow workers) hostage to their own narrow demands.

Perhaps even more outrageous, because the redundancy pay that workers could expect when companies folded their operations was extraordinarily generous under Irish law, one not infrequently encountered labor problems where some particular group had coldly calculated that they would put a company out of business in order to collect the

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redundancy pay rather than continue to work. I confess that there were occasions when the situation struck me as unreal.

Q: It would seem like, as the embassy, you'd say to an American firm: Stay out of here.

SORENSEN: Certainly, American firms had to know how to operate when they went there and what to expect. The Irish mentality was not an American mentality and there were a number of American companies who became disillusioned and left.

Q: In a way, there is almost a moral dilemma for you, isn't there, as an embassy? Part of the idea is to encourage American investments to this country because you want to strengthen ties, but at the same time you might be encouraging an entrepreneur to come in and lose his shirt. How did you feel about this? How did you handle this when people could come in?

SORENSEN: The only way one could handle the problem was to be absolutely honest, which meant warning them of the hazards. I should mention that the Irish government through its Development Authority encouraged foreign investment through a program of substantial subsidies and other inducements. This included the establishment of duty-free zones from which to penetrate the European community which Ireland had just joined, generous cash grants, free training for workers, and tax-free status for an initial period of up to seven years. We tried to point out that these inducements had to be balanced against certain disadvantages, particularly those having to do with the labor force, especially in rural Ireland.

Q: What were some of the attitudes that would impact on a business in rural Ireland?

SORENSEN: There is a peculiarly small town attitude at work in Ireland where, even in the larger cities, everyone seems to know everyone else. Much of Irish humor is based upon this quality in the Irish people; they like to cut one another down to size; pretentiousness can be deadly; so, however, can success, because it quickly generates jealousy.

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For example, I knew an Irish entrepreneur who had worked for an American food company and who then returned to Ireland to develop a highly successful mushroom-producing facility and a greenhouse operation producing tomatoes — products that were not then grown in Ireland, except seasonally in the case of the tomatoes. At some point, someone — perhaps one of this man's employees or a neighbor — put chemicals in the water supply and destroyed his entire crop. It was sheer local jealousy and a wish to “cut him down a notch,” as they would say, that led to it. Worse, it may well have been done by people who purported to be his friends. American firms ran into this same sort of pettiness if they weren't careful.

Q: Was Walter Curly there when you were there?

SORENSEN: No. I met him, but he came afterwards.

Q: You left then in 1974 and came back to Washington again. What were you doing then?

SORENSEN: I came back to go to the Senior Seminar, which is where you and I met.

Q: Ah yes, and then you were assistant secretary...

SORENSEN: Then I was the executive assistant to the Under Secretary for Economic Affairs, first Chuck Robinson and then William Rogers.

Q: What did you do in that job?

SORENSEN: We were engaged in overseeing the entire gamut of US economic relations around the world. It was an exciting time. You will recall that this was just after OPEC had successfully cartelized the global oil market, which generated substantial euphoria in the Third World. There was a notion among developing countries that the OPEC model could be applied to aluminum, coffee, bananas, tea, hemp and every other commodity produced in the developing world. Whether by using mechanisms such as OPEC or by other means,

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there was everywhere a rising and strident clamor for resources to be transferred from the developed to the developing countries.

To counter and neutralize these demands in the international fora where they were being made, the State Department took the initiative in organizing what we called the Conference on International Economic Cooperation in Paris, which aimed at bringing a limited number of the major developing and developed countries together to discuss in a forum that would not be too unwieldy (precisely because it was limited) the feasibility of various market stabilization schemes, including a common fund to finance their operation.

My boss, Under Secretary Robinson, had the responsibility of putting this conference together in Paris, and I was heavily involved in helping. Ultimately, at least as many of us saw it, the aim was to deflate third world demands by exposing in thorough going reviews and negotiations — which, as you know can be interminable — the impracticality of the various schemes put forward. In fact, over a period of years, that is what happened. We talked them to death.

Of course we were engaged in a host of other activities at the same time. It was during this period that the Russians went a long way towards cornering the grain market, much to the embarrassment of the Department of Agriculture. As a consequence, the Under Secretary's office was also engaged in negotiating a grain agreement with the Soviet Union aimed at regularizing their purchases. Kissinger saw it as a political means of tying them to us by making them more dependent. As I said, it was an interesting period.

Q: Did you feel that this was a period of time when economic matters and foreign affairs were more centered in the State Department, or had this shifted to Treasury?

SORENSEN: That was a period when the State Department under Secretary Kissinger wielded considerable clout. Of course there was the usual bureaucratic infighting between State and Treasury — Simon was Secretary of Treasury at the time — as well as between State and Agriculture. But, in these areas, we clearly had the lead. In fact, so crushed had

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the Department of Agriculture become as a result of the fiasco with the Russians, the they were positively deferential.

Q: Were there any other difficult issues that you were involved in at the time that sort of stand out?

SORENSEN: As I said, we dealt with a host of issues. Mind you, because of the success of OPEC we were heavily engaged in trying to sort out the economic impact on us, our friends and on bloc countries of the huge increase in oil prices. Obviously, it resulted in a massive transfer of resources from us to them, and the other side of that coin was to see that the money was somehow recycled back into productive use through the banking system. Otherwise, there would have been a massive drop in demand and a global recession.

I mentioned earlier in our conversation the involvement of our office in staving off an international default by two major countries. In part, their plight was due to the huge dislocations caused by the rise in global oil prices. These countries were the United Kingdom and Italy, and the package put together involved massive assistance from both the IMF and ourselves amounting to several billions of dollars. Obviously, had efforts such as this failed the international fallout would have been equally massive.

Finally, let me return briefly to the sense of confrontation that then existed between the developed and the developing world, which was made more acute by Soviet efforts to exploit this confrontation to their own advantage. I mentioned our efforts to defuse Third World pressure through the mechanism of the Conference on International Economic Cooperation, but we were also faced with confronting them in the context of the Seventh Special Session of the U.N. through which they sought to give legitimacy to their demands.

We put together a major speech for Secretary Kissinger to give (as it turned out, someone had to give it for him because of a crisis elsewhere) which, of course, was nothing but smoke and mirrors since only Congress could effect a real increase in the transfer of

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resources. Kissinger's instructions, however, had been to prepare a speech that would “dazzle the Third World like a Christmas Tree,” and it did — the triumph of diplomacy over substance. We were the soul of sympathy to their aspirations; the result: the issues were diffused, and nothing changed.

Q: Then you moved to Geneva, where you were DCM from '77 to '79. What do we have in Geneva, and what were you doing there?

SORENSEN: At the time I was there, we had ambassadors to disarmament negotiations that had been going on in Geneva since the end of the war; we had an ambassador responsible for GATT negotiations then in process — the so-called Tokyo Round; and we had a Mission to the European offices of the U.N. and to the specialized agencies of the U.N. located in Geneva. These included the International Labor Organization, the World Health Organization, the World Intellectual Property Organization, the High Commissioner for Refugees, the U.N. Disaster Relief Organization, the International Meteorological Organization, the International Telecommunications Union, and a small organization concerned with the drug problem.

The Mission is responsible for U.S. relations with all these organizations, and provided administrative backstopping for the GATT negotiators and for the disarmament talks as well. I went to Geneva as DCM and Deputy Permanent Representative to the UN office in Geneva and to its specialized agencies. *Q: It sounds like you were more a hotel-keeper than anything else, you know, with delegations coming in and out, all being experts and all this.*

SORENSEN: That was certainly a major function of the mission. Delegations would come from Washington for crucial meetings and/or major negotiations, but in interim periods the mission itself had responsibility for our ongoing relations, which meant that we had a mission officer, usually a specialist, assigned to work with each of these agencies. Obviously the mission was responsible for keeping in touch and reporting on

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developments within these organizations that affected or were reactive to U.S. policies. Finally, either the Ambassador or I was always included as a ranking member of each delegation that came, sometimes indeed as head of the delegation. I had the pleasure, for example, of signing on behalf of the United States an international treaty on patents and trade marks, on which occasion I received full powers from the President. This, too, was just housekeeping of sorts since obviously I hadn't engaged in the technical negotiations that led to it and which had gone on for some years, but it was lots of fun.

I was also in Geneva as *chargé d'affaires* when the decision was made to get out of the ILO, and I participated in that decision. That was a case where there was tremendous stress within the delegation, and I sometimes felt like a resident psychiatrist trying to calm some of our more emotive delegates, one of whom stormed into my office one day demanding to send a dissent message to Washington. As it turned out, the mission had never sent one and the instructions and regulations for doing it could not be found. We had to send to Paris to get them. In this case, I was able to inform the dissenter that this particular device was not intended for members of visiting delegations that had come to implement specific instructions.

Q: Did you have an ambassador there, or a number of them?

SORENSEN: I went there at the beginning of the Carter administration. An ambassador — a political appointee — was named about four or five months after I'd been there.

Q: I would have thought that you would have found yourself, with this very heterogeneous melange of agencies, all of which, as you say, were very highly specialized, having a hard time getting a grasp on how to keep everybody on track. How did you operate in this situation?

SORENSEN: It wasn't easy. Endemic to the situation was a constant tension in Washington between the domestic agency having a primary technical interest in a given international organization — the natural and obvious interest in the International Health

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Organization (WHO) was, at the time, our domestic Department of Health, Education and Welfare, for example — and, of course, the State Department's IO Bureau.

Q: IO being the Bureau for International Organization Affairs within the Department of State.

SORENSEN: Exactly. And this tension existed on a number of levels. By the time I went to Geneva, even the specialized agencies of the UN had long since become ideological battlegrounds between the East and the West — a struggle that had become increasingly bitter as we both strove to influence the ideological orientation of the Third World. Within the UN this eventually led to the establishment of a group of third world countries who identified themselves as the “non-aligned” precisely because they did not wish to take sides in this struggle.

Political struggles of a regional character — such as, for example, the Israeli-Arab issue — intruded into the technical work of the specialized agencies as well, and was a constant source of heartburn. In these struggles, the mission ostensibly fought to keep political issues from intruding into the technical considerations of the agencies. In fact, however, as a representative of the IO bureau, I not infrequently found that it was the State Department itself that introduced political considerations into the so-called technical debates.

For example, whereas in the ILO we constantly struggled to have certain labor practices in Eastern Bloc countries identified as being incompatible with the operations of a free labor movement — and we were no doubt right — on the other hand we became obsessed when Arab countries tried to raise the question of Israeli treatment of workers on the West Bank, in which case, in my view, we were dead wrong. This is simply to illustrate the manner in which domestic political interests had a way of injecting themselves into what should have been purely technical considerations.

There was another area, too, where the State Department's role was occasionally at cross-purposes with the interests of our domestic Departments having a primary interest

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in the work of the specialized agencies. This had to do with control of the budgets of these agencies. For better or for worse, Congress had made the Department of State responsible for justifying the U.S. contributions to the budgets of the U.N. specialized agencies. You will immediately grasp the problem if you reflect that the Department of State has no deep appreciation of, or direct interest in, these technical operations, and it therefore finds it extraordinarily difficult to muster much enthusiasm for the arduous task of justifying their respective budgets before Congress. This was a constant source of tension between IO — and, by extension, State Department people at the mission — and representatives of the domestic agencies primarily concerned with the technical work being done.

Here again, over time, I concluded that our overall approach was wrong. I believe, for example, that the budget for paying the US contribution to the ILO should be included and justified in the Department of Labor's budget, rather than in the State Department's budget. And this should be so with Agriculture for FAO, Commerce for WIPO, HEW (now HHS) for WHO, etc. My view is that these domestic agencies are in a better position than the State Department to judge the marginal utility of the last dollar appropriated by Congress for each of their areas of specialization, that is to say, whether the last dollar appropriated would be better spent on domestic programs or for international programs that presumably support our interests.

This is a constant source of friction, and the unwillingness of the Department of State to make the case before Congress for the work of the specialized agencies of the U.N. has been the cause of the United States' falling into deep arrearages in recent years. What is even more outrageous is that the State Department only clings to the privilege of controlling U.S. contributions to the budgets of these organizations for its own narrow bureaucratic interests, that is, to justify the existence of the responsible bureaucracies — batteries of small-minded clerks obsessed with notions of zero-growth budgets regardless of the importance or significance of the work being done. In my view, our consequent

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failure to conform to our international obligations in this area has, in recent years, been despicable. It has also been a violation of international law.

Q: What was your impression of the operations of the United Nations as you saw it in Geneva?

SORENSEN: With a few exceptions, I felt they were well run. I do not subscribe to the notion that these organizations are filled with incompetent people who do nothing except draw enormous salaries — a view often subscribed to by the IO bureau. Certainly, the agencies of the UN have their faults, but I found them to be generally as well run as agencies of the United States government — perhaps even better run in many cases.

Ironically, in my estimation the worst run UN agency in Geneva while I was there was the Disaster Relief Organization — the biggest disaster in the UN system, I used to think — and one of the reasons it was a disaster, again in my view, was because a retired American General who had been appointed deputy head of the organization at our behest was determined to impose American military concepts of command and control on an organization that could at best only try to coordinate the voluntary contributions of member states when emergencies arose.

Q: What sort of relations did you have with the U.N. in New York? I mean, our USUN mission in New York.

SORENSEN: Both missions operated under the direction of the IO bureau. While our mission in New York was, of course, the more important of the two and frequently gave the lead in enunciating policy positions during the debates in New York, we nevertheless operated quite independently, being primarily concerned to make sure the positions that we took were consonant with policies being laid down in Washington and enunciated in New York.

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As one might expect, a number of common issues and themes were being addressed throughout the U.N. system. For example, this was a period during which the Third World was trying to gain acceptance of something called the New International Economic Order (NIEO). The NIEO was to be a new system of economic relations among states that would have promoted the transfer of resources from developed to developing countries on the grounds that the wealth of the developed countries had been unjustly acquired through colonialism and imperialism. The NIEO was expressed in endless initiatives aimed at getting us and other Western countries to agree to its underlying thesis and supposed remedies.

I have already referred to one such initiative, which was to try to get us to agree to commodity stabilization programs covering the major raw materials produced by the Third World and to finance these programs through a common fund, which the Third World demanded that we, the consumers of raw materials, finance. Of course, whenever we looked into these kinds of schemes, they turned out to be primarily aimed at transferring net resources rather than stabilizing any prices.

Another example: with the same objective in mind, Third World countries tried constantly to mandate technical assistance programs in the U.N. technical agencies with themselves as beneficiaries. This was a particularly difficult issue for us since the Third World controlled a majority of the votes in organizations to which we were bound by treaty to contribute. This meant that they could, in effect, convert these agencies into resource transfer mechanisms from what we had conceived as their original purpose — agencies doing work of common interest and benefit to all.

Looking back, the variations on this effort to erode Western interests were endless, in which connection I'll mention just one final example: in WIPO, the World Intellectual Property Organization (the umbrella organization responsible for developing international patent and copyright law), Third World coalitions were always trying to introduce resolutions calculated to weaken and erode patent rights. They justified this by arguing

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that patent law was an artificial construction of developed countries aimed at exploiting the less developed and perpetuating inequalities. I found it absolutely fascinating to observe the transparent ways in which the Third World would try to cover these attempts at blatant theft with an intellectual patina, always dressed in NIEO robes.

Intellectual ideas, they argued, were bound to emerge in any event as a consequence of social and intellectual evolution and could not therefore be claimed as a property right by any one individual just because the idea happened to occur, as it were, to him or her first. If not him or her, it would have occurred very soon to someone else. They referred to this notion as “simultaneous convergence.” Of course, what they could never explain was why the idea always seemed to occur first in the mind of someone from a developed country.

The foregoing is a long way of explaining that I thought of us as playing a rearguard action fending off the NIEO in the UN system where our and Western interests generally were under genuine attack.

Q: Did you find yourself fighting the battle of Israel a lot in those organizations?

SORENSEN: Very much so.

Q: Trying to exclude Israel from them.

SORENSEN: In almost all of the technical organizations there were persistent efforts to get at Israel, not necessarily to exclude Israel from the organization, but certainly to hold them accountable for their actions in the occupied territories and in this way, obviously, to get at them politically. In the World Health Organization, for example, one could invariably count on a move to try to condemn Israel for its health policies in the occupied territories, or, at a minimum, to ask for an investigation of health conditions in the occupied territories.

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Mind you, considering how long the territories have been occupied, they may have had a point when one considers the stresses that the occupied have been under for at least a generation, but of course that represents a personal view.

Officially, we were always supportive of the Israelis, even to the point of being slavish. Their ability through their supporters in Congress to control State Department policy was something one could only view with a sense of humiliation. For example, while making my initial round of calls on my counterparts in other diplomatic missions in Geneva, my Israeli colleague promptly ticked off not only a list of upcoming issues that concerned them but the positions that I would be expected to take. He was providing what were clearly intended to be marching orders. It was so blatant that I felt compelled to respond that I would have to see what my instructions from Washington would be on each of the issues raised.

Q: You left Geneva in 1979 and went to Rome. How did that assignment come about and what were you doing?

SORENSEN: Our ambassador in Geneva, Ambassador Vanden Heuvel, was transferred to New York as one of the ambassadors to the UN. He asked me to come to New York with him, but the thought of coping with life in New York on the income of a Foreign Service Officer was too daunting, and I declined. At the same time, however, I didn't want to remain in Geneva after Vanden Heuvel left and he was gracious enough to recommend me for the job of Permanent Representative to the UN agencies in Rome, which had just opened up. Happily, his recommendation was accepted, and I left for Rome.

Q: What were your functions there?

SORENSEN: They were largely the same as in Geneva. There are four UN food agencies in Rome — The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the World Food Program (WFP), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), and the World Food

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Council (WFC). My job was to coordinate and oversee the implementation of US policy with respect to these organizations.

Q. During this period, the end of the Carter and the early Reagan years, what was the direction of what we were doing there, and did it change with the administration?

SORENSEN: Not too much, with one exception that I'll come to. I say not too much because, from the point of view of our larger national interests, the basic issues remained the same. Once again, these were (1) the continual effort by the Third World to erode what they regarded as the advantages and prerogatives of the developed countries; (2) their ongoing effort to gain acceptance of the New International Economic Order (NIEO); and (3) their maneuvers to manipulate each of these organizations so as to make them instruments of resource transfer. Beyond these issues, the organizations continued to constitute playing fields in which East-West issues were contested, as well as the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Finally, as ever, we had to confront the bureaucratic aspirations and interests of the elected UN and agency heads — aspirations and interests that were frequently not consonant with our own. Changing the guard at home had little impact on the way we saw these issues.

Q: Let me ask about our problem with transferring resources through these organizations, specifically in connection with food. Isn't our policy to do whatever we can to get food to people who need it? What was the problem?

SORENSEN: The problem has to do with the nature of our treaty obligations to these agencies as defined in their charters, specifically our obligation to pay a fixed percentage of their respective budgets. Unfortunately, when the charters of the various organizations were drawn up we were not foresighted enough to demand some sort of weighted voting that would protect the big contributors from unwarranted demands on their national treasuries. The result has been that so called technical cooperation or technical assistance

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programs in the budgets of these organizations has gradually become a major issue, and it is not difficult to grasp the dynamics of the problem. The Third World, having the majority vote, has only to mandate vast and elaborate schemes of assistance through the budgets of these organizations and it becomes the treaty obligation of our taxpayers simply to pay.

To come back to your question: of course our policy has been to do whatever we can to get food to people who need it, but we want to do it voluntarily. For example, in Rome there is an organization called the World Food Program, which takes surpluses, voluntarily donated by countries that have them, and channels these surpluses to needy countries in an organized and highly efficient manner. In this case, the resource to be transferred is something that we give voluntarily. We're not obligated to give it because it's part of an assessed budget.

The point is that what and how we give must obviously be under the control of congress, which has become increasingly incensed over the issue. In short, congress will not live with a situation where the Third World can use these organizations as instruments to make levies on the American tax payer. Congress insists upon reserving this privilege to itself.

Q: Were we ever living with it when it was equivalent to a levy while you were there?

SORENSEN: In the case of WHO, there was a period while I was in Geneva when the US simply refused to pay its assessment because a WHO resolution — legally passed, of course, by the governing body — required the organization to divert increasing portions of its expenditures to the Third World. This doesn't mean that these expenditures were not well spent, or that some of them may not actually have been in our interest. For example, WHO operates an early warning system intended to detect the outbreak of serious infectious diseases — Asian flue, for example — early enough to enable us to develop vaccines to prevent them from becoming epidemics. In this case, money is spent in the Third World where these things frequently originate in a way that makes us among

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the primary beneficiaries. Congress, however, saw the resolution in terms of principle and dug in its heels, and they didn't care much whether we benefitted or not.

Similarly, in FAO the governing body had passed resolutions that earmarked about 12 percent of FAO's budget for programs of technical cooperation, which was a euphemism for resource transfer. We strongly resisted this move, as did most of the other Western countries, with the result that the Director General never really tried to get the percentage significantly enlarged. Of course, inevitably there would be fierce debates over the issue at each meeting of FAO's governing body, but this was part of the game. We simply had to make it clear that any enlargement of the program, or any abuse of it, would risk driving us from the organization.

Q: So it wasn't a matter of the Third World countries having a completely free hand.

SORENSEN: Absolutely not. A good chunk of the money that they spend — twenty-five percent — comes from us, and we can always tell them that we simply won't pay and that we're getting out, as we did in the ILO and subsequently in UNESCO. To do this in accordance with the governing charters of these organizations, however, notice must be given. Thus, it is not quite as simple as walking out and terminating our obligations the same day. Still, the threat was there, and it is perhaps the only thing we have ultimately to control the outcome. Either that or pay whatever is levied upon us, sit back, and watch them spend it.

Q: Were you able to keep the other representatives informed of how we felt and keep riding herd on this thing? SORENSON: Do you mean the other major donors?

Q: Yes.

SORENSEN: In fact, there are informal mechanisms for doing this. Since the other major donors share our concerns, they have banded together and formed a coordinating body called the Geneva Group, named because it was first assembled in Geneva.

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Representatives of the major donors — the OECD countries — meet annually, and subgroups composed the OECD permreps to each of the UN agencies meet before almost every important meeting of their respective agencies, to coordinate their policies on budget and administrative matters that might affect the size of their contributions.

Q: Well then, your role was what? How did you fit into furthering American policy there?

SORENSEN: In the case of the Geneva Group, since the U.S. was one of its co-founders, the U.S. Permrep acts as one of its two co-chairpersons wherever and whenever the Group or a subgroup meets. We and the British, in effect, shared the job of coordinating a common position among the major donors on budget and administrative policies. This, by itself, was a busy job.

To answer your question in the larger sense, the role of the Permanent Representative and his or her staff was to follow the activities of each of the organizations to which he or she was accredited; to report developments to Washington; to work with policy-makers back in the department to formulate comprehensive and cohesive policies in respect of the organizations; to implement these policies and build support for them among other countries; in general, to promote and protect US interests as they relate to the various organizations and their work.

Q: When the Reagan administration came in, in 1981, did you feel any change in atmosphere about the role and all this? It came in rather ideologically distant, I would say, from the United Nations effort to begin with.

SORENSEN: That's right. And, in fact, the Reagan administration and now the Bush administration have demonstrated this ideological distance over the past decade or thereabouts through a remarkable disregard for our basic treaty obligations. I mentioned earlier that our ultimate sanction is to withdraw from an organization and thus end our obligation to contribute. At the same time, however, this step must be taken in accordance

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with the rules that govern withdrawal, to which we agreed when we joined, and which are applicable to all member states.

Unfortunately, instead of giving notice as we ought to do, thus terminating our legal obligation to pay, we have simply refused to pay while continuing to insist on the rights of membership. At the present time, we owe enormous sums in back payments to the UN system, which we've allowed to accumulate. We're like the member of a club who refuses to pay his dues but insists on continuing to use the club's facilities.

In my personal opinion, the irony of the US position is beyond belief. Originally we saw the UN system as a means of inculcating Western regard for international law, for treaty obligations, for civilized debate among nations. We saw the United Nations as a major vehicle for conveying our values. And now we ourselves have become perhaps the biggest renegade in the system. In some UN agencies — FAO is one of them — the United States arrearage exceeds the combined arrearages of all other nations combined. This is in total disregard of our treaty obligation. How is that for the leader of the free world to behave?

My feeling is that, if a UN agency doesn't serve our national interest, indeed we ought to get out. But we should do so in accordance with our legal obligation to give due notice. To say that, in the event we don't like the way an organization is being run or don't like what the majority is doing, we won't pay our bills but will insist on continuing to participate, is a sad commentary on our regard for principle. It means that we don't have any.

Q: Did you feel, say, from emanations from Washington, that they'd just as soon you would go away? I mean, not you, but your office and all that. After the Carter administration, was there a difference not only in instructions but also in the tone or the style as far as dealing with the United Nations organizations between the two administrations?

SORENSEN: Well, certainly one suddenly began to see an increasing disregard for treaty obligations, which was deliberate. I shall never forget the first meeting of US permreps that I attended following the Republican victory. It took place in the latter part of 1980 in

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Geneva. Jeane Kirkpatrick was there together with the Ambassador to the UN agencies in Geneva — some department store manager/owner from California. Somehow, the discussion came around to the question of US arrearages. I, together with a couple of other career Foreign Service people, took the position that, however we might feel about the activities or effectiveness of the UN and its agencies, we had a treaty obligation to pay until we gave legal notice to terminate the obligation.

Kirkpatrick greeted this view with a cavalier sneer, while the department store operator inferred that the view verged on downright treason and had, no doubt, contributed to the renegade attitudes being expressed, in his view, in UN fora. It was the first time that my loyalty had been impugned, even inferentially; it was also the first time that I had heard a responsible American official take what I regarded as an irresponsible position on US treaty obligations.

No doubt about it, then. There was a distinct change in the attitude of senior people at the top. And with it, I'm sorry to say, there was a change in attitude among many of the career people back in the Department — slavish types anxious to serve their political masters. In fact, some of the more pernicious changes in US policy with respect to holding back payments subsequently came from career bureaucrats who were duly rewarded with promotions, awards and other emoluments. There was an unparalleled loss of principle.

Q: What about the Soviet Union? Did that play much of role where you were?

SORENSEN: It did in Geneva, but the Soviet Union is not a member of FAO.

Q: How about in Geneva? How did you observe it? What sort of role was it playing?

SORENSEN: It played a very mischievous role at the time. To the extent that it could, it would align itself with Third World interests and play cynically on North-South differences. We were portrayed as neo-colonialists. The non-aligned movement came into existence, by definition, as a group that tried to be neutral between these two conflicting forces. It

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was interesting, however, to watch the extent to which the Soviets played on the notion that Western capitalism had exploited the developing world, that this was what had kept it from developing, and that therefore reparations were called for in the form of massive aid programs and other forms of resource transfer.

Q: The capitalist system to which the Soviet Union has just voted itself in, in the last week, to join.

SORENSEN: That's right.

Q: While you were in Rome, did our Department of Agriculture have much of a role in the FAO?

SORENSEN: Yes, they do. They provide all of the technical people who are involved and formulate US policy with respect to FAO's work in the areas of agriculture and forestry. Obviously, the State Department has neither expertise nor substantive interest in these areas.

Q: Then you were replaced by Millicent Fenwick, is that right?

SORENSEN: That's right.

Q: She was a congresswoman from New Jersey — all of a sudden your job was no longer a permanent representative but an ambassador.

SORENSEN: Millicent was still the permanent representative, but the State Department elevated the classification of the post. There was talk of trying to elevate the classification throughout my tenure, but it was made quite clear to me that, if the Department succeeded, my situation would become quite tenuous, the reason being that there were just too many people in the wings — failed politicians and the like — with political credits who

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were anxiously awaiting suitable openings in Rome. I was minister; she was sent there as ambassador. I should add that she did a superb job.

Q: Same job?

SORENSEN: The job was the same.

Q: You didn't get to fly the same flag, though.

SORENSEN: Regrettably, I didn't. But the nation showed its gratitude in other ways — with a ticket back to Washington.

Q: What did you do when you left Rome?

SORENSEN: When Millicent arrived on the scene, I asked for and went to the University of Washington in Seattle as a so-called diplomat-in-residence. I retired six months later.

Q: How did you find the student body, at least the ones you dealt with, their knowledge of the world and all?

SORENSEN: I found them generally quite capable. Because of Seattle's situation as a major port and its position on the Pacific rim, the student body had a broad gage and unique outlook.

I remember a graduate student who came to my office to chat. The young man spoke fluent Russian and had spent a couple of years in an office in Vladivostok looking after a Pacific Northwest interest in Soviet fishing which was apparently the result of some sort of bilateral arrangement. I gathered that there was a considerable number of Soviet trawlers off the Pacific coast that operated on American licenses owned by Pacific Northwest fishing interests who had negotiated some sort of agreement to share the catch. This young man had also spent some time on board the Soviet ships themselves, apparently for the agreed purpose of monitoring the catch. I found it fascinating.

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I should mention an additional feature of the University of Washington that I'm sure you already know: it is the home of the Jackson School of International Studies, which boasts not only a distinguished faculty but also a quite gifted and superior student body.

Q: So, you didn't find yourself in a backwater at all.

SORENSEN: Oh, no, not at all. To be frank, I think that standards everywhere have deteriorated over the years, and this was evident among many of the younger students that I met — particularly with regard to their ability to write. But this was a failure that I had observed over the years in Foreign Service reporting as well. On balance, the university boasted a superb faculty and a first class student body — as good, I think, as any place in the United States.

Q: When you came back, you retired, but then you sort of went right back into the same briar patch where you'd been in Geneva and Rome, didn't you?

SORENSEN: For my sins, I think.

Q: What were you doing?

SORENSEN: While I was in Seattle, the head of FAO's North American office retired. And since I was well acquainted with the organization as well as with our own government, the director general telephoned to inquire whether I would be interested in an appointment. It was this offer, which carried with it a grade and rank in the UN system equivalent to the rank of ambassador, that caused me to retire from the Foreign Service.

Q: What type of work were you doing?

SORENSEN: FAO's North American Liaison Office here in Washington is responsible for conducting FAO's relations with the governments of North America, that is, the United States and Canada. It is also responsible for FAO's relations with various international

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organizations situated in Washington, such as the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank, and for contacts, for example, with business and academic institutions interested in FAO's work and with trade groups.

To illustrate the closeness of these relationships, one of FAO's major functions is to gather and publish global statistics on agricultural production, consumption and trade — data that is vital both to the academic community and to industry.

FAO also operates the Codex Alimentarius Commission, which is responsible for developing and promulgating international standards in food quality and safety that have to do with food purity, additives, pesticide residues, and a host of other things that govern how food products are traded and marketed internationally. These are activities of obvious interest not only to governments but to producers and traders. I could go on at length about some of FAO's other activities, for example in global forestry and fisheries, but I think this illustrates the importance of their work.

Q: Did you find that it was any different working for the FAO than for the State Department? You changed sides of the table, didn't you, in a way?

SORENSEN: One could assume that there might be antagonisms between the two, and of course there were. FAO's interests are not always synonymous with US national interests and its perspective as an international organization, by definition, has to be different.

As we have already discussed, the United States originally helped to found and create the UN system because of a larger vision with respect to how states would interact and relate to each other. With the expansion of the UN system over the years by the creation and addition of more than a hundred new states, including many mini-states, political imbalances were created that were difficult to accommodate. Having worked for both the US government and a UN agency, I can understand both points of view.

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However, as I indicated earlier, what I find disconcerting is the US decision to react outside the scope of its treaty obligations to these organizations. In doing so, it has weakened not only the organizations that it has deliberately undercut, but its own moral stance and influence within them, which is of much greater long-term importance. What has saddened me, then, is a perception that our government has done more damage to itself than them.

Q: Well, Roger, I think that sort of ends it. I thank you very much.

SORENSEN: And I thank you.

End of interview